

A MODERNIST CINEMA

The background of the book cover features a collage of three abstract film stills. The top left still is a dynamic, multi-layered scene with figures in brown and beige tones. The top right still shows two figures in dark clothing against a red background. The bottom still depicts a group of people in a theater setting, with red curtains and spectators in the foreground.

Film Art
from 1914
to 1941

EDITED BY **Scott W. Klein**
AND **Michael Valdez Moses**

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For Karen and Katharine

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Introduction

Michael Valdez Moses and Scott W. Klein

The first public performance of Auguste and Louis Lumière's newly patented Cinématographe, which took place in the Salon Indien of the Grand Café in Paris on December 28, 1895, has been heralded by film historians as the birth of public cinema. However, on that early winter day in the last decade of the nineteenth century, it was by no means clear that an artistic revolution was in the offing. Some three years before, on the other side of the Atlantic, Thomas Edison had successfully launched the Kinetoscope, a "peep show" machine that enabled one paying customer at a time to view a single short moving picture. By the time the Lumière brothers screened their modest program of *actualités* to a meager audience of thirty-three people at a venue on the Boulevard des Capucines, Edison's device had already become a common attraction at "sideshows, penny gaffs, and Kinetoscope parlours across the US and Europe."¹ So far as anyone knew, the public show at the Grand Café in Paris marked not the momentous birth of "the seventh art"² that would help define modern culture, but merely another episode in an intense international commercial competition among a host of inventors, engineers, scientists, entrepreneurs, promoters, businessmen, and lawyers from both sides of the Atlantic. A great many individuals could, after all, make a legitimate claim to have pioneered (and sometimes patented) the new technologies that made possible the moving picture: Edison, the Lumière brothers, Thomas Armat, Charles Francis Jenkins, Louis Le Prince, Eugène Augustin Lauste, Auguste Blaise Baron, Max Skladanowsky, Eadweard Muybridge, Robert W. Paul, William Friese-Greene, Wordsworth Donisthorpe, and William Kennedy-Laurie Dickson.

A capital-intensive venture built upon cutting-edge technologies, a form of mass entertainment that has flourished in modern cities home to an expanding urban population, cinema has always been both a product and a shaper of modernity and modernization. As early as 1893, Edison's Kinetoscope demonstrated the commercial potential of moving pictures. But in the first decade of cinema, it was not obvious that the primary use of motion pictures would be for artistic purposes. Film scholars of "early cinema" (roughly the period 1893–1915, but further subdivided by academicians into discrete phases) have taken note of the new medium's potential uses: a vehicle for scientific education (surgery training films for physicians, studies of fluid dynamics and meteorology); a tool for police work (the identification of criminals); a means of religious proselytization (employed by the Catholic Church and the Salvation Army) and political agitation (the suffragette film); a purveyor of world

events (the newsreel); a recorder of history (the war documentary, real or staged); and a mode of vicarious travel and geographic exploration.³ Even as entertainment, the motion picture in its early years was almost always integrated with other turn-of-the-century forms of popular amusements that lacked the pretensions of art. In its first decade, moving pictures were, in Tom Gunning and André Gaudreault's influential formulation, a "cinema of attractions."⁴ In the 1890s it was not self-evident that cinema would emerge as an important modern art form, much less a *modernist* one.

From the retrospect of the twenty-first century, we can see the 1890s as a period when the gathering storm of modernist innovation in the arts was gaining force. Naturalism, symbolism, aestheticism, impressionism, post-impressionism, expressionism, decadence, art deco, and *modernisme* (the Catalan movement in architecture) all contributed to a decade of extraordinary aesthetic ferment. In 1893, the same year that Americans first gazed into Edison's Kinetoscope, Edvard Munch exhibited his expressionistic masterpiece, *Skrik* (*The Scream* or *Shriek*) in Oslo. The year 1895, when the Lumières introduced cinema to a Parisian public, also saw the premiere of Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 2 (*Resurrection*) in Berlin, the publication of Frank Wedekind's *Erdgeist* (*Earth Spirit*, the first of his "Lulu" plays), and Paul Cézanne's initial solo exhibition at the Paris gallery of Ambroise Vollard. Less than twelve months later in December 1896, with W. B. Yeats in the audience, the premier of Alfred Jarry's revolutionary theatrical experiment, *Ubu Roi*, sparked a near-riot among the patrons of the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre.

With historical hindsight, we can see that the birth of cinema coincided historically with the first stirrings of modernism (broadly defined) across the arts. In the first decade of the twentieth century, the new narrative film began to displace the "cinema of attractions" and emerge in its own right as an artistic form that would come to define cinema for modern audiences. A critical eye can detect even in these early short narrative films innovative features and distinctive formal techniques that would become part of the aesthetic repertoire of modernist practice. Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) ends with a self-reflexive gesture, the breaking of the dramatic "fourth wall." Its outlaw protagonist (Justus D. Barnes) looks directly into the camera and fires his pistol at the audience. The fantastical films of George Méliès, *Le Voyage dans la lune* (*A Trip to the Moon*, 1902) and *Le Voyage à travers l'impossible* (*An Impossible Voyage*, 1904), characterized by an impressive array of special effects and innovative cinematic techniques (multiple exposures, time-lapse photography, dissolves, substitution splices), anticipate the aesthetic daring of surrealism. Alice Guy-Blaché, Gaumont's head of production in Paris from 1896 to 1906 and arguably the first filmmaker to introduce a narrative element into cinema, not only experimented with double exposures and masking techniques, but, some years before the publication of Marcel Proust's *Du côté de chez Swann* (1913), radically altered the temporal flow of narrative events by running film backward.

The long narrative film only gradually displaced the one- or two-reel short. Hour-long features were released in America in 1903 (*The Passion Play*, directed by Siegmund Lubin) and in Australia in 1906 (*The Story of the Kelly Gang*, directed by

Charles Tait).⁵ But the full-length silent narrative movie became firmly established as a global cultural phenomenon only in the years before and during World War I with a flurry of epics released in Russia, Italy, France, the United States, Japan, India, Brazil, and South Africa between 1909 and 1916. Intriguingly, the cinematic form that came to dominate the twentieth century—the feature film—emerged at roughly the same time that Anglophone writers and critics have traditionally dated the beginnings of literary modernism: we recall Virginia Woolf's remark that “on or about December 1910 human character changed” and Wyndham Lewis's characterization of the key writers of his generation as “the men of 1914.”⁶ A subsequent and definitive revolution in motion-picture technology, the adoption of synchronized sound in 1927 (which would become the industry standard throughout America and Europe by the early 1930s), took place during the period when modernism arguably achieved its greatest and widest success. The 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s witnessed the worldwide triumph of the Hollywood studio system (to say nothing of the international cultural success of its competitors in France, Germany, Italy, and the Soviet Union), as well as the transnational flourishing of (so-called) “high” and “late” modernism.

For academic film critics and historians, “modernist cinema” is a term generally reserved for European or international art cinema in the post-WWII era—works, for instance, by Ingmar Bergman, Federico Fellini, Michelangelo Antonioni, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut, Robert Bresson, Alain Resnais, Akira Kurosawa, Andrei Tarkovsky, and Luis Buñuel, and the films of the Czech and German new waves.⁷ However, *A Modernist Cinema* focuses on the period between 1914 and 1941, the high-water mark of modernism across the arts, in order to explore the complex interrelationships among cinema, modernist aesthetics, and modernity itself.

The fifteen essays collected here examine how modernism informs both the silent film in its period of greatest global significance and the sound film during its first “classic” period. In conjunction with that effort, this book considers how motion pictures in turn influenced and contributed to international modernism more broadly, especially during the interwar years. Finally, the essays collected here examine in depth the dialectical relationship between a “modernist cinema” and modernity itself: how the former represented, comprehended, and altered our notions of modernity and its practices, and how the history and so-called crises of modernity in turn shaped the evolution of modern cinema.

Each chapter of *A Modernist Cinema*, written by a leading critic working in the New Modernist Studies, examines (at least) one important film by an internationally influential director released between 1914 and 1941. Almost all of the films under consideration are full-length narrative features, the exceptions being two feature-length documentaries and two shorter surrealist avant-garde works. Most of the contributors to this volume are primarily known as literary, art history, or cultural critics, though several have written extensively about the history of cinema. While the focus of each chapter is not exclusively on the purely formal cinematic features of a given film, all of the contributors have endeavored to be attentive to the technical

and formal qualities of the works in question and to the ways these films reflect or respond to the formalist revolution that characterized modernism more generally. Rather than provide a wide-ranging sketch of a given director's career, each contributor offers a detailed and careful reading of one or more films in an attempt to place it within the broader context of transnational modernism across the arts. Each chapter also highlights and explores at least one significant feature, problem, or aspect of modernity, be it political, historical, sociological, cultural, philosophical, aesthetic, technological, economic, or psychological.

While the fifteen chapters of *A Modernist Cinema* range widely across the cinema of America, Europe, and Asia and cover nearly four decades of the early twentieth century, they tend to coalesce around several common themes and topics. The contributors to the volume pay particular attention to the complex and unpredictable relationship between cinema as a modernist art form and the social and cultural developments, political and economic crises, and heated ideological debates of the first half of the twentieth century. Enda Duffy and Maurizia Boscagli place Giovanni Pastrone's epic *Cabiria* (1914) within the broad historical context of European imperialism and the rise of proto-fascist and progressive utopian politics in pre-War Italy. Lisa Siraganian and Tyrus Miller analyze the groundbreaking work—cinematic and theoretical—of Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov in relation to the aesthetic debates, ideological struggles, and political experiments of the early Soviet regime, while Elizabeth Otto reflects on the troubling relationship between Leni Riefenstahl's cinematic aesthetics and German Nazism. Responding to Siegfried Kracauer's Marxist-inflected critique of *Metropolis* (1927) as a "proto-fascist" work, Richard Begam argues that Fritz Lang's film embraces a conception of aesthetic and political autonomy consistent with liberal Christianity and Weimar democracy, one that promises to resolve peacefully the class struggle between workers and capital. Locating Yasujirō Ozu's work at the crossroads of east and west, Carrie Preston suggests that the director's early films exemplify a transnational and hybridized aesthetic simultaneously suspicious of imported western cultural forms and critical of a Japanese interwar regime that embraced nationalism, militarism, imperialism, authoritarianism, and a retrograde version of purified "traditional" Japanese culture. Focusing on the relative cinematic power of speech and visual scale, Scott W. Klein's analysis of *The Great Dictator* (1940) contrasts Charlie Chaplin's parodic treatment of Adolph Hitler and Benito Mussolini with the propagandistic aesthetics of totalitarian regimes in general and with the films of Riefenstahl, Eisenstein, and Alexander Dovzhenko in particular. Michael Valdez Moses considers *Stagecoach* (1939) as John Ford's deeply ambivalent response to the crisis of American modernity in the interwar years, a turbulent period in which the Great Depression and the New Deal cast into doubt the legitimacy and viability of liberal democracy and market capitalism. Jesse Matz's chapter on *La Règle du jeu* (1939) examines the productive tensions that arose from Renoir's progressive commitments to the Popular Front and revolutionary artistic experimentation on the one hand and his fascination with retrograde political orders (the aristocracy) and his belated employment of older aesthetic forms (seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and

nineteenth-century French theater and nineteenth-century French impressionism) on the other. Andrzej Gąsiorek explores Carl Theodor Dreyer's anti-authoritarianism and his distinctive critique of institutional power in *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928), while Michael Wood illuminates Buñuel's anti-rationalist "politics of disorder," an open-ended and anarchistic practice of aesthetic subversion suspicious of the tyrannical potential inherent in all forms of social order and all formalized aesthetic programs (including that of Buñuel's fellow surrealists). Laura Frost explores Hitchcock's fascination with "the gender politics of modernity" and with the revolutionary figure of the new (autonomous) woman in the director's early silent films, while Laura Marcus analyzes the complex gender dynamics of F. W. Murnau's *Sunrise* (1927), a work in which the struggle between the modern autonomous woman and the traditional figure of the loyal wife dramatizes the historical emergence of modernity itself.

At the same time, the contributors to this volume also remain attentive to the formal and generic properties of film understood as a discrete form of art, with its own distinctive and revealing relationship to modernity. In keeping with a commonly shared appreciation of cinema as a singular medium of artistic expression, the contributors endeavor to compare the "seventh art" with the other modernist arts. For example, while distinguishing the modern "sentimental" object ("Rosebud") in *Citizen Kane* (1941) from both the aesthetic (art) object and the object as commodity, Douglas Mao contrasts the ontological status of Orson Welles's film with that of both sculpture and painting. In his chapter on temporality in *Intolerance* (1916), Michael North helpfully distinguishes between the multiple narratives embedded within D. W. Griffith's film and the visual elements (particularly the close-ups) that help define the director's mature style. Griffith's cinematic modernism, North argues, depends on both the visual image and the written word associated with linear narrative (intertitles); the two elements imply very different modes of temporality that are yoked together in Griffith's modernist epic. North associates the narrative elements with the emergent form of continuity editing for which Hollywood films become famous—whereas Griffith's visual elements, his use of the image and the close-up, make possible a series of temporal disruptions, distortions, and distensions and an editorial mode more commonly associated with Eisenstein's notion of montage and Ezra Pound's modernist poetic compositions.

Lisa Siraganian's essay on Eisenstein, in turn, carefully distinguishes between the director's notion of cinematic montage and the parallel concept of collage, especially as the latter is represented in "bourgeois" visual art (even though the practitioners and critics of modernist collage would reject Eisenstein's politicized characterization of the art form). Siraganian argues that Eisenstein's distinctive conception of montage is intended, at least in part, to insulate the new Soviet cinema from the decadence of western bourgeois art. For Eisenstein, at least, collage (as opposed to montage) represents the ultimate seductive allure of the commodity and of western bourgeois capitalism.

Tyrus Miller's chapter on Vertov investigates, among many subjects, the director and film theorist's attempts to create a "pure cinema" that respected the immanent

development of the artistic medium, one that would adhere to its own rules and exploit its unique formal and technical capacities. Ultimately, it was Vertov's hope to create a documentary cinema free of intertitles—indeed, of language itself. Only then could the new medium free itself from dependence on earlier (prerevolutionary) forms of art: painting, literature, sculpture, and most especially the theater, all which were, for Vertov, politically suspect. Likewise, Elizabeth Otto's wide-ranging critique of Riefenstahl's *Olympia* (1938) helpfully locates the director's visual style within a political environment that pointedly rejected certain contemporary forms of avant-garde art (painting, sculpture) as degenerate.

Other contributors find not so much sharp contrasts between cinema and the other (modernist) arts, as similarities and interrelationships. Michael Valdez Moses finds much common ground between John Ford's mid-century vernacular cinematic modernism and that of other "populist" American modernists working in other media—painting, photography, architecture, literature, classical music, modern dance—who represented and celebrated life in the American west and on the frontier. Carrie Preston examines Ozu's cinematic use of various forms of Japanese theater (noh, kabuki, bunraku), while Richard Begam explores Lang's artistic debt to modernist architects such as Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier for the filmmaker's distinctive vision of the modern technopolis. And Jesse Matz's intensive exploration of Jean Renoir's aesthetic maintains that the fullest and final flowering of impressionism comes, paradoxically, not in the paintings of Pierre-Auguste Renoir and his fellow generation of French artists, but rather some decades later with the cinema of Abel Gance, Germaine Dulac, René Clair, and, of course, Jean Renoir himself.

Politics and aesthetics: the two are imbricated with each other, as well as with the technologies that bring film into being. Our contributors accordingly reflect upon the generic self-reflexivity of many of the films under consideration and on the technological basis of modernist cinema itself. Enda Duffy and Maurizia Boscagli, for example, discuss the pivotal importance of Pastrone's "Cabiria shot," a technical innovation that revolutionized cinema. Pastrone's groundbreaking use of the tracking shot not only fundamentally changed the cinematic medium and filmic narrative by introducing the moving camera, but it also importantly transformed motion itself (or at least its cultural significance). Richard Begam suggests that Lang's representation of the utopian and dystopian features of the modern city in *Metropolis* represents the director's self-conscious meditation on the promise and problems inherent in the German studio system established in Neubabelsberg, a technologically sophisticated and factory-like mode of film production that both empowered the individual artist, such as Lang, and threatened his creative autonomy. Klein likewise emphasizes the self-conscious and self-referential character of *The Great Dictator*, the first of Chaplin's films to feature fully synchronized sound and dialogue. Having resisted the commercial and artistic lure of the talkies long after their advent, Chaplin self-consciously dramatizes his own long-standing distrust of (mediated, recorded, and amplified) speech, particularly political speech, even while ultimately embracing the "new" technological power of the medium as politically necessary and expedient.

He concludes the film by breaking the fourth wall, speaking to his worldwide audience “directly,” offering a humanist plea against fascism and the global totalitarian threat posed by the “technological apparatuses of politics and propaganda.” For Laura Marcus, technologically mediated modes of entertainment come to characterize modernity’s break with nature and tradition, while for Laura Frost, the emergent popular cinema is a synecdoche for modernity; new technologies make possible a new institution, the movie theater. For Frost, the movie palace constitutes a feminized space that reconfigures the pleasure principle and makes widely available for the first time the peculiar (and implicitly gendered) affects and joys of modern life.

Tyrus Miller also takes full account of the self-reflexive appeal of Vertov’s *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). Vertov often turns the camera on the technical and mechanical aspects of the filmmaking process itself: Vertov’s film notably depicts Mikhail Kaufman (Vertov’s brother) photographing and Elizaveta Svilova (Vertov’s wife) editing the very film that we are watching. Vertov’s audience is implicitly encouraged to think of Vertov and his crew of “Kinoki” as fellow workers actively participating in the technological (and industrial) modernization of a new revolutionary socialist society. Other chapters explore the dangers and dystopian possibilities of technological “progress,” even and perhaps especially that which makes possible the evolution of an artistic medium. Elizabeth Otto’s detailed consideration of Riefenstahl’s comprehensive employment of the most advanced cinematic technologies of her day provides a case in point: Otto reflects on the fact that the same technological breakthroughs that made possible Riefenstahl’s greatest film, *Olympia*, also facilitated the development of the new and formidable military weaponry of the Wehrmacht, an arsenal already being readied in 1936 by the Third Reich for the conquest of continental Europe.

If film does nothing else, it represents bodies in both space and time. Another recurrent theme in *A Modernist Cinema* is the human body, and more particularly the performative body in motion. Duffy and Buscagali focus on the transformative effect of the new medium on human gesture, and on how cinema’s power to capture gesture enables a new level of political interpellation in modernist art. Frost explores the profound connection between Hitchcock’s scopic fascination with the sexualized female body and the somatic (and psychic) pleasures experienced by the only seemingly passive modern spectator who frequents a new (mainly urban) institution that typifies modern life: the cinema theater. Gąsiorek discusses in detail the central importance and ambivalent significance that the body and the face of Renée Falconetti play in Dreyer’s *The Passion of Joan of Arc*. The stiff postures, stilted bodily movements, and oddly angled head positions of this phenomenal actress are at once expressive of, and in tension with, the distinctive carceral framing that the director (and by implication, Joan’s inquisitors) impose upon their subject. Preston attends to the highly stylized and theatrical movements of Ozu’s actors, noting that many of their gestures, appropriated from earlier Japanese theater, are repurposed by the director. Those stylized gestures call attention to the hybridized medium of Ozu’s silent cinema, which is revealed to be a palimpsest of historical and cultural forms that signifies a distinctive form of (Japanese) modernity. Elizabeth Otto focuses on the seemingly perfect,

youthful, beautiful, athletic (and mainly, but not exclusively, Aryan) bodies in motion featured in Riefenstahl's *Olympia*. The documentary pretense of Riefenstahl's film, that it is a mere recording of the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games, incompletely disguises (by design) the racial and eugenicist doctrines of the Party that provided the financial and logistical support that underwrote the director's international success. Matz explores how the stylized theatrical gestures of Renoir's players and the glamorizing close-ups of the faces of his actresses profoundly complicate the ambivalent (even contradictory) political and social implications of the director's succès de scandale.

These shared themes—politics, aesthetics, technology, and the body—represent only a small number of the many connecting the chapters of *A Modernist Cinema*. To these we might add the following: attention to the geography of modernism—the ever-widening gap between city and country, the utopian and dystopian prospects inherent in internationalism and globalization, and the possibility that a region (rather than a nation-state) such as the American west or a mobile frontier might offer a template for an alternative form of modernity—the middlebrow; temporality and history; and the “aura” or potential spirituality inherent in cinema as a communal practice of creation and of viewership. To describe comprehensively every thematic and topical knot of *A Modernist Cinema*, however, risks the absurdity of the project Jorge Luis Borges satirizes in his fantastical short story of 1946, “On Rigor in Science” (“*Del rigor en la ciencia*”): an empire intent on perfecting the science of cartography generates a map so exact that it is drawn according to the same scale (1:1) as the territory itself.⁸ Readers will no doubt discover additional points of thematic overlap among the chapters as they explore the critical terrain with their own cartographic tools.

A Modernist Cinema is not the first or only critical work to address the relationship between cinema and modernism. The editors of the volume wish to acknowledge their debt to the scholars (including some contributors to this collection) whose earlier work has helped inspire this book. Miriam Hansen's work, especially her seminal essay from 1999, “The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism,” was one of the earliest and most important forays into the subject.⁹ Susan McCabe's *Cinematic Modernism* (2005) offered a groundbreaking exploration of the complex relationship between the formal techniques and thematic obsessions of Anglo-American literary modernism and early-twentieth-century cinema, especially European avant-garde films.¹⁰ David Trotter's *Cinema and Modernism* (2007) examined the writing of Joyce, Eliot, and Woolf and the films of Griffith and Chaplin, as part of a theoretically informed study of the deep connections between the new film technology and modernist aesthetics.¹¹ Michael North's *Camera Works: Photography and the Twentieth-Century Word* (2005) and *Machine-Age Comedy* (2009) opened the field of modernism to in-depth studies of visual phenomena. Laura Marcus's *The Tenth Muse: Writing about Cinema in the Modernist Period* (2010) revealed a trove of materials about the interrelationship between modernist letters and cinema that had long been under-recognized.¹² More recently, books by scholars such as Richard I. Suchensky's *Projections of Memory: Romanticism, Modernism, and the Aesthetics of Film* (2016), Anthony Paraskeva's *Samuel Beckett and Cinema* (2017), and Jonathan

Foltz's *The Novel after Film: Modernism and the Decline of Autonomy* (2017) have revealed fresh ways of looking at modernism through vitalizing new lenses. Suchensky contextualizes the epic scope and long form of modernist cinema within the history of western aesthetics from romanticism to modernism. Paraskeva argues that the modernism of film is best understood as temporally disjunct from the time-frames of literary modernism. Foltz approaches cinema from the standpoint of intermediability, where linguistic and visual art are seen as mutually informing modes of expression rather than as hierarchical imitators of one another.¹³ All have provided valuable roadmaps and raised formative questions, opening conversations to which we hope our contributors have made useful contributions.

There are two other issues raised by the structure and approach of the book: our criteria for the selection of films, and the now somewhat controversial assumption that works of cinema are largely the aesthetic product of the director. We have focused here, with the exception of shorter but seminal works by Buñuel and an experimental documentary by Vertov, on feature-length and mainly narrative films that are not typically thought of as "modernist"—films that are largely familiar to interested present-day viewers, and that were likely known to artists in the worlds of American and European modernism. For that reason, we have not tried to incorporate essays on the many important avant-garde films of the Dada period, say, or surrealist shorts such as Germaine Dulac's *La Coquille et le clergyman* (*The Seashell and the Clergyman*, 1928) or the later works of Maya Deren—certainly works of manifest interest to the specialist cinephile, but less known to the general public. Nor have we attempted to make the collection truly global—in part because of space, in part because many important filmmakers from Asia, Africa, and South America (for instance) came to world attention only after the period covered by this book. Examples of earlier cinema from these parts of the world were not—and to some degree are still not—well known, in part because they have not historically been well distributed internationally. Our hope is that each chapter here on a film and filmmaker that did make the editorial cut might nonetheless provide an original perspective on an immensely rich and complicated subject: the complex interrelationships among cinema, modernism, and modernity. We hope that future collections and monographs focusing on the dozens (even hundreds) of other important directors and their films will further enlarge and deepen our understanding of this subject.

We are also aware that organizing a collection according to the category of "major" directors may suggest an arguably conservative return to the idea of "auteurism" in an age when academic critics have largely come to think of cinema as a collaborative, institutional, and even industrial process. The theory of the cinematic "auteur"—once an avant-garde idea—was first advanced and promoted in the 1950s and 1960s by a remarkable set of film critics and future directors writing for the French publication *Cahiers du cinéma*: most conspicuously André Bazin, François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Jacques Rivette, Eric Rohmer, and Claude Chabrol. The advocates of the foundational theory that helped inspire the nouvelle vague argued that that the director was the sole "author" of his work; that his oeuvre was necessarily characterized

by a unique and individual style; and that his films could be distinguished from the merely generic work of the many competent craftsmen who worked within a studio system. The *Cahiers* critics celebrated the oeuvre of numerous directors (some represented in this collection) including Alfred Hitchcock, John Ford, Howard Hawks, Orson Welles, Nicholas Ray, Jean Renoir, Robert Bresson, Fritz Lang, Roberto Rossellini, Michelangelo Antonioni, Ingmar Bergman, and Kenji Mizoguchi. The auteurist theory was taken up and promoted in the United States by the influential American film critic Andrew Sarris (among others). It heavily influenced the directors of the New Hollywood in the 1970s and was embraced by a great many faculty and students in the leading American film schools.¹⁴ While the “auteur” theory prevailed for a time, by the 1970s and 1980s it came under severe critical scrutiny by both popular and academic film critics and historians.

Rejecting the notion that any film could be wholly the product of a single organizing artistic consciousness, revisionist critics increasingly turned their attention to the collaborative nature of film production. Thomas Schatz's brilliant seminal work, a spirited defense of the aesthetic merits of classical Hollywood cinema, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (1989), stands as an exemplary instance of this new approach.¹⁵ Schatz does not deny that some directors might properly be considered auteurs, but he shifts critical attention to the collective and commercial aspects of film production, emphasizing, for example, the critical roles played by producers and studio bosses, screenwriters and cinematographers, actors and set designers, editors and composers, managers and agents within a vertically integrated studio system that thrived (at least in Hollywood) from the 1920s through the early 1950s. For Schatz, each Hollywood studio (MGM, Universal, Warner Brothers) produced its own distinctive and generic product that appealed to different if overlapping segments of the American and international markets. For Schatz, the aesthetic appeal of many classic Hollywood films—James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931), say, or Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca* (1942)—is a testament to, rather than a rebuke of, the organizational genius and commercial goals of a studio system that tended to look upon directors as (pampered and highly paid) employees who were expected to work according to the formulas, and within the factory-like conditions of Hollywood.

We acknowledge the importance and critical appeal of this revisionary critique of the auteurist approach to cinema studies. But we also recognize that the tradition of recognizing work that is sometimes collective as the product of an individual's vision is embedded in the history of complex or monumental art. This view is a commonplace, for instance, in architecture, in which the designer's name (when known) is a metonym for the many hands that constructed the building. It was similarly common in Renaissance art for paintings to come out of an atelier under the name of the master—sometimes to the consternation of art historians, who are left to sort out what was created by different hands. Sculptors since the Victorian period have depended on creating original models, or maquettes, that were then transferred mechanically to stone, or enlarged, and often copied multiply from the original, by assistants and workmen.¹⁶ In this spirit, the contributors to *A Modernist Cinema* are

attentive to those many technical and formal aspects of filmmaking that are not generally the direct responsibility of the film director: for example, cinematography, editing, performance, music, screen writing, as well as production, sound, and costume design. Not a few of the contributors concern themselves with the crucial role that a historically specific mode of production played in the making of the films they analyze. Those “systems” varied considerably from country to country and from decade to decade: the Hollywood studio system in its infancy and later in its “classical” period, the emergent studio system of pre-War Italy, the vibrant and frequently experimental mode of film making that characterized the Soviet Union in the 1920s, the impressive and internationally influential Universum Film-Aktien Gesellschaft (UFA) studio system headquartered in Neubabelsberg during the Weimar period, or the complex top-down and highly politicized filmmaking practices of the Nazi era, to say nothing of the French studio systems of the 1920s and 1930s or the British and Japanese ones of the interwar years. And while it is true that many of the directors featured in *A Modernist Cinema* can make strong claims to the title of auteur, it is also worth noting that the contributors to this volume often invoke the name of a single director simply as a kind of shorthand for the collaborative process by which a given film comes into existence. Even when emphasizing the vital roles played by the screenwriter, cinematographer, editor, actors, and composer of *Stagecoach* (1939), for instance, the critic may find it convenient and efficient to refer to the classic Western off-handedly, if not perfectly accurately, as “a film by John Ford,” as one may similarly refer to “a building by Le Corbusier” or, in the contemporary art world, a (mass-produced or enlarged) “sculpture by Jeff Koons.”

A Modernist Cinema, in short, charts one possible route through a complex set of individuals, historical forces, and works of art as they intersected in the first half of the twentieth century—a projection, as it were, of one set of images on a critical screen. We hope that individual chapters will be of use to teachers of modernism who hope to incorporate some of the most famous films of the period into their curricula, and of interest to thinkers of all kinds whose interdisciplinary ambitions include film as an integral component of both culture and history. With that wish, we hand matters over to our contributors, whose own collaborative efforts have shaped and structured—and deserve all due credit(s) for—the singular book at hand.

Notes

1. See Simon Popple and Joe Kember, *Early Cinema: From Factory Gate to Dream Factory* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2004), 7.
2. The Italian critic Ricciotto Canudo, who wrote primarily in French, famously used the term in his 1923 essay, “Reflections on the Seventh Art” (“Réflexions sur le septième art”), having earlier referred to motion pictures as “the sixth art,” in his 1911 manifesto, *The Birth of the Sixth Art*. See *French Film Theory and Criticism: A History/Anthology, 1907–1939*, Richard Abel, ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), vol. 1, 58–66 and 291–303.

3. Popple and Kember, *Early Cinema*, 45–63.
4. See André Gaudreault and Tom Gunning, “*Le Cinema des premiers temps: Un défi à l'histoire du cinéma?*” in *Histoire du cinéma: Nouvelles approches* Jacques Aumont, André Gaudreault, and Michel Marie, eds. (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1989), 49–63; Tom Gunning, “The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant Garde,” *Wide Angle* 8, nos. 3–4 (1986), 63–70; and Tom Gunning, “An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)credulous Spectator,” *Art and Text* 34 (1989), 31–45.
5. The standardization of projection speeds at twenty-four frames per second did not take place until the introduction of synchronized sound technology between 1926 and 1930. The speed at which silent films were recorded and projected could vary considerably, so the running time of these films is necessarily approximate. The original cut of *The Story of the Kelly Gang* had a reel length of 4,000 ft, which made it the longest narrative film ever shown when it premiered at Melbourne’s Athenaeum Hall on December 26, 1906. Lubin’s *The Passion Play* (also known as *Lubin’s Passion Play*) consists of thirty-one short films or successive episodes of the Passion of Christ, which, when shown together today run an hour. Lubin’s film is not to be confused with Lucien Nonguet and Ferdinand Zecca’s 1903 *Vie et Passion du Christ (Life and Passion of the Christ)*, which has a running time of 44 min.
6. Virginia Woolf, “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown” (1924), in *Collected Essays*, vol. 1, Leonard Woolf, ed. (London: Hogarth Press, 1966), 319–37: 320; Wyndham Lewis, *Blasting and Bombardiering: An Autobiography (1914–1926)* (1937) (London: John Calder, 1982), 252. Woolf’s famous comment was inspired by another kind of modernist visual phenomenon, Roger Fry’s art exhibition “Manet and the Post-Impressionists,” which appeared in 1910 at London’s Grafton Galleries.
7. For an influential study of cinematic modernism in the postwar period, see András Bálint Kovács, *Screening Modernism: European Art Cinema, 1950–1980* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007). Kovács suggests a split period of film modernism, thereby underlining the stickiness of neat identifications: “in the case of modernism [in cinema] we are not talking of one period, but two (1919–29, and 1958–75),” 52.
8. Jorge Luis Borges, “On Rigor in Science,” in *Dreamtigers (“El Hacedor”)*, Mildred Boyer and Harold Morland, trans. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964), 90.
9. Miriam Bratu Hansen, “The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism,” *Modernism/modernity* 6, no. 2 (1999): 59–77.
10. Susan McCabe, *Cinematic Modernism: Modernist Poetry and Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
11. David Trotter, *Cinema and Modernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007).
12. See Michael North, *Camera Works: Photography and the Twentieth-Century Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); and *Machine-Age Comedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). See also Laura Marcus, *The Tenth Muse: Writing about Cinema in the Modernist Period* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
13. See Richard I. Suchenski, *Projections of Memory: Romanticism, Modernism, and the Aesthetics of Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Anthony Paraskeva, *Samuel Beckett and Cinema* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017); and Jonathan Foltz, *The Novel after Film: Modernism and the Decline of Autonomy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
14. Sarris’s most influential writings in defense of auteurism appeared in 1968 as a collection of essays: Andrew Sarris, *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929–1968* (New York: Dutton, 1968).

15. See Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), originally published New York: Pantheon Books, 1989.
16. See Mark Antliff, “Politicizing the New Sculpture,” in *Vorticism: New Perspectives*, Mark Antliff and Scott W. Klein, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 102–18.

Giovanni Pastrone's *Cabiria*, Gesture, Modernism

Enda Duffy and Maurizia Boscagli

The finest moment in *Cabiria*, the massively ambitious 1914 historical epic directed by Giovanni Pastrone, occurs when the high priest sacrifices the first of many children to Moloch, the pagan god. Pastrone's film is laden with jaw-dropping set pieces involving huge sets and crowds: the eruption of the Mount Etna volcano, with rushing people lit by the lava against the night sky, the crossing of the Alps by Hannibal's army of men and elephants, the burning of the Roman fleet. These scenes enliven a plot in which Fulvius Axilla (Umberto Mozzato), who is a Roman spy, and his muscular slave Maciste (Bartolomeo Pagano) rescue the girl Cabiria (Lidia Quaranta/Carolina Catena), who has been abducted by North African pirates and is about to be sacrificed. In the striking sequence, the High Priest Karthalo (Dante Testa) leads a crowd that surges up the steps of Moloch's temple, built in the shape of the god's body; they enter through his mouth. In the god's belly, then, is another statue, now of the seated god: a flight of steps rises between his knees. A drawbridge opens in the god's stomach; fire belches out. Below, the crowd crouches and swirls. The priest, bedecked in Assyrian robes, ascends. His stately gait marks the rigid gesture of authority. He holds in his outstretched arms the child about to be sacrificed: the child's limbs are flailing—with the gestures of an innocent, furiously fighting for her life. The agitated gesture of the powerless, the pompous gesture of authority, the conflicted crouch and dance of members of the crowd: the forces opposed in *Cabiria* are here encapsulated in the film's dialectic of gesture. The film's great innovation, the slow tracking shot—for *Cabiria* was the film in which the camera, placed on a track, could, for the first time, now move as it recorded¹—ensures that we see both gestures at once.

Cabiria, the most ambitious film produced by the thriving Italian film industry before World War I, and, with D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916), among the most ambitious movies of the medium's first, hectic silent era, bearing the imprint of so many of the forces that shaped filmmaking, the Italian nation-state, and the cultural forces at play in early-twentieth-century modernity, is one of the grandest epic productions of early modernist culture. As with other modernist epics—from James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) to Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* (1913)—it is a heteroglossic montage that juggles its versions of these forces with a sometimes carnivalesque, sometimes codified abandon. As in *Ulysses* and *The Rite of Spring*, in *Cabiria* gesture—the

stylizations of human movement—by flâneur, dancer, and actor—is central to each artwork. The tracking shot, innovative lighting, and dramatic editing orchestrate a dialectic of human gestures, in which the gestures of powerlessness are played off those of strength. Modernism across all genres attends to gesture, from Edgar Degas's dancers to the gait of Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway;² *Cabiria* does so with a modernist technology of the gaze that is now able to see it in its three-dimensional depth, as it occurred. In this filmic symphony mediated by a newly dynamic technologized gaze of the movie camera, the cultural politics of gesture in modernity was offered to the viewer as a newly intense aesthetic pleasure. *Cabiria*, like *Intolerance*, is an intensely political film, as well as an innovative moment in the development of the new art form. Here, the new technology's ability to “capture” gesture enables a new level of political interpellation in modernist art. The question regarding this sprawling and ambitious historical epic in the new medium of film, therefore, is whether its implicit politics, which might appear on first viewing to be standard-issue pre-Great War western imperial fantasy in Roman dress, is in any way undercut by the aesthetic possibilities generated by its many filmic innovations, beginning with the “Cabiria”—or tracking—shot for which it is best known.

Modernism and Gesture

On the final page of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, completed in 1914 in Trieste, the strangest passage is this:

15 April: Met her today pointblank in Grafton St. The crowd brought us together. We both stopped. ... Asked me, was I writing poems? About whom? I asked her. ... Turned off that valve at once and opened the spiritual-heroic refrigerating apparatus, invented and patented in all countries by Dante Alighieri. Talked rapidly of myself and my plans. In the midst of it unluckily I made a sudden gesture of a revolutionary nature. I must have looked like a fellow throwing a handful of peas into the air.³

Much of the stock in trade of modernist art is here: the street, the crowd, the hapless antihero, the talk about feeling through a technological metaphor (General Electric sold the first kitchen refrigerator in 1911).⁴ But what is the “sudden gesture” that Stephen makes, and what did it signify? It is one of the strange new gestures that all modernisms were noting in precisely this period. Take, for example, the clown strut of Charlie Chaplin, a sleight of footwork that may be the most famous gesture of the twentieth-century everyman; it was first seen in a 1914 Keystone comedy, *Kid Auto Races at Venice*. What Chaplin said of his tramp applies to Stephen—“He wears an air of romantic hunger, forever seeking romance, but his feet wont [sic] let him”⁵—except that in Stephen’s case this gesture applies to his flailing arms.

For a better analogy we might return to another masterpiece made mostly in Turin that premiered on April 18, 1914, Pastrone's *Cabiria*. In the film, just before the high priest throws child after child into the flames, the story pauses for a sequence clearly demarcated as "symbolic." The screen is dark; to left and right, we see a flickering flame. In the center an upraised arm appears, palm toward us, with a closed fist. Slowly, the hand opens, and, fingers held together, the hand gestures upward. A hand gesture, then, "of a revolutionary nature"? The film leaves to the audience the work of interpreting the gesture, although an intertitle speaks of "sacrifice ... roaring ardent hunger." This is a version of a gesture in wide use throughout the film, of the arm thrust forward, fingers together: the "Roman salute" (see Figure 1.1). This salute may possibly have been used in ancient Rome; at any rate, it featured in the historical epics that became a staple of Italian pre-War film.⁶ Eight years after *Cabiria*, it would be formalized as the characteristic national gesture, as Benito Mussolini's "fascist salute," and soon adopted farther north as Adolph Hitler's "Nazi salute." The claim here is not that Stephen Dedalus gave the first fascist salute in Grafton Street, Dublin, but that human gestures bearing many possible meanings became a prime focus across many art forms in the pre-War modernist moment. The significance of the gestures to which artists were drawing attention was often ambiguous; such works were sites



Figure 1.1 The "Roman Salute," Giovanni Pastrone, *Cabiria* (1914)

where the reactions of modern subjects to forces around them could be assessed through observation of these subjects' movements.

The pre-War years might be thought of as an era of relative gestural freedom: the waltz, for example, gave way to the new jazz dances. In various art forms it was a time, too, of experiments that explored how human gestures matched the subject's, and the crowd's, relation to structures of power. Since the 1860s, new technological possibilities of observing gesture, which had begun with the photo experiments of Jules Marey and Eadweard Muybridge, made a science of gestures seem possible. With the invention of film, the interest of modernist art in ambiguous gesture and the interest of science in the diagnostic possibilities of observed gestures came together. With the "Cabiria shot," a moving, technologized gaze could observe a moving body. The new medium of film again made the gaze seem "natural," because it offered a "camera eye" that was as dynamic as human gesture itself. Liberated into this apparent naturalness, however, human gesture now became newly available as a bearer of ideological significance. Older forms, such as opera, had showcased highly stylized gestures, from a repertoire in which audience and creator could tacitly agree on their import. Innovative modernist forms, such as Joyce's novel, broke these strictures, but then struggled to delineate new gestures or suggest their import. Once film, however, had matched human gesture's new fluidity with a fluidity of the technologized gaze, the audience was enabled to absorb gesture as a *jouissance* rather than an estranged effect. For silent film, after the introduction of the Cabiria shot, human gesture was primed to be the bearer of both pleasure and ideological impact.

Cabiria is thus a landmark of the first phase of full-bore modernism, because its encyclopedic gesturality is matched by an innovative technology of the gaze equipped to suggest its significance. This effect is the case even if *Cabiria* uses the new shot only occasionally, and experimentally. *Cabiria* documents how a range of human contortions issues from a corresponding range of social forces. It mixes and synthesizes gestures; it accentuates some, like the Roman salute, and undercuts others, in its index of the cultural trajectories operating in 1914. Gesture could now be seen in three dimensions, and thus as an intervention in a spatial field with its own depth. For David Trotter, this use allowed for a new sense of tenderness: if the camera came closer to the gesturing body, for example, a sense of closeness and physical intimacy could be gradually suggested.⁷ At the same time, the shot, with the camera moving smoothly around the gesturing bodies, offered a contrast between the smooth, seamless movement capacity of the camera and the more disjointed movement of the actor, so that every unsMOOTHNESS of the actor's gesture was now shown as a disruption of pleasure. Mechanical movement, the new technology implies, is now smoother than human movement. Even if it merely begins in *Cabiria*, smooth camera movement becomes film's implied norm; human locomotion portrayed by this smooth camera now had to be stylized into gesture to grant visual pleasure. The camera in movement could not only arouse affective reactions in the audience, of tenderness and the like; it could also modulate ideological perspectives on the action, especially in films that were deeply politicized historical dramas with epic aspirations.

Human gestures, both of individual characters and of crowds, are an intense concern of all modernisms. *Cabiria*, with its gesturing crowds, might thus be compared to T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), and each owes something to earlier crowd scenes in visual art, from the paintings of Pieter Breugel to the ceiling frescoes of Pietro di Cortona. The philosopher Giorgio Agamben has written, "By the end of the nineteenth century, the western bourgeoisie had definitely lost its gestures";⁸ he speaks of "a generalized catastrophe in the sphere of gestures"⁹ and offers it as a rationale for the invention of cinema: "In the cinema, a society that has lost its gestures tries at once to reclaim what it has lost and to record its loss."¹⁰ He describes how cinema, in which the machine gaze lingers upon every gesture, provides a space where old gestures can be elegized, and gesture rethought. Since Agamben's concern is the subsequent historical moment of "bare life" represented by the camps and the Holocaust, it is clear that what he regards as the earlier mass loss of gesture, when, as Stephen Dedalus discovered, all individuals were losing control of their gestures, is a premonition of the bare life suffered by those who enter the "state of exception"¹¹ in modernity. In other words, Agamben offers us a means radically to politicize the symphony of apparently disjointed gestures in modernist art. We might question his thesis—was nineteenth-century opera, for example, evidence of a broad acceptance of certain gestural protocols?—but the advent of new kinds of gesture in the modern moment is irrefutable, and Agamben alerts us to the political stakes of this development. The sometimes frantic gesturality of *Cabiria*, or the loss of control over one's gesture, as Stephen records in *A Portrait*, leaves a space, Agamben's perspective suggests, that the fascist salute, very literally, will fill. He regards the loss of a bourgeois gestural protocol as a possible index of the disintegration of a valid representative of democratic politics; frantic gesturality implies a political crisis. One value of a film such as *Cabiria* is that in it, the loss of gesture indeed appears as a flailing confusion, generating a broken rhythm of the fidget and the gag. When silent film highlights gesture, in all its strangeness, it opens a space not only where such gesture may be manipulated, but also an arena of experimental, novel gesturality. As Agamben implies, this is a moment of profound political danger; by opening a space of new freedom of movement, it might also have a positive utopian dimension as well.

If we consider the increased scientific attention to human gesture in the late nineteenth century to be further evidence of Agamben's "crisis in gesture," we can see that here, too, film arrives as a culmination, since scientific interest in observing the moving body was sparked by new observational technologies, beginning with the photo sequences of Muybridge and Marey. These prototypes of cinema were characteristic of a nineteenth-century theorization of the body as a "human motor,"¹² which, in the age of mass factory work, aimed to maximize the body's muscular efficiency. As the monitoring machines became so precise that the smallest movements, from finger twitchings to rates of breathing, could be tracked, medicine came to notate the smallest human gesture as symptoms of nervousness and "neurasthenia."¹³ Gradually, as in the work of Georges Gilles de la Tourette, the observation of human movement became the basis for analysis of human emotions. William James, in "What Is an

Emotion?" (1884),¹⁴ judged that emotions were first experienced upon the body as physical reactions, and were only then perceived as such; James's successor, Walter Bradford Cannon, wrote *Bodily Changes in Pain, Hunger, Fear and Rage* in 1915.¹⁵ This research, which was part of an intense interest in human movement on the part of medicine, mobilized new technologies of observation to consider emotion scientifically. Film, as the art form that was invented in the modernist moment, was then ideally positioned to carry science's modes of attending to human movement back to the realm of culture. It could celebrate such movement as gesture—that is, movement rendered artistic—and, at the same time, limn the political uses of such gesture, a task that science did not think to undertake.

The various pre-War modernisms may be seen as attempts to invent representational forms better to capture gesture as suggestive of emotional flux. In Agamben's terms, "an age that has lost its gestures is for that reason obsessed with them."¹⁶ The writing of Woolf, Thomas Mann, Joyce, and Marcel Proust report, with a new seismographic accuracy enabled by new kinds of writing, the smallest gestures of their characters as evidence of real-time changes in levels of vivacity and lethargy. Literature followed the logic of the scientists, for whom emotion could be inferred through observing gesture. At the same time, the modernist literary work placed each gesture, and the subjects who produced it, in social and cultural contexts that induced them to perform those gestures in the first place. They explain the gesture by giving it context, and thus inject it with ideological implications. Of the new media technologies invented by modernism to observe gesture, film, as the medium of the Deleuzian movement image,¹⁷ is the most apt for the task. Its moving camera can fluidly capture the flow of the body in movement, while cinema's engagement with narrative can open a gesture's historical context. With its striking lighting effects, its evident "epic" ambitions in history telling, its vast sense of space (monumental sets and extensive use of open-air scenes and location shots), and its innovative use of the tracking shot, *Cabiria* not only captures emotional depth, but also offers a vast historical spectacle as context for the gestures it displays. In every work of "*cinema muto*" or silent cinema, gesture is the sign system.

Cabiria is a masterpiece situated at the heart of modernism's work of making human movement new. The first Italian production to have full-scale artistic ambitions, it was a massive twenty-reeler when earlier costume dramas, such as *La caduta di Troia* (*The Fall of Troy*) of 1911, had been only two reels in length. With magnificent three-dimensional sets, it featured a huge cast to retell a grand sweep of Roman history, with multiple plots of villainy, heroic derring-do, and romance. It inspired the later epics of Cecil B. DeMille and D. W. Griffith, who was so struck by it that he transformed the film he was then making into *Intolerance*. *Cabiria*'s experiments with lighting made for spectacular special effects. The tracking shot, or "Cabiria shot," was one of the innovations credited to the Catalan cameraman Segundo de Chamon.¹⁸ Its crowd scenes anticipate *Metropolis*. *Cabiria* also introduced Maciste, the muscled giant, played by Bartolomeo Pagano, who went on to star in nineteen further "*forzuto*" (strongman) films. An epic of ancient Rome, it premiered with a full orchestra

playing a commissioned score, in theaters rather than cinemas, and openings were major cultural events. *The New York Times*, then suspicious of film, reviewed it; it carried cinema into a new phase of acceptance as a serious art form. Given the newness of silent cinema in 1914, however, *Cabiria*, in modernist mode, also flaunts its pop-cultural roots. This epic tale of the second Punic war, therefore, aimed ambitiously to expand the scope and possibilities of the new medium. The dialectic between its pop-cultural impulses and its grandiose aspirations manifests itself in its characters' repertoire of gestures.

Made in Italy before World War I, *Cabiria* was a product of the *Epochenschwelle*, the culturally fervid era of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's *Futurist Manifesto* (1912). On June 28, 1914, two months after the release of *Cabiria*, the Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated, setting off the Great War. In Italy, the fiftieth anniversary of national unification in 1911 had precipitated a push for colonial aggression; Tripoli was captured in 1912. By then, the languages of blood sacrifice that spread across Europe, colliding in Italy with futurist intensities, precipitated nervy, experimental, and warmongering texts. New technologies—the automobile, airplane, electric light, and cinema itself—were transforming daily life. Transnational political movements, especially those of labor unions and the Suffragettes, were gaining strength. In *Cabiria*, with its focus on the personal in the midst of the epic tale, these cacophonic forces and issues contend through a ballet of gesture. Is the film a propaganda piece for Italian dreams of imperial conquest, or does it suggest a political life beyond the self-aggrandizing imperial model? In its contrast between frenzied gesture and stylized movement, between involuntary gesture and the striking pose, between gestures of fear and those of courage, *Cabiria* moves the viewer by instigating a political unconscious of human gesture.

Cabiria's Gestural Choreography

First, consider that *Cabiria* stages a series of scenes in which the film self-consciously comments on its own techno-modernist craft. When we first see the child Cabiria, she is playing with a set of dolls and marionettes; this moment prefigures the scene in which Archimedes (Enrico Gemelli), planning technical advances that can defeat the might of Rome, takes a massive compass and describes an arc. Then we see his invention: a web of mirrors that captures light and directs it at the Roman ships, setting them alight. The unequivocal reference to tricks of lighting—a key feature of *Cabiria's* own technical know-how—is striking. As with the marionettes, the film draws attention to its own innovative, technologically enabled artifice. It does so again in the scene of the attack on the walls of Carthage, when we see that a hoist, holding a basket full of soldiers, is being raised and swung over the city wall. Here, we realize that the scene itself may have been filmed from a similar hoisted platform. Soon, a shot of a road lingers on the chariot-track grooves worn into it: the tracks on which *Cabiria's* camera moved are invoked. Here and elsewhere, it is the mechanical devices—the

marionette, the compass, the hoist—that perform the gesture. Human gesture is subsumed to, and shown as a more fragile phenomenon than, mechanical movement, which is the machine-secret behind this film's creation.

The new technologies of the day, leading to the fear that the new “horse power” was replacing human muscle power, gave a new aura of poignancy to the human body. If *Cabiria* has the audience see that the film's most enabling gestures are those performed by machines, its obsession with human gestures is in part elegiac, in part decorative. Human gesture, the turning crane or revolving compass seems to say, is unpredictable, and relatively powerless. This concept celebrates not only technology's might, but also its ability to represent, to make visible. Technology, the implication is, has use value, in that it enables and performs the representation; human movement, on the other hand, has symbolic value: that is, it gets its significance from being represented. (Gesture might be defined as human movement reduced to symbol.) In subtly highlighting how it places the technology of representation at the service of human movement as gesture, *Cabiria* underlies the relative mechanical powerlessness of the modern human subject as body, while, paradoxically, promising to liberate human gesture as symbolic. The film's base note, as seen from the very first scenes, when we watch the figures racing from the erupting Mt. Etna, is the sense of powerlessness and extraneousness of the human body; the film sets out, however, to reendow that body with meaning through an examination of its gestures. The assertion of the value of symbolic human agency in the age of machines, while acknowledging that it is machines that make this new medium possible, is at the heart of the dialectic of technology and gesture in the film. Machine gestures trump human ones, but the human ones constitute the spectacle.

The contest in *Cabiria* between the machine's power to represent and the human significance through being represented is then mapped in the film on to a further register, the contrast between high culture and the popular. Pastrone recruited Gabriele D'Annunzio, then the renowned “warrior poet” of Italy, to give his film the seal of high art. The poet contributed the sometimes portentous and unusually lengthy intertitles, and advised on plot and presentation: the film is presented as “Gabriele D'Annunzio's *Cabiria*” in the title sequence, and his portrait, from a painting by Romaine Brooks, appears at the end.¹⁹ D'Annunzian gloss, along with the classical subject matter, gave the suspect new medium a high-art respectability. This status is underlined by its visual references: the scene of Etna's eruption suggests Gustave Doré's illustrations of Dante's *Inferno* (1861). Still, film's origins in mass-culture peep-show entertainment, and its aim to entertain the masses, is palpable: the set-piece battles owe more to the circus than to battle art, and its herds of exotic animals, from Hannibal's elephants to the battle-scene camels, are circus-inspired.²⁰ The burning of the Roman fleet suggests Michelangelo Caravaggio's chiaroscuro, but also Barnum & Bailey Circus's 1884 Italian traveling pyrotechnical shows. Still, D'Annuzio's intertitles often accompany formal, sententious gestures of power, such as the Roman salute, or the moments of technological inventiveness practiced by the powerful. The popular, instead, has no such language, and its chief representative is the crowd. *Cabiria* is a film populated

by crowds, both Roman and African. These crowds swarm: that is, they run headlong away from horrors, toward spectacles. The crowd's gestures, in other words, are so fluid we might sense that they are still being formed. The crowd's members emerge from the world where human movement still has use value (in work), but their locomotion lacks authoritative gesture, which is to say, it is unstylized. The soldiers in the film, for example, rush or trudge: rather than being on parade, they are working, not gesturing.

The film's contrast between sententious formal gestures and its popular crowd scenes is tested in *Cabiria*'s representation of Africa. Here, the Italian audience gets to consider how, for the citizens of its new North African colony, the orientalist narrative, which both exoticizes and derides the Carthaginians, might be mapped onto the modern western narrative, of highbrow versus lowbrow tastes. What, the film asks, could a western grammar of African gesture look like? In *Cabiria*, inventive technology contrasts with the human body, high-art aspirations with the pop-culture elements, and the representation of Africans with that of Romans. In the stylized movements of the bodies of the two figures who are caught between the cultures, the child and then young woman Cabiria and the slave Maciste, we can discern the film's central gestural aesthetic. Since the implicit politics of the production springs first from its Italian context, and since a component of Italian national self-image was a sense of national gesture, we must first consider how the film's focus on stylized human movement worked in its Italian context.

The expression of Italy through gesture is a key concern of *Cabiria*. The film does not traffic in the stereotypes of the gesticulating Italian; nevertheless, the relation of Italianness to gesture governs the work's visual logic. Ancient Roman writers were among the first to theorize gesture, and they did so in terms of its political effects. Cicero's *De oratore* and Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria* make oratory the basis of mass political persuasion. Centuries later, Andrea de Jorio, inspired by the gestural poses of classical art, in 1832 produced the first cultural study of gesture, *La mimica degli antichi investigata nel gestire napoletano* (Gestural Expression of the Ancients in the Light of Neapolitan Gesture).²¹ Between the fiftieth anniversary of Italian unification in 1911 and Mussolini's march on Rome in 1922, there was a turn to the Roman empire as political model. *Cabiria*, and earlier costume dramas such as Pastrone's *La caduta di Troia* (1911) and Enrico Guazzoni's *Quo Vadis* (1913), participated in this "Romanitas" that glorified the ancient empire by offering gestural forms for such a politics. *Cabiria*'s "Romanitas" is further energized through the influence of the two most interesting art phenomena of the day in Italy, "D'Annunzianismo" and futurism. Both imbue the film, and the result is that *Cabiria* is the antithesis of a reverential display of gestures awaiting post-War fascist copying. Yet these influences, far from undercutting the nationalist-imperialist message of the film, may serve to make it more portentous.

D'Annunzio's role in *Cabiria*, made evident in the grandiloquence of the intertitles, underlined moments the poet wished the audience to see as symbolic. It created an

aura in the film around the issues of national sacrifice, heroic valor, and Roman fortitude. This aura is shot through the whole, without quite overwhelming its heterogeneity or its low-art suggestion of carnival excess. At the moment of the hand and the flames, for example, the intertitle declaims, "Now consummate the sacrifice in your throat of flame ... roaring, ardent hunger." D'Annunzio capitalizes on the film's dramatic chiaroscuro lighting effects to suggest, in the intertitles, a profound, unspecified significance in the imagery of flame and fire. From the early shots of Etna erupting, fire signals Roman sacrifice; the culminating fire scene comes when the Roman camp is set alight. Yet this fire, to Maciste and Fulvius, "is a ray of hope," notes the intertitle: fire summons some Romans to act heroically. D'Annunzio also seems to be behind the film's intermittent symbolist voluptuousness: when the princess is first shown, the intertitle announces her as "the passionate pomegranate flower." This symbolism affects gesture especially in the two dance sequences: first, the people's dance before the sacrifice, and then, in one of the film's final scenes, a solitary woman's dance in the background while Fulvius and Cabiria, united lovers, gaze out to sea. This scene is followed by a dream sequence in which, around the lovers, trails a fairy carousel of languidly waving women. Whether implanted by D'Annunzio or others, the film's symbolist semiotics works as follows: when depicting public life, it invokes fire and the heroic, with the martial coded as male; when it represents private life, we see dance as voluptuous, languid gesture. This code is all conventional, even "operatic"; yet D'Annunzio's symbolist vehemence, shot through with Nietzschean passion, brings even this high-art strand of the film close to the futurist spirit.

Cabiria is in no evident sense a futurist film, yet futurist assumptions are in part what render it dynamic.²² As a film without manifest avant-garde ambitions, it held little interest for Marinetti and his group; only in 1916 did the author of *The Futurist Manifesto* turn his attention to film, cooperating on a manifesto, "La cinematografica futurista." (In 1914 he had objected to Anton Giulio Bragaglia's "Fotodinamismo futurista.")²³ Yet *Cabiria* might be thought of as unconsciously futurist; it revels in the key futurist concerns of speed and new technology. We have seen how the film draws attention to its own technological advances, by means of lighting, editing, and moving cameras. With regard to speed, there is still debate about the proper speed at which films such as *Cabiria* should be shown.²⁴ The scenes move fast as the result of editing, an effect enhanced by the tracking shot, which is implicitly futurist in that it allows for seeing at a certain speed. That speed is not so great that it registers as modernist experiment, as does, for example, a painting by Giacomo Balla,²⁵ but it does demand that the technology match the dynamism of the human gesture. Paul Virilio, the great speed theorist, registered this aspect of the film at once:

Cabiria came from the land of the futurists, whose manifesto appeared three years earlier. For both Pastrone and the futurists, the linear-Euclidian organization of thought had come to an end, human sight was on the same footing as energetic propulsion.²⁶

He explains how, in the tracking shot, “The viewpoint can be mobile, can . . . share the speed of moving objects.” Depth can be shown more fully, cast as an effect of speed. In *The Pope’s Monoplane* (*Le monoplan du Pape*) of 1912, Marinetti himself had celebrated the experience of altered and fluctuating perspectives, in a warmongering account of his experience as an airman in the capture of Tripoli. Futurism haunts the “Cabiria shot,” because the shot implies that movement at any speed endows what is seen with an emotional depth. To move and be moved are equated.

Cabiria’s key technological innovation, as was the case with many other innovations in popular culture, worked all the better for slipping in unnoticed. In the tracking shot, the camera moved fluidly around the space shown, and around the characters. The result was futurism not as manifesto but as an apparently inevitable change—a change in nothing less than the ground rules of western perspective. Now, with the perspective changing as the camera moved, a correspondingly dynamic moving subject would garner most significance. Flow, it is implied, is the very condition of affective power. Thus *Cabiria* may be the first film in the history of cinema in which gesture looks “natural,” since now its characters’ movement is matched by the movement of the camera. Gesture is a kind of flow; the *movement image* that, a half century later, Gilles Deleuze would celebrate was now achieved.²⁷ Gesture and technology complement each other and make each other necessary. Nevertheless, in *Cabiria* it turns out that gesture is not quite “natural”: for the audience, it often appears excessive, and thus is in keeping with the brutal power plays of futurism. In particular, when the camera lingers on gendered and racialized bodies, *Cabiria*’s cultural politics are highlighted.

The most striking body in *Cabiria* is that of Maciste, the strongman; its gestures are the center of the moving camera’s attention. Playing in blackface and wearing a loincloth, his physique on constant display, he is the descendant of both the gladiator and the fairground strongman; he also exemplifies the cultural obsession in the early twentieth century with the physically strong male body. Eugene Sandow had written *Physical Strength and How to Obtain It* in 1897; Edgar Rice Burroughs first published *Tarzan of the Apes* as a book in 1914. Maciste’s ostentatiously oiled muscles bring the fairground strongman into film, and thus carry a charge of the carnivalesque, but they also testify to an anxiety about the signifiers of masculinity at the moment when technology was replacing workplace physical labor, and women were entering the public sphere.²⁸ Vaguely comic excess and formal, sententious reverence compete in *Cabiria*’s display of Maciste. A case can be made that the comedy registers only when the camera is still, and that the reverence begins once the camera has started to move, but given what Virilio characterizes as the occasional “misuse” of the tracking shot here, technology and the meaning of gestures do not match quite so neatly. In the first scene in which Maciste, as body, is displayed, he, and not the camera, moves: photographed slightly from below, as a monumental figure, he folds his arms and revolves, grandly, so that he comes to be displayed in profile. To post-1922 audiences, this moment shocks: with his strong jaw, folded arms, and barrel chest, Maciste is a virtual double for Benito Mussolini. Mussolini, who often stripped to the waist to strike

exactly this pose, may have copied it from *Cabiria*,²⁹ just as he may have adopted the Roman salute from this epic and others like it (see Figure 1.2). Such influence makes clear the authoritarian quality of the masculinity celebrated by *Cabiria*.³⁰ In the film he often moves with folded arms and solid resolution: a respect for the male body as monumental is being enacted here.

This male superbody, engaged in formal gestures, is reinforced by the film's extravagantly anthropomorphized architectural settings; at the same time, signaling a North African exotic, this body-imitating architecture alerts us to a fascinated ambivalence in *Cabiria* with regard to all bodies. Moloch's temple is shaped like a sphinx, its entrance a vast mouth. Whether inspired by Renaissance garden architecture or fairground structures, the effect is to commemorate the gigantic body. Yet here, too, the fairground logic operates: when Fulvius and Maciste escape from the temple by climbing out of Moloch's eye, a surreal Gulliver-like world is invoked and all massive bodies are mocked, as the gigantic architectural body becomes a plaything. Maciste's body at this moment, conversely, now seems insect-small, emerging from the giant's eye as an errant tear. Likewise, it is Maciste's enslaved body that must make the most strenuous gestures, in order for him to free himself. Maciste is shown chained to a grindstone, which he turns in a slow crawl of great physical exertion. When he is rescued by Fulvius, and, as the intertitle declares, "The joy of unexpected freedom increases his strength," he magnificently pulls the grindstone apart and breaks his



Figure 1.2 Maciste, Giovanni Pastrone, *Cabiria* (1914)

chains in one mighty gesture (see Figure 1.3). The human male body here is shown, fantastically, to be stronger than the film's anthropomorphized architecture. Maciste's gesturing body wants to break out of the very spatial bounds of the film. This act indeed would be an escape into a wholly new identity and status for the African slave, but it is one the film does not finally allow.

The body of the faithful pro-Roman, African slave Maciste, who also carries the limp body of his master when Fulvius is too exhausted to go on, is clearly a starred ideological signifier: his presence allows the Italian audience of 1912, after the Libyan war, to be assured that their African subjects can be enslaved yet faithful. Moreover, as played by an Italian, Maciste in a sense served to reassure the audience that their new subjects could be Italian, too. Maciste's faux-African Italian body is not that of the feared native other; rather, it is a dream of western male embodiment as transracial superman. This body's gestures are those of the subject who both accepts his slavery yet makes his grandest gestures in the cause of his freedom. Yet these gestures are always indeterminate, impressive as stages in a struggle, and Maciste's grand poses of arms folded and feet apart are ultimately the choreography of servility. At the film's end, for example, unexpectedly, he plays the lute; while Fulvius and Cabiria embrace, he is their Pan. It's a lute, in the silent film, we cannot hear: a futile gesture, again enacting art as servility.

A similar dialectic, but in reverse, is worked out around the female body of Cabiria herself. Whereas Maciste the slave experiments with strenuous gestures of freedom,



Figure 1.3 Maciste breaks his chains, Giovanni Pastrone, *Cabiria* (1914)

Cabiria, the free Roman child-woman in captivity, is presented as a subject whose gestures embody almost wholly the attitudes of subservience. She moves mostly beside, and in contrast to, the Carthaginian Princess Sofonisba (Italia Almirante-Manzini), who is played in the operatic film-diva style that would come to be known as "*borelleggiare*" in Italian, after the diva Lydia Borelli, who copied the gestures of Eleonora Duse. Sofonisba's "*divismo*" finds its opposite in Cabiria's gestures of meekness: the captive holds her body in a slouching curve, while she allows the lecherous Karthalo (Dante Testa) to place his hand beneath her chin as she bends forward, carrying her tray (see Figure 1.4). She is the only character who grows from child to adult in the film; yet her gestures, like those of Maciste, do not register change but only embody the pathos of her servitude. Her characteristic movement marks her fear: she trembles. Even though the film is named for her, hers is the body in it with the least vivid gestural repertoire. Only the limp body of the exhausted Fulvius, carried by Maciste, is less expressive. These are Agamben's modern bodies that have lost their gestures: the task of the other characters is to restore Fulvius's and Cabiria's lost Roman gesturality. In the end, we see her weep over Sofonisba, in another characteristic pose, the crouch. (Crouching, she reprises the pose of the praying North Africans in Moloch's temple.) In the final scenes, as Fulvius's lover, she has the conventional pose of a fin-de-siècle female love object: basking in Fulvius's attention, she



Figure 1.4 Cabiria ("Elissa") cowers before the lecherous Karthalo, Giovanni Pastrone, *Cabiria* (1914)

sits and leans back. The implication is that female capacity for movement is the property only of the *femme fatale* (here Sofonisba); the male slave Maciste can enter the public sphere through an assertive gesturality, but the child and woman are ciphers rather than subjects, gestured upon rather than gesturing, for whom a gestural agency is for now impossible. The film might appear to imply that only modern imperialism has the potential capacity to revivify the enervated western subject; the gesturality of the African slave Maciste reenergizes Fulvius and Cabiria, as shown when he presides over their love scene at the film's end. This closure, however, is all too conventional; in its visual language, the pleasure resides not in the ending, but in another version of gestural possibility shown throughout—the vast communal gesture of the crowd.

For Giorgio Agamben, a new gesturality would be the grammar of a new, ethical politics. For such politics to be made visible, this new order of gesture would have to be practiced not by a single character, but by a group. This is not only Agamben's late-twentieth-century logic, but also the logic of early-century modernism. Stephen Dedalus's uncontrolled gesture at the end of *A Portrait* gives way in *Ulysses* to a broader anatomy of strange gestures centered on Leopold Bloom's nervous gait and Stephen's frustrated movements. *Ulysses* maps how the gestures, especially the gait, of the young and the older man fall into common rhythm, enacted as they walk home together: it gives us a new group gesturality, but performed by only a group of two. In a significant way, this gesturality is the logic of *Cabiria* as well, for the most vivid feature of the film is its crowd scenes. Can a crowd have its gestures? Here, the crowds, first the Romans fleeing from Mt. Etna, then the worshipers who stream into Moloch's temple, seem to flow, and then raise their arms and rush about in a full-scale enactment of Agamben's vision of the early-twentieth-century bourgeoisie: a crowd that "had lost its gestures." In the battle scenes in the film, this sense of a crowd that has lost its gestures is initially extended, but then, strikingly, reversed. In the final battle on the ramparts of Carthage, for example, when the Carthaginians upturn the basket in which Roman soldiers are being hoisted up, we witness some of the film's most unnerving gestures of terror, as soldiers are tossed out, and, limbs flailing, fall through the air. Then, however, as the battle tide turns, the crowd of troops begin to form a crowd gesture, to act in unison. This is not the synchronized gesturing of Leni Riefenstahl's legions, but an improvised choreography of cooperation. The climactic scene occurs when Fulvius must scale the walls of Carthage. Soldiers crouch and form a platform by the wall, and then others climb on their shields, crouch again—and so on, until their group gesture has formed a human stair on which Fulvius clammers to the top of the city wall. This group gesture seems improvised; it shows the Romans impulsively orchestrating a group gesture in order to help their leader, and it gives us a gesture as a group means to overcome a challenge. It was the mass gesture shown on one of the posters to advertise the film (see Figure 1.5). Even if, like much of the film (and like much high modernism), it is a celebration of male gesture as imperial military action, it does posit gesture as potentially cooperative, and as effective. This moment is as close as the film comes to choreographing a new kind of gestural communitarianism. The Great War and post-War fascism would show that this spirit of



Figure 1.5 The human pyramid. Poster, Giovanni Pastrone, *Cabiria* (1914). Original poster art by Luigi Caldanzano (1880–1928). Published in *Gli avvisi delle Officine G. Ricordi E C.* (Milano: G. Ricordi, circa 1914)

cooperation could be hijacked; soon, the gestural repertoire this film made popular would be incorporated wholesale into the sign system of the new dictatorial order. Are *Cabiria's* innovative forms, then, and its heteroglossia of gesture, wholly subservient to a reactionary politics?

Cabiria's repertoire of authoritarian gesture, centered on the “Roman salute,” can strike the viewer today as a mishmash of dreams of Roman imperialism, recast for mass culture. Yet the question remains: can we snatch this gesturality away from its subsequent history, to even imagine that the gestures being represented here, and the means to show them, might offer a new gestural grammar, and, with it, the blueprint for a new kind of community? For the political possibilities of modernist innovative form, this question is key. Could *Cabiria's* formal innovations—its new ways of lighting bodies, its use of dramatic camera angles, of fast editing, and of the tracking shot—have proved dramatic enough to cut across or reverse the tendency of the film's narrative to support the imperial dreams of pre-War Italian nationalism? Can *Cabiria's* modernist innovativeness render it something more than a document of Italian imperialist, proto-fascist spectacle? To all this, one might offer a tentative yes. When the lighting of Sofonisba's silvered gown in the garden night scene, for example, gives her moving body a silver sheen, her North African hijab, and her very body are at once made ghostly and derealized: she is a powerful native woman whose very body, as well as the rights that might go with it, is being robbed of its very existence. At the same time, the silver glow, engendered by an innovative lighting experiment, also grants that body a modern glamour, so that this native woman, far from being othered, is also brought resolutely into the forefront of western modernity. For the western audience, the semiotics of her otherness is destabilized. Similarly, complex editing of, for example, the inn and palace-dungeon scenes, grants us a sense of successive, contrasting spaces (the prison cell, the courtyard, the secret passage, the city wall) and their interrelation, rendering impossible any blank othering of North African spaces. Finally, we come to the potential interpellative and aesthetic power of the film's key innovation, the tracking shot. Do these shots, quite rare here, render the gestures of the North African figures “natural”—given that the movement of the shot now matches the movement of the gesture—rather than exotic?

The film's finest tracking shot occurs in the famous series of scenes in the Temple of Moloch. Here, the huge throngs of Carthaginians bow before the statue of the seated god, in attitudes of subservience. Others dance frantically in the space before the statue. All this works perfectly as an image of exotic and heathen natives as seen through imperial eyes. Then, however, so slowly as to be almost imperceptible, the camera begins to move. It emerges from a corner, apparently tracking one woman in the crowd, who sidles into the temple, walks around the bowing worshipers, and then emerges close to the dancing figures. Minutes later, we realize that this figure may have been Fulvius, Roman adventurer, in disguise. Yet at this moment, the tracking shot invites us to engage with one figure, apparently a native, in the crowd, to consider her gait, and to imagine her as a singular moving body. This view is hardly a full-scale subversion of the imperial gaze, but it is a slight piercing of the totalizing othering

of the natives as an anonymous crowd. It lasts only for the duration of the tracking shot. The scene as a whole, filmed with a succession of still cameras, never accepts the crowd as anything other than exotic spectacle. The tracking shot, however, opens the possibility of attention to an individual, as a means of breaching the mass othering of the imperial gaze. It is enabled, furthermore, through innovative film technique, by an advance in the use of the technologized gaze. Amid *Cabiria*'s kitschy history, the modernist technology of the camera develops a flowing perspective that hints at an unpredictable gesturality, and thus plumbs a significance not ordained in advance.

Like much modernism, *Cabiria* traffics ambivalently in, and even panders to, some of the grimmest ideologies of its day, but its innovative use of the technologized gaze, casting gesture as ambiguous, at least disturbs the sense of the natives as merely a crowd. Perhaps only in the scene with the Roman soldiers cooperating to help Fulvius climb the city wall, and never with the natives, does the film display a new set of gestures shared by the group: if a new version of community is suggested here, it merely reinforces imperial legitimacy. Yet when the film camera, as it does so seldom, begins to move, an unstable zone of gesturality, in which we don't know how the gesture will be completed, is opened up, and the potential utopianism of the gesture in modernity is brought into focus.

Notes

1. The tracking shot, or “Cabiria shot,” is the most famous innovation in *Cabiria*. On its aesthetic impact, see, for example, David Trotter, *Cinema and Modernism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 102–3. Noting that the shots were used “to make the best possible use of the vast three-dimensional sets,” Trotter close-reads a scene to show that the tracking shot “beautifully expresses tenderness.”
2. On modernist gesture, see Carrie Preston, *Modernism's Mythic Pose: Gender, Genre, Solo Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Anthony Paraskeva, *The Speech-Gesture Complex: Modernism, Theatre, Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013); Guillemette Bolens, *The Style of Gestures: Embodiment and Cognition in Literary Narrative* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), originally published in French as *Le Style des gestes: Corporeité et kinésie dans le récit littéraire* (Lausanne, Editions BHMS, IUHMS, 2008), translated by the author.
3. James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London: Penguin, 1992), 274–75. Originally published 1916 (New York: B.W. Huebsch).
4. Susan Strasser, *Never Done: A History of American Housework* (New York: Henry Holt, Owl Books, 2000).
5. Quoted in William M. Drew, *The Last Silent Picture Show: Silent Films on American Screens in the 1930s* (Lantham, MD: Scarecrow Press, Rowan and Littlefield, 2007), 109.
6. Chap. 5, “*Cabiria*: The Intersection of Cinema and Politics,” in Martin M. Winkler, *The Roman Salute: Cinema, History, Ideology* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2009), 94–121.
7. Trotter, *Cinema and Modernism*, 102.

8. Giorgio Agamben, "Notes on Gesture," in *Means without Ends: Notes on Politics* by Giorgio Agamben; Cesare Casarino and Vincenzo Binetti, trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 49–62; 49.
9. Agamben, "Notes," 50.
10. Agamben, "Notes," 52.
11. Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, Kevin Attell, trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
12. Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).
13. Italians, especially Cesare Lombroso, author of *La donna delinquente* (*The Delinquent Woman*, 1893), and Angelo Mosso, author of *La paura* (*Fear*, 1891), were leaders in this field.
14. William James, "What Is an Emotion?" *Mind* 9 (1884), 188–205; 190.
15. Walter Cannon, *Bodily Changes in Pain, Hunger, Fear and Rage* (New York: Appleton, 1915).
16. Agamben, "Notes," 52.
17. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema I: The Movement-Image*, Hugh Tomlison and Barbara Habberjam, trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).
18. Joan M. Minguet Batllori, *Segundo de Chamon: The Cinema of Fascination* (Barcelona: Generalitat de Catalunya, Institut Català de les Indústries Culturals, 2012).
19. For this screenshot, see *Cabiria, Visione storica del III secolo a. C.*, Giovanni Pastrone, *Didascalie di Gabriele D'Annunzio*, curated by Roberto Radicati and Ruggero Rossi (Torino: Museo Nazionale del Cinema, 1977), 186.
20. Jacqueline Reich, "Italian Silent Film Genres: Comics, Serials, Historical Epics and Strongmen," in *The Italian Cinema Book*, Peter Bondanella, ed. (London: British Film Institute/Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 31–38, 33.
21. Andrea de Jorio, *Gesture in Naples and Gesture in Classical Antiquity*, Adam Kendon, trans. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000).
22. On Italian cinema and futurism, see Michael Syrimis, *The Great Black Spider on Its Knock-Kneed Tripod: Reflections of Cinema in Early Twentieth-Century Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012). *Cabiria* is treated throughout.
23. Giorgio Bertellini, "Silent Italian Cinema, An International Story," in Bondanella, *Italian Cinema*, 9–16, 14.
24. On versions of *Cabiria*, see Paolo Cherchi Usai and Martin Sopocy, "'Cabiria,' an Incomplete Masterpiece: The Quest for the Original 1914 Version," *Film History* 2, no. 2 (June–July, 1988), 155–65.
25. Enda Duffy, *The Speed Handbook: Velocity, Pleasure, Modernism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).
26. Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, Patrick Camiller, trans. (London: Verso, 1989), 16.
27. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).
28. Maurizia Boscagli, *The Eye on the Flesh: Fashions of Masculinity in the Early Twentieth Century* (Boulder, CO: Westview/Harper Collins, 1996).
29. For a photographic comparison, see Pierre Sorlin, *Italian National Cinema 1896–1996* (London: Routledge, 1996), 48–49.
30. On Maciste, see Angela Dalle Vacche, *The Body in the Mirror: Shapes of History in Italian Cinema* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 51–56.

D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance* and the Ever-Present Now

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D. W. Griffith once declared, “The task I am trying to achieve is above all to make you see.”¹ It is impossible to tell, at this distance in time, if he was purposely or accidentally paraphrasing Joseph Conrad’s famous pronouncement: “My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see.”² But the similarity raises all sorts of questions about the relationship between Griffith and aesthetic modernism. For some time now, it has been common to remark on the apparent similarities between Griffith’s work and that of certain major twentieth-century writers. Pauline Kael, for example, said of Griffith that “in his own way he attempted what Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, Marcel Proust and Virginia Woolf and James Joyce were also attempting.”³ Kael was speaking in particular of *Intolerance* (1916), which is also often credited with a direct influence on certain masterpieces of modernist filmmaking, from *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) to *Metropolis* (1927). And though this latter influence can be described in quite specific terms, the relation between Griffith and literary modernism remains at the level of the commonplace. The crucial words that Griffith does not quote from Conrad, “by the power of the written word,” seem to stand between him and the tradition that Kael evokes with the names of Pound, Eliot, Proust, Woolf, and Joyce.

A couple of years after echoing Conrad, Griffith restated his ambitions in an even more expansive way. Movies, he assured the readers of *The Editor*, will allow their audiences to “see everything—positively everything.” Movies can do so because they are immediate, not just because they are causally attached to their referents, but also because they take place in the privileged space of the present: “It is the ever-present, realistic, actual now that ‘gets’ the great American public, and nothing ever devised by the mind of man can show it like moving pictures.”⁴ Eyesight and the present, these statements imply, are crucially implicated in each other: the temporal present is verified for us by the apparent homogeneity in time of what we see at once in space; to see at all is to see in the present. Movies, according to Griffith, are the superior medium insofar as they enjoy this kind of sensory and temporal immediacy.

Of course, the relation of movies to “the ever-present, realistic, actual now” is a lot more complicated than Griffith’s boosterish statements imply. Any image tends to separate presence from the present, showing the viewer something that is not here

now. But a photographic image has a quality that other images do not, insofar as it preserves *a* present, the moment of exposure, so that even when the subject of the photograph is long gone, the moment of its registration lives on. This much is true in particular of common snapshots, which are not meant to record Mt. Rushmore or the Grand Canyon, because to do so would be utterly superfluous, but the moment the photographer encountered those sights. Thus any photograph, when viewed, has two nows superimposed on it. The movies, by adding motion, immensely complicate this basic situation. Vachel Lindsay once described film as a mirror combined with a clock, a formula that aptly expresses the problematic relationship of movies to the present.⁵ For the static present mirrored by an ordinary photograph is somehow stretched by the film medium across some expanse of time. Thus the difficult relationship of any present to the nonexistent time around it is reproduced within the film, as is the distressing necessity by which every present gives way seamlessly to another. And this movement of the mirror through time is contained within another such movement, that of the viewer through time, so that two nows are constantly sliding past each other. In films with any kind of editing at all, of course, the situation is even more complicated.

Instead of being “ever-present,” then, the now of a movie is a moving target, or a whole series of them. Instead of solidly situating us in the present, as Griffith claims, movies dramatize the tenuousness of our grip on it. More than any other experience except just sitting, watching a movie highlights the deeply puzzling aspects of living in time, a fact that many films exploit for thematic purposes. Griffith, on the other hand, seems to deny all this, and his dedication to an unproblematic, ever-present now seems to make him a naive modernist. For modernism is, above or below everything else, a commitment to the present, free and independent of any and all pasts. On an experiential level, though, the present is at once inescapable and impossible to live in. The phenomenology of the present is notoriously hard to account for, and it drove as subtle a thinker as Edmund Husserl to a lifelong distraction.⁶ Griffith may seem a bumpkin by comparison, but his belief in the movies as the native art form of the present issued in a series of magnificent, if flawed, works that shed the same kind of light on the problem of the present as those other magnificent, flawed works, *The Waste Land* (1922), *The Cantos* (1917–1969), and *Ulysses* (1922).

Discussions of Griffith very often begin with the famous comments of Sergei Eisenstein, following on Griffith’s own claims that “the first shoots of American film esthetic” are to be found in the works of Charles Dickens.⁷ Linking Griffith to the nineteenth-century novel in this way reinforces the general notion that Griffith’s main contribution to the “American film esthetic” was to have given it narrative coherence. But the first Dickensian technique that Eisenstein chooses for comment is the close-up, in particular the close-up of a teakettle in *The Cricket on the Hearth*.⁸ Eisenstein marvels at the power of the close-up, in book and movie, to pack a whole set of ideas and reflections into a small space, to make the audience or reader see what otherwise would have to be explained. But this power of ocular concentration is precisely what makes the close-up a non-narrative element, what made it such an

unwelcome innovation, at least according to the creation myth as Griffith told it. He notes ironically that it was considered “anarchistic” because it broke up the obvious flow of action across a legible physical space.⁹ Thus the close-up seems to exemplify a basic tension between Griffith’s ambition to make his audience see and the narrative coherence of the film.

Eisenstein’s essay is even more famous, though, for its comments on what he calls “the method of parallel action,” which he also traces to Dickens.¹⁰ Griffith, who claimed himself to have borrowed the idea from Dickens, tended to call it the “cut-back,” a term that for him included temporal flashbacks and parallel story lines as well as parallel action within a single storyline.¹¹ Continuity editing of this kind is, of course, the heart and soul of narrative filmmaking, allowing the development of complex story lines where films had previously been limited to simple reality shots. But it is also quite obvious that the development of continuity relies on a willingness to break into individual storylines and actions, a technique that Eisenstein calls “the transient thievery of the action.”¹² This vivid term emphasizes the way that continuity editing depends on discontinuity, on displacements, distentions, and distortions of the timeline. The result is that each element in the complex is enriched, as, for example, the anxiety of the businessman sitting by his telephone comes to have the danger to his family inscribed on it, but this access of visual significance comes at the price of temporal interruption. In early films like *The Lonely Villa* (1909) and *The Lonedale Operator* (1911), Griffith became a master at balancing intensity and interruption, but the balancing act would not have been necessary or useful if the two had not been in some kind of conflict in the first place.

In extolling Dickens as the fount of modern film technique, Eisenstein puts great emphasis on his powers of observation, which allow the descriptions in his novels to have a significance beyond the merely visual. But there is a persistent tension in this praise between the visual and the narrative. According to Eisenstein, Dickens’s eye resembles a camera not just in its acuteness of observation but also in its quickness. Like a good camera lens, he fixes, “in the hundredth part of a second,” otherwise transient details. “The truth is,” he says, “that Dickens always sees instantly, and in every last, least, tiny detail, *all* that there is to be seen.”¹³ This emphasis on the instantaneous makes Dickens seem more like a still photographer than a moviemaker, and makes it seem as if action were not just unnecessary to Dickens’ vision but even perhaps in conflict with it. The characters, Eisenstein claims, are perfectly observed, but they are only “perfect as long as he can keep them out of his stories.”¹⁴ The very traits that make them vivid prevent them from carrying out a convincing narrative action.

In short, Eisenstein emphasizes seeing in the present as much as Griffith does himself, and in doing so he defines a film aesthetic that implicitly makes coherent narrative a little harder to achieve. The same conflict may be discerned in the standard account of Griffith’s influence that follows Eisenstein. That account is based on an apparent conflict between the visual stimulus provided by the cinema of attractions and the narrative satisfactions superimposed on film by Griffith’s work at Biograph. The attraction, as it was influentially proposed by Tom Gunning, is a bit of pure spectacle,

a scene whose appeal goes no further than the sheer witnessing of it. Because its appeal is entirely visual, “the temporality of the attraction,” Gunning says, “is limited to the pure present tense of its appearance.”¹⁵ Since seeing happens in the present, an appeal made solely to the sense of sight will make any sort of temporal extension impossible, especially that on which narrative is founded.

The notion that Griffith gradually commits film to story is an old one, modulated by Gunning primarily in relation to the films that preceded Griffith, which can now be seen as expressions of an independent aesthetic and not mere fumblings toward a classic norm.¹⁶ Gunning has also shown in masterly detail how Griffith brought an increased spatial and temporal clarity to early film. The pure present of the attraction is submitted, movie by movie, to a temporal logic, and the relation between individual shots is disambiguated so that film can finally convey “continuity and simultaneity within a variety of spatial relations.”¹⁷ This result, then, becomes the basis of classic Hollywood cinema, while the attraction retreats to the fringes of alternative and avant-garde filmmaking. This is still a very influential version of film history, though its accuracy and adequacy have been attacked from a couple of different vantage points. The sources of the classic narrative paradigm, including Dickens, have been shown to contain powerfully atemporal elements of their own, and narrative impulses have been detected even in the cinema of attractions.¹⁸ It has made more sense beginning in the 1990s to see attraction and narrative as warring elements within every film, and this conflict seems to be the case even in those early Griffith films that seemed to establish the narrative system.

Griffith’s first extended sequence of parallel editing, according to Gunning, comes in *The Fatal Hour* (1908), a film whose title announces its dependence on the clock. In it, a detective is captured by the criminals she has been pursuing, and she is tied up before a pistol, which is linked to a large clock and set to fire at 12:00. Apprehended at about 11:40, the criminals graciously reveal their plan to the police, who set out, lickety-split, to stop the clock before it can strike the hour. Though the clock is in view for much of the film it does not in fact mark real time, and the amount of time advanced on the clock from shot to shot does not correspond to the actual time taken up by the action in the parallel shots. It is fairly obvious, in any case, that to be at all useful on the set, where the filming would have taken several hours, the clock could not have been operational. So the notion promoted in Gunning’s account, that in this film “each shot finds its place in an irreversible temporal logic,” must already be qualified just a bit.¹⁹ More fundamentally, the process of crosscutting between two simultaneous actions, that of the clock and the detective and that of the police racing to rescue her, sets up a complex temporal order. As Gunning puts it, “The order of shots no longer indicates a simple succession in time, but the staggered process of simultaneity.”²⁰ Though the clock on the wall tells the viewer that time marches on ineluctably, the cuts to the racing police in their carriage indicate a slip backward in time, to show something happening simultaneously elsewhere. This is an early and crude example of a technique that would later, Gunning says, be perfected, but it does show in a simple form what would

later become a temporal convention in classic Hollywood cinema: "Alternating of images equals simultaneity of occurrences."²¹

This convention is probably the most basic rule by which the disorderly set of instants delivered by the cinema of attractions is turned into a coherent timescape. But the order it imposes is incomplete, for the non-successive present of the attraction is not really hammered into orderly succession, one thing logically following and replacing another. Instead, simultaneity and succession are shown to coexist within a very uneasy portrayal of the present. In the timeline represented by the clock, the present is fleeting, each tick of it replaced by another in linear progression. In the simultaneity of montage, however, it is flexible in size and not limited to a purely linear progress. With the switch from one line of action to another, the same present in fact succeeds itself, and the testimony of the clock on the wall makes this twist in time all the more shocking. It is not so much that the pure present of the attraction remains as a residual presence within the narrative as that the incomplete imposition of narrative reveals some of the intrinsic peculiarities of the actual present of ordinary experience.

These points are all the more obvious in the early Griffith films in which parallel editing has a logical or an ideological purpose rather than a temporally dramatic one.²² In most of these cases, the ne plus ultra of which is of course *Intolerance* itself, shots of high and low life are alternated to create what Gunning calls a "moral dualism."²³ One of the best examples is *A Corner in Wheat* (1909), based on material from Frank Norris. In one series of shots, farmers struggle against the elements and the urban poor line up for handouts, while in another a financial wizard (Frank Powell) exults and celebrates as he corners the wheat market. There are no dramatic connections between the two sequences, and yet it is clear that they are supposed to be causally related and in some large sense simultaneous. But what sort of simultaneity links these sequences and in what sense can it correspond to what Griffith announced as the triumphant "now" of film? The farmers seem to live and work in a static time frame, while the financier's machinations seem to take only seconds. In one way, it might seem as if these divergent time lines were unified by reference to the present of the viewer, but that viewer was elevated, by the freedom granted through film editing, to a time and space not apprehensible by any actual human being. If there is a present here, it is the eternal present traditionally available only to God.

At one point in fact time stops still as a breadline of haggard beggars freezes into a kind of tableau vivant. The implication is that those in the breadline are immobilized by their poverty but also that their situation is timeless and eternal (see Figure 2.1).²⁴ But the frozen tableau, which looks like but is not a freeze-frame, is also a reminder of the photogram that is the static base of even the most dynamic film. In another way, though, the strange immobility of the breadline seems to be an inadvertent revelation of the odd syncopation of screen time that often marks parallel editing, especially the situation of the off-screen character, the Lonedale operator (Blanche Sweet), for example, who seems to wait in exactly the same pose for some seconds, as the train approaching to save her eats up the miles. In this case, it looks as if the camera filming *A Corner in Wheat* had switched back to the second storyline too soon and caught the



Figure 2.1 The breadline, D. W. Griffith, *A Corner in Wheat* (1909)

protagonists, waiting patiently as the primary storyline developed. Of course, there is no reason for these characters to wait, for the relation between them and the financier is not a temporal one in the first place. So what appears on screen is actually the static present within which logical comparisons are made, the odd, invisible simultaneity at the heart of parallel editing, the necessary moment in which two successive things are made simultaneous so that we can tell they are successive.²⁵

By developing as he does the resources of continuity editing, Griffith subjects the already complex present of the photograph to a set of rationalizations that complicate as much as they simplify. Griffith's notion that movies present the present becomes a commonplace, repeated by all sorts of film theorists.²⁶ Movies must have fascinated in the first place because they seemed capable of depicting a flowing present, something like the duration made so popular by Henri Bergson, a temporality that has come to be called "real time." But the problem with a real "real time" depiction is the same as that of the map as large as the territory it covers. It does not offer but stands in the way of perspective. A useful representation analyzes, reduces, compares, and summarizes, but a film aesthetic devoted to "real time" depictions has none of these resources. All it has are more presents. The rearrangement of these to tell a complex story ultimately means the establishment of another present, beyond even that of the spectator, a present that cannot actually be visualized, though it is the necessary context within which everything on screen is finally seen. This is the present, not by any means an ordinary now, in which *Intolerance* exists.

For many years, *Intolerance* was considered to be not just Griffith's masterwork but also the pinnacle of American filmmaking. It has also been compared with some frequency to those hugely ambitious, historically encyclopedic works in literature: *The Waste Land*, *The Cantos*, *Ulysses*.²⁷ Unfortunately, many such comparisons tend to find these works similar in their failure, especially their failure to cohere. The most extensive of these is Miriam Hansen's, which begins with a sharp judgment of the film as "a gigantic ruin of modernity."²⁸ She thinks of *Intolerance* in the way literary scholars frequently think of an unfinishable project like *The Cantos*, as a work ruined by its commitment to modernity. The choice of an unconventional organizational method, that is to say, dooms these projects to incoherence. To some extent, though, the commitment to modernity is also a commitment to the present in formal terms, to local, immediate, intensive effects rather than articulated narrative or logical design. There is a tendency to see these works as masterpieces of misplaced confidence, the kind of confidence Pound had that an image could not just display but also explain, a confidence that seems quite similar to that which Griffith had in the pure visual impact of film. Griffith, like Pound and Eliot, also makes his job harder by taking on history as a subject in itself and not just a source of story and décor. The relation of the present to the past thus becomes a structural problem. The gap between the subject matter, distanced in the past, and the immediacy of a medium meant to be modern gives these works that sense of ruin, as of great structures collapsed in upon themselves.

At its base, *Intolerance* is actually a good deal simpler than *The Cantos* or *The Waste Land*. There are four distinct story lines, taken to represent ancient, sacred, medieval, and modern times. These focus on four events: the fall of Babylon in 539 BCE; the crucifixion of Christ; the massacre of the Huguenots on St. Bartholomew's Day, 1572; and a modern story, datable by car license plates as occurring not later than 1914.²⁹ In very general terms, the four stories are meant to be the same story: the eternal conflict Griffith stages between love and intolerance, a concept that is very largely and loosely construed throughout the film. This general ideological matrix is supposed to hold the film together as Griffith intercuts the four timelines with one another: the betrayal of Babylon to the Persians by jealous, sectarian priests; the crucifixion of the Man of Peace (Howard Gaye), which Griffith had wanted to ascribe to some narrow-minded Pharisees until he was forcibly reminded of the crucial role of the Romans; the religious animosity between Catholic France and the Huguenots; and a rather tortured and strained sequence of events in the modern period, in which an industrial magnate spends so much money on the narrow-minded charities of his spinster sister that he must cut wages at his factories, throwing people out of work and into poverty, in which one of them falls in with bad companions, is falsely blamed for the death of his chief, and is almost hanged. Just how the last few stages in this drama are supposed to be caused by the sexual frustration of the spinster sister is one of the greater logical mysteries of the film.³⁰

The stories, then, are meant to be typical examples, moments chosen from a continuing conflict between elemental forces, and thus there are a number of parallels between them. But there are also differences. In one way, the overall story seems to be

one of decline, since the Babylon of Belshazzar (Alfred Paget) is portrayed as a model of tolerant authoritarianism, in which the people are left to their innocent pleasures, while the modern period is ruled by narrow-minded capitalists, who begrudge their underlings even a moment's enjoyment. On the other hand, though, only the modern story ends happily, since the innocent worker is not hanged, and thus the film seems to suggest that a modern justice system is worth something after all. As Hansen suggests, parallelism as a technique tends to slide between comparison and contrast,³¹ and even comparisons can be tricky when they are made across time. Are the similarities between Leopold Bloom and Odysseus meant to show how far humanity has fallen since classical times or that classical times weren't necessarily as grand as they have been said to be?

In any case, parallelism between the four story lines has a tendency not to reinforce but rather to undermine narrative coherence. At the most basic level, as Hansen puts it, "*Intolerance*, like few other American films, exemplifies the truism that linking requires cutting, for every connection between periods, one narrative is necessarily disrupted at the expense of another."³² Even when actual cutting does not occur, the implicit presence of three other time lines has the tendency to call into question the solidity of the one currently on screen. As Hansen explains it, this "transhistorical, *temporal omnipresence*" has a tendency to weaken the "*spatial* coherence and closure" on which the fiction effect depends.³³ But this point might also be put in purely temporal terms. Having four different historical presents alternate on screen vastly magnifies the disorienting effect of ordinary parallel editing, for there is no time to which all four might be referred, within which they might be composed. This disparity has an especially attenuating effect on the modern story, which should seem to be happening more or less now, in a time the ultimate conclusion of which has still to be determined, but which ends up in the temporal distance with the Persians and the Huguenots, whose fates were settled long ago.

Even within the individual stories, Griffith's rather casual attitude toward the norms of continuity editing and his devotion to decor and spectacle mean that narrative continuity is often overwhelmed by detail. Many scenes, especially in the Babylonian sequences, are so crowded it is hard to know where to look. Close-ups have a distressing tendency to seem like insertions into rather than selections from the larger canvas. Joyce Jesenikowski picks out the camel that ambles through the opening shot of the Judean sequence, whose qualifications for particular emphasis are not immediately clear.³⁴ To take another example, the toothless old man vignetted into the marriage-market scene in the Babylonian story has little spatial relationship to the shots he interrupts, and thus he seems the tool of a timeless comment about male appreciation of female beauty and not a dramatic elaboration. In short, Griffith's devotion to immediate visual impact and to ideological comment tends to set up a static undertow that impedes the development of a coherent narrative line.

The thrilling conclusion, the final chase scene that should tie all these loose narrative threads into a single satisfying bundle, actually leaves them even more obviously frayed. The chase, at this point in Griffith's career, is obligatory, and this one must

have seemed an opportunity to raise the ante, to have four chases in one. But there are problems with some of the older narratives that make this unfeasible. Surely it would be indecorous, even sacrilegious, to figure Christ's passion as a race to the cross, so the Judean story essentially disappears from the last two reels of the film, except for one shot of the Crucifixion that punctuates the tension of the modern execution scene. The Huguenot story becomes a variation on the pattern established with *The Lonely Villa*, but without vehicles, as Prosper (Eugene Pallette) works his way across Paris in the vain hope of saving Brown Eyes (Ruth Handforth) from the slaughter. So the pure chase scene is concentrated on the Babylonian narrative, in which the plucky Mountain Girl (Constance Talmadge) speeds her stolen chariot toward Babylon to warn Belshazzar of the invasion, while a small group in the modern story try to catch the Governor's train, to secure a stay of execution for the falsely convicted Boy.

The special oddity of this chase scene is that in some weird way the two stories seem to be racing each other. The message of the editing that created such scenes in the past is that two parallel, successive shots are in fact happening simultaneously. This was always a seriously strained fiction, but when the two timelines are 2,500 years apart, the simultaneity acquires a fantastic aspect. Of course, the viewer knows quite well that the stories are separate, but the speeding chariot of the Mountain Girl and the speeding motor car can easily seem to be speeding to the same place, in the same time, as they are apparently speeding to the same purpose. This misimpression may be underscored for a few viewers who notice the tire tracks left by the camera car in the path of the Mountain Girl. The Persian army is also racing toward Babylon on a back road heavily traveled by motor cars. For these viewers the sense that the two stories are being superimposed on each other may become actual and not just notional (see Figures 2.2 and 2.3). But the comparison may well remind the viewers that in a real sense the modern story is in the past as well, and that whatever passes for the present on the screen is in fact something done and finished some time ago.

There is a very real tension, then, between the linear narrative of the chase as such and the implications implanted by the parallel editing. On one hand, there is a continuously unrolling present, kept open to the future by the devices of suspense, while on the other hand, there is the vague, amorphous, and curiously static present implied by the parallels. Even the narrative by itself evokes a decidedly non-narrative pleasure, the pure thrill of the racing elements, which pound away, scene after scene, exciting even when they make no discernible progress. But the grand narrative of *Intolerance* encloses this relatively simple non-narrative experience, the pleasure of the image as such, within another, more complex experience, located in a different kind of present. This present, external to the four narratives and independent even of the time of viewing, is the focus of a number of specific elements within *Intolerance*.

The intertitles, for example, though they were composed by the very funny Anita Loos, adopt an "omniscient scriptural voice" that speaks from a position above and beyond all the narratives.³⁵ The narrator editorializes throughout, making it clear that sixteenth-century France is a "hotbed of intolerance" and that Monsieur La France is "effeminate."³⁶ The narrator also quotes, sometimes with and sometimes without



Figure 2.2 The Mountain Girl, D. W. Griffith, *Intolerance* (1916)



Figure 2.3 Tire tracks, D. W. Griffith, *Intolerance* (1916)

actual quotation marks. And there seems to be another level even beyond the narrator, a level that is the source of numerous notes appended to the intertitles themselves. Some of these are little self-advertisements, like the oddly distancing news that the Babylonian set is a “replica of Babylon’s encircling walls, 300 feet in height and broad enough for the passing of chariots.”³⁷ Some are protectively informational, like the news that the harridans grouped around the edges of the Babylonian marriage market are “women corresponding to our street outcasts, for life, the wards of Church and State.”³⁸ And some are frankly tendentious, such as the note claiming that the code of Hammurabi protects the weak from the strong.³⁹ In any case, these impersonal addresses from a position beyond even the narration of the intertitles establish a time frame that is as external to the baffled viewers as it is to the characters in the film.

A more visual element with the same effect is the transitional device that Griffith adapted from Walt Whitman. “Out of the cradle endlessly rocking” is a sort of motto for the film as a whole, a common intertitle, and a visual vignette marking transitions from one time to another. The vignette is composed of a long-haired girl, played by Lillian Gish, seated at a huge cradle, with three ghostly women in the background, representing the Fates. It puts birth in the foreground but also matches it with the death dealt out by the Fates, so that there is a full circle of life in one self-contained picture. The endless rocking of the cradle, as well as the repeated appearance of the vignette without any apparent variation, suggest a circular, repetitious time scheme, and there is nothing in the scene itself to place it in a particular time, though the whole thing has a vaguely archaic look. On its first appearance, the cradle scene is accompanied by an additional intertitle that reads, “Today as yesterday, endlessly rocking, ever bringing the same joys and sorrows.”⁴⁰

It is fairly obvious, then, that the cradle scene is Griffith’s attempt to provide a temporal matrix for the four storylines of his film, to link together what otherwise would look too various. But, as Hansen says in her long, detailed analysis of the cradle motif, what is supposed to link has always had the tendency to divide, so that the cradle has always stood out as just the sort of old-fashioned, non-narrative element that prevents the film from cohering.⁴¹ This interpretation also means, though, that the cradle best represents the peculiar sort of time in which *Intolerance* takes place. William Drew’s notion that it represents “the eternal present” makes the paradox clear, for the cradle scene never advances or changes, and thus it occupies the same moment of time for all time.⁴² If the contiguity of birth and death is meant to suggest that both take place in an instant, this is still an instant that takes forever, or at least the length of the film. For the eternal present of the cradle scene is also the most appropriate time frame for *Intolerance* as a whole, which should take place in a present distended to the size of all history. The ultimate frame in which the elements of *Intolerance* are supposed to be contained is the instantaneous one of logical comparison, a present that is inherently non-narrative, though it pretends to contain all of time.

Griffith’s gamble in *Intolerance* is that film can transform the ordinary, immediate present of human experience, with its problematic relationship to past and future, into the eternal present traditionally afforded only to God. This effect, according to

film's first great propagandist Terry Ramsaye, is precisely what parallel editing accomplishes: "The photoplay of today moves backward and forward through Time with facile miracle from the Present into the Past and Future by the cut-back, flashback and vision scenes." In this way film satisfies "the human wish to live in the Past, Present and Future all at once."⁴³ The phrase "all at once" makes the paradox clear, for there is finally no difference between expanding time to the size of eternity and collapsing it into the present moment. In either case, everything happens all at once. This is, more or less, the conclusion of Gilles Deleuze's analysis of *Intolerance*: "Time as interval is the accelerated variable present, and time as a whole is the spiral open at both ends, the immensity of past and future. Infinitely dilated, the present would become the whole itself; infinitely contracted, the whole would happen in the interval."⁴⁴ What Deleuze calls "the continually diminishing interval between two movements or two actions," the infinitesimal present of the cut itself, also tends inevitably to encompass the full immensity of time.

In somewhat more practical terms, this devotion to the eternal present means that there is no very satisfactory way to end the film. The chase requires a conclusion, and the Boy (Robert Harron) is finally saved from hanging, but the cradle goes on rocking nonetheless. If the back-and-forth tug of war between love and intolerance is in fact timeless, "the same today as yesterday," as the sign proclaims when the workers in the modern sequence are shot down by the police, then the salvation of the Boy is just an episode. The eternal present established above and beyond the chase scenes can be concluded only by apocalypse, or, as it happens, by double exposure. *Intolerance* switches for its last few moments to an apocalyptic battle scene, intercut with shots of crowds behind prison walls. These are dissolved by a double exposure, so the prisoners can run through walls suddenly become transparent, and then angels are superimposed over the battle scene (see Figure 2.4). Finally, a cross comes to be superimposed over the entire scene. As a technique, the superimpositions suggest a resolution of the back-and-forth cradle-rocking of the parallel editing, which can finally come to an end when two things can actually be seen at once. Only with this end is it possible literally to see what is implied throughout the film, that everything in it should ideally be visible in one instant of revelation.

The last scenes of *Intolerance* are apparently visualizations of what Griffith had in mind with his prophecy that movies will allow human beings to "see everything—positively everything." And they may also help to show the essential if paradoxical connection between the ambition to see all and the desire to see all at once, to apprehend "the ever-present, realistic, actual now." Griffith delivered these prophecies as part of a publicity barrage in support of *Intolerance*, a campaign in which he tried hard to make the movies sound educational. In this same short piece for *The Editor*, he also offered what has become a rather prescient vision of the future:

Imagine a public library of the near future, for instance. There will be long rows of boxes or pillars, properly classified and indexed, of course. At each box a push button and before each box a seat. Suppose you want to "read up" on a certain



Figure 2.4 Apocalypse as double exposure, D. W. Griffith, *Intolerance* (1916)

episode in Napoleon's life. Instead of consulting all the authorities, wading laboriously through a host of books, and ending bewildered, without a clear idea of exactly what did happen, and confused at every point by conflicting opinions about what did happen, you will merely seat yourself at a properly adjusted window, in a scientifically prepared room, press the button, and actually see what happened.⁴⁵

As he puts it in conclusion. "You will merely be present at the making of history."

A century later, we have had ample opportunity to see how limiting this apparently expansive view actually is. Griffith's confidence that movies are superior to books is not just based on the faith that visual evidence is better in many ways than written testimony, firsthand witness superior to secondhand accounts. He is also suspicious of the various processes of selection, analysis, condensation, and summary that make representations different from the things they are supposed to represent. What he proposes, then, is an account of human history that is just exactly the same size as human history itself. But the problems with this, a temporal map exactly the size of the thing it is supposed to map, are obvious. Who could ever witness any more than a tiny portion of it? How to select? Griffith's library proposes a level of chaos that would make Wikipedia look tidy by comparison.

This odd vision, though, exposes the connection between Griffith's formal dreams and the politics of *Intolerance*. In the film itself, that term frequently means nothing

more than a jealous disapproval of the pleasures of others. Behind this attitude is Griffith's not very covert defense of *The Birth of a Nation*, which he tries to accomplish by speciously associating the NAACP's opposition to racism with Prohibition and the blue laws. In general, intolerance comes to stand for a censorious selectivity, a narrow-mindedness that would stand in the way of the grand power of the movies to show all to everyone.⁴⁶ In his public statements, Griffith is always careful to associate film with the press, so as to attach the traditional freedom of the press to the movie industry. But, as Miriam Hansen has shown so brilliantly, *Intolerance* harbors a constitutional suspicion of print, backed by a naive faith in the capabilities of the image. On the positive side, then, a belief in the manifest and unchanging truth of visual evidence; on the negative, a jealous suspicion of representations of all kinds.

This suspicion cannot help encompassing narration along with other forms of representation. For narration is inevitably a process of selection, condensation, and rearrangement. Griffith's vision of the library of the future makes it clear that he does not really think that images *need* narration. Vision is not just simpler, but it is also more complete, and thus the viewer is not at the mercy of experts who choose what is to be told. Narration, in this sense, is a kind of formal intolerance. Deep within the structure of the film, then, there is an ideological opposition to the very processes of selection and arrangement that, on another level, will constitute Griffith's greatest contribution to the development of American cinema.

Of course, the notion that images speak for themselves, that visual evidence needs no interpretation, is itself a kind of intolerance, insofar as it tends to assume that everyone will see the same thing in exactly the same way. Griffith's bewilderment when this assumption did not turn out to be the case resembles that of Pound, who always tended to mistake disagreement for incomprehension. There are many other points of comparison possible between these two old-fashioned, conservative anticapitalists, who tended to assume that truth was obvious because it was unchanging. It was in part this confidence that allowed them to develop a modernist shorthand notation, dependent on visual symbols, for their respective art forms. However, a similar underlying ideological opposition to selection and arrangement made their masterworks into historical junk shops. One crucial difference, though, between the major literary modernists and Griffith is the greater self-consciousness of the former. Even the very first sketches for *The Cantos* are obsessed by the problem of form. Though the ending of *The Waste Land*, with its superimposition of peace on chaos, seems a dead ringer for the end of *Intolerance*, much of the poem is taken up with its own inability to hang together. On the other hand, it is a little hard to imagine what this sort of self-consciousness would have looked like in a film made in 1916. Perhaps the words that do not appear in Griffith's accidental paraphrase of Conrad are the ones that make all the difference, for the inescapable abstraction of the written word constantly frustrated any efforts on the part of literary modernism to develop a fully manifest visual style. For them, as writers, it was just too obvious that the present was not an option.

Notes

- * From *What is the Present?* By Michael North, Copyright © 2018 by Princeton University Press. Reprinted by permission.
- 1. From a 1913 interview, quoted by Lewis Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1939), 119. See Helmut Farber, “On the Endings of *THE BIRTH OF A NATION* and *INTOLERANCE*: Some Complementary Notes,” in *The Griffith Project*, vol. 12, Paolo Cherchi Usai and Cynthia Rowell, eds. (New York and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 98.
- 2. The fullest consideration of Griffith and Conrad is by Jordan Leondopoulos, *Still the Moving World: Intolerance, Modernism, and Heart of Darkness* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991). Leondopoulos discounts the possibility that Griffith may have known of Conrad's statement. See also the brief discussion in David Trotter, *Cinema and Modernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 51.
- 3. Pauline Kael, *Going Steady* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1968), 51–52.
- 4. D. W. Griffith, “Some Prophecies: Film and Theatre, Screenwriting, Education,” in *Focus on Griffith*, Harry M. Geduld, ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971), 34.
- 5. Vachel Lindsay, *The Art of the Moving Picture* (New York: Macmillan, 1922; reprint, New York: Modern Library, 2000), 132.
- 6. John Barnett Brough, “Translator's Introduction,” in *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time*, by Edmund Husserl (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1991), xi–lvii.
- 7. Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form*, Jay Leyda, trans. (New York: Harcourt, 1977), 195. For Griffith himself on his debt to Dickens, see 200 and Geduld, *Focus*, 52.
- 8. Eisenstein, *Film Form*, 198.
- 9. D. W. Griffith, “Working for the Biograph Company,” in *Focus*, 36.
- 10. Eisenstein, *Film Form*, 204.
- 11. D. W. Griffith, “What I Demand of Movie Stars,” in *Focus*, 52.
- 12. Eisenstein, *Film Form*, 211.
- 13. Eisenstein, *Film Form*, 209.
- 14. Eisenstein, *Film Form*, 199.
- 15. Tom Gunning, “Now You See It, Now You Don't: The Temporality of the Cinema of Attractions,” in *Silent Film*, Richard Abel, ed. (London: Athlone, 1996), 77.
- 16. Charlie Keil, “D. W. Griffith as a Transitional Filmmaker,” in *Griffith Project*, vol. 12, 1.
- 17. Tom Gunning, *D. W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 26.
- 18. Rick Altman, “Dickens, Griffith, and Film Theory Today,” in *Classical Hollywood Narrative: The Paradigm Wars*, Jane Gaines, ed. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), 9–47.
- 19. Gunning, *D. W. Griffith*, 99.
- 20. Gunning, *D. W. Griffith*, 103.
- 21. Christian Metz, quoted in André Gaudreault and Philippe Gauthier, “Crosscutting: A Programmed Language,” in *Griffith Project*, vol. 12, 31.
- 22. Gaudreault and Gauthier in fact reserve the term “parallel editing” for this situation, in which the temporal relation of the motifs to each other is not pertinent (“Crosscutting,” 31).
- 23. Gunning, *D. W. Griffith*, vol. 11, 134.

24. See Richard J. Meyer, "The Films of David Wark Griffith: The Development of Themes and Techniques in Forty-Two of His Films," in *Focus*, 111.
25. Max Jammer, *Concepts of Simultaneity: From Antiquity to Einstein and Beyond* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 7.
26. See, for example, Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978), 84.
27. For another example, see Tom Gunning's report on the narrative structure of *Intolerance* in *Griffith Project*, vol. 9, 47.
28. Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 132. For a comparison to Pound's anxieties about the coherence of *The Cantos*, see 136.
29. William M. Drew, *D. W. Griffith's "Intolerance": Its Genesis and Its Vision* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1986), 34.
30. The case for this part of the film is made best by Drew (*Griffith's "Intolerance,"* 20–22). His suggestion is that the lack of explicit causal connection between the beginning and the end of this storyline shows the power of distant forces over the working class.
31. Hansen, *Babel*, 223.
32. Hansen, *Babel*, 211.
33. Hansen, *Babel*, 148. This is her way of putting what is probably the oldest and most consistent objection to *Intolerance*, that the four stories are not really integrated. See, for example, Eisenstein, *Film and Form*, 243. Interestingly, Deleuze feels that the four achieve an "organic unity." See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*, Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 31.
34. Joyce Jesenowski, "Style and Technique," in *Griffith Project*, vol. 9, 60.
35. Claire Dupré de la Tour, "Intertitles," in *Griffith Project*, vol. 9, 81.
36. Theodore Huff, "Intolerance": *The Film by David Wark Griffith, Shot-by-Shot Analysis* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966), 9. It should be noted that Huff's "analysis" is actually a shot-by-shot description and that the print on which he relies is not universally considered the most authoritative. See Russell Merritt, "D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance*: Reconstructing an Unattainable Text," *Film History* 4 (1990), 337–75.
37. Huff, "Intolerance," 18.
38. Huff, "Intolerance," 28.
39. Huff, "Intolerance," 20.
40. Huff, "Intolerance," 2.
41. Hansen, *Babel*, 211.
42. Drew, *Griffith's "Intolerance,"* 20.
43. Terry Ramsaye, *A Million and One Nights: A History of the Motion Picture* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1926), 157. Quoted in Drew, *Griffith's "Intolerance,"* 19.
44. Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 32.
45. Griffith, "Some Prophecies," 35.
46. See Griffith's "The Rise and Fall of Free Speech in America," *Focus*, 43–45.

3

Sergei Eisenstein's Collage

Filming Montage in Museums at Night

Lisa Siraganian

When invoking the rage for cutting out fragments of visual information and juxtaposing them with other fragments, attached or in some way metaphorically connected to a larger pattern, we talk about the modernist fascination with either collage or montage. These artistic terms depict a broader avant-garde aesthetic variously located in Dada, cubism, constructivism, and the Bauhaus, and aligned with techniques such as assemblage, bricolage, papier collé, and so forth. Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein's films such as *Strike* (1925), *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), and *October* (1928) have become nearly synonymous with cinematic montage's birth and development. Yet Eisenstein is notably silent on the topic of collage. In both his own theorizing and that of film scholars since the 1930s, his inventiveness with montage is never aligned with painterly collage. Leaving aside for the moment Eisenstein's reserve on the subject (more on that to come), perhaps what is yet more surprising is the lack of historical or recent critical studies that take up this potentially rich connection.¹ Both the European and Soviet versions of collage have received their own sophisticated semiological and contextual analysis in art historical theorizing.² In contrast, theorizing on the history of montage has treated Eisenstein as something of a solo act, cinematic montage's lone genius interpreter, mythically creating an aesthetic form *sui generis*.³

This chapter considers why thinking about Eisenstein's theory and practice of cinematic montage, in connection with the theory and practice of painterly collage, matters to the history of modernist meaning. Both the early, intense, semiological cubist explorations of the 1910s and Eisenstein's developments in the following two decades explore in related ways how the contested category of a unit of art makes sense out of the bits of the world it connects to one another. For artists and filmmakers alike, the cutting and pasting together of disparate fragments of art's elements (its units of sense) raised one of modernism's most misunderstood yet obsessive concerns: understanding the basic relation between art objects and beholders as a problem of how artistic meaning could be communicated. Modernists often debated this question by focusing on the thematic status of conceptual and literal frames.⁴ Yet the important theoretical commonalities between Eisenstein and the visual collagists, whether in Europe or the Soviet Union, have not been examined.⁵ My aim is to begin to rectify

this omission by focusing particularly on the earlier European collages that have been ignored in criticism of Eisenstein and their relation to his aesthetic.⁶

By exploring the sophistication of Eisenstein's thinking on the visual arts, I first consider reasons that he actively resisted aligning montage with collage in his voluminous and influential writing. Analyzing instances of montage in his early film *Strike* as a chief illustration, I explore the semiology of collage in comparison with his semiology of montage, inserting Eisenstein as both practitioner and theorist into a conversation with "decadent" western modernism. Although Eisenstein was ostensibly (and officially) ideologically opposed to the easel painting bought and collected by the bourgeoisie, he was frequently in covert, and sometimes overt, dialogue with this art nonetheless. Insisting that montage is not "simply gluing together separate bits of film," but is instead the very quality inaugurating film's independence as an art form, he paradoxically both invokes and works from collage's context.⁷

At a minimum, understanding the connections between montage and collage supports new readings of montage, revealing how the visual language works in these films as a development from the syntax of painting. We will see the global reach of the modernist theory of meaning, with its focus here, first on framing, and second on neutralizing, upholding, or generally controlling the spectator's response. Last, we will see in these instances of art production modernism's political aims emerging out of a basic question: whoever the audience might be—bourgeoisie, proletariat, artists, or some of each—could their response constitute, or even have any impact on, the meaning of a work of art?

Montage without Collage

Even superficially, Eisenstein's montage resembles European modernist collage, particularly the early synthetic cubist collages of Pablo Picasso, in a number of ways.⁸ In both media, jarring cuts and realignments create new striking effect through inferred representations or associations. Typically, the cuts and connections involve juxtaposing elements from different contexts or time schemes to generate a meaning that any single element would not possess on its own. To make this meaning coherent to a viewer, as opposed to presenting merely a jumble of unrelated images, the combination of elements or shots relies on metaphorical connections that in turn require abstraction at the level of signification.

Consider an instance from each medium. In one of the better-known scenes from *Strike*, Eisenstein quickly interposes an enraged police chief planning brutal retaliation against striking workers, shots in a slaughterhouse of a bull being butchered, and scenes of dead striking workers (see Figure 3.1). As David Bordwell observes, the juxtaposition of elements is a climactic "leap into nondiegetic metaphor," in which a literal slaughter of a bull invokes a figural slaughter of the proletariat, "catapulting the event into a realm outside" the narrative.⁹ Over a decade earlier, in *Guitar, Sheet Music, and Glass* (1912), Picasso pasted a page of a musical score to a canvas, aligning



Figure 3.1 Slaughterhouse montage, Sergei Eisenstein, *Strike* (1925)

the page at the position where the absent strings would appear on the guitar silhouette (see Figure 3.2). This is one of many Picasso collages of the period in which, as Christine Poggi notes, his manipulation of objects “drives a wedge between the literal identity of these objects and our perception of them, thus making things into signs.”¹⁰

Although the effects are different, the strategy is similar. As Bordwell and Poggi are suggesting, Eisenstein and Picasso motivate a fragment to signify in a new and different kind of way within the scope of the “picture” as a whole. Each fragment represents one thing (the slaughtering of a bull, the composition of a piece of music) while simultaneously signifying something else: the brutal repression of workers by the ruling classes (for Eisenstein) and an aestheticized distinction (for Picasso) between the musical score or plan of an artwork and the instance of its temporal performance through the manipulation of guitar strings. The possibility of other potential meanings for any of these fragments (say, the slaughtering of the bull also representing the bovine-like docility of the masses, or the musical score representing lyricism) renders the act of interpreting the combined montage or collage increasingly complex. To this day, a robust debate continues about the audience’s involvement in—or irrelevance to—the meaning of collage elements.¹¹ As we will see, Eisenstein and Picasso each took a distinct approach in grappling with the problem of the reader’s interpretive freedom or constraint in making meaning out of the collage and montage elements.

To make these compositions work, both artists are pushing against the imagined limitation of their respective media to produce dramatic effects. Picasso grapples with the flatness of the picture plane in painting, as Clement Greenberg articulated early on in “Collage” and “The Pasted-Paper Revolution.”¹² Although more recent art historians (including Poggi and Yve-Alain Bois) challenge the modernist unity of Greenberg’s account of Picasso, they do so not to deny the radical attempts at resignification at work in collage, but to argue that Greenberg’s account was not radical enough. In a manner initially similar to Picasso’s, Eisenstein both acknowledges and attempts to overcome the fundamental characteristic of cinema: the optical and subsequently psychological identification of the viewer with the image on the screen.

Eisenstein’s knowledge of the tropes and ideology of European modernism (such as Picasso’s work from the teens) is unsurprising. Scholars have explored the related cosmopolitan features and interconnectedness of Russian, American, and European

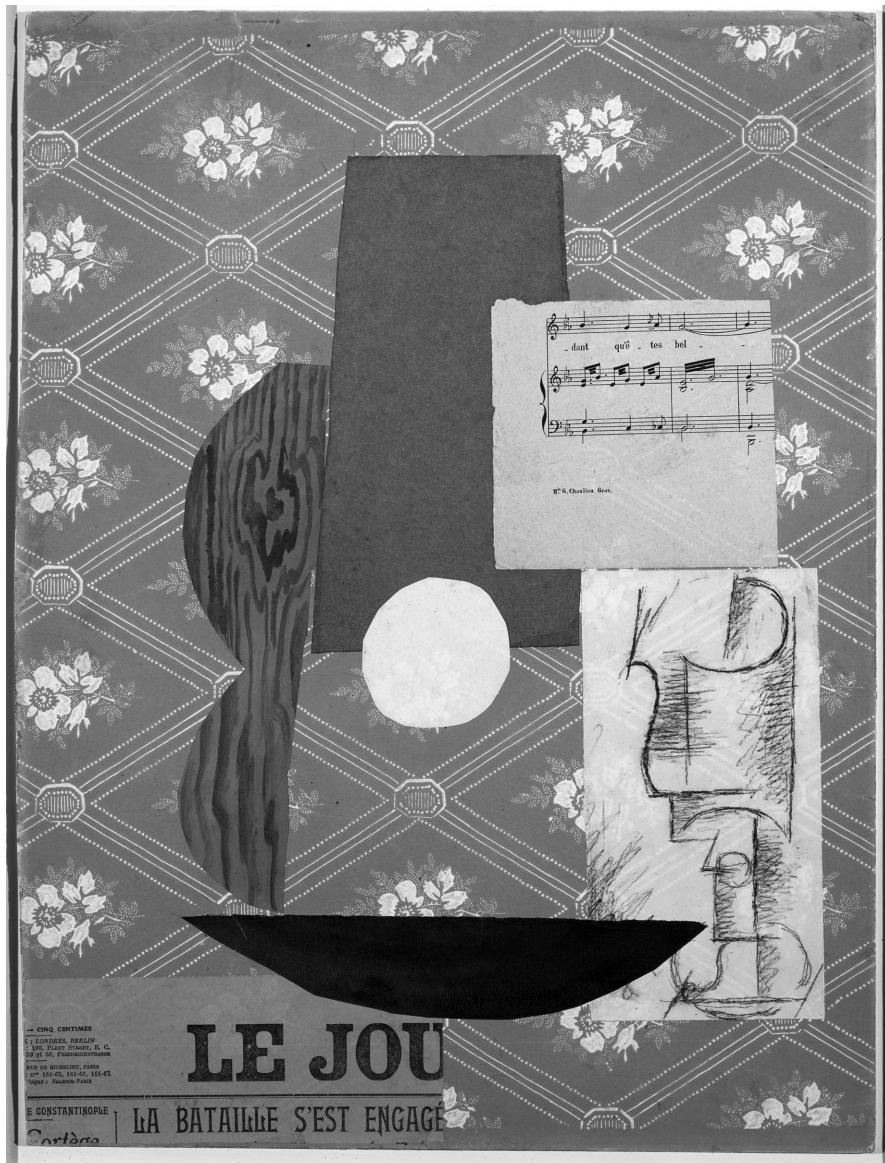


Figure 3.2 Pablo Picasso, *Guitar, Sheet Music, and Wine Glass* (1912). McNay Museum, San Antonio, Texas, US. © 2015 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

modernism.¹³ They have particularly noted the influence of the Moscow Arts Theatre on Eisenstein's development, including Vsevolod Meyerhold's revolutionary theories of actor movement and Lyubov Popova's and Varvara Stephanova's constructivist paintings and set designs.¹⁴ But Eisenstein's modernist influences in the 1920s were

also decidedly and overtly cosmopolitan, as they were generally in the Russian avant-garde of the time.¹⁵ In his Moscow theater productions of the early 1920s, Eisenstein wrote a few years afterwards, he "tried" to be "like a Cubist."¹⁶

Anglo-American literary modernism was also well represented among Eisenstein's sources. Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906) was a critical influence on *Strike*.¹⁷ Earlier, Eisenstein designed the sets and costumes for Proletkult Theatre's 1921 staging of Jack London's *The Mexican* and Meyerhold's version of George Bernard Shaw's *Heartbreak House*.¹⁸ Later, Eisenstein assigned James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) to his Moscow film students "as prose exercises to be turned into script form."¹⁹ For him, "*Ulysses* is of course the most interesting phenomenon for cinema in the West."²⁰ His deep appreciation of Joyce's writing, among all these modernists, suggests Eisenstein was keenly aware and appreciative of the similar semiology operating between avant-garde film and avant-garde developments in other media. Joyce was arguably the most aware of the way puns could be used to signify two distinct signifieds simultaneously, as do both collage and montage. To be clear, this is not to say that Eisenstein recognized in Joyce's texts a possibility for polysemous, reader-derived meaning (indeed, whatever interpretive role Joyce was aiming to open up or close down for the reader with his wordplay was never something Eisenstein discussed) but that both shared a fascination with the way artists could adapt style to signify multiple signifieds with one signifier.

Here, then, is the crucial point about Eisenstein's reluctance to acknowledge the connection to western painting's formal innovations: his resistance is less philosophical, ideological, or aesthetic than practical. Making such a formal connection publicly known could only hurt him politically. As a Soviet filmmaker who was required by Stalin himself to make severe changes to cuts of his films, Eisenstein had immediate, practical reasons to suppress his association with avant-garde developments in western painting.²¹ And as the son of a wealthy bureaucrat in Tsarist Russia, he was under pressure to hide any semblance of art for art's sake decadence from his work.²² Although by the late 1930s he would write positively about cubism as the final step before cinematic thinking, he also identified it as painting's last, failed attempt to solve problems of representation.²³ Thus, while cubism saw the faults of impressionism "absolutely correctly ... it conveyed it in forms that were more expressive of decadence."²⁴ Such bourgeois art needed to be rejected.

This explicit and near-total rejection of modern painting in his early, influential film writing had major effects. It led to the subsequent rejection of this multidisciplinary avenue of analysis in scholarly film criticism, contributing to confusion about the relation between theories of collage and theories of montage that continues to this day. Perhaps most problematic for Eisenstein was the uncomfortable reality that modern painters such as Picasso, Georges Braque, Juan Gris, Hans Arp, and Kurt Schwitters had discovered and put to use the art of fragmentation and juxtaposition years before Eisenstein himself began experimenting with related techniques in film. Picasso's and Braque's early collage experiments date from 1912, Dada experiments by Arp and Otto van Rees from 1915, and Schwitters's assemblages from 1918.²⁵ Soviet

cinema's belated use of related strategies in the 1920s—if indeed they were related—would imply that film was derivatively following or even plagiarizing painting instead of developing it as its own art form. That these revolutionary strategies derived from practices conceived in the decadent, western, cosmopolitan cities of Paris, Zurich, and Hanover could only be an added aggravation in a communist context.

To avoid such associations, Eisenstein makes the case for Soviet support of its film industry on the basis of the claim that cinema was the only medium having its historical moment of dominance at that time. In contrast, western art forms had already had their “successive dictatorships of: literature, painting, music.”²⁶ To give this argument credence, cinema needed to establish its independence from all other art forms: it had to be the influencer instead of the influenced medium. Presumably, this necessity is also why Eisenstein tends to wax cool on Soviet constructivism as a general aesthetic, carefully distinguishing his aims from constructivism because a “congruence would be incomplete and ineffective.”²⁷ The homegrown painterly and photomontage movement of constructivism challenged film’s dominance in the new hierarchies of art he envisioned.²⁸

In other words, Eisenstein had reason to separate cinematic montage clearly and cleanly from related techniques, such as assemblage, photomontage, and painterly collage, to establish film’s preeminence in modernism: it was an ideological form not contaminated by the bourgeois values laden in easel painting’s long history of patronage by wealthy ruling interests. Montage is not “simply gluing together separate bits of film”; it is instead “the factor that establishes the independence of cinema art.”²⁹ But this requirement also demanded a constant policing of montage’s borders to ensure that the technique did not slip into decadence and the formal preoccupations of art for art’s sake painting. Any perceived alignment with modern painting had to be strongly repulsed. When collage does make its rare appearance in Eisenstein’s writings, it is in an interview, in which the interviewer appears to be making the connection, not Eisenstein himself.³⁰

Making sense of this ideological, practical, and political dynamic also helps explain Eisenstein’s dismissive response to Dziga Vertov and the “Kino-Eyes,” beyond their palpable competitive jockeying for dominance in the Soviet culture industry. Announcing that contemporary film must work like “a tractor ploughing over the audience’s psyche,” Eisenstein dismisses Vertov’s filmography by arguing that “It is not a ‘Cine-Eye’ that we need but a ‘Cine-Fist.’ We must cut with our cine-fist through to skulls.”³¹ His point is that the superficial, identificatory qualities that the film medium prompts in spectators should not simply be accepted. That approach is what he understands Vertov to be doing in a film such as *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) as the anthropomorphized film camera and tripod become a new kind of person to identify with on the screen. Instead, the medium’s tendencies to prompt identification must be challenged and overcome. Rather than exercising our psyche by identifying or feeling with others, the psyche is plowed, the skull is impaled, the eyes we use to observe and then represent becomes fists we use to fight back against our oppressive reality. Successful montage, Eisenstein writes later, “breaks through its four-sided

cage.”³² Whether in Picasso or in Eisenstein, whether on canvas or on a movie screen, the goal is to pierce the “four-sided cage” of the picture plane. That penetration is the essence of their modernism.

At a more basic level, Eisenstein’s point is that Vertov is beholden to painting’s strictures. To distinguish his own work in *Strike* from Vertov’s films, Eisenstein demigrates Vertov’s as “one of [art’s] least valuable expressions in ideological terms,” comparable “to primitive Impressionism.”³³ He suggests that by “weav[ing] the canvas of a pointillist painting,” Vertov’s filmmaking effectively reproduces “the most ‘felicitous’ form of *easel* painting,” a modifier dripping with contempt (italics in the original).³⁴ Vertov’s and the Kino-Eyes’ supposed embrace of painting is described as a form of ideological blindness, “a manifest pantheism” emotionally impressed with the world’s surroundings,

*Instead of (as in *The Strike*) snatching fragments from our surroundings according to a conscious and predetermined plan calculated to launch them at the audience in the appropriate combination, to subjugate it to the appropriate association with the obvious final ideological motivation. (italics in the original)*³⁵

The Kino-Eyes’ intent to record visual impressions, without “subjugat[ing]” them ideologically, enables a false ideology of world-loving, acquiescent pantheism to dominate over Marxism. A film style drawing on painting’s mimetic, contemplative dynamics is doomed from the outset, warns Eisenstein, regardless of the Kino-Eyes’ ostensible aims. They simply will not be able to vanquish the inherent, corrupting, visual qualities of painting once they have permitted its essential dynamics into their filmmaking. The “corrupting influence of naturalism” is irresistible.³⁶ Western painting had to be aggressively, loudly shunned—even if contemporary western painting also was closely watched, contemplated, and grappled with in private, as Eisenstein’s affinities with collage imply.

Montage with or against Collage

Taking as a provisional premise that Eisenstein needed to theorize montage as dramatically opposed to or as uninfluenced by painterly-derived collage, we next can explore more carefully how these two formal techniques and styles operated similarly or differently for Eisenstein. Eisenstein’s worldview would not have permitted him to entertain such a question—this is someone who reported that he could not “remember the Louvre without a shudder.”³⁷ But as critics of the twenty-first century, we can move past the shudder to consider why juxtaposing montage and collage—whether as a friendly encounter or antagonistic battle—might be fruitful.

I have already mentioned some of the productive similarities between collage and montage, and here is another. Both forms explicitly aim to reveal the structure of the world by manipulating palpable instances or pieces of it. When Schwitters, Braque, or

Arp takes some chosen bit of detritus from everyday life and pastes it onto a canvas to signify a crucial aspect of that life (whether its social mores, wastefulness, decrepitude, or even sweetness), each is committed to selecting aspects of his world and representing them tangibly and meaningfully. Similarly, when Eisenstein argues that a film should not simply present or demonstrate events, but must instead “be a tendentious selection of, and comparison between events,” he was similarly arguing that selection and juxtaposition were key to a work’s power to make its audience experience the dynamic reaction intended by the filmmaker.³⁸

At least one difference is captured in that modifier “tendentious,” which assumes that a selection of elements not made provocatively will instead “‘gra[b]’ you . . . purely superficially.”³⁹ For Eisenstein, there is no middle ground between tendentious selection and impressionistic, superficial choosing. Despite this distinction, theories of collage and montage agree that individual elements, derived from what Eisenstein often called “raw material,” signify differently in their “raw” state than when in their finished, or fully composed, state.⁴⁰ A piece of tablecloth means one thing when found on a table, and something else when an artist glues it to a canvas. A shot of a slaughtered cow means one thing when spotted in raw footage of a slaughterhouse and something else when intercut with a scene of striking workers.

To avoid an explicit theoretical alignment with collage, Eisenstein’s intriguing essay, “Beyond the Shot” (1929), employs Japanese representation as an opportunity to explain his theory of film meaning by way of an exotic, extra-cultural analogy with the Japanese language. Although the analogy avoids the terms and language of collage, it effectively reiterates the concept. According to Eisenstein, Japanese cinema was “unaware of montage” at this moment in time, yet the country’s representational culture more generally was flush with it. Reminiscent of Ezra Pound’s unearthing of imagism in Chinese ideograms, Eisenstein discovers montage in Japanese script. Just as montage links shots that represent two different or unrelated moments to create a new, third representation, Japanese script combines “two ‘representable’ objects to achiev[e] the representation of something that cannot be graphically represented” otherwise.⁴¹ Through this analogy Eisenstein illustrates that a unit of film meaning (like Japanese) is entirely different from a letter or a word in a language that uses a more constrained and abstracted alphabet (like Cyrillic), and thus that the semiology of montage operates differently from the way other, non-visual types of language do. Surprisingly, cinematic montage turns out to be closer to Japanese than to painting.

This “discovery” of montage in the Japanese script is permitted to emerge from a connection to a non-cinematic art because it is sufficiently outside of Eisenstein’s cultural sphere: Japanese script appears without the freighted bourgeois associations of decadent western easel painting. But just how that meaning operates, even in Japanese cultural forms, requires careful distinctions that, once more, recall the visual language of collage: “The shot is by no means a montage *element*. The shot is a montage *cell*.⁴² The difference between “element” and “cell” is crucial for him. “Element” implies a more finished form in which each part is added up sequentially, whereas “cell” does

not have, according to Eisenstein, that same sense of a finished quality: cells are parts of a body that rely on the unity of the whole. The same distinction emerges in his reported theoretical dispute with film director Vsevolod Pudovkin. Whereas Pudovkin understands montage “as a *series* of fragments,” as “bricks” in a “chain,” Eisenstein “opposed him” with a “view of montage as *collision*” that “gives use to an idea.”⁴³ No series of elements could add up to montage; only the ramming together of juxtaposed cells can create montage. Picasso’s *Guitar, Sheet Music, and Glass* implicitly makes a similar (if less violent) point, requiring the collision of different ancillary units to generate a new meaning.

Eisenstein’s theorizing of montage via Japanese culture in “Beyond the Shot” resembles a theory of collage in all but the name. But he does articulate a key difference between collage and montage in other essays related to that previously mentioned “tendentious selection.” The difference emerges when he turns to conceptualizing the real unit of film meaning, which is neither the cell nor the collision, but the *attraction*. In order for the collision of cells to become a unit of meaning, the collision has to register on the audience as such. Only then does it become an attraction. Furthermore, this process works only with an audience that is a known, homogenous quantity (demographically and socially) because it requires “chains of associations that are linked to a particular phenomenon in the mind of a particular audience.”⁴⁴ Like an audience watching a 3D movie without the necessary 3D glasses, the collision effect will come to naught, lost on an unprepared audience who has not been demographically calibrated by the filmmaker.

This theory helps explain why shots added up serially (like bricks in a chain) cannot be montage: the “attractional calculation” has not yet been applied to them. Whatever a series of shots add up to, they can’t (or can only randomly, which is not tendentious because not intended) add up to an intended, audience-focused attraction: they were not placed next to one another following the principle of attractional calculation. If the most basic unit of cinema is the attraction, then juxtaposing shots without the emotional reactions accounted for is an incomplete or failed cinema of attraction, and thus not fully a cinema of montage.

Eisenstein’s definition of a unit of film meaning generates all the other conceptual differences between collage and montage. Both aim to give the viewer a palpable experience of the structure of the everyday world, but only montage and the theory of attractions understand the audience’s response as part of that real world that (tautologically) needs to be synthesized and reframed for the audience: “the methods of processing the audience are no different in the mechanics of their realization from other forms of work movement and they produce the same *real, primarily physical* work on their material—the audience.”⁴⁵ The audience’s response becomes one more kind of raw “material” for the montagist to incorporate into a film.

To put the matter starkly, the only important difference between Eisenstein’s theory of montage and a theory of collage Picasso would have signed onto is whether the ultimate meaning of the art object—film or painting—requires

the audience's participation in that meaning. When Picasso creates three-dimensional cubist installations in corners of his studio, photographs them, and then destroys them (as he did between 1911 and 1913), he transforms a collection of objects such that "by the force of his vision it was not necessary that he paint the picture," as Gertrude Stein put it.⁴⁶ But for Eisenstein's cinema of attractions, the meaning of a shot or a set of shots cannot be completed without the audience's response.⁴⁷ That is the fundamental point Eisenstein makes by insisting on the attractional calculus. Film meaning, for Eisenstein, requires this relation between audience and film, with the audience reacting to the film in a manner induced by juxtaposed images.

Furthermore, for Eisenstein, film meaning occurs when the audience's emotional shock as intended by the filmmaker leads to the realization of a political truth. If that awareness does not occur for the audience, then it is not just that film meaning has failed to be transmitted, but also that the film meaning on some level did not really exist at all when that "film" was conceived, filmed, or shown. Hence, "it is not the facts being demonstrated that are important but the combinations of the emotional reactions of the audience."⁴⁸ As he puts a similar point years later, the essence of the "montage principle" is that it "forces the spectator himself to *create* and thereby releases the great force of latent creative excitement within the spectator" (we can see the paradox of spectatorial compulsion versus freedom in the notion of "forc[ing]" the audience "to create").⁴⁹ In contrast, for collage artists such as Picasso, whether or not you as an audience member do or do not respond to his work is irrelevant to the work's meaning precisely because spectators cannot create that meaning—whether they are compelled to or not. The moment of the attraction contains all the force of difference between montage and collage.

It might appear that collagists, in making this distinction, are requiring *nothing* of their viewers, while Eisenstein is demanding a kind of advanced looking from an audience primed to work through and generate a particular emotional response. But it is more accurately the reverse. The emotional response that Eisenstein requires of the audience is effectively a behaviorist, reflexive response—in today's cognitive science landscape, it would be the kind of reaction that could be accurately measured by a functional MRI (fMRI) scan of the brain. If an audience member's brain reveals the "correct" reactive scan, then film meaning has occurred. The tendentious slogan intended has become the tendentious attraction realized. In contrast, not just collage but arguably all art requires a different kind of response to understand, but not to make, the painting's meaning. Experiencing a painting as an intentional, meaningful object involves a varied series of responses: a range of different forms of awarenesses, observations, and interpretations that might occur in different sequences or not at all. No doubt advanced looking occurs in a myriad of ways. But whatever interpretation a spectator comes to after studying *Guitar, Sheet Music, and Glass*, it is not one that determines Picasso's meaning in creating it.

Cinematic Montage as Collage at Night

Despite the Soviet avant-garde's knowledge of and experience with western European and Anglo-American modernism in its various forms, Eisenstein worked to suppress montage's particular affinities to collage, one of modernism's best-known creations. His film theorizing and films dramatize the resemblance as well as the crucial differences that result from incorporating the requirement of the audience-focused "attraction." We see an Eisenstein who, by developing this contrast with collage, was deeply invested in the critical, international modernist dilemma of the frame and who was developing a unique solution to this problem. He was particularly taken with how to appear to embolden, but ultimately to control and coerce, the spectator's response on the other side of that "four-sided cage." On the one hand, the attraction seems to make the spectator an equal in creating the film's meaning, invoking a heteronomous artwork in which spectators are "drawn into a permanently occurring process."⁵⁰ But on the other hand, because for Eisenstein ideology always reigns supreme, and because the audience's response is dictated by that ideology, a spectator's experiential role in the film's creation is perpetually delimited by the filmmaker's ideological aims.

Eisenstein's "Museums at Night" chapter of his autobiography provides one of the clearest accounts of this paradoxical dynamic. In this late text, his understanding of the relationship between painting and film meaning emerges from his strategy of transforming the experience of wandering through museums into the agitational collision he intends with his films. As he sees it, the key problem with large museums such as the Louvre (aka "international museum bazaars") is partly with the art displayed, and partly with the docents who "divert the visitor from a spontaneous awareness and perception toward their boring discourses and superficial deductions."⁵¹ Like bad film directors, the docents "blu[r]" the spectators' vision of the work, leading to a dangerous, seductive absorption into the images facing them:

The women in the canvases seemed to be warming themselves in the sweaty animal heat of the herd of corpulent visitors. Their rounded (or, in the case of the primitives, ascetic) bodies shone with the texture of the canvas. And it seemed, in this corrupting atmosphere of a bazaar, that these Venuses, Dianas, and Europas were about to climb out of their frames, as Degas's mercilessly flabby women in his caustic watercolors climb out of their baths, in order to take the nosy visitor by the arm and lead him back with them behind the olive, crimson, or cherry-colored curtains in the foregrounds of the canvasses they have left.⁵²

This horror-fantasy of bourgeois spectatorship entails the immoral mixing of seer and seen, of spectator and representation, due at least in part to western museums' "corrupting atmosphere of a bazaar." His strongest complaint is not exactly that the capitalistic aspects of these museums transform art into a commodity, although he does note that the paintings at the Louvre look like postage stamps on an envelope—that

is, currency in a more colorful form. Instead, his major anxiety is that the museum induces an experience so absorptive and illusory that the paintings' frames fail to hold their representations at bay. The "mercilessly flabby women" (the horror) threaten to drag the spectator-conquest back through the curtains in the paintings' foregrounds and into the deep world of the representation, ravaging the barely conscious viewer with their enveloping flesh.⁵³ Not even the Louvre's crowds are this terrifying.

Eisenstein's account here is clearly provocative—or, to use a favorite word, tendentious. It resembles his concerns over Vertov's so-called impressionism, as well as his broader imperative to hold film distinct from the realms of other visual arts. More pertinently, even while the imagined dangers of impressionism and realism terrify, they simultaneously distract from the more perilous dangers of collage, in which life's raw materials are literally glued on a canvas and could be tactiley manipulated, or at least be perceived to be so, by the viewer. For if impressionist and realist paintings, in their various forms, seemed seductive and frivolous (representing life without challenging the status quo), collage was even more so. What could be more likely to induce viewers to luxuriate in the pleasures of commodity culture than actually having literal commodity culture on full display in these works? Such a commodity-induced stupor contrasts sharply with the aims of Russian constructivism's "socialist objects" (as Christina Kiaer describes), which aimed to turn industrial objects into "amplif[iers]" of the human's sensory possibilities instead of muffling or mollifying them.⁵⁴

Eisenstein next offers a means to counteract this decadent museum culture, describing a method of transforming the corrupting tendency of museums, even if it is not one that ordinary proletarians would be able to practice. Specifically, he recommends visiting museums during the night when they are not properly lit. Recounting both a visit to the Hermitage and to a Mexican museum of Ancient Mayan Culture (museums opened to him when he was filming nearby, a perk of his un-proletarian status), Eisenstein explains how, when the electricity was cut off in Mexico, they had to light matches to see their way around the sculpture: "The statues also gained in weirdness, absurdity, disproportion, and scale, because they were suddenly snatched out of the darkness by matches struck now here, now there."⁵⁵

In intermittent flickers, the "motionless stone monsters" came to life. He and his companions wander around the museum, striking matches at different moments and from different positions, causing a strange perceptual phenomenon to occur: "it seemed as if, during the periods of darkness, the monsters had managed to change position and place in order to gape with their wide, round, bulging, dead, granite eyes from a new viewpoint at those who were disturbing their age-old peace."⁵⁶ Seeing sculptures come to life is the same kind of shock—the same type of attraction—that revolutionary art can stimulate. In contrast, the "shameless indifference" of the museum's ordinary electric light bulbs leads to the corresponding shameless indifference of spectators who are not able to experience the stone monsters enlivened. Droning docents and voluptuous Degas paintings lead to dangerous absorption into bourgeois commodity culture; a blast of electric light hid the dynamic latency in sculptural

forms. Only the “intertwining of illumination and darkness” gives the imagination space to wander “down the mysterious paths of art.”⁵⁷

Seeking out art in a dark museum, wandering around dim galleries, and flashing matches at sculpture at regular intervals: this is a sequence of actions transforming the museum-going experience into a cinematic one. Looking at art in museums at night—if we follow Eisenstein’s instructions—does not seduce viewers into identifying with the image in such a way that we would seek to be ravaged by a painting. Instead, we can catch an experience of the attraction: the weird, absurd, disproportionate strangeness that art induces in us. In the process, traditional visual works of art transform into the attractional cinematic experience of Eisenstein’s films. He converts the museum into a space that must itself be managed and framed by the filmmaker, in this case by sequential bursts of light—call them shots—framed by the feeble glow of the matches. For that matter, this description of how to look at art in a museum replicates the experience of his most famous montage sequences: the awakening of the stone lions during the Odessa steps sequence of *Battleship Potemkin* (see Figure 3.3) There, too, intervals of light and darkness—the quintessential structure of film frames that require the break not just of the shot but also between each still photo and the next—make the sculptural lions seem, just as Eisenstein writes of the Mayan sculptures, to “change position … to gape with their wide, round, bulging, dead, granite eyes from a new viewpoint at those who were disturbing their age-old peace.”⁵⁸

To be perfectly clear, the point here is that even in his most aggressively opposed discussion of paintings, sculpture, film, and other visual art, Eisenstein still finds a way to ground his cinematic theorizing in the modification of conventional, bourgeois visual art experience: wandering around a museum and looking at sculpture. Juxtaposing static shots of the illuminated images of sculpture enables him to create a dynamic sequence that leads to a different kind of response in the spectator. But he is relying on discrete visual elements—selected views of sculpture, in this case—to create his art. Perceiving one kind of sign (the stone sculpture) as indicative of another (waking lions), is the quintessential collage aesthetic. When the viewer experiences that aesthetic as a cine-fist in its face, then, and only then, the sequence has succeeded in becoming montage. Finally, if in one sense he wants to give the



Figure 3.3 Stone lions, Odessa steps sequence, Sergei Eisenstein, *Battleship Potemkin* (1925)

spectator's imagination space to expand while wandering through the museum (in contrast to the soporific docents and painted representations in the Louvre) then in another and more important sense, he entirely withholds this opportunity from his audience, controlling their aesthetic response to the film through his "revolutionary" cuts of flickering match light.

A similar dynamic appears in the earliest of Eisenstein's films. In a playful moment early in *Strike*, the head of the secret police pulls out a photo album filled with pictures of private operatives who will infiltrate the organizing factory workers (see Figure 3.4). The police chief looks through the book, pointing with his pencil to each photograph on a page; the following intertitle provides code names for these secret agents: "The Fox," "The Owl," and so on. In the next shot, the figures in the photos suddenly become animated, peering out and winking at the viewer, before preparing themselves for their duplicitous work. Eventually, they leave their "photo" mat-frames. The next shot shows the boss smiling, we assume, at the photo album; but then, as the last shot of the sequence reveals, the boss is actually grinning at the secret agents now standing in his office, listening to his instructions.

On one level, this sequence can be read thematically and ideologically: what makes these "private operatives" dangerous is their shape-shifting qualities, a point emphasized subsequently when the agents transform into their bestial namesakes. Police agents cannot be trusted, because they appear in one place or one form and then turn out to be somewhere or something else entirely. The related motif of mistaken or hidden identity sets much of the film's plot in motion. When a worker commits suicide because he is wrongly accused of theft, it leads to initial stirrings of revolution. The capitalists also regularly enlist different kinds of rogue agents, some with capitalist and some with anarchical sentiments, to disrupt the aims of the workers' collective. Thus the thematic point leads to an ideological one. Your identity is less reliable as a characteristic than how you choose to act, whether you are actively supporting the worker's revolt or are assisting the capitalists in crushing it. This point would have resonated for Eisenstein, considering his bourgeois background and his long-standing avant-garde sensibilities, either of which made him a suspect double agent. Insisting that the explicit ideological message of the film trumped any formal or thematic representation could quash these suspicions.



Figure 3.4 Photo album/secret-agent montage, Sergei Eisenstein, *Strike* (1925)

But beyond these thematic and ideological readings of the sequence, the film is also cannily making a point almost identical to the one Eisenstein reiterates throughout his life in his montage theorizing, his filmmaking, and his autobiographical writing. The visual fragments of life, whether art fragments or commodities, must be transformed not just into collage but also into the montage of attractions. This is the composite form that reveals an ideological truth about the world: in the workers' struggle, actions will always trump identities. Like the Louvre's seductively painted women luring the spectator to step inside the painting frame, rendering them faint for the political fight ahead, the secret agents shatter the fourth wall to cross the abstract barrier separating the world from representations. Only with the right combination of cuts and reframing is montage able to control, or at least neutralize, either bourgeois painting or the secret agents represented in *Strike*.

From this perspective, capitalist art—even cubist collage—is just another kind of capitalist secret agent, luring in semiconscious spectators as dupes to be seduced and exploited one way or another. For Eisenstein, turning visual experiences into ideological montage—that is, the montage of attractions—requires art coming out at characters and becoming part of their reality, as in this sequence. Here and elsewhere, he precisely figures the subjugation of form and theme to ideology, with a cine-fist that strikes the audience in the face with its unequivocal meaning. Yet even as Eisenstein seeks a montage that makes collage into a politically viable cine-fist, montage remains inextricably linked to the European modernist collage it attempted to cast aside.

Notes

1. Caroline Maclean, in “That Magic Force that is Montage: Eisenstein’s Filmic Fourth Dimension, *Borderline* and H. D.,” *Literature and History* 21, no. 1 (Spring 2012), 44–60, points out that the recent critical work of David Trotter and Andrew Shail resists seeing montage as a generic modernist trope. See David Trotter, *Cinema and Modernism* (London: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Andrew Shail, *The Cinema and the Origins of Literary Modernism* (New York: Routledge, 2012).
2. See William Rubin, *Picasso and Braque: Pioneering Cubism* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1989); Christine Poggi, *In Defiance of Painting: Cubism, Futurism, and the Invention of Collage* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992); Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990); Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005); Maria Gough, *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); and Christina Lodder “Constructivism and Productivism in the 1920s,” in *Art into Life: Russian Constructivism, 1914–1932* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990), 99–117.
3. Nonetheless, my work builds on scholarship such as Anne Nesbet’s, who draws out Eisenstein’s aesthetic philosophy by connecting his films to André Breton’s surrealist philosophy of “savage junctures”; Anne Nesbet, *Savage Junctures: Sergei Eisenstein and the Shape of Thinking* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2003), 18. For other work that has drawn out the connections in Eisenstein’s film to other media and in a broader aesthetic context,

- see Yuri Tsivian, "Eisenstein and Russian Symbolist Culture," in *Eisenstein Rediscovered*, Ian Christie and Richard Taylor, eds. (London: Routledge, 1993), 75–104; and Philip Cavendish, *The Men with the Movie Camera: The Poetics of Visual Style in Soviet Avant-Garde Cinema of the 1920s* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013).
4. See Lisa Siraganian, *Modernism's Other Work: The Art Object's Political Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).
 5. Michael O'Pray takes up issues of framing in Eisenstein but does not connect them to collage. Michael O'Pray, "The Frame and Montage in Eisenstein's 'Later' Aesthetic," in *Eisenstein Rediscovered*, 204–11.
 6. A longer version of this argument would need also to consider the Russian constructivist collages and photomontages and their influence on Eisenstein's work. Important accounts have begun to develop this scholarship, but tend to limit their discussions to Eisenstein's early work in Russian theater. See James Goodwin, *Eisenstein, Cinema, and History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Margarita Tupitsyn, *The Soviet Photograph, 1924–1937* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996); and Robert Leach, *Revolutionary Theatre* (London: Routledge 2005).
 7. Sergei Eisenstein, *Selected Works, Volume 1, Writings, 1922–34*, ed. Richard Taylor (London: I.B. Tauris, 1988), 133.
 8. For clarity, I employ the terms "analytic" and "synthetic" here, following Clement Greenberg's well-known stylistic terms (versus Douglas Cooper's historicist "early" versus "late" labels), to refer to the period between 1912 and 1914 when Picasso and Georges Braque *first* began to affix collage pieces and papier collé to their canvases. After this period, they and other cubists would either use or ignore collage techniques more variously, as various critics have noted. For discussions, see Clement Greenberg, "The Pasted-Paper Revolution," in *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969*, vol. 4, John O'Brian, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 61–66; Douglas Cooper, *The Cubist Epoch* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1971); Poggi, *In Defiance*; and Rubin, *Picasso and Braque*.
 9. David Bordwell, *The Cinema of Eisenstein* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 58.
 10. Poggi, *In Defiance*, 79.
 11. For an excellent recent discussion of these theoretical issues within the context of Picasso, see Charles Palermo's *Modernism and Authority: Picasso and His Milieu around 1900* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015). Exploring modernism as "characterized by its uneasy relation to authority" (177), Palermo describes how the openness of Picasso's work "embodies or enacts a problem in interpretation (that meaning is the author's and interpretation is the audience's) and makes it an important component of the work's meaning. But it leaves the historical audience's actual response—outside or inside the work—pointedly in question" (176).
 12. Greenberg, "Pasted-Paper Revolution," 61–66.
 13. See David Kadlec, "Early Soviet Cinema and American Poetry," *Modernism/modernity* 11, no. 2 (April 2004), 299–331; Donald Pizer, "John Dos Passos in the 1920s: The Development of a Modernist Style," *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 45, no. 4 (December 2012), 51–67; and Yuri Tsivian, "Charlie Chaplin and His Shadows: On Laws of Fortuity in Art," *Critical Inquiry* 40, no. 3 (Spring 2014), 71–84.
 14. Mike O'Mahony, *Sergei Eisenstein* (London: Reaktion, 2008), 17–36.

15. There are connections between Eisenstein and Brecht, for example. See Robert Leach, "Eisenstein's Theatre Work," in *Eisenstein Rediscovered*, 105–19.
16. "Eisenstein on Eisenstein, the Director of 'Potemkin'" (1926), in *Works*, vol. 1, 74.
17. Nesbet, *Savage Junctures*, 37–38.
18. The Proletkult Theatre production was based on Jack London's 1911 short story, "The Mexican." Meyerhold's version of *Heartbreak House* was never produced; O'Mahony, *Eisenstein*, 30, 36. Shaw's original play was published in 1919 and first staged in 1920.
19. Ivor Montagu, *With Eisenstein in Hollywood* (New York: International Publishers, 1969), 29.
20. Sergei Eisenstein, "Literature and Cinema: Reply to Questionnaire" (1928), in *Works*, vol. 1, 96. On Joyce and Eisenstein, see T. W. Sheehan, "Montage Joyce: Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, and *Ulysses*," *James Joyce Quarterly* 42–43, nos. 1–4 (Fall 2004–Summer 2006), 69–86. For a challenge to the Joyce/Eisenstein connection (to be replaced with Joyce/Godard), see Louis Armand, "JJ/JLG," in *Roll Away the Reel World: James Joyce and Cinema*, John McCourt, ed. (Cork: Cork University Press, 2010), 139–48.
21. On Eisenstein's relation to Stalin, see Alexander Zholkovksy, "Eisenstein's Poetics: Dialogical or Totalitarian?," in *Laboratory of Dreams: The Russian Avant-Garde and Cultural Experiment*, John E. Bowlt and Olga Matich, eds. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 245–58; Richard Taylor, *Film Propaganda: Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1998); E. A. Dobrenko, *Stalinist Cinema and the Production of History: Museum of the Revolution* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008).
22. O'Mahony, *Eisenstein*, 12–46.
23. By the 1930s, Eisenstein admitted that "the 'gap' between Picasso and the cinematographer is significantly narrower than that between Paul Signac and the Wanderers"; Sergei Eisenstein, "Yermolova" (1937), in *Selected Works, Volume 2, Towards a Theory of Montage*, eds. Michael Glenny and Richard Taylor (London: I.B. Tauris, 1991), 83.
24. Sergei Eisenstein, "Laocoön" (1937), in *Works*, vol. 2, 119.
25. Leah Dickerman, "Zurich," in *Dada: Zurich, Berlin, Hanover, Cologne, New York, Paris* (Washington, DC: D.A.P./National Gallery of Art, 2005), 26; Dorothea Dietrich, "Hanover," in *Dada*, 154–78.
26. Eisenstein, "The Problem of the Materialist Approach to Form" (1925), in *Works*, vol. 1, 60.
27. Eisenstein, "Yermolova" (1937), in *Works*, vol. 2, 97. However, early on he does single out constructivist artists such as Alexander Rodchenko for a likeminded formal sense. Sergei Eisenstein, "The Montage of Attraction" (1923), *Works*, vol. 1, 34. See also Sergei Eisenstein, "Speeches to the All-Union Creative Conference of Soviet Filmworkers" (1935), in *Selected Works. Volume 3, Writings, 1934–1947*, ed. Richard Taylor (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996), 19.
28. Soviet constructivist collage is generally understood as less semiological than western European variants of collage, and Eisenstein's interest in montage tended toward the more semiological variant. As he puts it in 1928, "Now that we have discovered what constitutes a word, a form, a fragment of speech in cinema language, we can begin to power the question of what we can *express cinematically* and how." Sergei Eisenstein, "Our 'October': Beyond the Played and the Non-Played" (1928), in *Works*, vol. 1, 105. On constructivism, see Kiaer, *Imagine*; and Gough, *Artist*.
29. Sergei Eisenstein, "Conversation with Eisenstein on Sound Cinema" (1929), in *Works*, vol. 1, 133.

30. Sergei Eisenstein, "Conversation," in *Works*, vol. 1, 131.
31. Sergei Eisenstein, "The Problem of the Materialist Approach to Form" (1925), in *Works*, vol. 1, 62, 64.
32. Sergei Eisenstein, "Beyond the Shot" (1929), in *Works*, vol. 1, 145.
33. Eisenstein, "The Problem of the Materialist Approach to Form" (1925), in *Works*, vol. 1, 62.
34. Eisenstein, "Problem," 62.
35. Eisenstein, "Problem," 63.
36. Sergei Eisenstein and Sergei Yutkevich, "The Eighth Art: On Expressionism, America and, of Course, Chaplin" (1922), in *Works*, vol. 1, 30.
37. Sergei Eisenstein, *Immoral Memories: An Autobiography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983), 173.
38. Sergei Eisenstein, "The Montage of Film Attractions" (1924), *Works*, vol. 1, 41.
39. Sergei Eisenstein, "Montage," 41.
40. Sergei Eisenstein, "Montage," 44.
41. Eisenstein, "Beyond the Shot," 139.
42. Eisenstein, "Beyond the Shot," 144.
43. Eisenstein, "Beyond the Shot," 144.
44. Eisenstein, "Montage," 41.
45. Eisenstein, "Montage," 56.
46. Gertrude Stein, "Picasso," *Writings 1932–1946*, vol. 2 (New York: Library of America, 1998), 509.
47. Intriguingly, Soviet constructivists influenced by the French cubists envisioned a collective artistic labor falling somewhere in between Picasso's and Eisenstein's positions. Anatolii Strigalev describes its popularity: Vladimir Maiaakovskii published a poem without his name, entitled "150,000,000," explaining that he wanted his readership to finish and improve on the poem (no one did either). Similarly, Vladimir Tatlin suggested that the artist creates a form and the collective draws on the various abilities of each of its members to realize the form in reality. Anatolii Strigalev, "The Art of Constructivists: From Exhibition to Exhibition, 1914–1932," in *Art into Life: Russian Constructivism 1914–1932* (Henry Art Gallery, Seattle, 1990), 31–32.
48. Eisenstein, "Montage," 49.
49. Eisenstein, "Montage 1938," (1938), in *Works*, vol. 2, 311.
50. Eisenstein, "Montage 1938," 302.
51. Eisenstein, *Immoral Memories*, 173.
52. Eisenstein, *Immoral Memories*, 173.
53. Suggestively, Eisenstein associates decadent and effeminate western art with the "flabby" bodies of women, raising the prospect of an unexpected and subterranean connection between Eisenstein's own homoerotic inclinations and "modernist" aesthetics and the "masculine" posturing of Soviet (and Stalinist) era art (the "hard" bodies of the new Soviet man). I thank Michael Moses for alerting me to this point.
54. Kiae, *Imagine*, 37.
55. Eisenstein, *Immoral Memories*, 178
56. Eisenstein, *Immoral Memories*, 179.
57. Eisenstein, *Immoral Memories*, 180.
58. Eisenstein, *Immoral Memories*, 179.

From Automaton to Autonomy

Mechanical Reproduction in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*

Richard Begam

Modernism, Technology, and Cinema

"Is not the machine today the most exuberant symbol of the mystery of human creation? Is it not the new mythical deity which weaves the legends and histories of the contemporary human drama?" So wrote Enrico Prampolini in his 1922 manifesto, "The Aesthetic of the Machine and Mechanical Introspection in Art."¹ From Filippo Marinetti's futurism to Wyndham Lewis's Vorticism, from László Maholy-Nagy's *Telephone Picture* (1922) and Fernand Léger's *Still-Life with Ball Bearing* (1926) to the Vesnin Brothers' design for the Leningrad *Pravda* Office (1924) and Le Corbusier's Ozenfant Studio (1924), the figure of the machine is omnipresent in modernism. Jacob Epstein turned the human body into a machine in his sculpture *Rock Drill* (1915), which provided the title for—and influenced the aesthetics of—a section of Ezra Pound's *The Cantos* (1970).² James Joyce wrote the machine into the "Aeolus" chapter of *Ulysses* (1922), even supplying it with a voice ("Thump, thump ... Clank it, clank it ... Slit, slit"), while George Antheil transformed his *Ballet Mécanique* (1924) into the musical equivalent of an assembly line, complete with sixteen player pianos, seven electric bells, three propellers, and a siren.³ To be sure, not all the modernists were enthusiastic about the machine or the age of mechanical reproduction it ushered in. The agrarianism, organicism, and vitalism celebrated by such writers as E. M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, and D. H. Lawrence meant that many modernists were critical of the increasing role technology was playing in everyday life, but here, too, responses were complicated, if not ambivalent. Cosmopolitanism, autonomy, and social mobility—generally prized by the modernists—were substantially enhanced by various technological innovations, especially those in locomotion, communication, and manufacturing. For better or worse, technology was inextricably linked not only to modernity but also to modernism, and nowhere was that link more self-evident or more immediately felt than in the emerging art of cinema.

Certainly it is significant that the cinema evolved synchronously with modernism. 1895, the year the Lumière brothers held their first public film screening in Paris, also witnessed the publication of Joseph Conrad's *Almayer's Folly*, H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine*, Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull*, and Frank Wedekind's *Pandora's Box*—which

was later made into G. W. Pabst's movie of that title (1929) and later still provided the libretto for Alban Berg's *Lulu* (1937).⁴ Much of early cinema also developed alongside movements in modernism, especially those in painting. Expressionism helped inspire the set designs and visual style of Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) and F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922); surrealism shaped the narrative logic of Luis Buñuel's *Un chien andalou* (1929) and *L'Âge d'or* (1930); and cubism influenced the analytic montage of Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and *October: Ten Days That Shook the World* (1928).⁵ But if modernism and cinema converged in various ways, there was one important respect in which they diverged. While modernist writers, painters, and musicians primarily worked with the same materials as their artistic forebears, filmmakers relied on a radically new technology, with the result that the work of art now entered the age of mechanical reproduction.

In what follows, I argue that few modernist films explored technology and its significance for cinema as imaginatively or provocatively as Fritz Lang's 1927 masterpiece, *Metropolis*. Drawing on Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," I examine how Lang developed visual equivalents to the "auratic" and the "mechanical" in mounting his own critique of technology.⁶ At the heart of the film is the relation between automation—most notably exemplified by the robotic Maria (Brigitte Helm)—and the autonomy essential to Lang on aesthetic and political grounds. The latter is a major concern of Benjamin's essay, whose "Epilogue" famously argues that fascism aestheticizes politics. In *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947), Siegfried Kracauer takes up Benjamin's charge and levels it at *Metropolis* in what has become a highly influential reading of the film—one that I consider in detail toward the end of this chapter.

The Machine and the City: Lang's Dialectical Modernism

Discussing the evolution of *Metropolis* in a 1965 interview with Peter Bogdanovich, Lang remarked that while much of the screenplay originally dealt with magic and the supernatural, the focus of the film gradually changed, becoming in Lang's words a "picture in which human beings were nothing but part of a machine ... I was very interested in machines."⁷ On the one hand, Lang's description of human beings reduced to so many cogs and wheels, the disposable appendages of an industrial apparatus, suggests that his attitude toward technology was decidedly critical. On the other hand, his assertion that he was "very interested in machines"—as the creation of the robotic Maria confirms—has led a number of commentators to view the film as more sympathetic to technology.

Confusion on this question has arisen, at least in part, because the criticism often approaches the idea of technology in the aggregate, conflating an interest in modernist design with the subordination of the individual to the machine, or drawing equivalences between all forms of mechanization and the more specific effects of

Fordism and Taylorism. Anton Kaes is representative of such an approach, claiming that the “opening montage demonstrates a fetishization of machines,”⁸ a line of analysis that Barbara Hales presses further, describing *Metropolis* as “a visual testament to the strength and beauty of technology,” which she connects to Ernst Jünger, whose glorification of war and technology have parallels with futurism and Nazism.⁹ Other critics, however, maintain that Lang’s attitude toward technology is more ambivalent. Andreas Huyssen argues that the film “vacillates” between German expressionism, which viewed technology as “oppressive and destructive,” and *Neue Sachlichkeit* with its “unbridled confidence in technical progress and social engineering.”¹⁰ Finally, where Huyssen detects “vacillation,” R. L. Rutsky discovers “mediation,” contending that Lang navigates a middle course between various oppositions, including technological dystopianism and technological utopianism.¹¹

Now the notion that Lang’s attitude toward a technopolis of the future was—as the criticism suggests—equivocal or perhaps even favorable owes a debt to his description of first viewing the Manhattan skyline during a visit to the United States in 1924: “I looked into the streets—the glaring lights and the tall buildings—and there I conceived *Metropolis*.¹² In “Was ich in Amerika sah” [“What I Saw in America”]—written to promote the film—he emphasizes the beauty and dynamism of New York, though even here he betrays a certain ambivalence, speaking of “these Babylons of stone calling themselves American cities,” where “[a]dvertisements” reach “up to the stars.”¹³ As Holgar Bachmann points out, Lang acknowledged the city’s darker side in private comments, describing it as a jumble of “confused human forces … living in perpetual anxiety … at night [it] did not give the impression of being alive; it lived as illusions lived. I knew then that I had to make a film about all of these sensations.”¹⁴ It is particularly revealing that Lang portrays the nocturnal life of Manhattan as not “being alive,” or as living “as illusions lived.” This sense of the city as simulacral, a place of illusion and illusion-making, is crucial to understanding *Metropolis* as a film preoccupied not only with technology but also with the mechanical reproduction that makes cinema possible.¹⁵

The idea that *Metropolis* presents two aspects, one vibrant and attractive, the other sinister and subterranean, is built into the spatial organization of the city, whose surface “illusion” conceals the “confused human forces” that lie beneath it. The film begins with the image of a square tilted on its corner, which is then crisscrossed by intersecting lines as the word METROPOLIS appears, equating the city with the abstract art of modernism.¹⁶ The title fades into an establishing shot of the urban landscape with skyscrapers arranged in three pyramidal groupings accompanied by stirring and expansive music. As night recedes and daylight creeps up the sides of the buildings, a rising sun illuminates the sky framed in rainbow arches. The message is unmistakable: we are witnessing the dawn not simply of a new day, but of a new era in which the utopian future has at last been achieved. Or so it seems. Lang uses a time-lapse technique to speed up the movement from night to day, indicating that time itself, wrenched from its natural rhythms, is being mechanically manipulated. The scene then dissolves into a series of pumping pistons, which reproduce

the silhouette of the city but in the inverted form of upside-down triangles. In other words, standing behind the appearance of the utopian future is the reality of the technology that powers it. The score also changes from the uplifting music of the opening into the driving and whirring sound of machinery, which we now see in a montage of spinning turbines, humming flywheels, and oscillating armatures.¹⁷ Lang then cuts to the image of a ten-hour clock—the established sequence of time is again distorted—as its hand counts down the last five seconds of the work shift, ending when a factory whistle sounds a dissonant chord.¹⁸

The intertitle “Shift change” appears, followed by the first image we see of humans. To the right are workers in dark uniforms, standing in formation with their backs to the camera, while to the left, facing the camera, is another group of similarly clad men. The symbolism of this opening shot, complete with the barred gate that rises at the shift change, is obvious: these are not workers so much as prisoners. This idea is reinforced by several medium-long shots, which show the workers moving in mechanical unison with heads bowed and arms held stiffly at their sides while a slow march of funereal music plays. The vertical organization of Metropolis is further emphasized as the workers enter a gang elevator, which carries them into the depths of the city as three intertitles (“deep below” “the earth’s surface lay” “the workers’ city”) slowly glide down the screen.

After the workers arrive at the bottom of Metropolis and enter into the Machine Hall, the scene fades to an intertitle arranged in pyramidal form that scrolls up the screen:

As
deep as
lay the workers'
city below the earth,
so high above it towered
the complex named the “Club
of the Sons,” with its lecture halls
and libraries, its theaters and stadiums.

The ascending title obviously answers the earlier descending title, while its shape echoes one of *Metropolis*’s dominant visual motifs, the triangle associated with urban utopianism.¹⁹ There follow several scenes that introduce the film’s hero, Freder (Gustav Fröhlich), shown first racing in a sports stadium and later taking his pleasures in the “Eternal Gardens” with a young woman (Margarete Lanner). After playing a coy catch-me-if-you-can game with Freder, she falls into his arms as Maria (also played by Brigitte Helm) appears at the entrance to the Eternal Gardens surrounded by the impoverished children of the Workers’ City. Turning to the children, Maria gestures toward Freder and the woman and proclaims, “Look! These are your brothers!”

I have discussed the three opening scenes of the film in some detail because they demonstrate the stark—some would say melodramatic—contrast that Lang draws between the oppressed masses and the privileged elite. Indeed, the film’s spatial

organization literalizes Marx's account of base and superstructure: below are the means of production, above the leisure and culture it makes possible. Commentators often point critically to Lang's fascination with the seductively streamlined geometry of *Metropolis*—its Mies van der Rohe exteriors, its Moholy-Nagy interiors—but what these commentators miss is the *dialectical* character of Lang's presentation. By juxtaposing the heights with the depths, the beautiful illusion with the brutal reality, he exposes the ideological mystifications of a modernity that erects its monuments on the backs of the workers. This exposure becomes even more explicit after Freder descends into the Workers' City. There he witnesses firsthand the operations of the M-Machine, where workers move in rigid synchronization with a dehumanizing technology, becoming, as Lang remarked in the Bogdanovich interview, "nothing but part of a machine." After the M-Machine explodes, Freder imagines it as the pagan god Moloch, devouring the People of Israel, who are explicitly equated with the workers. Later in his father's opulent art-deco office, a visibly distraught Freder gestures toward the huge picture window where we see the city's dazzling modernist architecture. When Freder asks, "And where are the people, father, whose hands built your city——?" his father responds "Where they belong," as a subjective-camera shot shows the workers descending in an elevator. Freder utters to himself, "In the depths ... ?" and then wonders aloud, "What if one day those in the depths rise up against you?"²⁰

As the previous analysis makes clear, there is nothing ambiguous about the film's treatment of labor and technology, especially the Fordism and Taylorism it deplores. Certainly Lang is not a Luddite, nor is he opposed to all forms of technology, which obviously includes the cinema. It is also the case, as commentators have observed, that *Metropolis* itself utilizes the most up-to-date special effects, including the much-discussed Schüfftan process, which made it possible—through the use of a mirror—to integrate miniatures of buildings with actors. But Lang was far more skeptical of the age of mechanical reproduction than the criticism has allowed, and that skepticism goes to the very heart of the film, with its fascination with automata and autonomy.

Ave Maria: From Spartacist Radicalism to Weimarian Liberalism

So far I have concentrated on the visual and spatial design of *Metropolis*, which I have argued is implicitly Marxist. Before turning to the significance this design has for automata and autonomy, I want to consider the film's plot, which it will surprise some to hear is explicitly Christian. The screenplay, written by Fritz Lang's wife and cinematic collaborator, Thea von Harbou, is at one level a conventional boy-meets-girl story. Upon first seeing Maria, Freder immediately falls in love and—at the same time—rather conveniently develops a class consciousness. But as the film progresses we discover this class consciousness is not so much Marxist as Christian. So it is that Harbou constructs her plot around a series of images and allegories drawn from the Bible. Thus, after confronting his father, Joh Fredersen (Alfred Abel), Freder again

descends into the depths and, having changed places with a worker, is symbolically crucified on the hands of a huge clock as he utters “Father—! Father—! Will ten hours never end——??!”²¹ He then visits the equally symbolic 2,000-year-old catacombs beneath the city, where Maria preaches a sermon that features the story of the Tower of Babel. The epigraph of the film—and Maria’s central message—is “the mediator between head and hands must be the heart!” When a worker asks, “But where is our mediator, Maria?” she responds, “Wait for him! He will surely come!” as the camera cuts to a dramatically lit Freder.

The “Intermezzo” section is also heavily freighted with Christian symbolism, much of it drawn from the Book of Revelations. In scenes that crosscut between a delirious, bedridden Freder and the erotic dance of the simulacral Maria, the latter is compared to the Whore of Babylon, as the Thin Man (Fritz Rasp) proclaims, “The days spoken of in the Apocalypse are nigh!” Later an intertitle quotes from Revelations 17:4 (“And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet color”), as Freder imagines statues of the Seven Deadly Sins coming to life and being led forth into Metropolis by the figure of Death. We then cut to Maria posing atop a seven-headed, ten-horned beast, recalling Revelations 17:3: “And I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet colored beast … having seven heads and ten horns.” As Death menacingly advances toward the camera, slashing the air with his scythe, the intertitle reads “Death descends upon the city——!”

The “Furioso” section features a spectacular flood, which is motivated not so much by narrative necessity as by Biblical symbolism.²² The various subplots converge in this section as Freder and the real Maria rescue the children from the flood, the robotic Maria is exposed and destroyed by an enraged mob, and Freder engages in a life-and-death struggle atop the city’s cathedral. The film ends before the doors of the cathedral with Freder, the almost-sacrificed Son, now acting as the Mediator between “Head” and “Hands.” Hence Management and Labor—here represented by Joh Fredersen and the foreman of the workers—are reconciled through Christian altruism and empathy.

Needless to say, the Christian subtext of the film is a tangle of contradictions. If one insists upon strict, one-to-one correspondences, the film becomes a ludicrous Oedipal romance between Freder (Jesus) and his mother (Mary), with matters further confused by passing references to the Tower of Babel, the Apocalypse, and the Flood. But such a reductively literalist reading is clearly misplaced. Lang and Harbou are not insisting on equivalences but suggesting analogies within a broadly conceived religious framework, one in which an idealized young woman inspires a privileged young man with a message of brotherly love and social justice. Given the historical context of 1920s Germany, the Christian plot also has the effect of dramatically shifting the film’s political register, moving it away from the Spartacist radicalism of the opening scenes and toward the Weimarian liberalism of the ending.²³ But the Christian plot does more than enact this shift. Like Walter Benjamin, Lang was fascinated by the ontology of the photographic image, an ontology that, as Benjamin argued, was not unrelated to religious experience.

The Auratic, the Mechanical and the Fate of Autonomy

The argument of “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” is familiar but worth briefly reviewing. With the advent of mechanical reproduction—or “technical reproducibility,” to translate the German more precisely—art undergoes a world-historical transformation in which its “aura” is destroyed.²⁴ The “aura” is, to speak in Max Weber’s terms, the power of art to enchant or mystify. Before mechanical reproduction, the ontological status of the work of art is defined by its absolute uniqueness. As Benjamin writes, “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.”²⁵ The uniqueness of the work of art guarantees both its “authenticity” (there is only one “true” *Mona Lisa*, c. 1503–1506) and its “distance” (one must travel to see the *Mona Lisa*), thereby conferring upon it a cultic status. Given both the singularity of the art object and its spatial remoteness, the viewer experiences reverence in its presence, investing it with sacred, even religious, significance.²⁶ But with the invention of photography all of this changes: “for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual . . . From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the ‘authentic’ print makes no sense. But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics.”²⁷

For Benjamin, cinema is the greatest manifestation of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, which is to say, in the age of the demystified and desacralized image. Film alters, in his view, the aesthetic experience in two fundamental ways. First, as we have seen, by virtue of its technical reproducibility it destroys the auratic function of art. Since film is distributed on a mass basis, there is no original or authentic version of it—simply a series of copies. Second, by virtue of its constructedness—the use of montage, camera angles, tracking shots, and so on—film substitutes critical distance for sacred distance. As a result, the cinematic audience, like the Brechtian viewer, is estranged from the art object, which is to say, made aware of the dangers of enchantment and therefore compelled to stand back and critically examine the spectacle before it: “The sequence of positional views which the editor composes from the material supplied him constitutes the completed film. It comprises certain factors of movement which are in reality those of the camera, not to mention special camera angles, close-ups, etc. . . . This permits the audience to take the position of a critic, without experiencing any personal contact with the actor . . . the audience assumes the position of the camera; it examines. This is not the approach to which cult values lend themselves.”²⁸

With the film’s Christian subtext in mind, I would like to consider the relation between auratic and mechanically reproduced art in *Metropolis*, a relation that is



Figure 4.1 Maria on dais, Fritz Lang, *Metropolis* (1927)

perfectly illustrated by the two Marias. In her original form, Maria epitomizes the sacred both in her character and visual representation. Lang introduces his heroine in the Eternal Gardens scene by shooting her in “star-focus”—which blurs the visual field around the subject—and by backlitting her hair to produce a halo effect. The auratic representation of Maria is even more evident in the catacombs sequence, where Lang first positions her on a dais, framing her in a circle of light (see Figure 4.1) and utilizing a high-camera angle to emphasize her distance from the workers who worship her from afar (see Figure 4.2) By contrast the simulacral Maria is in theory endlessly reproducible, which means that she functions as a kind of mass object that eliminates all distance. The scene in which she is introduced as an erotic dancer plays on fantasies of universal availability and proximity, as the composite shot of the staring eyes demonstrates. Later, in a scene set in a Yoshiwara nightclub, Lang presents the simulacral Maria as a kind of Louise Brooks figure, a generic 1920s showgirl who, again, is accessible to anyone and everyone. The simulacral Maria’s contrast with the authentic Maria is underscored by the Yoshiwara setting, which visually reproduces the scenic design of the catacombs, consisting of a stairway leading up to a dais framed by rectangular structures on either side. But in the nightclub scene the Christian symbolism is undone—the crosses and candles are replaced by art-deco design and artificial lights—and the distance that previously separated Maria from the workers is eliminated as the showgirl version of herself teasingly backs away from the



Figure 4.2 Distance between Maria and workers, Fritz Lang, *Metropolis* (1927)

admiring men while inviting them toward her (see Figure 4.3). Later still, this sexual promiscuity translates itself into political proximity. In the catacombs, the simulacral Maria stirs the workers to revolt, while an off-key version of “*La Marseillaise*” sounds as she is carried away on their shoulders, becoming a sort of Teutonic Marianne.²⁹ Maria’s identity with the workers is further underscored in the scenes that follow—the meeting in the public square, the storming of the Machine Hall, and the destruction of the Heart Machine—scenes that are presented in a series of medium and medium-long shots where Maria becomes one with the crowd.

Of course, it must be remembered that despite appearances the simulacral Maria does not act on her own initiative. Lacking any will of her own, she is not a free agent but an actress who performs a role—scripted first by Joh Fredersen to discredit the authentic Maria and then by Rotwang (Rudolf Klein-Rogge) to destroy his enemy, Fredersen—and this lack of agency brings us to an important distinction between Lang and Benjamin. Obviously both men are, up to a point, in favor of mechanical reproduction—which, after all, makes motion pictures possible—but the simulacral (and therefore volitionless) Maria highlights a fundamental problem with art based on technology: the *automaton* threatens to destroy *autonomy*. Indeed, one might argue that the aesthetic autonomy that is crucial to Theodor Adorno’s vision of modernism is effectively eliminated in the studio system, whose large production budgets and mass distribution undermine the individual authority of the director. In other



Figure 4.3 Proximity in Yoshiwara, Fritz Lang, *Metropolis* (1927)

words, Lang's film registers serious anxieties about a mechanized and technologized art in which artists no longer control their own creations.

Lang's reservations about the artistic limitations of the film industry become especially evident in the figure of Joh Fredersen, who in many respects functions as a 1920s studio head. Thus he builds a self-contained and self-sustaining city over which he autocratically rules; he has at his disposal state-of-the-art technology and a special-effects expert in the person of Rotwang; and through these resources, he is able to manipulate images that shape and influence public opinion, as the example of Maria demonstrates. When we first encounter Fredersen, he behaves like central casting's version of a Hollywood producer, pacing back and forth in his palatial office as he gives dictation, issues commands, and dismisses subordinates. Even his dress suggests the casual attire of Hollywood (sports jacket, light-colored slacks, and white shoes), as opposed to the formal suit one would expect a business executive to wear.³⁰ Also key to this metafictional reading of the film is the simulacral Maria. Although most critics treat her merely as a robot, Lang also presents her—at least metaphorically—as a cinematic invention, the kind of celluloid fantasy that Hollywood and, for that matter, UFA, specialized in producing. So it is that her creation depends, as Anton Kaes has observed, on "machines, electricity, and chemicals—all the elements that are also needed to create a lifelike image in the photographic process on film ... the female robot becomes an emblem for the cinema as such."³¹ Even her introduction into

the Metropolis elite, orchestrated by Rotwang and Fredersen, is handled as a “star-is-born” launch at an elegant, black-tie party. It should also be pointed out that although she plays the part of a movie star in Yoshiwara, trading on her glamour and sex appeal, her principal function is to impersonate the authentic Maria—which is to say, to be an actress.

If the metafictional reading I have proposed still seems doubtful, two things are worth remembering: Maria bases her sermon in the catacombs on the story of the Tower of Babel, and Joh Fredersen’s office sits atop a building called the New Tower of Babel. Why this fascination with the celebrated text from Genesis?³² Obviously, the Tower of Babel provides a cautionary tale about hubristic overreaching, but Lang’s contemporaries would have also recognized another, more topical reference. UFA, which overwhelmingly represented the German film industry, built a new studio in 1922—expanding it in 1926—just outside Berlin in a place called Neubabelsberg, or New Babel Mountain. It is there that *Metropolis* was shot and there, following its Berlin premiere, that it was drastically cut by a studio worried about marketing a film that ran 153 minutes in length. While different excisions were made in different countries, for some eighty years the film existed only in a diminished form, missing approximately half an hour of its original running time. Then in 2008, a copy of the original print was discovered in Buenos Aires, and thus led to a restored version of *Metropolis* in 2010, one that adds continuity to the narrative, including some important scenes with the Thin Man. But the story of the restoration is not entirely happy. In the early 1970s, lab technicians in Buenos Aires were careless while reducing the original 35 mm print to a 16 mm negative, with the result that the recovered footage was scratched and grainy, causing sufficient damage in some instances that it became necessary to supplement scenes with intertitles. In other words, thanks to Neubabelsberg, even the restored film we have today gives us only a diminished sense of Lang’s original vision.³³

Now if Lang expresses reservations about art in the age of mechanical reproduction—reservations that the cutting of *Metropolis* would seem to justify—Benjamin treats the new art of cinema as aesthetically progressive and politically liberating. Here it should be pointed out that Benjamin’s own evolving views owe a significant debt to Bertolt Brecht’s 1931 essay, “The Film, The Novel and Epic Theatre,” which argues that cinema provides an alternative to “the old kind of un-technical, anti-technical ‘glowing’ art, with its religious links.”³⁴ Brecht’s language, with its emphasis on a “glowing art” and “religious” associations, strikingly anticipates Benjamin’s idea of “auratic” art. After reading a draft of Benjamin’s essay, Theodor Adorno responded with a lengthy letter, which identifies a shift in Benjamin’s thinking, one that Adorno specifically attributes to Brecht’s influence: “In your earlier writings, of which the present essay is a continuation, you distinguished the idea of the work of art as a structure from the symbol of theology on the one hand, and from the taboo of magic on the other. But I now find it somewhat disturbing—and here I see a sublimated remnant of certain Brechtian themes—that you have . . . rather casually transferred the concept of the magical aura to the ‘autonomous work of art’

and flatly assigned a counter-revolutionary function to the latter.”³⁵ Adorno goes on to insist that autonomy is essential to the art object, because it enables artists to resist various forms of mystification while guaranteeing their aesthetic and intellectual freedom: “Dialectical though your essay is, it is less than this in the case of the autonomous work of art itself; for it neglects a fundamental experience which daily becomes increasingly evident to me in my musical work, that precisely the uttermost consistency in the pursuit of the technical laws of autonomous art actually transforms this art itself, and, instead of turning it into a taboo or fetish, brings it much closer to a state of freedom, to something that can be consciously produced and made.”³⁶ Especially salient are Adorno’s concluding remarks on cinematic constructedness as a form of Brechtian *Verfremdung*, or “estrangement,” an attribute that Adorno finds missing from the vast majority of UFA productions: “When I spent a day in the studios of Neubabelsberg a couple of years ago, what impressed me most of all was how *little* montage and all the advanced techniques you emphasize are actually used; rather, it seems as though reality is always *constructed* with an infantile attachment to the mimetic and then ‘photographed.’ You underestimate the technical character of autonomous art and overestimate that of dependent art; put simply, this would be my principal objection.”³⁷ In other words, Adorno reacts to the aesthetics of mechanical reproduction with the same skepticism Lang displays in *Metropolis*: namely, that the new art of film, especially insofar as it is a studio creation, threatens to substitute the automation of mass entertainment for the autonomy of the individual artist.

Adorno’s letter is revealing because it stages in miniature a debate that took place within the Frankfurt School between aesthetics and politics, a debate that is of special relevance to modernism, which has often been condemned—in some quarters still is—for preferring formal innovation to social commitment.³⁸ And this observation brings us to the political dimension of *Metropolis*, which Siegfried Kracauer, Benjamin and Adorno’s fellow Frankfurt School critic, accused of being proto-fascist.³⁹

The Politics of Form

In *From Caligari to Hitler*, the classic study of pre-WWII German cinema, Siegfried Kracauer criticizes *Metropolis* for its “preponderance of surface features,” arguing that “the decorative not only appears as an end in itself, but even belies certain points made through the plot.”⁴⁰ Schooled in German aesthetics, Kracauer has chosen his words deliberately: when the decorative becomes “an end in itself” it achieves the autonomy that Kant and Adorno believed is crucial for art.⁴¹ In Benjaminian terms, Lang’s cinematic formalism has the effect of “aestheticizing politics,” opening the film up—whatever Lang’s own political orientation might be—to charges of proto-fascism. Especially objectionable from Kracauer’s perspective is one scene in particular, the flood sequence near the end of the film: “In his exclusive concern with ornamentation, Lang goes so far as to compose decorative patterns from the masses who are desperately trying to escape the inundation of the lower city. Cinematically

an incomparable achievement, this inundation sequence is humanly a shocking failure.”⁴²

Kracauer’s claim that Lang aestheticizes politics has decisively influenced the critical reception of *Metropolis* and needs to be considered in some detail. Below (see Figure 4.4) is a frame taken from the scene in which the authentic Maria struggles to save the workers’ children from the flood. The visual geometry of the composition is highly wrought—the circular figure near the bottom, the rhythmic alteration of windows, the triangles of light and shadow—creating an image as elaborately patterned as a painting by Mondrian. Certainly one could argue that Lang is so attracted by visual design that he has aestheticized violence, treated the potential mass drowning of children as an exercise in formalism. Ironically, the problem with Kracauer’s Marxist reading is that, as Adorno said of Benjamin, it is insufficiently dialectical.

In the “Furioso” sequence, Lang crosscuts between the two Marias. The simulacral Maria throws the switch on the Heart Machine, represented by a huge spinning wheel, which then overloads the generators and causes a massive hydraulic failure. By contrast, the authentic Maria operates the hand switch on the gong, summoning the children from the tenements in an effort to rescue them. Lang deliberately emphasizes the parallels between the two scenes: both involve activating mechanical devices (one high tech, one low tech), and both are dominated by circular imagery (the wheel of the Heart Machine, the drum of the gong). But as Lang develops this contrasting imagery

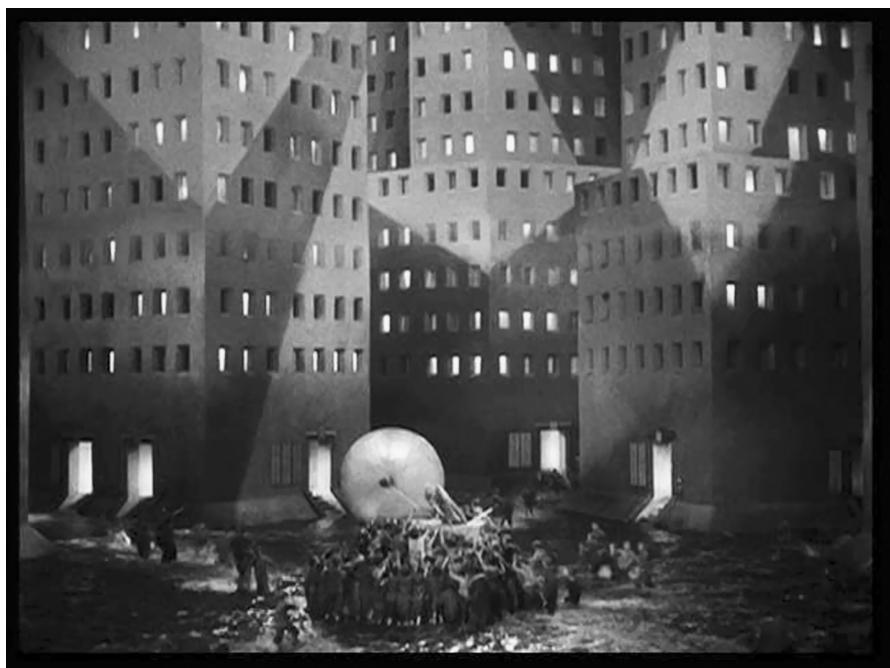


Figure 4.4 Maria struggles to save children, Fritz Lang, *Metropolis* (1927)

it undergoes a subtle but decisive change. The simulacral Maria is associated with modern technology—the spinning wheel, the electrical discharges, the overheating generators—while the authentic Maria is associated with an imagery that is organic, even womb-like: a mother figure, a group of children, an amniotic flood. Indeed, as the scene progresses, the visual representation of the gong is gradually transformed, ultimately taking on the appearance of a massive, almost mythical egg, which rises out of the generative medium of water (see Figure 4.5). Obviously both the imagery of the spinning wheel and the sounding gong possess elements of abstraction and monumentalism, and in this sense they both can be regarded as modernist. But the contrasts that Lang draws—destruction versus salvation, fire versus water, and most significantly mechanical versus natural—indicate that he is not merely using his imagery “ornamentally” or “decoratively” as Kracauer alleges—but has anchored it in the film’s thematic and narrative development.

In a later section of his book, Kracauer returns to *Metropolis* and presses further his criticism. Focusing on the film’s ending, he discovers not the affirmation of Weimarian democracy that Lang presumably intended, but a subtly encoded fascist subtext: “In fact, Maria’s demand that the heart mediate between hand and brain could well have been formulated by Goebbels. He, too, appealed to the heart—in the interest of totalitarian propaganda.”⁴³ Abandoning his earlier claim that the film’s formalism is *extrinsic* to its meaning, a matter of mere ornament, Kracauer now argues the exact



Figure 4.5 Gong as mythical egg, Fritz Lang, *Metropolis* (1927)

opposite. Lang's "all-devouring decorative scheme" is of a piece with the highly patterned formalism that characterized the Nazi rallies—here, Kracauer cites Goebbel's speech at the Nuremberg Party Convention of 1934—a formalism that in *Metropolis* serves not an aesthetic but a political purpose, which is to say, Joh Fredersen's power-hungry "claim to omnipotence."⁴⁴ As Kracauer goes on to observe, describing the film's concluding scene, "the workers advance in the form of a wedge-shaped, strictly symmetrical procession which points towards the industrialist standing on the portal steps of the cathedral. The whole composition denotes that the industrialist acknowledges the heart for the purpose of manipulating it; that he does not give up his power, but will expand it over a realm not yet annexed—the realm of the collective soul. Freder's rebellion results in the establishment of totalitarian authority, and he considers this result a victory."⁴⁵

There are several problems with Kracauer's interpretation. Putting aside the fact that he contradicts his earlier claims concerning Lang's "decorative" formalism, such a reading willfully ignores the development that Fredersen's character undergoes in the "Furioso" section. After the power outage in *Metropolis*, a desperate Fredersen asks, "Where is my son," to which the Thin Man replies, "Tomorrow, thousands will ask in fury and desperation: Joh Fredersen, where is my son!" causing Fredersen to reel back and clutch his head in agony. After his son survives a life-and-death struggle with Rotwang, a still distraught Fredersen removes his hands from his head, dramatically revealing that his hair has turned white, a visual transformation that signals a spiritual conversion. Later still in front of the cathedral, Grot (Heinrich George) leads the workers in a wedge-shaped procession, but this grouping of men is notably different from the squadron-like formations we saw at the beginning of the film. The workers now march with their heads held high and move at a natural pace rather than in the machine-like cadences of the opening scene. What is more, the "symmetrical procession" does not, as Kracauer asserts, point "towards the industrialist"—who in fact is *absent* from the scene—but toward the apex of the pediment over the cathedral entrance, thus underscoring the film's Christian resolution (see Figure 4.6).⁴⁶ It is also significant that the shape of the procession echoes the shape of the cathedral and its pediment, recalling the triangle, which, as we have seen, is the sign of utopian idealism and Christian trinitarianism in *Metropolis*.⁴⁷ In other words, the visual imagery of the scene is perfectly consistent with an ending that affirms a Christian reconciliation between management and labor within the context of Weimarian democracy.

Kracauer concludes his analysis of *Metropolis* with what is intended to be its QED moment: "Lang relates that immediately after Hitler's rise to power Goebbels sent for him." Kracauer then goes on to quote what is purportedly Lang's own description of his encounter with Goebbels: "he [Goebbels] told me [Lang] that, many years before, he and the Führer had seen my picture *Metropolis* in a small town, and Hitler had said at that time that he wanted me to make the Nazi pictures."⁴⁸ In point of fact, Lang himself reported that in April 1933 Goebbels offered him the management of the entire German film industry, prompting Lang, who was half-Jewish, to flee to Paris that very night.⁴⁹ Of course, the fact that Goebbels admired Lang's craftsmanship

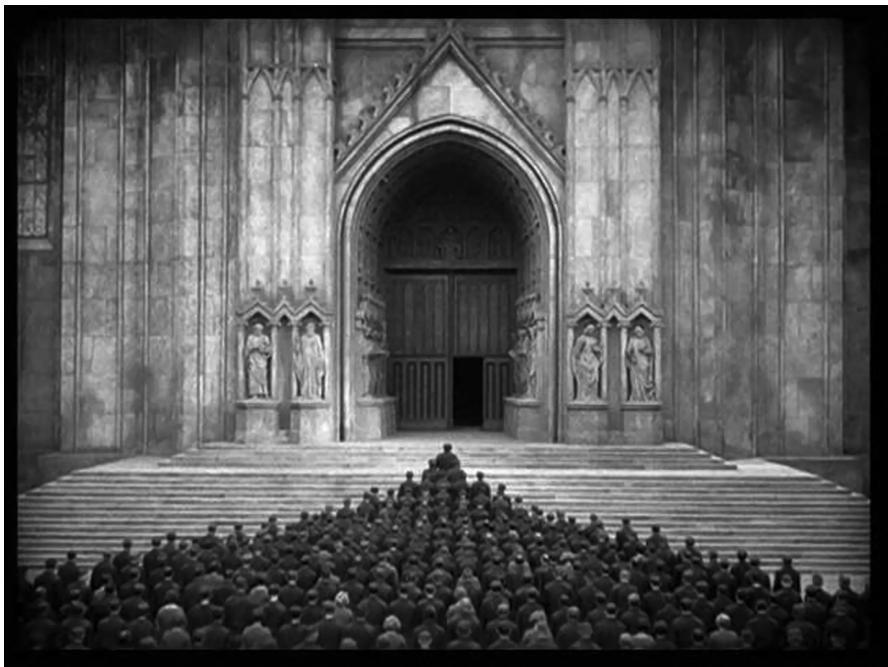


Figure 4.6 Symmetrical procession of workers, Fritz Lang, *Metropolis* (1927)

and artistry reveals nothing about the politics of *Metropolis*. On March 28, 1933, the German Board of Film Censors banned Lang's most recent film, *Testament des Dr. Mabuse* (1933), demonstrating that the Reich's propaganda minister had no difficulty distinguishing between aesthetics and ideology. The following day, Goebbels hosted the "top personnel of the German film industry" at the Hotel Kaiserhof in Berlin, where he expressed his admiration not only for Lang's *Die Nibelungen* (1924), with its Wagnerian myth-making, but also for Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, whose politics were hardly congenial to National Socialism.⁵⁰ Although Gösta Werner calls into question the timing of Lang's departure from Germany⁵¹—the better evidence is that he left in July 1933, not April—the fact remains that Lang rejected Goebbels's offer and eventually emigrated to the United States, where, significantly, he spent World War II making a series of explicitly anti-Nazi films.⁵² Indeed, he made one of them with a man named Bertolt Brecht.⁵³

In the final analysis, *Metropolis* offers a spirited, liberal defense of autonomy against the logic of automation and the automaton. The idea of the automaton—an inhuman figure with a superhuman power to mesmerize—is of particular interest in the context of Weimar Germany. R.L. Rutsky has argued that the Fredersens, father and son, can be interpreted as early versions of Hitler, who was often represented as combining a "steely' paternal will" with "spiritual-maternal emotionality and love."⁵⁴ Yet surely—surely—if there is an avatar of Hitler in Lang's film, it is not the Fredersens

but the simulacral Maria, who lashes the masses into fury with seductive gestures and demagogic speeches, and then inspires them to overthrow the established order. If we think of her as a celluloid invention, a creation cooked up by the wizards of UFA, she shows just how dangerous media manipulation can be. I began this essay by quoting the futurist—and I might add fascist—Enrico Prampolini, who called the machine the “new mythical deity,” identifying it with the spectacle and monumentalism that enchanted the masses in Germany and Italy, even as it destroyed political and aesthetic autonomy.⁵⁵ Lang was an enthusiastic advocate for both kinds of autonomy, and *Metropolis* is a film that presciently demonstrates the terrible consequences that follow when individual freedom is surrendered to communal authority.

Notes

1. Enrico Prampolini, “The Aesthetic of the Machine and Mechanical Introspection in Art,” *Broom* 3, Edward Storer, trans., no. 3 (1922), 235–37.
2. See “Section: Rock-Drill De Los Cantares LXXXV–XCV” (1955), in Ezra Pound, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1996), 561–667.
3. James Joyce, *Ulysses*, Hans Gabler, ed. (New York: Vintage, 1986), 7.101, 7.136, 7.174–75.
4. Other iconic works of early modernism stand in close proximity to the Lumières’ introduction of cinema to Paris, from Edvard Munch’s *The Scream* (1892), Knut Hamsun’s *Pan* (1894), Claude Debussy’s *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* (1894), and Alfred Jarry’s *Ubu Roi* (1896) to Stéphane Mallarmé’s *Un coup de dés* (1897), August Strindberg’s *Inferno* (1898), Paul Cézanne’s *Nature morte avec rideau et pichet fleuri* (1899), and Arnold Schoenberg’s *Die verklärte Nacht* (1899).
5. In Eisenstein’s “Synchronization of Senses,” he twice uses cubism as an analogy to explain the specific effects of montage; see Sergei Eisenstein, *The Film Sense*, Jay Leyda, ed. and trans. (New York: Harvest, 1942), 98, 103. For another account of the influence of cubism on Eisenstein, see Lisa Siraganian, “Sergei Eisenstein’s Collage: Filming Montage in Museums at Night,” chapter 3 in this volume.
6. Although a number of critics have passingly referred to Benjamin in relation to *Metropolis*, none to my knowledge has used “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (see note 25) to analyze Lang’s film. Gunning deals with Benjamin’s theory of allegory; Murphy refers to Benjamin and urban experience; and Rutsky briefly touches on the “aura” as discussed in Benjamin’s “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire”; see Tom Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of Vision and Modernity* (London: BFI Publishing, 2000), 54, 77; Richard Murphy, “Modernism and the Cinema: Metropolis and the Expressionist Aesthetic,” *Comparative Critical Studies* 4, no. 1 (2007), 111; and R. L. Rutsky, “The Mediation of Technology and Gender: Metropolis, Nazism, Modernism,” in *Fritz Lang’s “Metropolis,”* Michael Minden and Holger Bachmann, eds. (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2000), 236, 239.
7. Peter Bogdanovich, *Fritz Lang in America* (London: Studio Vista, 1967), 124.
8. Anton Kaes, “Cinema and Modernity: On Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*,” in *High and Low Culture: German Attempts at Mediation*, Rheinhold Grimm and Jost Hermand, eds. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 23.

9. Barbara Hales, "Fritz Lang's Metropolis and Reactionary Modernism," *New German Review* 7 (1992), 19. For Hales's discussion of Jünger, see 20 ff.
10. Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 67.
11. Rutsky, "Mediation," 217–45.
12. Bogdanovich, *Lang*, 15.
13. Holgar Bachmann, "Introduction," in *Fritz Lang's "Metropolis": Cinematic Visions of Technology and Fear*, Michael Minden and Holger Bachmann, eds., 4. Scott Klein has interestingly suggested in conversation that "Babylons of stone" reaching "up to the stars" may allude to D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916), which like *Metropolis* was a big-budget epic.
14. Bachmann, "Introduction," 5.
15. Quoting from Patrick McGilligan's biography of Lang, Bachmann points out that Lang had already begun to conceive *Metropolis* in April 1924 before he arrived in New York in October 1924 ("Introduction," 6). Nevertheless, the images of Manhattan had a profound effect on Lang and no doubt contributed both to his conception of the film and to its visual design.
16. All film references are to the video version of the film restored by Transit Films: Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau Stiftung and released on Kino Video in 2010.
17. The Kino Video includes the original score of *Metropolis*, which was composed by Gottfried Huppertz.
18. The twelve-hour clock, which registers the twenty-four-hour sequence of time, is here reordered into a clock organized around the ten-hour work shift.
19. The figure of the upright triangle carries associations that are both negative (the New Tower of Babel) and positive (the cathedral). Indeed, the thematic development of the film can be charted as a movement from the former to the latter.
20. See the conclusion to the "Manifesto of the Communist Party": "Communists everywhere support every revolutionary movement against the existing social and political order of things ... Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communistic revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win"; see *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd edn., Robert C. Tucker, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 500.
21. See Matthew 27:46: "And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying ... My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" All Biblical references in this chapter are to the King James version.
22. See Genesis 6:12–13: "And God looked upon the earth, and, behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted his way upon earth. And God said unto Noah, The end of all flesh is come before me ... and, behold, I will destroy them." Narratively speaking, it is not clear why the destruction of the power grid should flood the Workers' City.
23. According to his biographer, Lang was not especially political; see Patrick McGilligan, *Fritz Lang: The Nature of the Beast* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 158. Nevertheless, as I will presently argue, Lang was clearly anti-Nazi, and his inclinations were, if anything, left wing: "The director and von Molo [Lang's assistant] shook their heads, more than once, over Thea von Harbou's rightward drift. Von Molo was a committed Socialist, and Lang gave many the same distinct impression" (162). McGilligan argues that Harbou's politics were complicated: "[She] had always been a conservative nationalist, while at the same time she demonstrated progressive tendencies; she was an early, outspoken advocate of legalized abortion in Germany, an activist for reform in sex-discrimination legislation,

- a proponent of equal rights for women" (157). In the early 1930s, Harbou began to embrace Nazism and this philosophy, as well as problems in her marriage with Lang, led to a divorce in 1933, the same year Hitler came to power. Lang remarked of the divorce, "Our separation was amicable ... The only thing that divided us was National Socialism" (McGilligan, 181).
24. The German title is "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit," which translates as "The Art Work in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility." For another account of the "auratic," see Douglas Mao, "On Auratic and Sentimental Objects: High and Low Modernism in Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane*," chapter 15 in this volume.
 25. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, Hannah Arendt, ed.; Harry Zohn, trans. (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 220. I use the Zohn translation because it corresponds more precisely to the layout of the essay in Benjamin's *Schriften* than does the version published in Walter Benjamin: *Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935–1938*, Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, eds., and Howard Jephcott, Howard Eiland and others, trans. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002). There are occasional problems with the Zohn translation, including, as previously noted, his rendering of the title.
 26. Benjamin expands on the concept of the aura as follows: "the social basis of the contemporary decay of the aura ... rests on two circumstances, both of which are related to the increasing significance of the masses in contemporary life. Namely, the desire of contemporary masses to brings things 'closer' spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction ... To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose 'sense of the universal equality of things' has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction," 223.
 27. Benjamin, "Work of Art," 224.
 28. Benjamin, "Work of Art," 228–29. I have slightly altered the Zohn translation, which reads as follows: "Consequently the audience takes the position of the camera; its approach is that of testing." The original German ("Es übernimmt dessen Haltung: es testet") turns on the phrase "es testet," which can be translated as "it tests," "examines," "inspects," "investigates," or "scrutinizes." Given the context, it is clear that the audience, which "assumes the position of the camera," is visually engaging the object and therefore either "examines" or "inspects" makes sense in English. I have used the former, since "examine" includes ideas both of "looking at" and "testing." For the original German, see Walter Benjamin, *Schriften*, Band I, Th. W. Adorno, ed. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1955), 380.
 29. Maria even tugs at the collar of her blouse, suggesting the bare-breasted Marianne depicted in Eugène Delacroix's well-known 1830 painting, *La Liberté guidant le people*.
 30. Of course, Lang was specifically concerned about autonomy in the German film industry, largely represented by UFA, but Hollywood would have provided the more familiar frame of reference for the model of a studio head.
 31. Kaes, "Cinema and Modernity," 25.
 32. See Genesis 11: 1–9.
 33. Obviously the decision to cut the film drastically occurred after its premiere and therefore did not influence Lang's intentional design. My larger point, however, is that Lang is aware of the problems mechanical production and the studio system pose for a director, problems that as it turned out were prophetically realized in the case of *Metropolis*.

34. Bertolt Brecht, “The Film, the Novel and Epic Theatre,” in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, John Willet, ed. and trans. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), 48. The full passage from Brecht reads as follows: “Literature needs the film not only indirectly but also directly. That decisive extension of its social duties which following from the transformation of art into a paedagogical discipline entails the multiplying or the repeated changing of the means of representation … This apparatus [film] can be better used than almost anything else to supersede the old kind of untechnical, anti-technical ‘glowing’ art [ausstrahlenden Kunst], with its religious links. The socialization of these means of production is vital for art” (48). For the original German, see Bertolt Brecht, *Versuche*, vol. 3 (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1959), 257–58.
35. From Adorno’s letter dated March 18, 1936; see Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence, 1928–1940*, Henri Lovitz, ed.; Nicholas Walker, trans. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 128.
36. Adorno and Benjamin, *Correspondence*, 128–29.
37. Adorno and Benjamin, *Correspondence*, 131.
38. In this regard, the Lukács-Adorno debate is especially relevant; see Georg Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, John Mander and Necke Mander, trans. (London: Merlin Press, 1963); and Georg Lukács, “Trying to Understand Endgame,” in Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1, Rolf Tiedemann, ed.; Shierry Weber Nicholsen, trans. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 241–75.
39. Adorno argued that it is through its autonomy that art critiques society, that “[art] becomes social by positioning itself in opposition to society, and it first establishes this position by being autonomous. By crystallizing into something uniquely its own—rather than obeying existing social norms, thereby qualifying as ‘socially useful’—art criticizes society by merely being there, for which puritans of all denominations condemn it. There is nothing pure, nothing structured according to its immanent law, that does not implicitly critique our debasement by conditions which are moving toward a total-exchange society, a society in which everything is a means to an end [in ihr ist alles nur für anderes]”; see Theodor Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), 335; my translation. For the other English translations, see *Aesthetic Theory*, Robert Hullot-Kentor, ed. and trans., (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 225–26; and *Aesthetic Theory*, Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, eds.; C. Lenhardt, trans. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 321.
40. Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1947), 149.
41. For Kant on aesthetic autonomy, see “Analytik des Schönen,” in Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, [1790], 1974), 115–54.
42. Kracauer, *From Caligari*, 149–50.
43. Kracauer, *From Caligari*, 163–64.
44. Kracauer, *From Caligari*, 164. In quoting Goebbels’ speech at the 1934 Nuremberg rally, Kracauer specifically compares Fredersen to Hitler’s Minister of Propaganda: “The pictorial structure of the final scene confirms the analogy between the industrialist and Goebbels,” 164.
45. Kracauer, *From Caligari*, 164.
46. Kracauer, who obviously did not have access to video versions of the film, has misremembered the scene.

47. The upright triangle is contrasted with the inverted triangle of the piston in the opening scene of the film.
48. Kracauer, *From Caligari*, 164.
49. For an account of Lang's meeting with Goebbels, see Gösta Werner, "Fritz Lang and Goebbels: Myth and Facts," *Film Quarterly* 43, no. 4 (1990), 24–27.
50. Werner, "Fritz Lang," 26
51. Werner, "Fritz Lang," 27.
52. See, for example, *Man Hunt* (1941), *Hangmen Also Die!* (1943), *Ministry of Fear* (1944), and *Cloak and Dagger* (1946).
53. *Hangmen Also Die!* gives a fictionalized account of Operation Anthropoid, the 1942 assassination in Prague of Reinhard Heydrich, who was the chief architect of Hitler's Final Solution.
54. Rutsky, "Mediation," 233. "The re legitimization of Fredersen's (and presumably, after him, Freder's) leadership at the end of the film is not simply an affirmation of a tyrannical masculine order; it is based on the mediation of this particular order with an eternal-feminine spirit," 232. Rutsky then goes on to equate the eternal feminine with Hitler, who "seems at times to be represented as both father and mother," 233.
55. In Rome Prampolini helped design the "Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution," which was opened in 1932 by Mussolini.

5

“Suspense Is like a Woman”

Sex and Style in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Pleasure Garden* and *The Lodger*

Laura Frost

Modernism is in the eye of the beholder. This is notably true in the case of Alfred Hitchcock, whose Hollywood films of the 1950s and early 1960s such as *Rear Window*, *Vertigo*, and *Psycho*, with their innovative camerawork, structural ironies, self-conscious wit, and psychosexual tensions, have been claimed by postmodern critics, while his contributions to modernist cinema have received far less attention.¹ When François Truffaut and the *Cahiers du cinéma* hailed Hitchcock’s auteurism, they minimized his early work, asserting that he “became Hitchcock” only once he had gone to America. Despite the fact that Hitchcock himself always emphasized the importance of his silent films—ten made between 1925 and 1929—as the foundation of his technical knowledge and style, when he is included in histories of modernist cinema, Salvador Dalí’s dream sequence in *Spellbound* tends to garner more notice than Hitchcock’s own efforts.²

In his silent films, by means of montage sequences, subjective camerawork, cross-cutting, and other resourceful visual storytelling, Hitchcock promotes a formally intricate, experimental style that is consonant with modernist aesthetics. He was obsessed with technique, planning every shot before he arrived on the set: “I put first and foremost cinematic style before content.”³ He had a strongly instinctual but also highly analytical approach to cinema.⁴ While some contemporary critics recognized the impact of his craftsmanship—a *Close Up* review notes that *Blackmail* “deserves our attention … because it has a conscious effort to bring technical thoughtfulness to bear on its own construction”⁵—Hitchcock was more often, as Rachael Low notes, “tagged with a grudging label: ‘very clever entertainer, but not an artist.’”⁶ Hitchcock did not align himself with avant-garde filmmakers. Although he attended screenings of the famed London Film Society, he remained on the periphery of that circle. He was always interested in appealing to a mainstream, commercial audience, tirelessly promoting himself in newspapers and popular magazines, and even founding his own PR firm to that end.⁷ Low speculates, “Had Hitchcock been German, Russian or French, had he even presented himself as a more conventionally bohemian figure, he would almost certainly have been taken more seriously.”⁸ Those who recognized Hitchcock’s contributions were hesitant to include him without qualification in the company of

great modernist directors. Arthur Vessel, for example, writing in *Sight & Sound* in 1936, asserted that “Hitchcock is our native Fritz Lang” but, he added, “often the sum-total of a Hitchcock film is a sense of disappointment, based in the realization that the film’s intellectual substance is too slight to hold it together.”⁹ Similarly, in a 1941 essay, Graham Greene recounts a conversation with a “middle-brow woman” who praises Hitchcock’s films; Greene counters, “Is there very much in Hitchcock? . . . He’s tricky, not imaginative. . . . he amuses, but he doesn’t excite.”¹⁰

“Middlebrow” versus “intellectual,” “amusement” versus “substance”: the contrasts that shaped the reception of Hitchcock’s work also reflect the conceptualization of modernism in general. In the early and mid-years of the twentieth century, many artists and writers, confronted with an explosion of popular culture—commercial novels, magazines, newspapers, music, and mainstream cinema—responded by inventing new modes of engagement with their audience. In the face of pastimes that were perceived as trite or pandering, those artists now recognized as “modernist” offered more challenging works that resisted quick assimilation. In literature, writers such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, T. S. Eliot, Jean Rhys, and William Faulkner demanded that readers grapple with nonlinear narratives, fragmented language, multiple points of view, obscure allusions, and ambiguities that had to be deciphered. In the visual domain, artists like Constantin Brâncuși, Fernand Léger, Pablo Picasso, and Georges Braque confronted viewers with non-mimetic abstraction, cubist fragmentation, and surreal juxtapositions. Modernist art revolutionized the nature of representation and inaugurated unprecedentedly active and interpretive modes of spectatorship. Substituting one set of pleasures (refined, acquired, cognitive) for another (popular, embodied, accessible), modernists redefined what qualified as worthy pleasure. Modernist pleasure is “difficult”: the studied and deliberate pleasure of solving a crossword puzzle or an algebraic equation, for example.¹¹

Hitchcock presents an especially complex example of these modernist paradigms of pleasure. He did not deploy his groundbreaking camerawork and editing in the service of intellectual challenge but rather toward engaging the spectator and heightening emotions. His formal innovations are combined with an accessibility that has not always been associated with and, indeed, until fairly recently has often been theorized as antithetical to modernism. In a sense, it is the great popularity and mainstream appeal of Hitchcock’s cinema that have prevented it from being understood as truly modernist. If we consider Hitchcock’s work in terms of pleasure, it is consistent with modernist aesthetics at the same time that it reflects upon those principles. Despite their apparent antagonism to it, modernist artists routinely engaged with popular pleasure, but did so through devices of indirection, irony, and distance that mitigated against enjoyment won too easily. Hitchcock’s work follows and illuminates this modernist strategy. Moreover, his films perpetuate while exposing another key feature of modernism: the centrality of gendered conflict and the new woman specifically within modernist constructions of pleasure. These features are particularly striking in Hitchcock’s earliest films, which would set the patterns for his whole career.

In 2012, the British Film Institute unveiled restored versions of Hitchcock's surviving full-length silents featuring remastered prints and recovered footage. The so-called Hitchcock 9—*The Pleasure Garden* (1926), *The Lodger* (1926), *The Ring* (1927), *Downhill* (1927), *Easy Virtue* (1927), *The Farmer's Wife* (1928), *Champagne* (1928), *The Manxman* (1929), and the silent version of *Blackmail* (1929)—began touring the United States in 2013, screened with live musical accompaniment, rendering this early work freshly visible. These films deliver the director's first cameo and authorial signature, his original transitions, lighting, and suggestions of sound, all of which give substance to Hitchcock's claim that his "sense of cinema" was established long before he set sail for America and makes clear that these films belong in any complete account of cinematic modernism.

Hitchcock's silent films demonstrate not only his technical contributions but also how his inventive craftsmanship was connected to and motivated by upheavals in interwar British culture. These early films constitute an archive of British cinematic and social history, imparting the intoxicating and tense texture of modernity and especially the changing conditions of sexual expression. Much illuminating scholarship has focused on the sexual politics of Hitchcock's work: its anxious masculine subjects, its queer undercurrents, and, most principally, its women and their relation to an oppressive "male gaze." With deliberately provocative comments such as "the trouble today is that we don't torture women enough,"¹² Hitchcock roused criticism about whether his is a sadistic (Donald Spoto, Laura Mulvey) or a masochistic cinema (Gaylyn Studlar) or a mix (Tania Modleski, Teresa de Lauretis).¹³ Hitchcock's silents provide an opportunity to revisit key work on gender and spectatorship¹⁴ with the benefit of the material, historicist turn in cinema studies and modernist studies since the 1980s by critics such as Tom Gunning, Ben Singer, Miriam Hansen, David Trotter, and Laura Marcus.¹⁵ My goal here is not to claim Hitchcock for feminism or to condemn him as misogynist—Modleski has convincingly argued that his representations of women are ambivalent—but rather to examine his early body of work as it reflects on what Rita Felski calls "the gender of modernity" and to address the persistent question of female desire in narrative as it is historically circumscribed in his silent films. Hitchcock draws his principles of suspense and spectatorial pleasure—as well as the formal intricacy he promotes throughout his body of work—from the turbulent developments around sex and gender in the early to mid-twentieth century.¹⁶

Hitchcock's silents coincide with and reflect upon two significant and overlapping developments in interwar cinema culture and British social history: (1) cinema's eclipse of other popular entertainment forms and its recognition as an important art form, and (2) the emergence of women as politically and socially independent voices. Throughout the interwar period, women and the cinema were often imagined as interconnected and as a foil for aesthetic modernism (or even just "serious art"). The mass-produced popular or vernacular culture against which modernism defined itself was constantly coded as somatic, sensual, noncerebral, passive, middlebrow, and *feminine*; the cinema in particular was strongly associated with women and understood as a female or feminized space. From early in his career, Hitchcock conceptualized

his audience as mainly female: "Women," he stated in 1931, "form three-quarters of the average cinema audience."¹⁷ If one of the arguments against Hitchcock as an artist was his accessibility (merely "amusing" and not sufficiently "intellectual"), which was associated with female and middlebrow audiences, it is ironic that his representation of women generated one of the central critiques of him—"Why do you hate women?" one 1935 interviewer asked him¹⁸—that persisted until the end of his career. Even though Hitchcock would later disparage some of his work, such as *Rebecca*, as "novelettish," which he defined as "a whole school of feminine literature ... lacking humor,"¹⁹ his films constantly borrow from and rework middlebrow genre fiction and vernacular culture.

Women's increasing agency and participation in public culture are key developments of modernity, and Hitchcock's films reflect these changes, as well as the ambivalence, fear, arousal, and anxiety that accompanied them. Modleski, addressing *Frenzy* (1972), Hitchcock's late and most explicit expression of violence against women, argues that it is an error to read the film simply as evidence of Hitchcock's misogyny; it should properly be understood "as a cultural response to women's demands for sexual and social liberation, demands that were, after all, at their height in 1972."²⁰ Hitchcock's silents span an era in the throes of what were, arguably, even more seismic shifts in women's roles. Women's struggles for autonomy, equality, adventure, and pleasure—marked politically by events such as the achievement of suffrage for British women twenty-one and over in 1929, the expansion of women in the workplace made possible by the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act of 1919, and the birth-control movement, and marked culturally by prurient, angry, anxious, and exhilarated representations of flappers, suffragettes, and working girls—clearly fired Hitchcock's imagination. The period of Hitchcock's silents saw the emergence of new types of "glamorized yet controversial women workers," as Katherine Mullin describes them, who "inspired uneasy tensions between moral panic and erotic fascination": dynamics that are very much evident in Hitchcock's silent films.²¹ Hitchcock did not merely represent these new types on the screen: he also considered these women as vital to the development of cinema. "The use of women in pictures is historical and inevitable," he remarked in an interview. "What was the serial in silent days? 'The Perils of Pauline.' Nobody was interested in the perils of George."²² Underlying the humor, Hitchcock makes an important observation about how the rise of modern cinema and the birth of the new woman—both associated with troubled pleasure—coincided and influenced each other. The proposition of the first Pauline film, in 1914, is emblematic of modern women's desires: "I suppose I'll marry Harry someday," Pauline (Pearl White) says, "but first I want to live a life full of excitement and adventure!" The impetus of her narrative may be liberation, but its drama lies in the dangers posed to women who pursue excitement and autonomy.²³

Richard Allen argues that "a female gaze of an explicitly sexual character is completely absent ... throughout Hitchcock's work, with the occasional exception, like the sexual come-on purveyed by Miriam to Bruno in *Strangers on a Train* (1951), for which she is severely punished."²⁴ On the contrary, Hitchcock's silents are replete

with desiring women including, memorably, Anny Ondra's flirtatious barmaid in *The Manxman*; the assured, gum-chewing ticket seller (Lillian Hall-Davis) in *The Ring*; the spoiled aristocrat's flapper daughter (Betty Balfour) in *Champagne*; and the minx-turned-murderess (Anny Ondra) in *Blackmail*. These stories of female appetite are not necessarily feminist: to be sure, not all, or even most, are progressive or sympathetic. While *Easy Virtue* earnestly explores a divorced woman's social ostracization a decade before the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1937 (which permitted women as well as men to demand divorce for reasons other than adultery), in *Downhill*, a waitress (Annette Benson) fakes a pregnancy to trap a man; there is a similar plot in *The Ring*, Hitchcock's only original screenplay. Rarely simple, these films sketch the unstable landscape of interwar gender politics, including women who are desiring and desired, threatening and threatened. Allen is correct that often these gestures of desire result in punishment, but the same is true for Hitchcock's men.

Focusing here on the first two of Hitchcock's extant silents, both of which were based on popular women's novels, I will explore how his striking renderings of vision and cognition, stylized violence, icy blondes, female victims, falsely accused men, and erotically fixated subjects were deeply rooted in interwar conflicts. Hitchcock's silents amplify the gendered oppositions of middlebrow culture and build upon them a syntax of suspense that reflects the modernist principle of difficult pleasure. Hitchcock's earliest films demonstrate how his technical inventions were, from the beginning, intimately connected to his view of modern women, sexuality, and the pursuit of pleasure as an inherently risky business.

“What Every Chorus Girl Knows”

Of Hitchcock's nine surviving silent films, the one that has garnered the most critical attention is *The Lodger: A Story of the London Fog*.²⁵ This updated Jack the Ripper story features ingenious editing, dark humor, moral ambiguity, and unrelenting suspense. Hitchcock told Truffaut that his “technical know-how, in my opinion, dates back to my work on *The Lodger*"; it was “the first time I had exercised any style.”²⁶ However, it was neither Hitchcock's first picture nor the first in which he expressed his distinctive style. That honor belongs to *The Pleasure Garden*, completed a year before *The Lodger* but released a year later. While Hitchcock disavowed *The Pleasure Garden*, it is an important predecessor to *The Lodger* insofar as it establishes basic principles of spectatorship, pleasure, and sexual conflict that he would elaborate over the course of his career.

Eliot Stannard's screenplay for *The Pleasure Garden*, based on a 1923 Sandys, Oliver (born Marguerite Florence Laura Jarvis) novel by the same title, tells the story of a chorus girl, Patsy Brand (Virginia Valli), who works at a club called The Pleasure Garden. She befriends Jill Cheyne (Carmelita Geraghty), who comes to the city to seek a job while her fiancé, Hugh Fielding (John Stuart), is posted to a plantation “overseas.” But Jill turns out to be a gold digger who uses wealthy men to rise in the

ranks as a feature dancer. Meanwhile, Patsy, toiling in the chorus, initially appears to be a sophisticate but is actually softhearted and naive: she is drawn into a bad marriage with Levet (Miles Mander), a colleague of Hugh's. Patsy is eventually matched with Hugh when she finds that Levet has been living adulterously with a "native" woman (Elizabeth Papritz) overseas, but not before Levet drowns his mistress by strangling her in the ocean: Hitchcock's first murder, rendered through sharply rhythmic cuts and underwater shots.

Critics have been unimpressed with the film's plot—Iris Barry wrote that *The Pleasure Garden* was "saddled with a crude and tasteless story"; Rachael Low calls it "banal."²⁷ Hitchcock himself pronounced *The Pleasure Garden* "Melodramatic. But there were several interesting scenes in it."²⁸ One of the most interesting is the opening sequence, which binds cognition, sex, and vision together in an Ur-scene of what we now recognize as Hitchcockian style. The film makes use of its middlebrow source material and proto-cinematic forms of vernacular culture in order to highlight, by contrast, the technological possibilities of film, and to initiate Hitchcock's viewer into an active form of spectatorship.

Immediately after the credits,²⁹ the screen opens onto young women in shorts who are descending a spiral staircase—the first staircase of many to come in Hitchcock's work—that has been masked to the right and the left by darkness (see Figure 5.1). The



Figure 5.1 Masked staircase, Alfred Hitchcock, *The Pleasure Garden* (1926)

restricted optic prefigures the telescoped engagement of the male audience that the chorus girls are about to meet; it also calls attention to how the visual field has been constructed. There is no pretense toward simply recording the action as an omniscient narrator would. Rather, Hitchcock emphasizes the primacy of the camera in structuring and mediating spectacle, and in establishing multiple points of view as well as interior and external psychosexual dynamics.

From the staircase, the camera moves to a high overhead shot of the stage where a group of women in black shorts and blonde wigs races out onto the floor and dances in a line behind a solo figure downstage. A quick shot of the dancers onstage from the implied vantage point of the audience is followed by a longer left-to-right pan of the front-row spectators as the dancers would see them: men in tuxedos, their eyes riveted on the dancers, along with one comically dozing woman. A reverse pan settles on an elderly man in the middle who ogles with his tongue out, a monocle in his eye. We switch optics again to a blurry, unfocused image: it is the chorus dancers seen through the man's myopic point of view. He draws up a pair of opera glasses and several shapely bare legs come into view. Then he tilts up the body of a blonde woman in a spangled top. Just as he settles on her smiling face, the camera switches to her perspective as she sees him leer and lick his lips, lower the opera glasses, and replace them with the monocle. Alternating between the two figures, the camera reveals her smile falling as the man murmurs something, his tongue lolling out of his mouth again.

Suddenly, the blonde dancer meets the man's gaze with her own, glaring at him for several seconds, her eyes wide, brows arched, admonishing him, before turning away imperiously. The moment breaks the frame of theatrical illusion, in which consumers wield the gaze and performers attract and passively absorb that gaze. Here the "sexual object" also becomes the "looking subject,"³⁰ overturning what Mulvey characterized as the classic patriarchal arrangement in cinema, "Woman as Image, Man as Bearer of the Look." The chorus girl's look marks the advent of narrative suspense as a conflict about sexuality and agency: a conflict that disrupts the seemingly polarized (passive/active) and gendered arrangement of pleasure and power. The feminine figure, who is originally presented as pure bodily spectacle, is unexpectedly granted the same visual agency (and a concomitant expression of interior depth) as the audience in the stalls; not only does she return the gaze with her own, but she also rebuffs it. More than just a surprise or a shock—although it is that, too—the chorus girl's gaze puts into motion the film's main drama of women's autonomy, dependence, erotic power, and vulnerability.

This episode of promised visual pleasure quickly becomes a demonstration of outright aggression, which is all the more noteworthy when compared to the source material. In Sandys's novel (where the episode appears well into the story), the dancer on stage is oppressed by the man's stare ("that forceful regard" that she "could not escape"). Fearful and shrinking, she does not return the gaze: "For the rest of the time they were on stage she kept her eyes averted from the stalls."³¹ Hitchcock's version of the scene radically changes Patsy's role in the interaction and also draws attention to

the means by which Patsy's exchange with "Mr. Monocle" (as Maurice Yacower calls him³²) is rendered on the screen.

By setting the very first shot of *The Pleasure Garden* in the theater, Hitchcock summons a dynamic recent history of the pleasure industry in Britain. Cinema emerged from but then eclipsed the music hall theater, where short films were part of a mixed bill that would have included acts like that of the chorus girls. Theater and especially the music hall had a markedly different structure of spectatorship from that of cinema. While an audience could respond to recorded film, it could not actually communicate with the screen; a common point of criticism of early film was that it was a narcoticizing or stupefying experience of spectatorship. Hitchcock's restless camera (constant movement and shifting perspectives that require audiences to continuously reorient themselves vis-à-vis the spectacle before them), together with the surprise of Patsy's response to Mr. Monocle, inscribes active viewing, undermining the idea of simple, passive film spectatorship. At the same time, the simultaneous points of view and multiple camera angles (high and low, close-up and long shots) provide a depth and range of spectatorial experience that the music hall could not.

Undeterred by the dancer's scowl, Mr. Monocle stands up, buttons his coat, and proceeds to ask the manager for an introduction to the chorus girl after the show. "Meet Patsy Brand," a title card announces as the manager beckons and Patsy obediently greets this paying customer. Face to face with his object of desire, Mr. Monocle is awkward, unctuously complimenting Patsy on her "lovely curl of hair." She reaches up and pulls off what is an artificial lock, handing it to him with a casual laugh. He is aghast to see his fetish detached (see Figure 5.2). In close-up, Patsy laughs again. The camera pulls back to show Mr. Monocle looking flummoxed as she saunters away.



Figure 5.2 The artificial lock, Alfred Hitchcock, *The Pleasure Garden* (1926)

The sequence is noteworthy not only for its formal properties but also because of its bearing on Hitchcock's sexual politics. In *The Pleasure Garden*, Hitchcock puts the male gaze on display as well as the female. Patsy's reaction to Mr. Monocle implies that his voyeurism, at first humorous, has tipped over into something sordid, perverse, and obsessive: the kind of viewership that Hitchcock would spend a lifetime exploring. The fervid watching modeled by the blacked-out frame around the staircase and the scopophilia of the monocle and binoculars also evokes an important pre-cinematic optical apparatus: the hand-cranked mutoscope, designed for viewing in public venues like boardwalks, train stations, and amusement parks, whose "single-viewer peep show nature," Tom Gunning writes, was hospitable to "voyeuristic" spectacles.³³ Mutoscope films (still photography cards that were turned in order to produce motion) commonly boasted undressed women and dancers. They often incorporated the act of looking into the film itself, a self-conscious strategy now more often associated with "highbrow" modernism than middlebrow or lowbrow culture.³⁴ Hitchcock models this kind of viewing in *The Pleasure Garden* in the exchange between Patsy and Mr. Monocle and in subsequent scenes of the chorus girls disrobing that put the camera/audience in the place of the voyeur. (Displaying the private gaze of the peep-show voyeur upon the collectively viewed cinema screen was a strategy that Hitchcock would deploy over and over in his subsequent films.) Mutoscope scenarios often end abruptly with a reversal (e.g., the voyeur is caught, the woman walks off screen, etc.); hence, as Katherine Mullin has observed, this kind of viewing, which might seem to reinforce the power of looking, actually "dramatized [a] sense of exposure by rupturing the illusion of invulnerability that their scenarios of concealment and secret infiltration of private space might be expected to uphold."³⁵

Later in *The Pleasure Garden*, Hitchcock replicates mutoscope conventions in order to suggest that there might be a pleasurable thrill in having one's sense of scopic invulnerability exposed. A sequence with the dancers includes a title card that teasingly promises to disclose "What Every Chorus Girl Knows."³⁶ In 1925 this phrase would have reminded contemporary audiences of those emblazoned on top of mutoscopes to advertise their programs (e.g., "What the Butler Saw" or "What Every Wife Must Avoid"). Lois Banner argues that chorus girls of the 1920s, with their flapper haircuts and modern costumes, epitomized a "new, modern concept of womanhood, one that involved independence, sexual freedom, and an enterprising, realistic attitude towards a career."³⁷ While dancers from the previous century were perceived, like actresses and prostitutes, to be sexually available,³⁸ thanks to the Tiller Girls' machine-like precision and highly publicized modern dancers such as Loie Fuller and Anna Neagle, who rose from the chorus line to celebrity, dance was increasingly understood as a discipline, an art, and a career rather than a variant of the oldest profession. That said, "chorus girl" remained shorthand for shady women well into the 1930s.³⁹ Patsy's moxie in the opening scenes of *The Pleasure Garden* fades as her vulnerability leads her to marry badly. By contrast, Jill, who casts coy backward looks at the stage door johnnies, is indeed for sale, but she sets her own price, leveraging her sexuality as a means of upward mobility.

“What every chorus girl knows,” then, alludes to the racy reputation of chorus girls that *The Pleasure Garden* undermines through Patsy but confirms through Jill. What follows the title, however, is far from titillating: a dancer washing her stockings in the sink with LUX, “the world’s first mass market beauty bar” circa 1925. This product placement/joke deconstructs the glamour of the chorus girl (like Patsy’s curl and the peroxide jokes in *The Lodger*) and also plays on the contemporary discourse of social purity that framed women’s sexuality in the period, like the advertisement for Gordon’s Gin’s “White for Purity” that haunts Alice (Anny Ondra) after her near-rape in *Blackmail*.

Hitchcock’s riffs on the mutoscope and the music hall, which blend prurience with humor and realism, show the many available points of identification in his scenes displaying women’s bodies, countering the idea of a monolithic male gaze. Women, too, were “drawn to the keyhole,” to borrow Judith Mayne’s phrase, in their capacity as cinema (and mutoscope) spectators who were just as intrigued by the modern working girl, the chorus girl, the flapper, and the suffragette as men were.⁴⁰ Throughout his work, Hitchcock grounds his narratives in sexual and gender conflict around appearance and reality, freedom and restraint, and propriety and libidinal drive: the thieving “working girls” in *Psycho* (1960) and *Marnie* (1964), the sacrificial Mata Hari of *Notorious* (1946), and the sexually aggressive jokester in *The Birds* (1963), for example, can be traced back to the women of Hitchcock’s silent films.

With remarkable economy, Hitchcock’s prologue to *The Pleasure Garden* sketches a brief encounter as a minefield of sexual conflict. Mr. Monocle expects pleasure in his trip to the theater, but is instead punished; for Patsy, too, something goes wrong, as Mr. Monocle disturbs her performance and her sense of well-being. Balancing tonal registers (visual delight and sensuality is offset by humor, aggression, and indignation), Hitchcock draws on genre conventions and stereotypical character types only to confound them at a time when women were challenging the sociopolitical order in Britain. In his next film, *The Lodger*, Hitchcock connected the drama of contemporary women to risk, pleasure, and explicit physical danger in order to advance a new syntax of suspense.

Murder: Hot and Wet

With its assimilation of jagged German expressionism, *Lustmord* themes, arresting graphic design, and technological currency, *The Lodger: A Story of the London Fog* feels strikingly modern. More than any of Hitchcock’s silents, this tale of murder and romantic/erotic danger matches the director’s technique to his abiding thematic interests. While the European modernist and avant-garde influences of *The Lodger* have tended to overshadow its middlebrow source material, the film draws as much on the latter as the former. *The Lodger* centers on the soon-to-be-familiar figure of the Wrong Man. A killer of blonde women leaves a calling card inscribed with a triangle and “The Avenger” at the scene of the crimes; meanwhile, a handsome stranger

(Ivor Novello) arrives at a lodging house and his oddly vampiric habits make him the top suspect. Hitchcock recasts the historic Jack the Ripper's victims—prostitutes—as contemporary “working girls” and constructs a story about the risks of women exercising choices coded as modern.⁴¹ The film begins with a close-up of a terrified blonde woman (Maudie Dunham) screaming, as if from her killer’s point of view. Were it not for her expression, the strongly backlit, artfully composed shot with hair fanned out around her face could pass for a glamour image in a contemporary women’s magazine (see Figure 5.3). We never learn the woman’s identity, but the electric theater-marquee sign blinking throughout the film, “TO-NIGHT ‘GOLDEN CURLS,’” draws a connection between the victim and chorus girls in curly blonde wigs who worry about the Avenger’s proclivity for fair-haired women. We are back in *The Pleasure Garden* of commodified, fetishized, and theatricalized femininity, but here Mr. Monocle’s erotic fixation on blondeness has become an incitement to murder.

Immediately following the scene with the chorus girls, a title card with another triangle graphic announces “DAISY” (June Tripp): a mannequin with fashionably bobbed blonde hair who is strutting on a runway for the benefit, a reverse-shot shows, of a wealthy man and several female companions. The “mannequin,” or fashion model, was an even newer figure of modernity than the chorus girl. The first fashion show in Britain with a live “mannequin parade” was staged around 1900; fashion models became popular only in the mid-1920s.⁴² Mannequins raised the same questions about sexual availability as chorus girls. Later in the film, the lodger attends Daisy’s “dress-show.” Two flappers cast longing looks in his direction, but he has eyes only for Daisy. In reverse cuts, Hitchcock shows Daisy and the lodger smoldering at



Figure 5.3 Unidentified woman screaming, Alfred Hitchcock, *The Lodger* (1926)

each other. Reworking the scenario of display in *The Pleasure Garden* with its conflicting vectors of vision, Hitchcock matches Daisy's long, inviting gaze with the lodger's. The couple first expresses open and mutual erotic interest at Daisy's workplace, suggesting that she has more sexual autonomy there than the traditional and domestic setting of the house, which is controlled by her parents. Afterward, when the lodger buys the sequined flapper dress Daisy has modeled and presents it to her as a gift, Daisy's working-class parents object and make him take it back lest he think he can “buy” their daughter.

Unlike *The Pleasure Garden*, where the chorus girls' problems are largely the result of their vulnerability in living without familial protection, Daisy is introduced in a second title card as “the daughter of the house.” Her dual roles—as a professionally visible mannequin, on the one hand, and as a potential wife and mother, on the other—reflect her divided position in a love triangle between the policeman, Joe (Malcolm Keen)—her would-be paramour—and the mysterious lodger, and in another implied triangle connecting the lodger as a murderer who seeks out fair-haired girls, and the lodger as lover, whose blonde sister is said to have been one of the Avenger's victims. Hitchcock plays these geometric conflicts against strong visual contrasts throughout the film. It always seems to be dark in the streets of London, where the murders occur; inside the brightly lighted home, the murders are all anyone talks about. Joe first appears sitting in a kitchen chatting cozily with Daisy's mother (Marie Ault) as she rolls out cookie dough. By contrast, the lodger knocks at the door at precisely the moment the electric meter has run out, as if the sinister darkness of the street had invaded the home. But like F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (Max Schreck), whom he strongly resembles, the lodger must be invited in, exposing his victims' complicity.

Murder is terrifying and exciting to everyone in *The Lodger*. It is “hot on the aerial” and “wet on the press”; people are rapt, hysterical, and aroused as they gossip and joke about it. Daisy's attraction to the lodger epitomizes this pulse of fascination and fear. She flirts with Joe, who represents law, propriety, and convention (but who also likes blondes and handcuffs, as reflected in an episode that Spoto calls “one of the boldest scenes in silent film”⁴³), but once the mysterious lodger comes on the scene, Joe pales in comparison. Hitchcock shoots Novello as all shadows, ominous symbolism, and suave good looks. A long close-up of Novello approaching the camera lens for a kiss invites the audience to swoon in Daisy's place, exemplifying how Hitchcock combines technical novelty and sensation: pleasure in both a “highbrow” and “lowbrow” sense.⁴⁴

We are never quite sure if what we are seeing between Daisy and the lodger is a prelude to violence, as when he menacingly picks up a poker during a chess game with Daisy, when he points a knife at her only to flick a crumb off her dress, and most particularly, when he interrupts her taking a bath. Once again, Hitchcock invokes the voyeuristic “girlie reel”; however, there is no peephole here. The lodger merely listens through the door; it's the camera and we, the audience, who take on the role of the voyeur in watching Daisy recline in the steamy tub. Although the lodger alarmingly tries the door handle, intensifying the audience's apprehension, a title card states that

“Daisy didn’t worry,” as it seems that he wants only to ask her if she’s angry at him for buying her the dress.

Throughout *The Lodger*, Hitchcock presses at the limits of his medium, seeking ways to narrate effectively without sound or excessive title cards. Here, too, he mobilizes contemporary conflicts around women and sexuality to achieve a formal goal, as Daisy is one of the key bearers of sound in the film. The silent scream of the blonde woman that opens *The Lodger* is countered throughout the film by Daisy’s laugh. Just as Patsy’s contemptuous mirth confronts male power in the opening sequence of *The Pleasure Garden*, Daisy’s laugh asserts her autonomy, which the film constantly calls into question. Before the lodger sees her, he hears her guffaw when her father (Arthur Chesney) falls from a ladder. Daisy also snorts at Joe’s declared affection for her, and at the way the lodger has turned the pictures of blonde women toward the wall; she laughs in the bathroom at the lodger’s anxiety about buying her the dress (see Figure 5.4). But Daisy also screams twice: first when Joe handcuffs her wrists in a mock arrest, which brings the lodger to the top of the stairs, frowning down at them, and again, in reverse, when Joe hears Daisy screaming upstairs and dashes there only to find her in the lodger’s arms. Daisy’s laugh signifies her defiance, but also her imprudence. In its proximity to her scream, it is one of many devices that Hitchcock deploys to intermesh sex and violence, desire and fear, in order to, as Truffaut observed, film love scenes like murders and murders like love scenes.⁴⁵ In the final scene, “TO-NIGHT ‘GOLDEN CURLS’” flashes behind the lovers in an uneasy symmetry: the sign that was a harbinger of murder now returns to trouble the film’s apparently happy closure. The discrepancy between Daisy’s audacious desire for the lodger—a desire

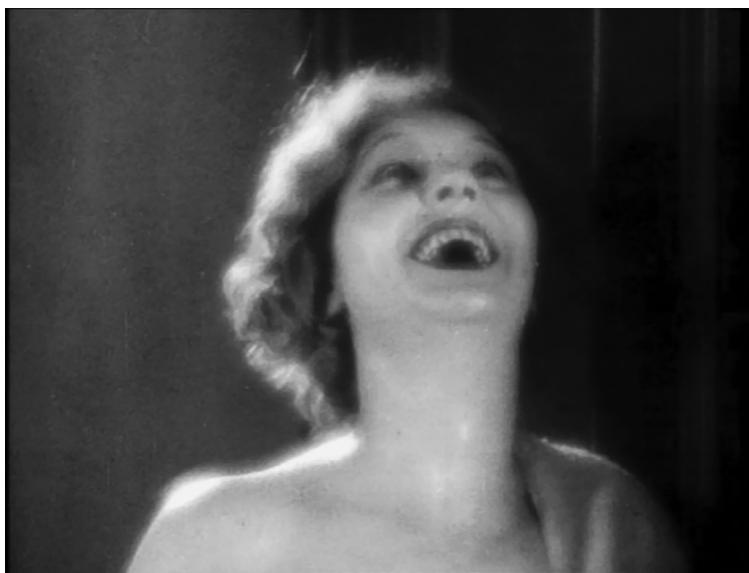


Figure 5.4 Daisy’s laugh, Alfred Hitchcock, *The Lodger* (1926)

coded as distinctly "modern"—and what we, the audience, think we know about the dangers he represents, reverberates with the film's last frames.

While the middlebrow source material for *The Lodger*, a 1913 novel by Marie Belloc Lowndes, may not seem promising in terms of the darkly ironic themes Hitchcock was drawn to, he remarked that "Mrs. Lowndes, God rest her soul, was like a little housewife. But she used to write these more or less horrific novels," suggesting the kind of paradox that he liked, especially in women. ("An English girl, looking like a schoolteacher, is apt to get into a cab with you and, to your surprise, she'll probably pull a man's pants open"; "You know why I favor sophisticated blondes in my films? We're after the drawing-room type, the real ladies, who become whores once they're in the bedroom."⁴⁶) In Lowndes's novel, the lodger is clearly guilty, but the narrative focuses on the landlady's collusion. She is unable to report him both because she depends on the rent and because she has a mesmerized protectiveness toward him. Hitchcock converts this dynamic into Daisy's perilous attraction to the lodger.⁴⁷

Hitchcock adapts elements of his middlebrow source material in order to map the murder and the erotic/romantic plot onto the modern woman. Mainstream cinema and fiction were fascinated by the drama of women asserting their independence while trying to navigate more traditional roles, especially in terms of romance. Sadomasochistic eroticism was standard fare in British women's genre fiction—particularly romance fiction—of the period. E. M. Hull's bestselling novel *The Sheik* (1919), for example, launched Rudolph Valentino's career when it was adapted for the cinema, and audiences flocked to see the story about a headstrong flapper who is forcibly subjugated by a desert dominant. Hitchcock goes much further in the direction of danger with the serial killer in *The Lodger*, and he augments this storyline with destabilizing shifts in tone (e.g., from humor to fear to romance in the bath scene of *The Lodger*) that are not typical of genre fiction.

As a blueprint for Hitchcock's future thrillers, *The Lodger* instantiates Robin Wood's proposal that "the key to Hitchcock's film is less suspense than sexuality (or, alternatively, that his 'suspense' always carries a sexual charge in ways sometimes obvious, sometimes esoteric); and that sexual relationships in his work are inevitably based on power, the obsession-with-power/dread-of-impotence being as central to his method as to his thematic."⁴⁸ Throughout Hitchcock's work, narrative suspense is produced by the roller coaster of modern sexuality.⁴⁹ For Hitchcock, sex itself, in order to be cinematic, needed to be suspenseful. He had already worked out this equation in *The Lodger*, in which erotic attraction is plotted in tandem with serial murders. "Sex on the screen should be suspenseful," he told Truffaut. "If sex is too blatant or obvious, there's no suspense." Otherwise, "there's no possibility to *discover* sex."⁵⁰ In *The Lodger*, Hitchcock represents the discovery of murder and the discovery of sex as coextensive. When Hitchcock takes his audience along on the ride to "discover sex," the adventure is usually propelled by a woman of his ideal type who was excitingly enigmatic, both reserved and lustful, but always inscrutable. "Suspense is like a woman," he opined. "The more left to the imagination, the more the excitement."⁵¹ While this statement is usually interpreted as referring to his method—to explain, for example, the shower

scene in *Psycho* (no real nudity, only its illusion)—his silent films also suggest the extent to which Hitchcock drew his ideas about suspense from perceived social instabilities incited by the modern woman: frictions around economic necessity, desires for intimacy and autonomy, public lives and domesticity, and the pursuit of potentially hazardous erotic desire. The instability of tone is matched by and established through Hitchcock's camerawork, with its constant shifts from one character's perspective to another's, staccato montage, and other conspicuous editing techniques that call attention to themselves and the construction of the story, as opposed to Hollywood-style continuity editing in which seamless rendering of narrative is the goal. Visual pleasure, like eros, is never a straightforward affair for Hitchcock: it is just as stylish and intricate as other elements of his cinematic language.

This point brings us back to the question of Hitchcock's modernism. The experimentalism, indirection, abstraction, fragmentation, and non-mimetic representation associated with modernism demand heightened attention and effort on the part of the spectator, and thwart the supposedly easy, simple gratifications supplied by popular genre novels, newspapers, and mainstream cinema. These formal innovations entailed a fundamental redefinition and reconfiguration of the pleasure principle. The kind of contorted satisfaction that modernism supplied was earned by overcoming confusion and cognitive difficulty.⁵² When asked in a 1972 interview, "What do you want to do to the audience?" Hitchcock replied, "Give them pleasure. Same pleasure they have when they wake up from a nightmare."⁵³ This is pleasure after having passed through the vicarious nightmare of suspense: pleasure as relief from unpleasure, beyond the pleasure principle. While Hitchcock's plots do not hinge on intellectual obscurities, they do depend on devices such as visual encodings and interpretation, and the withholding of important information; the desire for narrative resolution is often frustrated, as key motivations are never fully disclosed. For example, in *The Lodger*, the solution to the murder is sewn up all too tidily, in a blink-and-you'll-miss-it phone call announcing that the Avenger has been apprehended. However, we never see the killer or know his motive, with the result that the conclusion actually resembles a cliffhanger. Similarly, the disconcerting "GOLDEN CURLS" sign prevents full closure at the end of the film. Likewise, Hitchcock's famous "McGuffin" frustrates viewers who expect neat closure and the resolution of loose ends. Thomas M. Leitch argues that the "games" Hitchcock sets up for his audience, including his cameos, constitute "a fundamental redefinition of the pleasure contract" insofar they shift the narrative rules of mainstream cinema.⁵⁴ Hitchcock's films assimilated the difficulties and wit of modernist style into mainstream cinema. Even as he challenged his audience in these emotional, visceral, and cognitive ways, he always sought to entertain and amuse, suggesting that the modernist assumption of two separate orders of pleasure with two distinct audiences—the higher pleasures of difficult art and the lower pleasures of accessible culture—is inherently false.

There is more than a little *Perils of Pauline* in *The Pleasure Garden* and *The Lodger*, revolving as they do around plucky women who venture away from the

home into the public sphere in search of pleasure and freedom. Like other modernists who appropriated elements of popular culture only to disguise them through distancing formal devices, Hitchcock transforms the woman-in-peril genre, in which suspense moves in one direction (toward resolution and relief), into complex cul-de-sacs, digressions, and visual arabesques that can have their own satisfactions independent of plot (e.g., sequences such as the joke about "What Every Chorus Girl Knows" in *The Pleasure Garden* or the point-of-view kissing scene in *The Lodger*). In doing so, Hitchcock's drama of gender conflict and erotic trepidation comes to epitomize the difficult pleasure that modernism harnessed to form itself. Pleasure in modernity is exciting and alluring, Hitchcock implies, because it is unstable, bewildering, dangerous and, above all, suspenseful; the dramas of new women exemplified this tension for him. And tension, for Hitchcock, as for modernism in general, is synonymous with style.

Including Hitchcock in the pantheon of modernism illuminates the reconfiguration of the pleasure principle that happened in mid-twentieth-century art as well as the place of women in that critical maneuver. I have argued here that Hitchcock's silent films, populated as they are with active women seeking adventure beyond the home and traditional roles, constitute an archive of gendered modernity that is intimately connected to Hitchcock's formal innovations and the sensations he wanted to impart to his audience. His early films demonstrate how profoundly Hitchcock's all-important style is shored up on the gender politics of modernity, and that his credo that "suspense is like a woman" demands that we read his work simultaneously in terms of style and substance.

The two kinds of difficult pleasure—formal and thematic—that Hitchcock intertwines in his early films have different legacies. His intricate craftsmanship and technical innovations have been widely studied, imitated, and assimilated into mainstream cinema and visual culture in general, even as his films remain unrivaled and distinctive. We might say that Hitchcock's aesthetic modernism, his formal difficulty, has been largely absorbed, as he himself encouraged. However, the conflicts about pleasure, agency, and women's sexuality represented in *The Pleasure Garden*, *The Lodger*, and his other early films remain unresolved decades later. Even after two waves of feminism, women's sexuality remains a subject of debate. Hitchcock's films, with their attention to the confusing social scripts that mandate women's and men's behavior, raise the question of what is to be gained by thinking of pleasure, and women's sexuality in particular, as fundamentally suspenseful, elusive, or difficult. Is this an only more elaborate articulation of Freud's "dark continent," or his unanswered query "What do women want?" Or, as Hitchcock himself suggested, is there a utility—even a pleasure—in keeping that obfuscation in place? However one chooses to read the gender and sexual politics of Hitchcock's films, what's clear is that one of Hitchcock's—and modernism's—enduring legacies is the fascination of what's difficult.

Notes

1. Robin Wood's about-face on the importance of Hitchcock's silents is instructive. In the original edition of *Hitchcock's Films*, he dismisses the early films, asking, "Who wants the leaf-buds when the rose has opened?" (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1965), 29. In *Hitchcock's Films Revisited* he concedes, "The point-of-view montage techniques that reach their ultimate mastery and elaboration in films like *Rear Window*, *Vertigo*, *Psycho*, are already highly developed in the British period" (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989, 73, 240). Notable recognitions of Hitchcock's silent work include Maurice Yacowar, *Hitchcock's British Films* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010); Tom Ryall, *Alfred Hitchcock and the British Cinema* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2000); William Rothman, *Hitchcock: The Murderous Gaze*, which argues, "If there is a modernist cinema, it begins with Hitchcock" (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 6; and David Trotter, "Hitchcock's Modernism," *Modernist Cultures* 5, no. 1 (May 2010), 106–26.
2. See, for example, Ted Perry, ed., *Masterpieces of Modernist Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).
3. Sidney Gottlieb, *Hitchcock on Hitchcock: Selected Writings and Interviews* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 292.
4. Of *Strangers on a Train*, Hitchcock remarked to Truffaut, "One could study it forever." François Truffaut and Helen G. Scott, *Hitchcock* (New York: Simon and Schuster; rev. edn., 1985), 195.
5. Kenneth Macpherson, "As Is," in *Close Up 1927–1933: Cinema and Modernism*, James Donald, Anne Friedberg, and Laura Marcus, eds. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 90–92.
6. Rachael Low, *The History of the British Film: 1918–1929*, vol. 4 (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1971), 307.
7. See Robert Kapsis, *Hitchcock: The Making of a Reputation* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1990).
8. Low, *History of British Film*, 307.
9. Cited in Donald Spoto, *The Dark Side of Genius* (New York: Little Brown, 1983), 187.
10. *Graham Greene Film Reader: Reviews, Essays, Interviews and Film Stories*, David Parkinson, ed. (New York: Applause Theatre and Cinema Books, 2000), 400.
11. See Leonard Diepeveen, *The Difficulties of Modernism* (New York: Routledge, 2002).
12. Spoto, *Dark Side*, xix.
13. See Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975), 6–18; Gaylyn Studlar, *In The Realm of Pleasure: Von Sternberg, Dietrich, and the Masochistic Aesthetic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); Tania Modleski, *The Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory* (New York: Routledge: 2005); Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).
14. See, for example, Mary Ann Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator" *Screen* 23, nos. 3–4 (September–October 1982), 74–87; Mary Ann Doane and Janet Bergstrom, eds., special issue of *Camera Obscura*, "The Spectatrix" 20–21 (1989); Judith Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993); Judith Mayne, *The Woman at the Keyhole* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); and

- Jessica Brent, "Beyond the Gaze: Visual Fascination and the Feminine Image in Silent Hitchcock," *Camera Obscura* 19, no. 1 (2004), 76–111.
15. See, for example, Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," *Wide Angle* 8, nos. 3–4 (Fall 1986), 63–70; Tom Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the [In]Credulous Spectator," *Art and Text* (Fall 1989), 31–45; Tom Gunning, "Modernity and Cinema: A Culture of Shocks and Flows," in *Cinema and Modernity*, Murray Pomerance, ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 297–315; Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); Miriam Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism," *Modernism/modernity* 6, no. 2 (April 1999), 59–77; David Trotter, *Cinema and Modernism* (Oxford: Blackwell), 2007; and Laura Marcus, *The Tenth Muse: Writing about Cinema in the Modernist Period* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
 16. Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); Patrice Petro, "Rematerializing the Vanishing 'Lady': Feminism, Hitchcock, and Interpretation," in *A Hitchcock Reader*, Marshall Deutelbaum and Leland Poague, eds. (Blackwell: Oxford, 2009) 126–35.
 17. "How I Choose My Heroines" (first published in *Who's Who in Filmland*, 1931; republished in Gottlieb, *Hitchcock on Hitchcock*, 73–75).
 18. "Women Are a Nuisance: An Interview with Barbara J. Buchanan." Originally published in *Film Weekly*, September 20, 1935. Republished in Gottlieb, *Hitchcock on Hitchcock*, 10.
 19. Truffaut and Scott, *Hitchcock*, 127.
 20. Modleski, *Women Who Knew Too Much*, 111.
 21. Katherine Mullin, *Working Girls: Fiction, Sexuality, and Modernity* (London: Oxford University Press, 2016), 2.
 22. Cited in William Hare, *Hitchcock and the Methods of Suspense* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2007), 319.
 23. See Ben Singer, "Female Power in the Serial-Queen Melodrama: The Etiology of an Anomaly," *Camera Obscura* 8 (January 1990), 90–129; 122.
 24. Richard Allen, *Hitchcock's Romantic Irony* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 69.
 25. See, for example, Richard Allen, "The Lodger and the Origins of Hitchcock's Aesthetic," *Hitchcock Annual* 10 (2001–2002), 38–78; Joseph Garncarz, "German Hitchcock," in *Framing Hitchcock* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002, 59–81; and Sanford Schwartz, "TO-NIGHT 'GOLDEN CURLS': Murder and Mimesis in Hitchcock's *The Lodger*," *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 20, no. 1 (2013), 181–206.
 26. Truffaut and Scott, *Hitchcock*, 44.
 27. Iris Barry, *Let's Go to the Movies* (New York: Arno Press, 1926), 235; Low, *History of British Film*, 167.
 28. Truffaut and Scott, *Hitchcock*, 31.
 29. In the National Film and Television Archive's and the British Film Institute's restored version of *The Pleasure Garden*, the credit sequence shows a spotlight shining on a costumed single woman performing a modern dance; the Rohauer print omits it. Unless otherwise noted, I reference the Rohauer print or the NFTVA version, as the

- BFI's print is not yet available. For a detailed analysis of the three versions of the film, including their very different endings, see Sidney Gottlieb's chapter on "Hitchcock and the Three *Pleasure Gardens*," in *Hitchcock at the Source: The Auteur as Adapter*, Barton R. Palmer and David Boyd, eds. (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011), 33–46, and also the shot-by-shot comparison at http://the.hitchcock.zone/wiki/The_Pleasure_Garden_bootlegs.
30. See Mayne's *Cinema and Spectatorship* and *The Woman at the Keyhole*; and Lauren Rabinovitz, *For the Love of Pleasure: Women, Movies, and Culture in Turn-of-the Century Chicago* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 35.
 31. Oliver Sandys, *The Pleasure Garden* (London: Hurst and Blackett), 80.
 32. Yacower, *Hitchcock's British Films*, 14.
 33. Tom Gunning, "Machines That Give Birth to Images: Douglass Crockwell," in *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Film Avant-Garde, 1919–1945*, Jan-Christopher Horak, ed. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 341–42.
 34. Two of the most famous mutoscope series were the "What the Butler Saw" and "Peeping Tom," both of which featured male voyeurs at keyholes who were watching women behaving saucily. See Gunning, "Machines" (335–62); Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Mayne, *Woman at the Keyhole*; and Katherine Mullin, *James Joyce, Sexuality, and Social Purity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
 35. Mullin, *James Joyce*, 158.
 36. This sequence does not appear in the Rohauer print. See http://the.hitchcock.zone/wiki/The_Pleasure_Garden_bootlegs.
 37. Lois Banner, *American Beauty* (New York: Knopf, 1983), 183.
 38. Josephine Dolan and Sarah Street, "'Twenty Million People Can't Be Wrong,'" in *British Women's Cinema*, Melanie Bell and Melanie Williams, eds. (London: Routledge, 2009).
 39. Texts from the period such as Jean Rhys's 1934 novel, *Voyage in the Dark* (New York: Norton, 1994) and Katherine Mansfield's 1919 short story, "Pictures" (*Katherine Mansfield Selected Stories* [New York: Norton, 2005]) suggest that the chorus girl was a figure of still fragile autonomy.
 40. As Charles Musser (*Emergence of Cinema* [New York: Scribner, 1990]) and other historians of early film have pointed out, women were part of the audience at mutoscope parlors. Lauren Rabinovitch has demonstrated that there were plenty of films from the period showing women in the at-the-keyhole scenarios: "Early cinema routinely portrayed women either in possession of a visual gaze or overturning the male mastery of the gaze"; Rabinovitch, *For the Love of Pleasure*, 82.
 41. Although the original victim is an aristocratic woman, the Avenger's sister, the subsequent targets are working-class women in the streets of London.
 42. Caroline Evans, *The Mechanical Smile: Modernism and the First Fashion Shows in France and America, 1900–1929* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).
 43. Spoto, *Dark Side*, 90.
 44. While Novello exerts classic matinee charm, he is also sexually ambiguous—the lodger is said to be "a bit queer" and "not keen on the girls"—demonstrating how Hitchcock complicated men's sexuality as well as women's.
 45. Truffaut and Scott, *Hitchcock*, 533.
 46. Gottlieb, *Hitchcock on Hitchcock*, 153; Truffaut and Scott, *Hitchcock*, 224.

47. Marie Belloc Lowndes, *The Lodger* (Champaign, IL; Boulder, CO: Project Gutenberg; NetLibrary, 1990–1999).
48. Robin Wood, "Ideology, Genre, Auteur," in *Film Genre Reader IV*, Barry Keith Grant, ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 78–92; 90.
49. Hitchcock used this metaphor to explain the appeal of vicarious fear in film. See "The Enjoyment of Fear" in Gottlieb, *Hitchcock on Hitchcock*, 116–21.
50. Truffaut and Scott, *Hitchcock*, 224.
51. Hitchcock, From *Films and Filming*, July 1959. Quoted in Spoto, *Dark Side*, 431.
52. Hitchcock, "The Enjoyment of Fear" in Gottlieb, *Hitchcock on Hitchcock*, 116–21.
53. Sidney Gottlieb, *Alfred Hitchcock Interviews* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), 104.
54. Thomas M. Leitch, *Find the Director and Other Hitchcock Games* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 190.

6

F. W. Murnau's *Sunrise*

Between Two Worlds

Laura Marcus

F. W. Murnau's *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* (1927), F. W. Murnau's first American film, is a work of modernist cinema whose relationship to the modernity it represents is an ambiguous one. To a significant extent a "city" film, one of whose immediate contexts was the "city symphony" of the 1920s (notably Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt [Berlin: Symphony of a Great City]* of 1927), it contrasts the values of rural life and community with the excitements and dangers of the modern metropolis. As a late silent film, which was synchronized with a musical score for distribution, it represents the perfected nature of the silent medium, in its pictorialism, its uses of motion and gesture, and its visual expressivity. At the same time, it reaches out toward the articulation of language and sound, often, though not invariably, making this part of the depiction of the modern city. In broader terms, we find in Murnau's late cinema a relationship—sometimes a tension—between the romantic, often traditional premises of its filmic narratives and its attraction toward the "tremendous energy" (which Murnau wrote that he had found in America) of modern life.

In my discussion of *Sunrise*, I explore the various dualisms present in the film—country/city, nature/artifice, silence/sound, tradition/modernity—while also suggesting that these oppositions are not absolute. There are at times more fluid exchanges between them. In relation to silence and sound (one of the central issues explored in this chapter), Molly Haskell has argued that "Murnau's city often seems like a metaphor for the sound film, trying to burst into the peaceful haven of the country, the silent film."¹ This interpretation is a productive reading of *Sunrise* as a transitional film, but Haskell's statement does not fully address the continuities in the film between country and city soundscapes. Nor does it take up Murnau's extensive and sustained uses of "implied sound" (cutting across the silent/sound division, in the visual representations of sound or a sound source and its aural apprehension). This feature is present in his earlier films, (in particular *Der letzte Mann [The Last Laugh]* of 1924), as well as in *Sunrise*.

The oppositions and pairings in *Sunrise* are not only thematic but are also embodied in Murnau's extensive use of projected landscapes (the city in the country/the country in the city); dual or bicameral spaces (as in shots in which background

and foreground represent different arenas or forms of movement); implied sound (as silent sound). The film is also a hybrid of American and European cinematic conventions. As Lucy Fischer has suggested, *Sunrise* uses American traditions of melodrama but “transcends its standard melodramatic roots and veers towards a more eccentric style”: we can perhaps translate “eccentric” as expressionist.² Finally, and as a related point, the film is generically hybrid. Comic sequences are interspersed throughout the narrative while, more fundamentally, the film’s narrative is a variant on the essentially “comic” plot of “remarriage.” Stanley Cavell has argued of the “re-marriage” comedy of the 1930s that “the drive of its plot is not to get the central pair together, but to get them *back* together, together *again*:”³ this impetus is also true for *Sunrise*, though the “divorce” motif of the modern 1930s talkies appears in *Sunrise* in the darker and more melodramatic motif of the planned murder of the Wife (Janet Gaynor) by the Man (George O’Brien).

A few months prior to the opening of *Sunrise* on September 23, 1927, Fox Film Corporation had released the silent version of the romance *7th Heaven*, starring Janet Gaynor and Charles Farrell; it was re-released on September 10, 1927, with a synchronized Movietone soundtrack, including sound effects and a musical score. Directed by Frank Borzage, the film is set in the Paris of the 1910s, and represents a city, on the eve of World War I, of sewers, working-class street life, and rooftops. Gaynor’s character, Diane, is introduced to the viewer as an abused waif, who subsequently reveals inner strength, all the domestic virtues, and utter devotion to the rambunctious Chico, played by Farrell. In 1929, at the inaugural Academy Awards ceremony, Gaynor won the first award ever given for “Best Actress” in acknowledgement of her multiple performances in *7th Heaven*, *Sunrise*, and Borzage’s *Street Angel* (1928). George O’Brien, the male lead in *Sunrise*, was best known at this time for his starring roles in John Ford’s silent Western, *The Iron Horse* (1924), and *The Johnston Flood* (1926, directed by Irving Cummings), in which Gaynor also starred. O’Brien’s image at this time, and later, was shaped by his appearances in films of action, adventure, and heroism: his role in *Sunrise* is, in the first part of the film, at odds with this character image, whereas Gaynor’s was more fully and consistently continuous with the part she had performed in *7th Heaven*. In both films, indeed, it is the male character who undergoes change and development, whereas the diminutive heroine is characterized by her unalterable fidelity; there was undoubtedly considerable interchange between the two films and their directors in their making.

When in 1926, Murnau traveled to Hollywood to make *Sunrise* for William Fox, he was already established as among the most original and influential of European directors. His final German film (for UFA) was *Faust* (1926); Murnau based the drama not only on Goethe’s text but also on early legends. His films of the early 1920s included *Nosferatu* (1922), a key film of German expressionism and a loose reworking of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897). Murnau’s attraction toward these tales of unholy pacts and of redemption by virtuous women bears closely on the plot of *Sunrise*; the Wife could indeed be understood as a Gretchen figure.

The year 1922 also saw Murnau's *Der brennende Acker* (*The Burning Soil*), a film patterned on the contrast between the existence of rural peasants and the life of nobility in the city. The city/country divide is a theme that absorbed Murnau from his early films through to his penultimate film *City Girl* (1930), which he first conceived (under the title *Our Daily Bread*) as "a tale about wheat, about the sacredness of bread, about the estrangement of the modern city dwellers and their ignorance about Nature's sources of sustenance."⁴

The Murnau film that had particularly drawn William Fox's attention was *The Last Laugh*. This is in its entirety a city film, set between the grand hotel that employs the film's central protagonist (an elderly doorman played by Emil Jannings who, in the course of the film, loses his job, his uniform, his status, and his *raison d'être*) and the working-class tenement block where he lives. Murnau described his intentions for the film in an interview with Matthew Josephson (one-time editor of the little magazine *Broom*); Murnau spoke of his desire to combine an absolute simplicity of plot with a limitless range "in its power of understanding and dramatizing ideas":

You can tell the story of "The Last Laugh" in a sentence, but I wanted the emotions of the central character to become something beyond the power of words to express. I wanted the camera to picture shades of feeling that were totally new and unexpected; *in all of which there is a subconscious self* which in a crisis may break out in the strangest ways, and this picture at times reached the subconscious man under his hotel livery.⁵

The Last Laugh uses techniques (distorted images, handheld camera, superimposition) to express the doorman's subjective vision, in states of shock, humiliation, and drunkenness. Despite his beginnings in the theater, Murnau believed that, as he wrote in a magazine article in 1928, the future of the cinema lay in the realization of directors that "the motion picture is a separate art that has nothing in common with the stage and can express fine shades of thought and feeling that are impossible to the spoken drama." Murnau emphasized, in this discussion, his concern with the camera as an instrument of thought: "I talk to an actor of what he should be *thinking*, rather than what he should be *doing*."⁶ The film is without intertitles and reveals the strength of Murnau's desire to create a purely visual cinema.

Visuality, nonetheless, incorporates dimensions of the aural. *The Last Laugh* engages with the visual representation of sound, as "implied sound" or "visual acoustics"⁷ in ways that would be very fully developed in *Sunrise*. Lotte Eisner commented of *Sunrise* that, although it was a silent film, "sound becomes perceptible everywhere through the power of the images and the eloquence and precision of the acting."⁸ The "perceptibility" of sound in *The Last Laugh* is manifested in the repeated representations of sound-producing instruments (whistles, a trumpet, a violin), and of the movement of sound, as illustrated by a shot of a trumpet in motion.⁹ Murnau also depicts exaggerated human sound-making (in particular, calls and cries by means of which news of the doorman's humiliation is circulated around the tenement

block). Through close-ups of the women's hand-framed mouths and cupped ears, and camera movements across the tenement yard, Murnau represents sound as traversing space: as speech it is, moreover, associated with the communal sphere (and its attendant lack of privacy) and with women's gossip.

Made a few years before the sound revolution was in train, *The Last Laugh* represents, through visual means, a sonic universe in which the communities orchestrated by sound can be both benign (as in music-making) and malicious. In both *The Last Laugh* and *Sunrise*, there is also the "voice" of the community, attached in *Sunrise* to the life of the rural village. The former happiness of the young married couple, who live on a rural small holding with their child, is represented to the viewer in flashbacks conjured up by the voices of the villagers, and their words given in the titles, as if they were the narrators (or, as in Greek tragedy, the chorus) of the drama to be unfolded. They describe the destruction of the family's happiness and the farm's prosperity with the arrival of a woman from the city, with whom the Man is having a passionate affair.

Sunrise was an adaption of a short story, "Die Reise nach Tilsit" ["The Journey to Tilsit"] by the German novelist and dramatist Hermann Sudermann, published in 1917.¹⁰ The film narrative, which develops Carl Mayer's script, follows the story's plot fairly closely, though there are also some significant departures from it. In Sudermann's story, which is set in East Prussia, the young woman with whom Ansas, the husband, has a sexual relationship is employed as a servant: she is not identified as having come from the city and does not embody its allure as does the equivalent character, "The Woman from the City" (Margaret Livingston), in *Sunrise*. In Sudermann's story, the couple, and the villagers in general, are Lithuanian: Tilsit, the nearby town that they visit, has a mixed German and Lithuanian population. The story is thus precise about ethnic and religious identity and difference, whereas *Sunrise* works with a more "universal" binary of city and country and maintains an imprecision about its settings. The central scene of reconciliation in the church in *Sunrise* is not present in "The Journey to Tilsit," though the admiration of the town dwellers for Ansas's beautiful young wife, Indre, "lovely and pale as a madonna," which reignites his feelings for her, has counterparts in Murnau's film. The starker difference is that at the short story's close Ansas drowns, having saved Indre by tying her to the reeds with which he had initially planned to secure his own safety. Despite Ansas's repentance, there is narrative retribution for the murderous plans he and the girl had entertained.

In Sudermann's story, modernity enters with the planned extension of the railway from the city of Tilsit to near the village. Indre's first encounter with the railway is in Tilsit, and her responses to it echo those attributed to early film spectators, in their first viewings of the locomotive on the screen: "She cries out and keeps her eyes closed and doesn't know whether she should go on laughing or start crying again. But because Ansas is protecting her she decides to laugh and uncovers her face and goes 'Puff puff.'" The train, her husband tells her, is traveling to Berlin: the world is being opened up by the railway.

At the opening of *Sunrise*, locomotion is bringing the modern world to the village. After the hand-drawn credits, the titles read, "This song of the Man and his Wife is of

no place and every place; you might hear it anywhere at any time. For wherever the sun rises and sets in the city's turmoil or under the open sky on the farm, life is much the same; sometimes bitter, sometimes sweet." Following this declaration of timeless and unchanging verities, in both city and country, a title card appears with the legend "Summertime . . . vacation time" accompanying a painting, expressionist in style, of a railway station. This transmutes into the film image, with two trains in the station, one moving off and the other puffing out clouds of steam before it, too, pulls away. Through the curved glass of the wall of the station, the buildings and cars of a modern city can be seen. Throughout *Sunrise*, Murnau (working, as on many of his films, with the set designer Rochus Gliese and with cameramen Charles Rosher, who had experience of both American and European filmmaking, and Karl Struss) plays with such relations of foreground and background, with the background frequently represented as a form of moving backdrop perceived through a glass wall or screen. The visualization of duality (in foreground/background relations as well as split screens) finds its counterpart, as I began by suggesting, in the splittings and doublings of the film narrative—city/country, Vamp/Wife—while the married couple (the Man and the Wife) is constructed as an absolute value.

The next shots in the opening sequence continue the *topos* of transport: trains, an ocean liner, and, finally, a ferry moving toward the shore of a village: both the frenetic locomotion and sound of the trains and the stately motion and bulk of the ocean liner give way to the peaceful progress of this open-topped vessel, its passengers waving to the shore as the boat nears the dock and they are greeted by those awaiting it. "Vacation time" clearly runs at a slower pace than modern, mechanized time, as represented by the locomotives. The camera work abandons their speed, and the montage of their superimposition. At the close of this brief sequence, a complex shot takes in the landing boat, the village, and the dock, recalling, in a very different setting, the opening of *Nosferatu*, in which the vessel, with its dead crew, glides into the harbor.¹¹

In *Sunrise*, a title card follows this last shot in the sequence: "Among the vacationists was a Woman of the City. Several weeks had passed since her coming and still she lingered." Time is now no longer just slower, but out of joint: "vacation time" has turned into something more threatening to the community. There is then an interior shot; the Woman from the City enters a darkened room from the left, lighting a cigarette from a guttering candle, brushing out her dark bobbed hair while she smokes and, before she dresses in fashionable garments, shedding her negligee to reveal a lace camisole. There is a cut to her walking, from the top of the screen, into a room, in the tilted foreground of which an elderly peasant couple are eating a simple meal under a huge oil lamp (see Figure 6.1). The perspective and angles, as well as the depth of field, render the visual fields occupied by the rural couple and the modern woman radically separate, in a further example of the film's emphasis on split, dual, and bicameral spaces. The old woman rises as instructed to polish the Woman from the City's high-heeled shoes, which we then follow as she walks along a village street. At stages she seems to become the object of the villagers' glances, but at others there is



Figure 6.1 Depth of field and split space, F. W. Murnau, *Sunrise* (1927)

no mediation in the camera's tracking of her progress through the village, as she looks into the lighted windows of the houses she passes.

Pausing outside a house, she purses her lips to whistle. This is the first of many instances in the film of implied sound. The whistle is an erotic signal that becomes part of the auditory realm as we see the Man, inside the house, turning his head as he hears the sound. He is, indeed, all ears, while the gestures (in particular his repeated rubbing of his neck) that suggest an uneasy conscience also draw attention to the orifice of the ear. The innocence of the Wife, by contrast, is marked by her seeming lack of auditory awareness, as she moves from the room to the kitchen in setting the table for their meal. The domestic objects (a breadboard, bowls) on the dining table compose a pictorial still life that exists in total opposition to the movement, excitement, and sound that the Man seeks and follows, and these still and silent objects are fully associated with the Wife, who comes back into the room, carrying a tureen of soup for their meal, to find the room empty and her husband gone (see Figure 6.2). The Woman from the City's whistle, as Melinda Szaloky argues, "is the tune that disrupts the harmony of the couple."¹² It is, one might say, the discordant note in the "song of two humans."

There are strong visual and thematic echoes in this sequence of the German director Karl Grune's 1923 silent film *Die Strasse* (*The Street*), the quintessential



Figure 6.2 The Wife, F. W. Murnau, *Sunrise* (1927)

“street film” of the Weimar period. At the start of Grune’s film a bored middle-aged man (Eugen Klöpfer) lies on a sofa, clearly yearning for the excitement of the city outside, whose enticements initially appear as shadow images on the walls and ceiling of the apartment. The faces of a smiling young woman and of a grimacing circus clown appear in superimposition: the modern city is thus imagined as the arena of pleasures both erotic and ludic. The shadow play and the disembodied faces in close-up further suggest that the city is to be apprehended as a cinematic arena: the man watches the projected images as if they were films. As his wife (Lucie Höflich)—definitively a Hausfrau rather than an object of desire—approaches the dining table with a tureen of soup, he makes a bolt for the door, subsequently entering a realm of dark urban spaces and of criminal events that will run throughout the long night. The morning will see him return, much chastened, to his home: his wife’s only response is to take the soup tureen out of the oven and replace it on the dining table.

In *Sunrise*, as I have noted, the allure of urban modernity is first embodied in the figure of “the Woman from the City,” while the young Wife’s pale loveliness is that of the “madonna” of Sudermann’s story. The sequence following on from the Man’s departure from his home, in pursuit of the Woman from the City, is one of the most celebrated in film history. Murnau described it thus in 1928:

They say that I have a passion for “camera angles.” To me the camera represents the eye of a person, through whose mind one is watching the events on the screen. It must follow characters at times into difficult places, as it crashed through the reeds and pools in *Sunrise* at the heels of the Boy, rushing to keep his tryst with the Woman of the City. It must whirl and peep and move from place to place as swiftly as thought itself.¹³

In a long tracking shot, the camera follows the Man into the darkness of the marshes, but appears to leave him to follow its own path as it takes a shortcut, tracking through the foliage and alighting on the Woman from the City standing alone in the moonlight. Murnau’s description of the shot suggests that it could be understood as a use of “subjective camera,” with the spatial discontinuities expressing the Man’s emotional confusion, though Murnau’s words also indicate the extent to which he sees the camera as possessing a consciousness, and a desire, of its own. It might also be suggested that it is part of the power and the dangerous allure of “the Woman from the City” that she can draw the camera’s eye and, by extension, that of the spectator, toward her.

The camera stays on “the Woman from the City,” watching her as she reacts to a sound (which we infer to be that of the Man’s footsteps coming closer) by refreshing her makeup. As he enters the frame from the left, the two embrace; there is a cut to a shot of the weeping Wife with the child, and then a cut back to the Man and the Woman from the City together (see Figure 6.3). Intertitles show her seducing him with her words as well as her embraces—“Come with me to the City.” In answer to his question “and my wife?” the woman replies, “Couldn’t she get drowned?”; the words of the title become fluid as they sink down the frame, as if being pulled underwater. This moment is followed by a shadowy image of a male figure in a boat, throwing a body overboard: as Lotte Eisner noted, “Murnau uses blurred images and slow motion to indicate thought which has not yet become action.”¹⁴

The complex relationship between words (as intertitles) and the images they conjure up is at its most intense in the sequence that follows. The Man reacts with violence to the Woman from the City’s suggestion that he kill his wife, but she turns his anger into erotic passion, and the words “Come to the City” again appear on the screen, as the attractions of the city life that they could lead together is conjured up. At this point actual sound enters to accompany the spectacle, with the cacophony of the city streets and “fan-like montages of jazz musicians” and their accompanying sound.¹⁵ The sequence uses rear projection, so that the Man and the Woman from the City, lying back on the ground, watch the filmic “city symphony” that rises up from the ground and is projected before them, in both its visual and its auditory dimensions. The Woman from the City, that is, shows the Man (or, rather, takes him to) the cinema. She then begins a frenzied dance to the jazz music’s rhythms, and the man pulls her to him and down to the earth.

The next sequence begins with a low tracking shot along the muddy ground, picking out two pairs of footprints, as if to play with the very concept of “tracking.” The



Figure 6.3 The Man with the Woman from the City, F. W. Murnau, *Sunrise* (1927)

camera's nosing along the ground is at one with the sense of the chthonic in the sexual relationship. This dragging down to the earth is also enacted in the Man's stooped and heavy gait in the first part of the film (it is alleged that Murnau had George O'Brien's shoes weighted with lead to aid the required "acting with his back"); it is further connected to the fantasy and the fear of the body being pulled under the water. At the close of the sequence, the camera tilts up from the ground to show the Woman from the City gathering up the bulrushes that, she proposes, the Man should use to save himself during the faked boat accident in which his wife will be drowned.

The darkness and low angles of the scene in the marshes are in contrast with the open skies of the boat journey, as the Man rows the Wife across to the City. Yet the one carries over the danger from the other. The Wife in the small boat is surrounded by a waste of water. Once they have left the shore of the village, with its church bells ringing out, there is nothing in the frame to contain or protect her. She shrinks back as the Man's eyes darken and he comes toward her with his murderous hands. As she clasps her hands in supplication or prayer, the Man is brought to an awareness of the horror of his actions. He puts his arms over his face and at this moment the church bells (as represented in the musical score) ring out loudly. The sound of the bells thus marks the beginning of the sequence, as the couple leave the shore in the boat, and its end, with the overturning of the Man's murderous intentions. Returning to his seat on the boat, he rows furiously to the other shore.

In her attempt to escape him, the Wife runs from the boat and boards a railway tram: her husband, pleading with her not to be afraid of him, catches up and climbs on behind her. The sequence that follows was highly complex in its construction (bringing together location shots with trick photography), but appears as an extended fluid movement. The Wife huddles in her fear and misery and the Husband in his guilt: they observe nothing as they stand in the observation car. Meanwhile, the tram curves through the scenery outside, moving along the shores of the lake, through the industrial landscape of the city's outskirts and into its center. We watch the changing scenery and the transformation from country to city in lieu of the film's protagonists, who are turned inward to the psychological drama.

The couple's misery and estrangement continue on their arrival in the city, until they enter a church where a wedding is taking place. Murnau again introduces the theme of spectatorship, as the Man and Wife sit in a back pew of the church to watch the ceremony. As in the opening sequences of the film, it is the man who is suggestible to the (implied) auditory realm: it was he, and not the Wife, who heard the Woman from the City's whistle and it is now he who (undoing the Woman from the City's seductions) is fully attentive to the words of the wedding vows (which are given in the intertitles). There is a play here with the performativity of the vows ("I now declare you man and wife"), which is rendered as a mode of mimesis. The Man (again "all ears") experiences the words as affect, through his body, and breaks down in tears at the words of the marriage ceremony, particularly as they relate to the promises to love, to cherish, and to keep from harm. The Wife guides him outside the church: they embrace and there is a shot of the church bells above them ringing out, in a perfect synchronization of sound and image. In the conjoining of the visual image and the sound of the bells in the sequence, "the married couple" and "the married print" (the industry's term for the joining together of image and soundtrack in the finished product) become metaphors for each other. They are, as it were, "wedded," not mechanically "welded," to borrow the poet H. D.'s (Hilda Doolittle's) distinction in her discussion of Movietone films in the late 1920s.¹⁶ A decade later, the art historian and film theorist Rudolf Arnheim referred to the combination of artistic media as a "successful marriage," in which each medium retains its separateness.¹⁷

Church bells are, as I have suggested, central to the "soundscape" of *Sunrise* and to the drama, forging a connection through sound between the village and the city. The ringing bells are, furthermore, the instruments of a form of "remarriage" between the Man and the Wife: as they walk down the church steps, they are taken by onlookers to be a newly married couple. They pass through the city traffic and into a subjectively experienced pastoral landscape: the rear projection (creating the country in the city) both recalls and provides an absolute counter to the earlier scene in which the Vamp conjured up the city scene in the marshes. It is as if the Man and the Wife, walking through the projected landscape, were together occupying both a different imaginative space and a different film world, until they were shocked back into reality by the cacophony of the city traffic that, by embracing in the middle of the road, they brought to a standstill. The sound sequence here is also marked in ways similar to

that of the sequence in the marshes: sound is intense and discordant and, in the later scene, introduces the only speech in the film, as an enraged driver honks his horn and yells at the couple, "Get out of there." These two sequences would indeed suggest that sound film is entering as a disruptive principle, breaking into the peace of the silent film (placed on the side of the pastoral and rural): sound is marked as noise rather than as communication. Yet we should also note that the church bells ring out across the spaces of the country and the city, perhaps suggesting that sound can create continuities not only between these ostensibly opposed spheres but also between the film worlds of silent and sound cinema.

The couple's day in the city contains a number of set pieces, combining pathos and comedy, and pointing up their situation as rural folk unaccustomed to the ways of the city. The husband has his hair cut in a barber's shop; the couple visit a photographer's studio to have their picture taken; they spend the evening in a setting modeled on Luna Park. While some critics have suggested that these sequences are largely redundant or purely whimsical, I would argue that they are important engagements with aspects of modernity, showing the negotiations of country people with urban activities and spaces. The modern hairdresser's salon, the photographer's studio, and the leisure complex all point to a culture of consumption made possible by technology.

The scene at the hairdresser's, with its mise en scène of chrome-design modernism and use of Hollywood-style montage, plays with gender identities in the modern world. The husband, immobilized in the barber's chair as his hair is cut and his face shaved by an effete and mannered hairdresser (Ralph Sipperly), is a disempowered figure. The Wife, meanwhile, has reacted with horror to a hairdresser's suggestion that she have her hair cut. The blonde, helmet-like wig worn by Janet Gaynor in the part of the Wife was an object of ridicule from the outset, but it was insisted on by Murnau: as he wrote of Janet Gaynor's role in the film, "I had to submerge her physical beauty to emphasize the beauty of her heart." Beyond this reasoning, I would note that the wig creates an entirely smooth, earless surface to her head. She is, effectively, without ears, so fully are they concealed throughout the film. When a hairdresser starts to unpin the Wife's hair, thinking that she wants it cut, she, horrified, clasps her hands not so much to her hair as over her ears (or the place where her ears would be). Her refusal to have her hair "bobbed" (one of the key markers of the "flapper" of the period was her short, "bobbed" hair) marks her absolute distinction from the Woman from the City: as we recall, the opening shot of the film, after the prologue, was of the Vamp energetically combing through her short, dark hair. More significantly, perhaps, the Wife's purity (and her remoteness from the film's representations of modernity) is connected to the relative absence of auditory exposure and aural suggestibility in her persona: to this extent she does figure an "innocence" that would subsequently become attached to the silent film with the coming of sound cinema.

The two further, lengthy city scenes in the center of *Sunrise* (those set in the photographer's studio and in the film's version of Luna Park) serve to reinforce not only the unfamiliarity of these village dwellers with city life, but also their simple virtues: the Wife's beauty and charm; the Man's strength and physical dexterity. The introduction

of these scenes might also be an aspect of Murnau's wish, or his response to the demand, to make an "American" film. Eisner, in seeking an explanation for the inclusion of the "Luna Park gags" in *Sunrise*, points to a letter from William Fox to Murnau (December 27, 1927), on the subject of his next film, *4 Devils* (1928): Fox wrote that he hoped the scenario "will contain pathos, thrills, well-timed and calculated comedy situations intermingled with the other emotions which I am certain every large picture requires."¹⁸ Beyond this wish, there were obvious cinematic models for Murnau to follow, in particular D. W. Griffith's *Way Down East* (1920), which interspersed, in self-consciously "Shakespearean" fashion, comic interludes (often involving "rude mechanicals" and animals) between the sequences of melodrama and pathos.

In *Sunrise*, the comic scenes (sometimes decried by critics as representing not so much American style as "heavy" German humor, an aspect of the film's ambiguous placing as American or as European, or indeed as an admixture of the two) also have motivations beyond the merely diversionary. The interlude in the photographer's studio extends the theme of technologically mediated spectatorship (also found, though in a very different context, in the representation of an imaginary cinematic screen in the early scene between the Man and the Woman from the City), as the photographer (J. Farrell MacDonald) looks at the couple under the black cloth and through the inverting viewfinder of his old-fashioned camera and captures a "snapshot" of their affections (see Figure 6.4). Second, the scene reinforces the thematic of "remarriage," extending the sequence in the city church in which the broken couple watch a wedding and implicitly reaffirm their own vows. "She is the sweetest bride I've seen all year," the photographer says to the husband (in the words of the intertitle), having taken the pair to be newlyweds.

The Luna Park episodes showcase the representation of the modern city as a fun-fair and the relationship between the couple and the mass, as the camera takes its questing course to seek the pair out amid the crowd. This relationship is a common trope in city films of the 1920s: in King Vidor's *The Crowd* (1928) the central protagonist (James Murray) struggles, and fails, to assert his individuality among the city masses, while in Paul Fejos's *Lonesome* (1928) the lonely pair (Glenn Tryon, Barbara Kent) who fall in love at the fairground (again modeled on Luna Park/Coney Island) are almost immediately separated in the crowd. *Sunrise* seeks to restore the perfection of the married couple (the film's own variant on the theme of identity and the mass) not only as theme but, as I discuss later, also as image within the frame.

The sequence, set in the Luna Park environment, in which the husband catches an escaped fairground piglet, drunk on spilled wine, has its counterparts in Griffith's cinema, but also harks back to the use of subjective camera in *The Last Laugh*. The Man and the Wife are the most artless of performers as they dance a "peasant dance" in front of an enthusiastic crowd. The dance interlude (which is a performance of country ways brought into city life) again extends the film's self-reflexive focus on spectatorship. Beyond this, it also elevates the rhythms of the country dance and its accompanying music (to which the Wife is the first to respond) over the cacophonous jazz rhythms with which the Woman from the City enticed the Man. Empowered



Figure 6.4 Photography as visual mediation, F. W. Murnau, *Sunrise* (1927)

by the folk rhythms, the Wife persuades the Man to join her in the traditional dance: their perfect coordination represents their productive mutual attraction. As they dance, the watching crowd of city dwellers sways in unison (see Figure 6.5). Jazz, too, is rendered more communal and sociable, as the Man and the Wife sit down in the restaurant while, seen behind them through a glass wall, couples in the adjacent hall dance to its music. The background movements of these figures transmute into aerial acrobatics over their heads as the Man and the Wife consume a bottle of wine. The sequence extends both the film's use of imagery and camera movement to represent states of mind and its constructions of bicameral spaces, in which the frame contains two different kinds of perspective and modes of energy that breach each other's boundaries.

In the film's final section, the Man and the Wife leave the restaurant and the Park, making a return journey that is both a spatial and an emotional reversal of their unhappy outward journey. Murnau's pictorialism is at its most heightened in the shots of the moonlit lake, on which the couple's small boat begins its journey back to the village: "another honeymoon," as the Man says to the Wife. The peacefully reflective waters are, however, stirred up by a violent storm whose beginning we see as the film cuts back to the city and Luna Park. The fireworks that the Man and the Wife watched with delight on their departure from the city are now replaced in the sky by bolts of



Figure 6.5 Dancing in Luna Park, F. W. Murnau, *Sunrise* (1927)

lightning: the fierceness of nature has replaced modern spectacle. The sleeping Wife wakes in the boat as it begins to rock violently: the couple cling to each other and the Man ties the bales of rushes, hidden in the bottom of the boat on their outward journey, to his wife. The boat overturns.

As the film nears its ending, Murnau alternates shots in which there are different compositions of figures and relations of absence and presence: shots of the lake and the village in which there are no human figures, as well as those in which the figures appear singly. The Man climbs out of the water and onto the rocks; the Wife floats on the lake, unobserved by any human eye. Her body moves diagonally from top to bottom of the frame until she leaves its edge, the floating rushes, which have come loose from their ties, in her wake. These moments are interspersed with shots of the Woman from the City (alone in her room watching the running villagers with their lanterns from a window, or crouched, catlike, on the horizontal of a tree branch to observe the apparently fruitless search for the Wife) and with those in which the villagers, searching for the Wife, move as a group. The images (whether empty of the human, showing the human figure in its isolation, or following the movements of the collective) become a graphic representation of the loss of the couple, Man and Wife, as a composition within the frame.

Sound also plays a major role in this part of the film. As the Man climbs onto the rocks, he calls out for his wife, the cry being represented by the sound of a horn that

seems to spell out the two syllables of her name, Indre. In the house, to which he has returned after the assumed loss of his wife, he lifts his head on hearing the Woman from the City's whistle: the passion this sound formerly inspired has now turned to violent hatred. His attempts to strangle her are stopped only when he hears another cry: that of the villager who calls out (her cries represented through cut-in close-ups and the sound of a horn) that the Wife has been found.

Lying on the bed with her long hair loose, Janet Gaynor as the Wife bears a striking resemblance to Lillian Gish at the end of *Way Down East*, after the extended scene in which the icy river pulls Gish's wronged character toward a waterfall. The visual reference to Griffith's film is reinforced by Murnau's inclusion, at this heightened dramatic moment, of a brief jocular scene (pointing up the possessive aspects of marriage) among the village folk, including the old man whose knowledge of the tides led him to find the Wife and to bring her in alive. The couple are restored to the community. There is a shot of the peaceful village, into which enters a horse and cart taking away the Woman from the City: she crouches in the cart, facing back to the village. The vehicle moves out of the frame and she becomes a vanishing trace. Her "animality" and, indeed, vampiric qualities, have served not only to reinforce her outsider status but also, in their very excess, to point up the film's own, arguably inflated, commitment (which was unlikely to be that of Murnau, as a homosexual man) to the marriage pact and the married couple.¹⁹ The distinction between Wife and Vamp, Madonna and Whore, is an absolute in the film (unlike the other, more porous dualisms that I have discussed). The Woman from the City must be expelled in order to preserve the "song of two humans." With her energies bookending the film, she is a disruptive force on the side of the new: to a significant extent she is a movie-made figure, but she must exit the film before it can come to a final resting place.

As the Woman from the City leaves the frame and the film, there is a cut to the Wife in bed, the child next to her. The Man's face enters the frame from the left and the closing images of the film are of the Man and the Wife kissing, the child now no longer within the frame. The couple—along with "the song of two humans"—has been restored. This long closing kiss, followed by a naturalistic shot of the coming dawn, is replaced by an image of an artificial sun, and then the word FINIS, whose initially shaky, fluid letters rise up the frame (in a reversal of the watery, downward motion of the word DROWNED toward the film's beginning), finally resolving themselves in perfect graphic stasis. It is a most emphatic assertion of closure.

The artifice of the art-deco sun gave the title "Synthetic Dawn" to Robert Herring's highly critical review in the journal *Close Up* on the film's release, in which he satirized Fox Studio's claims for the film as "the screen's first international picture" and (in the person of "Mr. Fox") Hollywood's concept of "art" and art film. He took issue with *Sunrise* both for its lack of realism and for what he perceived as its failure to represent the inner lives—the "states of mind"—of its characters. He also saw it as a retrograde film: "The cinema should be the means of this age to express what this age feels and there is nothing of this age in *Sunrise*. *Sunrise* takes us back and makes us unlearn."²⁰ Yet the process of "unlearning" could be understood as part of Murnau's project, at a

technological as well as a thematic level. He had written of his wish for “the recovery of a simplicity and definitiveness of the technical process,” through a film apparatus capable of creating “a symphony made up of the harmony of bodies and the rhythm of space.” The vision would seem to be one in which the “symphony” could not be complete without “a new, complicated technical apparatus”; one might speculate that Murnau had the evolving technologies of sound in mind at this point.²¹

Herring’s review pointed to what he saw as the falsity of the film’s constructions and the cynicism of its “international” appeal to “no place and every place … all time and no time”:²² its artificial lake and “synthetic” sunrise, its gendered stereotypes, and an anti-modern allegorizing that he associated with late Victorianism and the other-worldliness of William Morris’s visions. For Lotte Eisner, by contrast, it is the combination of the artificial and the natural that is one of *Sunrise*’s achievements: “Studio and nature complemented and harmonized with each other. Mists wreathed a landscape which had been built on the set. An artificial moon rose over the real marshes.”²³

A later generation of film theorists, while giving due weight to the film’s aesthetic and technical achievements, frequently drew out the tensions between the energies produced by the drama of transgression and the film’s seemingly conventional morality and conservative (sexual, familial, social) ideology. Mary Ann Doane, writing in the 1970s, perceived the image of the artificial sun as a masking of the film’s resolution of such contradictions.²⁴ Dudley Andrew, for whom *Sunrise* ranks as among the greatest of all works of art, gave a different reading, in which the “conscious sun” at the film’s close becomes a parable—a reworking of Plato’s myth of the cave—for the cinema itself:

We are confronted with a tableau that looks back at us and holds us prisoner beneath it. When the projection bulb goes out and the houselights fade in, we sit staring at a screen that has lost its glow. The almighty sun, able to hold the very image of love, was itself a prisoner of the screen. And as we look about the film becomes once more a parable, a snapshot of love, at sea in a more pervasive darkness.²⁵

In substituting the adjective “almighty” for “artificial” in referring to the sun of *Sunrise*, Andrew would appear to be making a direct reference to the final line of Andrew Marvell’s poem “On a Drop of Dew”: “Into the glories of th’almighty sun.” The implication is that Murnau’s *Sunrise* is to be understood as akin to a metaphysical poem; both, perhaps, in the ways it brings together contradictory forces and ideas and, to adopt (with an alteration from “verbal” to “visual”) T. S. Eliot’s account of “The Metaphysical Poets,” in its engagement “in the task of trying to find the [visual] equivalent for states of mind and feeling.”²⁶

Whether or not one follows Andrew in his account of the sublimity of *Sunrise* (a term also used of the film by the French critic Jean Domarchi²⁷), his argument is productive in that it requires the spectator or critic neither to lament nor to attempt to resolve the film’s contradictions but to acknowledge them as its substance and to allow them to challenge the ways we think and feel. Such a challenge is one definition, at

least, of the nature and the power not only of Murnau's *Sunrise* but also of modernist cinema, tout court.

Notes

1. Molly Haskell, "Sunrise," *Film Comment* (Summer 1971), 16–19. Reprinted in *Passport to Hollywood: Film Immigrants Anthology*, Don Whitemore and Philip Alan Cecchetini, eds. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1976), 402–8, 32.
2. Lucy Fischer, *Sunrise: A Story of Two Humans* (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 15.
3. Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 1–2.
4. Letter from Murnau to Fox, December 28, 1927. In Lotte Eisner, *Murnau* (Paris: Le Terrain Vague, 1964; English translation London: Secker and Warburg, 1973), 197.
5. Matthew Josephson, "F.W. Murnau: The German Genius of the Films," *Motion Picture Classic* XXIV, no. 2 (October 1926), 84.
6. F. W. Murnau, "Films of the Future," *McCall's Magazine* (September 1928), 27, 90.
7. The fullest account of implied sound is by Melinda Szalóky, who argues, with reference to *Sunrise*, that this is a neglected dimension of silent films. Even films without a soundtrack typically feature speaking characters and other examples of what she calls "visual acoustics." In *Sunrise*, "every significant moment in the narrative is expressed acoustically." Melinda Szalóky, "Sounding Images in Silent Film: Visual Acoustics in Murnau's *Sunrise*," *Cinema Journal* 41, no. 2 (Winter 2002), 109–31; 127.
8. Eisner, *Murnau*, 181.
9. Eisner, *Murnau*, 81–82.
10. Hermann Sudermann, "Die Reise nach Tilsit," accessed February 22, 2016, <http://gutenberg.spiegel.de/buch/die-reise-nach-tilsit-1984/1>. Translated by Lewis Galantiere as "The Excursion to Tilsit," in *Lithuanian Tales* (New York: Horace Liveright, 1930).
11. Dudley Andrew, *Film in the Aura of Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 28–58, provides a detailed analysis of this sequence (35) and the link to *Nosferatu* (41).
12. Szalóky, "Sounding Images," 118.
13. Murnau, "Films of the Future," 90.
14. Eisner, *Murnau*, 180–81.
15. Janet Bergstrom, "Sexuality at a Loss: The Films of F.W. Murnau," in Susan Rubin Suleiman, ed., *The Female Body in Western Culture: An Analysis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), 243–61, 259–60; Fischer, *Sunrise*, 37.
16. H. D. (Hilda Doolittle), "The Mask and the Movietone," *Close Up* (November 1927), 18–31; 20. Reprinted in *Close Up: 1927–1933, Cinema and Modernism*, James Donald, Anne Friedberg, and Laura Marcus, eds. (London: Cassell, 1998), 114–20.
17. Rudolf Arnheim, *Film as Art*, 3rd edn. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 207.
18. Eisner, *Murnau*, 183.
19. See Robin Wood, "Murnau's Midnight and *Sunrise*," *Film Comment* 12, no. 3 (May–June 1976), 4–19; and Robin Wood, "Sunrise: A Reappraisal," *CineAction*, no. 17 (Summer 1989), 66–71.
20. Robert Herring, "Synthetic Dawn," *Close Up* II, no. 3 (March 1928), 38–45; 44.

21. Murnau's reflections on this matter were recorded in his notes, which were in turn incorporated by Lotte Eisner in *Murnau*, 84.
22. Herring, *Close Up*, 44.
23. Eisner, *Murnau*, 179.
24. See Mary Ann Doane, "Desire in *Sunrise*," *Film Reader* 2 (1977), 71–77.
25. Andrew, *Film in the Aura*, 54.
26. In his essay on "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921) T. S. Eliot writes, "They were, at best, engaged in the task of trying to find the verbal equivalent for states of mind and feeling." T. S. Eliot, *Selected Prose* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1953), 118.
27. Domarchi wrote, "What strikes the spectator most [about *Sunrise*] is the perfection with which Murnau accommodates prosaic themes in his expression of the sublime." Cited in Fischer, *Sunrise*, 71 (her translation).

“A Language Worth the Trouble of Learning”?

Carl Theodor Dreyer’s *The Passion of Joan of Arc*

Andrzej Gąsiorek

Controversy has long swirled around Carl Theodor Dreyer’s *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928). There were objectors to the idea of a Protestant Danish director making the film when it was in production, and it divided audiences after its release: whereas some acclaimed the result, others were less enamored. It was generally agreed that Dreyer’s *Joan* was an innovative work and that Renée Falconetti’s emotionally charged performance in the principal role was a triumph, but many commentators were troubled by the film’s use of techniques that in their view sat uneasily with that performance. This response was because Falconetti’s acting, however convincing, was inseparable from the film’s framing of her performance, and the latter relied on the close-up as a structuring device and on geometrized interiors that created an oppressive atmosphere through *mise en scène*. The close-up, moreover, was supplemented by a variable pace (with some slow pans but also some fast cutting and some rapid dolly-in shots) and by unusual camera angles, the film boldly announcing that it sought to depict the conflict between the beleaguered maid and her unbending judges in a self-consciously stylized fashion. Several critics discerned a tension in the film between the demands of naturalism and a tendency to abstraction: they were willing to laud the realism of Falconetti’s performance, but they dismissed Dreyer’s obtrusive cinematic techniques as a form of mannered excess. At the heart of this objection was the sense that content and form were working against each other in *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, with the result that its coherence as a work of cinematic art was compromised.¹ Paul Rotha summed up the case against the film when he asserted that its “overwhelming fault” lay in its “isolation of the visual images from the dynamic content.”²

This critique is problematic for a number of reasons. First, it judges *The Passion of Joan of Arc* according to an ideal of aesthetic unity that is inapposite to the experimental nature of Dreyer’s film; if instead we align it with other modernist works from the period—across a range of media—we can see it as part of a cultural field in which techniques of fragmentation, juxtaposition, and bricolage produce a deliberate aesthetic of disunity. Second, the negative critique of *Joan* assumes that Falconetti’s acting is naturalistic in all respects, whereas in truth it is naturalistic only in part; much of

what the actress does (through stiff postures, stilted bodily movements, and oddly angled head positions) leans toward the geometric and thus displays affinities with the construction of the set, the *mise en scène*, and the framing of shots. There is no simple dichotomy here between naturalism and abstraction. Third, even if we agree that Falconetti's portrayal of Joan is in certain respects psychologically convincing, and if we further acknowledge that this aspect of her portrayal is in tension with the geometrized set and the self-conscious shooting style, it does not follow that this tension should be seen as an aesthetic failure; on the contrary, we should take seriously the possibility that it enables the film to demonstrate—at the level of style—the sharp disjunction between Joan's perspective and that of her clerical judges. It is through *style* that *The Passion of Joan of Arc* registers the conflict with which it is preoccupied.³ The film shows not only that Joan is under constant threat from those who are trying her but also, and equally importantly, that their view of her is so distorted that there is an unbridgeable gap between her words and their negative interpretation of her truth claims.⁴ The judges cannot acknowledge these claims, I want to argue, precisely because they constitute a threat to military, political, and ecclesiastical power.

Renowned for its close-ups, awkward camera angles, unusual disposition of objects and people within each frame, paucity of establishing shots, and a pace that is at times slow, at times fairly rapid, *Joan* is a self-reflexive intervention in the aesthetics of early cinema.⁵ The film relies on what David Bordwell terms “constructive” rather than “analytical” editing (the latter, often referred to as “continuity editing,” is commonly used in Hollywood).⁶ Rather than using an establishing shot to present the cinematic space as a whole and then exploring it analytically, Dreyer creates a claustrophobic cinematic space out of a series of tightly focused shots that disorientate viewers because they have little sense of how objects and characters relate to one another or fit into the wider space to which they belong. Added to this effect is his use of geometrized interiors, angular figuration of faces and bodies, flat white backgrounds with few distinctive features (and further interference with depth perception), and oblique camera angles. The composition of the interior scene works to intensify the conflict it dramatizes, visually imprisoning Joan in every frame; at the same time, the subjectivized *mise en scène* functions as an expressionist force that appears to act in concert with the judges, so that Joan is menaced both by her external environment and by the human beings who are ranged against her.⁷ In short, stylistic hybridity in *The Passion of Joan of Arc* is not an aberration from an ideal of organic unity but is central to its modus operandi, which puts questions of interpretation and coherence at its heart.⁸ This ambiguity suggests, in turn, that hermeneutically confident readings of Joan are problematic because they ignore the implications of the film's disjunctive aesthetic, which is inseparable, in turn, from its challenge to realist narrative conventions and to the norms of an emergent Hollywood cinema.⁹

Our recognition of this challenge takes us only so far, however. For inasmuch as the issue of the film's disjunctiveness cannot be ignored, the question of what purposes it serves and what effect it may have on the viewer remains to be addressed. It should be admitted from the outset that any answer one might give to this question will be

inconclusive because the film invites markedly different readings, as has been shown by the divergent reactions it has provoked over the years. In this chapter I focus both on the film's dramatization of the conflict between Joan and her judges, which the film is careful to portray as a battle between incommensurable discourses, and on its depiction of the ineffable nature of mystical experience, which—in keeping with the tradition of apophatic theology—it presents as irreducible to the languages (visual or verbal) that are available to describe it. I explore these issues by considering three related aspects of *The Passion of Joan of Arc*: first, its complex treatment of naturalism and abstraction, which I suggest should be conceived not as opposed terms but as interwoven tendencies that crisscross throughout the film; second, the paradox of the close-up, which functions on the one hand to heighten sympathy for Joan's human predicament (here the connection to naturalism is strong), and on the other hand as an autonomous cinematic feature that disrupts the diegesis and draws attention to the medium of the film (here the link to abstraction is especially significant); third, the exploration of mystical religious experience in relation to the exercise of institutional power, which is inseparable in Dreyer's film from his emphasis on the incompatibility of conflicting discourses (ways of seeing) and from his interest in otherness and the challenge it poses to institutional power.¹⁰

To understand Dreyer's treatment of naturalism and abstraction in *Joan* it is important to consider it in relation to 1920s debates about avant-garde cinema and to contrast it with films that were interested in the implications of abstraction and the close-up. Looked at in this context, the nature of Dreyer's intervention in *The Passion of Joan of Arc* becomes clearer: we grasp why his interests and his practice were at odds with the work of many other experimental filmmakers. In the years just before Dreyer made *Joan* several critics and directors explored the issue of how cinema could embrace the energy of modern life and thus become a truly contemporary medium; much attention was paid to techniques that evoked speed, energy, and the experience of simultaneity, the argument being that film—like no other art form—had the technical resources to evoke a technologizing modernity in all its dynamism. At the same time, these writers and filmmakers (following the pioneering work of D. W. Griffith and Sergei Eisenstein) were interested in the uses to which the close-up could be put.¹¹ Several influential figures argued that the close-up had the power to elevate the normally unnoticed humdrum objects of daily life to the status of poetry. According to these critics, on the one hand film had the capacity to evoke the frenetic pace of modern life because it was able to capture movement and, by means of crosscutting, to create the sensation of simultaneity; but on the other hand film also had the power to disclose the hidden beauty of everyday existence by means of the cinematic image, the close-up functioning as the technique par excellence that revealed quotidian life in all its fullness.¹²

It is important to emphasize that the critics who were making these arguments tended to focus on the physical object rather than the human subject. The point is not that human beings were absent from various avant-garde films of the early 1920s, but that people were no longer the primary point of focus in such films. Non-narrative

works like Walter Ruttmann’s *Lichtspiel* (1921), Man Ray’s *Le retour à la raison* (1923), Hans Richter’s *Rhythmus 21* (1921) and *Filmstudie* (1925), Viking Eggeling’s *Symphonie diagonale* (1924), and Marcel Duchamp’s *Anémic Cinéma* (1926) transpose the discoveries of abstract painting into an art of the moving image and in some cases exclude human beings altogether. But even in the films that include people and are representational to some extent—for example, René Clair’s *Entr’acte* (1924) or Fernand Léger’s *Ballet Mécanique* (1924)—the human subject is subordinated to the aesthetic demands of movement, light, shadow, pattern, and form.

Individuals in these films are no more significant than the material world in which they have their being. A kind of dehumanization is at work in some avant-garde theorizing about cinema and in the abstract or semi-abstract films that were being made at the time: the subject is displaced by the object.¹³ Louis Aragon’s “On Décor” (1918), for example, presented cinema as an art that could celebrate modern existence by raising banal everyday objects up “to the superior life of poetry.” Film, he argued, had the capacity to detach these objects from their usual functions in everyday life and to transform them so that they took on “menacing or enigmatic meanings.”¹⁴ The setting of a film, moreover, could express a social perspective that communicated in its own right. Aragon used Charlie Chaplin as his touchstone, arguing that through set construction and *mise en scène* the comic master’s films imbued the hostile environment in which he moved with a symbolic reality that was as aesthetically significant as anything that took place within their storylines. Léger, in turn, drew attention to a different aspect of film’s interest in the object. Discussing his own *Ballet Mécanique*, he described it as an attempt to give filmed objects “a very deliberate, very calculated mobility and rhythm.”¹⁵ Interested in how such objects could be defamiliarized as well as animated, he saw the close-up as a technique that was key to this estranging dimension of cinema.¹⁶ Above all, he connected the close-up to cinema’s fascination with the speed of modern life, which, he argued, “crushes and eliminates” the human subject—“reduces its interest, pulverizes it.”¹⁷

The close-up here is inseparable from critical emphasis on a technological dynamism that functions not to enhance the human element in film but to shatter it.¹⁸ This view of the close-up could not be more different either from Dreyer’s deployment of it in *Joan*—namely, to show extreme human suffering as well as to gesture toward a transcendent spiritual realm—or from his desire to place the individual at the heart of his work. (See, for example, his claim that there is “nothing in the world that can be compared to the human face.”¹⁹) Nor should we lose sight of the equally significant fact that at certain moments (especially when Joan is reflecting before she responds to accusatory questions) Dreyer slowed down the action of the film, thereby distancing himself from a “modern” aesthetic of speed.²⁰ By insisting on a style of acting that was almost sculptural in its intensity, creating scenes that resembled static tableaux, and offering lingering close-ups of the complex emotions playing across Joan’s face, Dreyer indicated that the human subject was his principal concern.²¹ By doing so he sought both to explore the psychology of his tormented protagonist through a

process of “simplification and abbreviation” (terms that already signal a turn to abstraction and symbolism) and to point toward the otherworldly dimension of her spiritual experience.²²

We can better comprehend this twofold aspect of *The Passion of Joan of Arc*—which is present in Falconetti’s performance as well as in the tension in the film between naturalism and abstraction—if we have some understanding of Dreyer’s view of cinema’s potential. He put his case in a 1955 lecture that sheds light on the techniques he used thirty years earlier in *Joan*:

Where does the possibility of an artistic renewal of film lie? I, for my part, can see only one way: *abstraction*—but, in order not to be misunderstood, I hurry to define the word “abstraction” as an expression for the perception of art which demands that an artist shall abstract from reality in order to reinforce its spiritual content, whether this is of psychological or purely aesthetic nature. Or said even more succinctly: Art shall represent the inner and not the outer life.²³

Dreyer maintains that cinema can evoke the depths of inner life primarily by means of abstraction, which goes far beyond a given individual’s particular time-bound experience. Indeed, for Dreyer, abstraction enables the filmmaker to access and evoke “a higher reality,” thereby creating “a spiritual experience.”²⁴ The cinematic vision, he argues, should not be limited by or reduced to material reality but should seek to penetrate it in order to uncover and display the supernatural dimension that it cloaks. This quest is not to be confused with the approach to abstraction associated with the work of the filmmakers previously mentioned. It belongs instead to an intellectual trajectory that includes the work of such figures as Vassily Kandinsky, Wilhelm Worringer, and W. B. Yeats, all of whom connected abstraction and symbolism with the search for spiritual truth.²⁵ The “central idea” in any film, Dreyer argued, must be transformed “into a symbol,” and the symbol in his view functioned as a correlative of abstraction: “With symbolism we are well on the way to abstraction, for symbolism works through suggestion.”²⁶

Abstraction offers Dreyer one significant way to explore spirituality in *Joan*, but the close-up is no less important. The close-up, in turn, needs to be seen in relation to the preceding discussion about naturalism and abstraction, not least because many commentators on the film have discussed it in a rather naive way, lauding it for its capacity to disclose Joan’s innermost being and to penetrate to the secrets of her “soul.”²⁷ This critical emphasis on the revelatory quality of the close-up frequently goes hand in hand with an empathic response to Falconetti’s performance, especially when this performance is interpreted in a naturalistic way. But a careful viewing of the film suggests that the close-up hardly operates in a straightforward manner and that Falconetti’s acting style cannot be reduced to its naturalistic elements. Abstraction features prominently both in Falconetti’s acting and in the film’s many close-ups, and Dreyer’s account of the latter helps us to understand why. The close-up, he explained, had a double function: it focused on Joan’s face in order to register her every fleeting

emotion, but also it disturbed the film’s illusionism by being granted an aesthetic independence that freed it from the realist frame:

I don’t know how I could have possibly told the story of Joan’s trial and death if I had not had the help of the close-ups in getting the viewers completely inside of both Joan’s and the judges’ hearts and souls. But it is quite true that my idea of telling the story of Joan’s agony in close-ups hardly followed the rules of a “proper” dramatic film at that time. There was an unwritten law that the single close-up should function as a part of a long shot’s “harmonic” completeness and as a detail in the overall pattern of the material. And then came my close-ups [that] sprang unannounced from the screen and insisted on their right to an independent existence.²⁸

In short, the close-up was not supposed to operate in a unitary way in *Joan*. Instead, Dreyer conceived it as a hybrid cinematic feature that heightened the film’s psychological realism but simultaneously called that realism into question. Referring to his close-ups as “a flock of boisterous mischief makers” with the power to produce a “shock-effect,” Dreyer indicated that an important aspect of the close-up as he envisaged it was its capacity to interfere with audience identification.²⁹

This concept sounds rather Brechtian, but Dreyer’s use of the close-up to distance the viewer has greater affinities with Viktor Shklovsky’s Russian Formalist concept of estrangement because it is not informed by Brecht’s revolutionary politics.³⁰ Dreyer’s close-up creates what Shklovsky usefully describes as “a special perception of the object” (human subject, in the case of Joan) in order to produce a “vision” of it that does not so much grant or reinforce knowledge as complicate it, thereby casting doubt on previous certainty.³¹ This process of calling knowledge into question undermines the prosecutors’ judgement of Joan and impedes the viewer’s access to Joan’s inner self. The viewer is asked to do the hard interpretative work that the judges refuse to do (a point to which I will return).

In keeping with Dreyer’s account of the close-up’s dual function, the film offers a doubled view of Joan through its entirety: she is presented at once as a vulnerable human being with whom the audience can to some extent empathize and as a mystic whose religious experience is ineffable and incommunicable. The close-up draws spectators in (almost demanding an emotional reaction to Joan’s plight) but it also holds them at bay, refusing to present Joan’s inner life as ultimately knowable. Throughout the film Joan is shot in a way that emphasizes her spiritual otherworldliness. Dreyer’s screenplay indicates how important this aspect of the film was to him. In scene after scene Joan is shown looking up and away from the earthly realm: “her eyes raised to heaven as if she saw beings visible only to her”; “her expression, which is filled with the glory of a heavenly vision”; “the expression of one who is far removed from this world”; “her expression is transfigured.”³² In the film itself, Falconetti performs this otherworldliness by means of the static, sculptural acting style that I have mentioned already. Her face is frequently tilted upward, while the physical relationship of the head to the torso is often awkward, as though to suggest the dualism of

body and soul (see Figure 7.1). The face is filmed from acute and unusual angles (usually from the side or from below), and it is frequently placed at the edge of the frame. This compositional strategy seems to imply that Joan's experience cannot be contained (represented) by the camera that tracks it. By oscillating between naturalism and abstraction the film foregrounds the dual nature of its protagonist's experience, suggesting by visual means that her suffering is integral to her experience of a spiritual reality that cinema can gesture toward but cannot fully elucidate. Abstraction (as in Kandinsky and Worringer) points to a transcendent realm but makes no attempt to represent it.

What then of the human (naturalistic) element of Dreyer's depiction of Joan? It cannot be denied that this depiction may provoke anguish in the audience; indeed, for some spectators the suffering depicted in the film is so harrowing that they can scarcely bear to watch it.³³ For these viewers, the close-up in *Joan* encourages identification and empathy, aspects of the film that are brought out in Jean-Luc Godard's *Vivre sa vie* (1962) when Anna Karina's character goes to see *Joan* and tears well up in her eyes at the moment that Joan (in close-up) is told that she must prepare herself for death. But one shouldn't conclude on this basis that the viewer is vouchsafed knowledge of Joan's spiritual experience or granted access to the truth of her "soul."³⁴ Such assertions ignore the fact that in most of her close-ups Joan is mute and that although her expressions reveal her bewilderment and her pain, they do not disclose what she is thinking. Nor can these claims be squared with the estranging nature of the close-up in *Joan*, which, as we have seen, works against empathy and identification by cutting across and destabilizing the naturalistic elements of Falconetti's performance. It seems more plausible to suggest that the film presents mystical religious experience



Figure 7.1 Falconetti gazing upward, Carl Theodore Dreyer, *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928)

as resistant to any language—visual or verbal—that would seek to encompass it. On Joan’s face, the screenplay notes, just after she has been accused of blasphemy, “there lingers the expression of one who is far removed from this world.”³⁵ Joan’s inner experience remains private and remote.³⁶

Joan’s unknowability is as much about the enigmatic nature of visionary experience as it is about the opacity of any human being. But in the specific context of Dreyer’s film the emphasis on what defeats or escapes knowledge has a particular point: it stands in marked contrast to the prosecutors’ claim that they *do* know the truth about Joan, a truth they articulate through the language of heresy. *The Passion of Joan of Arc* offers a critique of the way that power works when it is under threat, suggesting that the clerical prosecutors who have Joan’s fate in their hands are constructing a “knowledge” of her that bows to the dictates of religious and military authority. Throughout the film the interaction between the actors, the set, the composition of shots, and the variable perspectives of the camera produces a beleaguered protagonist who is beset on all sides by antagonistic forces. In a key scene, Joan is asked if God hates the English, to which she responds defensively, “Of God’s love or hate I know nothing.” This evasive reply is followed by a close-up of the prosecutor’s hardening expression, as he realizes that by means of this response Joan has refused to compromise herself. Falconetti is shot sideways and from above, at an acute angle, and this way of encasing her within the frame not only signals the stress she is under but also suggests she is trapped in an impossible situation (see Figure 7.2). In order to enhance this effect, and to encourage the viewer to share the sense that she is physically surrounded, Dreyer introduces a short pan around the room. The prosecutors are shown to be pressing in on Joan, menacing her with accusatory stares and disbelieving questions; although it



Figure 7.2 Framing as abstraction, Carl Theodore Dreyer, *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928)

is possible to work out that they are actually at a distance from her, the camera gives the impression that they are physically intruding upon the space she occupies (see Figure 7.3). The resultant sense of threat contributes to the chilling atmosphere of claustrophobia that dominates the action from start to finish.

The unequal power relation between Joan and her judges is established from the outset. At the beginning of the film Dreyer contrasts Joan's isolation with the bustling clerics and soldiers who crowd into the castle at Rouen and who fill the space in which the action will unfold; this spatial domination prefigures the way Joan later on will be bullied into submission. The exclusion of other women from a *mise en scène* that is dominated by two groups of men (English soldiers and French clerics) further emphasizes Joan's solitariness. Before she is brought into the chamber to be tried, the camera focuses on the clerics' craning, intrusive faces and then tracks sideways as they look from the edges of the room (and the frame) at the English soldiers who are a constant presence throughout the film (a reminder of where the power really lies) and at a single chair in the middle of the interrogation chamber. Shadows of the soldiers are visible on the pale walls, contributing to an atmosphere of foreboding, before the camera cuts to a monk reading from an imposing bound tome—a visible sign of the learning and authority that will determine the course of the proceedings. This point is reinforced when one of the prosecutors is shown reading from a charge sheet before the camera cuts to a shot of a bewildered Joan. Dreyer positions the camera above her in this scene, so that it is looking down upon her, rendering literal the dominating stance adopted by her judges throughout the trial; when observed from her point of view, they are typically shot from below, forcing her to look upward while they stare down at her from a symbolically elevated position. A series of rapid crosscuts



Figure 7.3 Spatial relationship during trial, Carl Theodore Dreyer, *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928)

between Joan and the chief prosecutor then follows, before the camera shifts to Joan’s manacled feet, offering the viewer a stark reminder of her status as a prisoner.³⁷

The contrast between power and powerlessness lies at the heart of the film. It is inseparable from the gender politics that played an important part in the 1431 trial. The trial transcripts show that Joan’s male attire, which was interpreted as a usurpation of male authority, was a key issue in her interrogation.³⁸ Her refusal to conform to the codes of expected womanly behavior allowed her prosecutors to raise doubts about her virtue and the trustworthiness of her claims.³⁹ In *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, this disregard of gender norms provokes the judges’ angriest reactions; at these moments Dreyer’s camera lingers on tightly framed close-ups of their furious expressions and shrieking mouths. When Joan insists that she will put off her male clothing only when her God-given mission has been completed, her assertion is followed by a pan of disturbed judges whispering to one another; the scene culminates with a shot of two clerics smiling conspiratorially, after which Joan is asked if God ordered her to dress as a man. The sly response to her affirmative answer is a further question, which is clearly designed to trip her up: “And what reward do you expect to get from God?” The camera now cuts between Joan and the smirking monks, who seem to believe they have trapped her into making an injudicious reply. A long shot of Joan’s serene, uplifted face is followed by a confounding answer: “The health of my soul.” The camera then cuts to an enraged monk accusing her of blasphemy and, moving right up to her, shouting directly into her face. Dreyer films this harrowing moment by crosscutting between close-ups of the monk’s face and extreme close-ups of his moving lips, which take over the entire frame, filling it with an image of the wider violence that his words threaten to unleash.

Joan is dominated and threatened not only within the film’s diegesis but also by the decor, the composition of each shot, and the camera frame. This confluence of extradiegetic features is particularly clear in the torture-chamber scene. Dreyer positions the camera close to the ground so that the prosecutors are several times viewed in this scene from below. Dreyer’s use of low-angle shots gives us Joan’s point of view, the camera’s perspective once again stressing the judges’ power over her. But Dreyer deliberately goes beyond realism here because in one or two instances during this pivotal scene the angle of the camera (as it points upward at the judges) is so acute that it cannot in fact represent Joan’s actual point of view. This stylized exaggeration of perspective once again draws attention to the work the camera is performing, pushing the film away from naturalism and driving it further toward abstraction. When the judges persist in trying to force an admission of guilt from Joan by asserting that her “visions are from the Devil,” and the pressure on Joan mounts, the film gives us another extreme angled shot, in which the camera is aimed upward at her face and kept very close to her body. The position of the camera, allied to the tight framing of the torso, traps Joan within the shot and, by presenting her face and body in such an awkward, almost distorted fashion, further dramatizes the extraordinary tension of this key moment. When Joan refuses to submit and to alter her testimony she is taken to the torture chamber to be shown the instruments that will be used to wrench

a recantation from her. Crucially, the lead-up to the torture chamber scene already hints at the threat to come by means of carefully composed frames that structure interior decor in such a way that it seems actively to menace Joan.⁴⁰ As the priests file out of her cell, just after they have threatened to torture her, they are shot from the chest up, while the vast space above them is given over to high walls, diagonal lines, and an elevated arch. When they enter the torture chamber they are filmed in extreme close-up so that their bodies fill the foreground of the frame with dark blocks of shadow that have a quasi-abstract quality. Joan, in contrast, is seen walking through what looks like a tiny door in the background of the frame; she thus appears to be dwarfed not only by the giant, almost inhuman figures in front of her but also by the door that encases her (see Figure 7.4). The construction of space in these scenes diminishes Joan visually, and once her smallness and vulnerability have been established, the film ramps up the tension by crosscutting at increasing speed between Joan, her manacled feet, various medieval instruments of torture, and a huge spinning wheel that eventually induces her to faint. The close-ups of the torture instruments serve a completely different function from that of the close-ups of her face: these particular objects (like the doors, walls, and prison bars of the *mise en scène*) create an expressionist image of a hostile world that is forever at odds with her beatific visions.⁴¹

By means of these carefully choreographed scenes Dreyer shows how political and religious power is underpinned by the threat of force. But he is also suggesting that the standoff between Joan and her judges is the product of a conflict between irreconcilable discourses. Joan's mystical visions and the claims she makes in their name cannot be accepted by a clergy that serves the political interests of an English-led faction in a struggle for French territory. The film emphasizes the incommensurability



Figure 7.4 Joan diminished in background, Carl Theodore Dreyer, *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928)

between Joan’s account of her spiritual experience and the politically motivated discourse of heresy by dramatizing it in *visual* terms as well as showing it to be a battle between two different kinds of language, one appealing to inner truth and a direct encounter with God, the other appealing to institutional authority.⁴² The film is full of shots of the prosecutors observing Joan (often from secret hiding places), an obvious way of foregrounding the issue of perspective (angle of vision) and of indicating that Joan is always the object of a scrutiny that constructs her in a certain way.

One scene in particular makes this point clear. Three grinning guards torment Joan by mocking her truth claims. They turn her into a parody of a Christ-like figure by placing a straw crown on her head, and then one of them peers through his hand, “as if to see her better,” the screenplay tells us, when in fact he is squinting at her and viewing her in an obviously distorting and satiric manner.⁴³ This skewed perspective results in a mocking judgment (“She looks just like a daughter of God, eh?”), which reinforces the viewer’s sense that Joan is being “named” in ways that conform to pre-existing assumptions about her heresy and that ensure her own account of herself will not be acknowledged.⁴⁴ What is on display here is the creation of a “knowledge” that serves the interests of power. Ideology functions here to police boundaries, and to punish transgression. As one of the judges pronounces at the moment of execution, “Like a rotten member we cut you off from the body of the Church.” The act of institutionally sanctioned killing is a refusal of acknowledgment, and it is countered by a cry from the watching crowd (“You have burnt a saint!”) and by the riot that immediately follows Joan’s immolation.

Stanley Cavell and Emmanuel Levinas have written about the relationship between acknowledgment and knowledge in ways that are pertinent to the present discussion. For Cavell, to acknowledge someone is to go beyond mere knowledge because acknowledgment demands action (a response of some kind). In particular, human suffering “makes a *claim* upon” the observer of it, and this means that the refusal to recognize suffering constitutes a failure to *know* it: “A ‘failure to acknowledge’ is the presence of something, a confusion, an indifference, a callousness, an exhaustion, a coldness.”⁴⁵ I would add that in *The Passion of Joan of Arc* the coldness or callousness to which Cavell refers is shown to be driven by political and religious imperatives: Joan’s prosecutors behave as they do because they are resisting what they perceive as a challenge to their authority.⁴⁶ In Cavellian terms, they have prejudged Joan and thus have failed a basic test of empathy. They have shown themselves to be incapable of entering into, of giving credence to, of taking seriously her claims precisely because they can see what she says only as a threat to their interests. Levinas provides a helpful supplement to Cavell’s argument through his detailed exploration of the meaning of the face. For Levinas, acknowledgment is inseparable from the challenge the human visage can offer to power. The face, he writes, is that which “resists possession, resists my powers”; it is a call to acknowledgment, which should banish once and for all the instrumental attitude—the treatment of the other as an object, a thing to be used.⁴⁷ For Levinas, the face should undo the will to power at its root, but he understands that if this ethical challenge is evaded (because those who hold power refuse to give it up),

then the most likely result will be a desire to destroy the other: “To kill is not to dominate but to annihilate; it is to renounce comprehension absolutely. Murder exercises a power over what escapes power.”⁴⁸

Cavell’s and Levinas’s reflections on knowledge, acknowledgment, and power go to the heart of Dreyer’s concerns in *Joan*. For his film is finely attuned to the ways in which power asserts itself when it is put under pressure. The multiple close-ups of Joan’s face confront the judges with her suffering and constitute a mute appeal for understanding and sympathy, but the latter can interpret (construct) her behavior only as a bid for power that seeks to escape power. In order to show what is at stake here, Dreyer contrasts the intransigence of Joan’s harshest judges with the struggles of conscience that the trial’s less ideologically driven clerics experience. Houpeville (Jean d’Yd), for instance, risks his life by questioning the legal basis of the process and by declaring Joan a saint (a pronouncement that the rioting crowd endorses at the end of the film), but he is dismissed for daring to speak out; Massieu (Antonin Artaud) is shown to be sympathetic to Joan throughout the trial, even if (unlike Houpeville) he submits to the lead prosecutor’s authority. With the shadowy Warwick (Camille Bardou) pulling the strings on behalf of the English in the background, the film shows how political, military, and religious interests work in concert to make institutional acknowledgment an impossibility in this particular historical situation.

At the end of the film everything descends into chaos. The claustrophobia of the trial, which takes place entirely indoors, gives way to the confusion outside the castle walls that arises after Joan has been burned. There is a transition here not only from a controlled institutional space to a public and much less predictable one but also from a slow lingering rhythm to a fast-paced, aggressive crosscutting style. Dreyer’s camera is at its busiest here: soldiers are shot from above, at a strange perpendicular angle that captures their bobbing helmets in an abstract pattern of movement; the enraged crowd is frequently shot from below, so that they are shown leaping right over the camera; the soldiers lash into the crowd in a frenzy of violence that is evoked by means of rapid cuts. This is now a drama of speeded-up movement, of cinematic simultaneism, of clashing perspectives, and of events that are happening so fast that they can scarcely be taken in by the watching eye. The closing scenes are all the more powerful for the contrast they provide with the slower rhythm of the rest of the film and the stillness that has been associated with Joan throughout it. The compressed tension of the first part of the film isolates the battle between Joan and her judges, but now, released into a less easily controllable social and political arena, that tension explodes. The tight angles, geometric compositions, and confined frames of the interior scene burst asunder, and the riot with which the film ends not only reminds us once more of its disjunctive style but also raises the question (again) of how we are to understand Joan’s mystical experiences.

Antonin Artaud (who played Massieu in the film) once made a remark that touches on Dreyer’s modus operandi in *The Passion of Joan of Arc*. He observed, “What is clear is what is immediately accessible, but what is immediately accessible is the mere skin of life.”⁴⁹ Dreyer, in turn, maintained that cinema should “represent the *inner* and not

the *outer life*” and should focus not on “the things in reality” but “the spirit in and behind the things.”⁵⁰ These claims belong to a wider debate in the early decades of the twentieth century not only about cinema’s capacity to be a visionary and revelatory medium but also about art’s ability to access the spiritual and thereby escape naturalism.

In *The Passion of Joan of Arc* Dreyer manifests a desire to move beyond the material realm and the realist canons over which it presides. In doing so he developed a cinematic style that was distinctively his own and that some commentators have regarded as almost *sui generis*, creating a film that resembles no other and that led to no significant developments along similar lines.⁵¹ Whereas other filmmakers and critics sought to re-enchant the everyday reality of modern technological and urban life, Dreyer forged a hybrid style that combines naturalism and abstraction. The close-up lies at the heart of this hybrid style because it, too, functions in a doubled way, further reinforcing the film’s preoccupation with the two dimensions of Joan’s experience: her suffering as an embodied creature and her faith in a spiritual dimension beyond the material world. How viewers respond to a film that has both vexed and enthralled those who encounter it will depend in large measure on their prior convictions and commitments, but anyone wishing to engage with it might bear in mind T. S. Eliot’s remarks about the challenge of modernist poetry: “remember that what [the poet] may have been trying to do, was to put something into words which could not be said in any other way, and therefore in a language which may be worth the trouble of learning.”⁵²

Notes

1. Rudolf Arnheim, “Accusations against a Good Film” (1928), in *Film Essays and Criticism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 140; Paul Rotha, *The Film Till Now: A Survey of World Cinema* (Feltham, UK: Hamlyn, 1967), 301–7; Tom Milne, *The Cinema of Carl Dreyer* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1971), 96, 100.
2. Rotha, *The Film Till Now*, 306.
3. Dreyer comments usefully on the difficulties of understanding how style works: “Style is not something that can be separated from the finished work of art. It saturates and penetrates it, and yet is invisible and undemonstrable.” Carl Dreyer, “A Little on Film Style” (1943), in *Dreyer in Double Reflection: Carl Dreyer’s Writings on Film*, Donald Skoller, ed. (New York: Da Capo, 1991), 128.
4. So much so, indeed, that some critics believe Dreyer’s depiction of the interrogating clerics verges on caricature. Ole Storm, for example, suggests that “the portrayal of the priesthood has a satirical edge worthy almost of Daumier.” Carl Theodor Dreyer, *Four Screenplays*, Oliver Stallybrass, trans. (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1970), 21.
5. I’m grateful to Donald Greig for pointing out to me in private correspondence that the average shot length of *Joan* is around three-and-a-half seconds. Greig usefully contrasts *Gertrud* (1964), which has fewer than a hundred shots, with *Joan*’s approximate fifteen hundred shots to underscore his observation that although at times *Joan* moves slowly, the overall pace of the film is hardly languorous.

6. David Bordwell, *The Films of Carl-Theodor Dreyer* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981).
7. For a discussion of the cinematic transformation of reality through mise en scène in early film, see Richard Abel, “The Contribution of the French Literary Avant-Garde to Film Theory and Criticism (1907–1924),” *Cinema Journal* 14, no. 3 (Spring 1975), 18–40; 29.
8. See Bordwell, *Dreyer*; and Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (Berkeley: Da Capo Press, 1988).
9. For a formalist analysis of *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, to which all critics of the film remain indebted, see Bordwell, *Dreyer*, though I am unconvinced by his attempt to fold the film’s disjointedness into a wider unity. For cautionary remarks on this latter point, see Sean Desilets, “The Rhetoric of Passion,” *Camera Obscura* 53, 18, no. 2 (2003), 57–91.
10. For more on this theme, see Dreyer’s films *Day of Wrath* (1943) and *Ordet* (1954).
11. For the influence of D. W. Griffith (*Intolerance* [1916], especially) on Dreyer, see Jean Drum and Dale D. Drum, *My Only Great Passion: The Life and Films of Carl Th. Dreyer* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2000). For Eisenstein on Griffith and the close-up, see Sergei Eisenstein, “Dickens, Griffith, and the Film Today,” (1944) in *Film Form*, Jay Leyda, ed. and trans. (London: Dennis Dobson, 1963), 195–255.
12. For more on these issues, see Abel, “Contribution of the French Literary Avant-Garde,” 29; and Eugene C. McCreary, “Louis Delluc, Film Theorist, Critic, and Prophet,” *Cinema Journal* 16, no. 1 (Autumn 1976), 14–35.
13. For a seminal account of modernist dehumanization, see José Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Essays on Art, Culture, and Literature* (1925), Helene Weyl, trans. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972).
14. Louis Aragon, “On Décor” (1918), in *The Shadow and Its Shadow: Surrealist Writings on the Cinema*, Paul Hammond, ed. (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1991), 28–31; 29.
15. Fernand Léger, “Ballet Mécanique” (c. 1924), in *Functions of Painting*, by Fernand Léger; Alexandra Anderson, trans.; Edward F. Fry, ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973), 48–51; 50.
16. Léger, *Functions*, 50.
17. Fernand Léger, “A Critical Essay on the Plastic Quality of Abel Gance’s Film *The Wheel*” (1922), in Léger, *Functions*, 20–23; 20. There is a wider context here, which includes painting and writing of the Italian futurists and also Blaise Cendrars’s “manifesto” *L’ABC du cinema* (1926), which celebrated the “ivresse” of cinema and rejected an aesthetic of “immobility.” See Blaise Cendrars, *Hollywood, Volume 3: La Mecque du cinéma*, “L’ABC du cinema,” “Une nuit dans la forêt” (Paris: Éditions Denoël, 2001), 141 and 145. For more on Léger, see Malcolm Turvey, “The Avant-Garde and the ‘New Spirit’: The Case of *Ballet mécanique*,” *October* 102 (Fall 2002), 35–58.
18. For more on this point, see Eric Robertson, “The Birth of Colour: Optical Technology, Visual Music and the Parisian Avant-Garde,” *Nottingham French Studies* 50, no. 3 (Autumn 2014), 12–27.
19. Carl Theodor Dreyer, “Imagination and Color” (1955), in Skoller, *Dreyer in Double Reflection*: 174–86; 186.
20. Fast crosscutting in the film is reserved for two sequences: the scene in which Joan is threatened with torture, and the riot that takes place after Joan’s death.
21. For more on the implications of the “sculptural and the static” as key features of Dreyer’s style, see Dreyer, “A Little on Film Style,” 126.

22. Dreyer, “Film Style,” 145.
23. Dreyer, “Film Style,” 178–79.
24. Dreyer, “Film Style,” 179.
25. See Wassily Kandinsky, “On the Spiritual in Art” (1911), in *Complete Writings on Art*, Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo, eds. (New York: Da Capo, 1994), 114–219; Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style* (1908), Michael Bullock, trans. (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1997); and W. B. Yeats, “The Theatre” (1899), in *Essays and Introductions*, by W. B. Yeats (London: Macmillan, 1961), 165–72. Schrader discusses Worringer’s relevance to Dreyer’s work in *Transcendental Style* (138–41).
26. Dreyer, “Film Style,” 129. For discussions of these aspects of Dreyer’s filmmaking, see Kirk Bond, “The World of Carl Dreyer,” *Film Quarterly* 19, no. 1 (Autumn 1965), 26–38; and Vladimir Petrić, “Dreyer’s Concept of Abstraction,” *Sight and Sound* 44, no. 2 (Spring 1975), 108–12.
27. See Béla Balázs, *Theory of the Film: Character and Growth of a New Art* (1952), Edith Bone, trans. (New York: Dover Publications, 1970), 63 and 74; and Boerge Trolle, “The World of Carl Dreyer,” *Sight and Sound* 25, no. 3 (Winter 1955), 122–27; 124.
28. Quoted in Jean Drum and Dale D. Drum, “Greatness and Tragedy,” booklet accompanying *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (Masters of Cinema DVD: Gaumont, 2012), 5–29; 20.
29. Drum and Drum, “Greatness and Tragedy,” 20.
30. See Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, John Willett, ed. and trans. (London: Methuen, 1964); and Bertolt Brecht, *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, John Willett, trans. (London: Methuen, 1985).
31. Viktor Shklovsky, “Art as Technique” (1917), in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, eds. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 18.
32. Dreyer, *Four Screenplays*, 28, 32, 35, and 42.
33. See, for example, H. D. (Hilda Doolittle), “Joan of Arc” (1928), in *Close Up 1927–1933: Cinema and Modernism*, James Donald, Anne Friedberg and Laura Marcus, eds. (London: Cassell, 1998), 130–33; Robert Bresson, “Propos de Robert Bresson,” *Cahiers du cinéma* 13 (October 1957), 4; and Casiana Ionita, “The Catholic Spectator: Cinema and the Church in France in the 1920s,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 32, no. 4 (December 2012), 501–20.
34. See Balázs, *Theory of the Film*, 63 and 74; and Trolle, “The World of Carl Dreyer,” 124. For a critique of naive claims about the film’s spirituality, see Ros Murray, “‘The Epidermis of Reality’: Artaud, the Material Body and Dreyer’s *The Passion of Joan of Arc*,” *Film-Philosophy* 17, no. 1 (2013), 445–61; 454.
35. Dreyer, *Four Screenplays*, 35.
36. See Josh Appignanesi and Devorah Baum, “Ex-Memoria: Filming the Face; Memorialisation, Dementia and the Ethics of Representation,” *Third Text* 20, no. 1 (January 2006), 85–97; 92.
37. Dreyer, *Four Screenplays*, 29–30.
38. These aspects of the trial have been discussed widely. See Marina Warner, *Joan of Arc: The Image of Female Heroism* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1987); Bonnie Wheeler and Charles T. Wood, eds., *Fresh Verdicts on Joan of Arc* (New York and London: Garland, 1996); Craig Taylor, ed., *Joan of Arc: La Pucelle* (Manchester, UK, and New York: Manchester University Press, 2006); Helen Castor, *Joan of Arc: A History* (London: Faber and Faber, 2014).

39. Castor, *Joan of Arc*, 91 and 92. See also Susan Schibanoff, “‘True Lies’: Transvestism and Idolatry in the Trial of Joan of Arc,” in Wheeler and Wood, *Fresh Verdicts on Joan of Arc*, 31–60, and Taylor, *Joan of Arc*, 14.
40. For more on this point, see Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, 123.
41. After Joan is accused of blasphemy, for instance, she is described as having “the expression of one who is far removed from this world.” Dreyer, *Four Screenplays*, 35. See also Carl Theodor Dreyer, “Ebbe Neergaard” (1960), in Skoller, *Dreyer in Double Reflection*, 200–205; 201. 23.
42. The secondary literature on heresy is vast. For an overview, see Edward Peters, ed., *Heresy and Authority in Medieval Europe: Documents in Translation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1980).
43. Dreyer, *Four Screenplays*, 46.
44. The screenplay constantly emphasizes Joan’s failure to understand questions and to discern their wider implications. See Dreyer, *Four Screenplays*, 32, 33, 61, 62, and 64.
45. Stanley Cavell, “Knowing and Acknowledging,” in *The Cavell Reader*, by Stanley Cavell; Stephen Mulhall, ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 46–71, 69.
46. Dreyer claimed that those who condemned Joan did so “not because they were evil and cruel” but because they were “caught up in the religious conceptions of that time.” Carl Theodor Dreyer, “My Only Great Passion” (1950), in Skoller, *Dreyer in Double Reflection*: 143–46; 145. The film, in my view, seems to depict them in a harsher light than this comment suggests.
47. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Alphonso Lingis, trans. (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 197.
48. Levinas, *Totality*, 198.
49. Antonin Artaud, “Witchcraft and the Cinema” (1930), in Hammond, *The Shadow and Its Shadow*, 63–64; 64.
50. Carl Theodor Dreyer, “Imagination and Color,” in Skoller, *Dreyer in Double Reflection*, 174–86; 179 and 184.
51. See Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (1960) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 79–80.
52. T. S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* (1957) (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 102.

Intervals of Transition

Dziga Vertov's *The Man with a Movie Camera*

Tyrus Miller

“One Hundred Percent Film”

Dziga Vertov (born David Abelevich Kaufman) was a pioneer of experimental documentary in the Soviet Union. Over the course of his career, he developed a dazzling range of cinematic techniques not simply to “catch life unaware,” as one of his characteristic slogans had it, but also to penetrate, analyze, and organize the sensible world utilizing the full technological and communicative possibilities of cinema. Vertov was a daring innovator in two distinct if occasionally entangled tendencies in cinema, each of which subsequently has its own divergent legacies, the documentary and the avant-garde film. As Philip Rosen points out,

Vertov could be aligned with the historical avant-gardes and the “experimental” media traditions; his contemporary, Kazimir Malevich, of all people, already held Vertov’s work up as the best kind of thing film could do in comparison to Cubism, Futurism, and (implicitly) his own Suprematist painting. On the other hand, Vertov was fully involved in the emergence of the concept of documentary and struggles over the term.¹

Critics have consistently grappled with understanding how to reconcile these two intertwined tendencies in Vertov’s work. This problem was a key controversy already for Vertov’s contemporaries, and the filmmaker often faced incomprehension if not outright hostility for his stubbornly original ways of thinking about how to make a film that was both documentary and avant-garde.

Although within the spectrum of Soviet artistic debates Vertov strongly differentiated his position from those of his contemporaries, in a key respect his work exemplified a general issue for the revolutionary modernists of the early Soviet Union. Animated by the idea of creating a revolutionary art, they faced the difficulty of reconciling in a new art two distinct senses of “revolution”: a metaphorical application of the term, as they sought to innovate new forms and techniques; new ways of organizing their material, in analogy to the radical social change compelled by the events of 1917; and a literal application of the term, as they sought to serve, participate in,

and push forward the revolutionary creation of a socialist society and culture. The history of Soviet modernism can be thought of, accordingly, as so many attempts to construct a bridge between these two senses of revolution, a high-tension bridge made up of innovative artistic forms. Vertov, in this respect, challenged himself to develop artistic procedures that would coherently bind together the seeming antipodes of revolutionary social life and innovative modern art. Incorporating in one continuous artistic process the passage from the almost-raw social reality captured in documentary footage by the “Kino-Eye,” to the modernist artifice of compositional montage, to the conditioning of still-callow Soviet hearts and minds through cinema viewing, Vertov sought to awaken the revolutionary social future that was, in his view, latent within his newsreel archive of the Soviet present.

Kaufman’s adopted pseudonym “Dziga Vertov” means “spinning top,” or possibly “spinning Gypsy,” encompassing connotations from the cameraman’s turning of the film camera’s crank, to restless nomadism from place to place, to virtuoso skill in performance, to the globe’s “revolution” toward the new day. He began his filmmaking career as a newsreel director during the Russian Civil War that followed the Bolshevik seizure of power of October 1917. Although he would constantly draw upon the experience of his early *Kinonedelia* (film week, a Soviet news weekly) and *Kinopravda* (film truth) newsreel productions, and in many cases, even reutilize the archived newsreel footage itself, Vertov soon far outstripped his journalistic point of departure. He would go on to produce several longer, more complexly orchestrated documentary feature films such as *Kino-Eye* (1924), *Forward, Soviet* (1926), *One Sixth of the World* (1926), *The Eleventh Year* (1928), *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), *Enthusiasm* (1931), *Three Songs of Lenin* (1934), and *Lullaby* (1936).²

Like other modernist artists innovating in media from literature to painting and sculpture to music and theater, Vertov also sought a new language of cinema that would expand to unprecedented degrees the intrinsic technical, communicative, and social capacities of the medium. His 1929 masterpiece, *The Man with a Movie Camera*, brings these aspirations to bear on film with a maximum of intensity.³ In a typical modernist gesture, Vertov programmatically asserted that cinema should develop according to its own material laws and thus, in *The Man with a Movie Camera*, he dispensed with conventional intertitles, too compromised for him by dramatic and literary values, in favor of what he called “100 percent film language.”⁴ In the manifesto text that opens the film, Vertov explicitly states, “This experimental work is directed at the creation of a totally international absolute language of cinema founded on its total separation from the language of theatre and literature.”⁵ Although he had earlier tried new grammars to minimize intertitles, such as starting an intertitle sentence with words and completing it with images, in *The Man with a Movie Camera* he dispensed altogether with the props of verbal language—with the important exception of words on advertisements, street signs, posters, and printed texts in the spaces he was filming—letting images and movements carry the full burden of cinematic communication. Moreover, he also intended his film as a manifesto of cinema’s critical place within Soviet life in the 1920s. Vertov thus explicitly notes the dual

discourse—artistic and critical-theoretical—in this statement about the film: “*The Man with a Movie Camera* represents not only a practical result; it is, as well, a theoretical manifestation on the screen.”⁶ Accordingly, too, he incorporated into *The Man with a Movie Camera* a running evaluative commentary on contemporary cinema, parodying and criticizing negative instances of it, such as the melodramatic fiction films that appear repeatedly on posters and cinema marquees throughout the film, and trumpeting the heroic production process of his own activist “non-acted” documentary film mode.

Even more flamboyantly, Vertov highlights the process of film production itself, from the collection of raw material from the streets, workplaces, and domestic settings of Soviet life through the analysis, sorting, and recombination of that material at the editor’s table. His film is replete with daredevilish images of his brother and cinematographer Mikhail Kaufman at work (and occasionally a second cameraman as well, identified by Graham Roberts as Peter Zotov⁷) in Buster Keaton-like poses on moving cars, trains, a fire engine, and a racing motorcycle, as well as amid busy street traffic, oncoming trams, coal miners, and molten steel flying through the air in a factory (see Figure 8.1). Analogously, highlighting another part of the film production process, we see the eyes of Vertov himself and his main editor



Figure 8.1 Mikhail Kaufman filming Dziga Vertov, *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929)

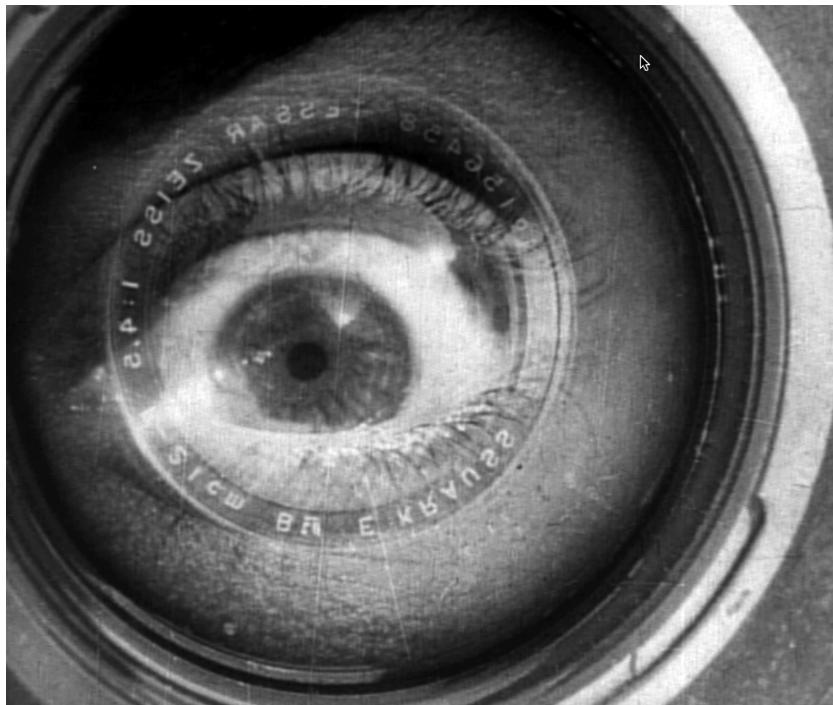


Figure 8.2 Cameraman's Eye, Dziga Vertov, *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929)

(and Vertov's wife) Elizaveta Svilova as a recurrent, signature image in the film (see Figure 8.2). Several times, too, Svilova appears among labeled strips of film—many recognizable as footage already seen in the film—as she selects, spools, cuts, and splices film stock in the labor of editing (see Figure 8.3). Implicitly, there is an advertising or propaganda dimension of the film as well: an attempt to persuade the viewer to favor this sort of film product, to attend the screenings of this film and others like it, or even to take action to join the “Kino-Eye” movement as filmed subjects, critical supporters, or producers of “non-played” documentary films. With his film, Vertov poses a bold claim that “the man with the movie camera” and “the woman with the editor’s scissors” are exemplars of a new, socialist type of technical worker. They are, he implies, as much the vanguard engineers of the new Soviet film production as the class-conscious miners, steelworkers, sailors, building workers, textile spinners, and telephone operators are proletarian vanguards in their own particular domain of industry.

The film that resulted from these multiple and overlapping agendas was complex, controversial, and multilayered in its construction, and critics have only partially unpacked its meanings and reached some degree of consensus about its salient features. John MacKay offers this useful summary of features now recognized as definitive of Vertov's film:



Figure 8.3 Elizaveta Svilova editing, Dziga Vertov, *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929)

Its relentlessly self-reflexive probing into film production, exhibition, and reception; its function as a (largely) wordless manifesto for Vertov's experimental, militantly non-fictional film practice; the way it resolves itself into thematic blocks (on topics like "the workday begins," "cycles of life," "industry," "leisure," and so on) while sustaining several narrative strands (the unfolding of the workday; the time of the film's projection; the time of the film's production); its distinctive focus on women as central protagonists in the construction of socialist society; the extraordinary complexity of its montage.⁸

Critics also generally agree in seeing *The Man with a Movie Camera* as composed of episodic segments, with thematically related images, spaces, and events forming distinctly patterned clusters. They have, however, proposed a number of quite different ways of segmenting the film. Stephen Crofts and Olivia Rose, for example, divide the film into seven sections, which encompass the trajectory of a single day from rising to rest, framed by the screening of a film in a cinema:

1. A Credo (Vertov's text at the opening)
2. Induction: The Audience for the Film

3. Section One: Waking. This comprises the whole series beginning and ending with the Waking Woman.
4. Section Two: The Day and Work Begin.
5. Section Three: The Day's Work.
6. Section Four: Work Stops, Leisure Begins.
7. Coda: The Audience for the Film.⁹

In contrast, Roberts divides the film into sixteen sections, a segmentation that allows him to identify significant patterns of recurring themes at definite time intervals in the film.¹⁰ These patterns of recurrence, he argues, lend Vertov's film an underlying structural integrity despite its diversity of images and events. Vlada Petrić goes even further, breaking Vertov's film down into fifty-five analytic units that he subjects to extremely close reading over the course of his book-length study.¹¹

All these segmentations are, of course, only frameworks for retrospective analysis and may not correspond to Vertov's actual compositional process, which can be only partially reconstructed from archival evidence (still awaiting further research) and inferred from interpretative engagement with the film itself. Each of these proposed segmentations does, however, reveal different interconnections, patterns, and associative links between the images of Vertov's film, when examined at various scales and levels of granularity. Films with the modernistic complexity of material and montage like *The Man with a Movie Camera*, we might observe, confound conventional distinctions between meanings intended by the author and those that may have been unintended but implicit in the composition, and that may be elicited only upon later critical analysis. Vertov, in following his general procedures and supervising the film's overall construction, may very well have opened the final product up to a variety of happy accidents that we now, in watching *The Man with a Movie Camera*, see as contributing to the artistic value of his film. Vertov embraced the rich chaos of potential meanings in film material drawn from "life caught unaware"; and while he saw his compositional activity as shaping and controlling that chaos, he left substantial latitude for an open-ended generation of meanings, respondent to different situations and different audiences. In this regard, his film can be seen as related to the multivocal works of literature that his contemporary Mikhail Bakhtin called "heteroglossic": for example, the complex novels of Fyodor Dostoyevsky¹²; the modernist montage-novels such as Andrei Bely's *Petersburg* (1913), James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), John Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), and Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929); or even the later avant-garde works that Umberto Eco would call "open works,"¹³ which leave room for conscious elaboration and completion during specific acts of viewing, hearing, or reading. In any case, however, for first-time viewers, Crofts and Rose's seven-part segmentation has the virtue of providing an overarching, schematic structure that makes intuitive sense of an otherwise baffling rush of images, unassisted by an evident storyline or explanatory intertitles. As I will discuss in my conclusion, this large-scale "diurnal" structure, which Crofts and Rose sketch out, relates to a number of themes and motifs in *The*

Man with a Movie Camera and is essential to Vertov's design of the film. Specifically, I call attention to Vertov's thematic counterpoint between the cycle of the day, a "revolution" of the planet that naturally returns to its starting point, and the historical "world revolution" that the Bolsheviks have wrought, for which the turning of industry's wheels and pulleys, the dynamic circulation of socialist masses, and the cranking of Vertov's camera together symbolize the opening of history's closed circle onto an unprecedented future.

Vertov, Politics, and Avant-Garde

Already Vertov's *Kinopravda* series of newsreels, begun in 1922, asserted a more daring social and compositional agenda than the standard newsreels of the time, with their typically limited range of portrayed events such as funerals and ceremonial speeches and their conventional techniques in which portrait shots, static recording of processions, and lengthy explanatory texts predominated. In contrast, Vertov considerably widened the domain of depicted subject matter to include a spectrum of events and social facts, utilizing montage to establish surprising relations between the individual segments and themes, and boldly trusting images over text and intertitles for communicating his intended message. Over the course of a decade of film work leading up to his production of *The Man with a Movie Camera* in 1929, Vertov developed an extensive repertoire of experimental techniques to supplement his hunt for raw material among the streets, factories, and fields of the Soviet Union: stop-motion animation, unusual camera speeds, innovative montage editing, the use of cameras mounted on moving cars or other vehicles, the use of cranes and other means of suspending the camera, live-sound recording, and recorded sound montage.

Both in the ways that he collected his pre-edited footage and in his editing methods, Vertov emphasized cinema as an active analyst and organizer of reality, rather than—as was often attributed to him by hostile critics and rival filmmakers—a mere passive recorder of it. Kino-Eye, for example, represented for him “the possibility of making the invisible visible, the unclear clear, the hidden manifest, the disguised overt, the acted non-acted, making falsehood into truth.”¹⁴ In a notorious and disquieting metaphor, Vertov would even go so far as to suggest an analogy between the camera's work and activity of the feared Soviet internal police: “The work of the movie camera is reminiscent of the work of the agents of the GPU [State Political Directorate, the security police established in 1922] who do not know what lies ahead, but have a definite assignment to separate out and bring to light a particular issue, a particular affair.”¹⁵ Yet this sense of cinema as an active force of disclosure, organization, and communication, not simply of registration, allowed Vertov to assert that it offered workers worldwide “the opportunity to see and hear the whole world in an organized form, to see, hear, and understand one another.”¹⁶ Hence, too, Vertov called for “the genuine cinematification of the worker-peasant USSR,”¹⁷ which to him meant the cinematic consummation of such key socialist projects as Vladimir Lenin's early

call for an all-Russian newspaper (*What Is to Be Done*, 1902), as well as the Bolshevik leader's commitment in the early years of the USSR to electrification, technical rationalization of industry, and useful education for the masses.

In several programmatic essays, Vertov suggested that he saw editing and montage as a continuum running from the selection of material, through the various stages of organization during and after filming, to the stages of montage typically thought of as editing. Editing, he noted in a 1926 article, should be regarded as "the organization of the visible world," in which the following continuous stages can be distinguished:

1. *Editing during observation*—orienting the unaided eye at any place, any time.
2. *Editing after observation*—mentally organizing what has been seen, according to characteristic features.
3. *Editing during filming*—orienting the aided eye of the movie camera in the place inspected in step 1.
4. *Editing after filming*—roughly organizing the footage according to characteristic features. Looking for montage fragments that are lacking.
5. *Gauging by sight (hunting for montage fragments)*—instantaneous orienting in any visual environment so as to capture the essential link shots ...
6. *The final editing*—revealing minor, concealed themes together with the major ones. Reorganizing all the footage into the best sequence. Bringing out the core of the film-object. Coordinating similar elements, and finally, numerically calculating the montage groupings.¹⁸

Each of these represented a significant stage of editing for Vertov, who thus thoroughly refuted the accusation that he was only passively capturing reality on film without imposing an artistic, ideological, or conceptual design on his raw material. On the contrary, he argues, filmed material was subject to editorial selection, analysis, judgment, and organization *at each stage of the production process*, thus contributing to, in a phrase he used in several essays, "the communist decoding of the world."¹⁹

Even more important than his arguments against conventional newsreel reportage, however, were Vertov's ongoing, vehement polemics against cinema based on theatrical or literary fiction, rather than being drawn from the factuality of Soviet life, with its industrial and agricultural developments, its introduction of machine technologies, its persisting social contradictions and conflicts, and its ethnic and national diversity. When attacking the fiction film, Vertov had in mind both film imports from other countries, especially the United States, which had begun to penetrate the Soviet market after the Civil War ended around 1921, and the nascent Russian film industry, which both in the pre-revolutionary period and during the 1920s produced numerous generic fiction films such as romantic comedies, adventure stories, and psychological dramas. Suggesting the foreign and non-Soviet provenance of the latter, Vertov refers broadly, for example, to "the psychological Russo-German film-drama."²⁰ In one particularly intemperate pronouncement in the early 1920s, Vertov calls for the death of

cinematography to allow the emergence of the authentic cinema he believed himself to represent:

WE proclaim the old films, based on the romance, theatrical films and the like, to be leprosy.

- Keep away from them!
- Keep your eyes off them!
- They're mortally dangerous!
- Contagious!

WE affirm the future of cinema art by denying its present.

“Cinematography” must die so that the art of cinema may live. WE *call for its death to be hastened.* (italics in the original)²¹

Vertov also pointed out that special techniques such as slow motion, freeze-frame, and stop-motion animation were helpful in shattering the dramatic illusion underlying the “theatrical” film, and hence could help define a cinematically specific language of film separate from literature or drama: “We have done animation filming for a long time, since the first issues of *Kinopravda*, and consider it an important weapon in the struggle against artistic cinema.”²²

Vertov understood his cinematic work as having a revolutionary political aim. He sought to place this important new medium in the service of the new Soviet society inaugurated with Lenin’s 1917 revolution, helping to uproot and destroy reactionary legacies of the past, and supporting the transition to a fully realized socialism. Like his peers in the radical politicized avant-gardes of early Soviet Russia, Vertov saw his work as transcending “art,” at least as it had conventionally been understood in the past. Thus, in a 1924 statement “On *Kinopravda*,” Vertov offered a destructive prospect to artists seeking refuge in the cinema to continue making “art” after the political, social, and technological revolution that the new Soviet order had brought about:

The international conflagration of “art” is at hand. Sensing destruction, workers in theater, artists, writers, choreographers, and canaries like them are fleeing in panic. Looking for shelter, they’re running to cinema. The film studio is the last stronghold of art.

[...]

We will explode art’s tower of Babel.²³

Vertov’s violent rejection of traditional art in favor of a mobilized, experimental, and militant practice of cultural production that might not even be describable any longer as “art” was anticipated by the movements of the avant-gardes that emerged in force in Europe, including Russia, after 1910. Already in 1909, the Italian futurists had exhorted the end of decadent art and literature in their slogan “let’s murder the moonlight!”; in 1912, the Russian futurists delivered their manifesto as “A Slap in the Face of Public Taste,” arguing that Alexander Pushkin, Fyodor Dostoyevsky,

Leo Tolstoy “etc., etc.” should be dumped over the side of “the ship of Modernity”; and looking to the artists of revolutionary Russia, the Berlin Dadaists declared, “Art is dead! Long live the machine art of Tatlin!”²⁴ Vertov’s attack on traditional art, however, represents more than just a résumé of earlier avant-garde anti-art attitudes. It also anticipated—ironically, given Vertov’s intricate analytic and compositional work—the anti-intellectual tendencies of Josef Stalin’s cultural revolution in the late 1920s and early 1930s, during which, against the pretensions of bourgeois literati and artists, the USSR affirmed its “strong, young, materialist, earthbound, proletarian culture, proud of its brutal simplicity and its crude and violent new vision of the world.”²⁵

The turbulent early years of revolution and civil war in the Soviet Union bred a particularly truculent avant-gardism among its most radical artists, who nourished ever-heightened artistic provocations with attitudes of political militancy and dreams of utopian messianism. Famously, in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Peter Bürger suggests that the classical avant-garde was defined by its attempt to break with the institution of autonomous art, and by its efforts, which appropriated cultural means typical of the political sphere, to reconcile art and life in a new unity.²⁶ While Bürger’s key examples are the western European avant-gardes of Dadaism and surrealism, the radicalized Russian avant-gardes of the early Soviet period represented an especially exacerbated version of this avant-garde aspiration to abolish “art” in favor of non-autonomous social functions such as didactics, political agitation, propagandistic persuasion, and design of industrial objects. Vertov’s work and theoretical pronouncements, militating against “artistic” cinema, should be seen in this light as well.

Another typically avant-gardist characteristic, evident for instance in futurism and Dadaism, was the interaction of programmatic leaders such as F. T. Marinetti or Tristan Tzara with a larger group context of artistic work and a speculative projection of group activity into a would-be social “movement” (or, alternatively, eventual affiliation of the avant-garde group’s activity with existing communist, fascist, or other organized political parties and movements). Analogously, the film author we know as “Dziga Vertov,” while certainly an important creative individual, might be better understood to designate a creative *collective*. As the numerous images of filmmaking in *The Man with a Movie Camera* acknowledge, Vertov’s work is unthinkable without the contributions of his group of close collaborators, including the cameraman Kaufman and editor Svilova, who were early on designated “The Council of Three” and later the “Kinoki” (the Kino-Eyes). Notably, in keeping with this collective ethos, Vertov eschewed the title of “director” of *The Man with a Movie Camera*, nominating himself in the opening titles as “author-supervisor of the experiment.”²⁷ Moreover, Vertov’s work was imbued by the speculative social vision—largely unrealized—of generalizing Kino-Eye activity from his small group to a broad, even global movement:

Kino-eye pursues precisely this goal of establishing a visual bond between the workers of the whole world. . . . The kino-eye movement is gradually gaining attention and support. Sympathetic letters from provincial areas, supporting the

resolutions of peasant viewers, emerging groups of kinok-observers, the reinforcing of the kinoks by a new shift of Komsomol [Communist youth organization] film production workers, and finally, portions of the state clientele that have turned to kino-eye—all these things are of considerable encouragement to us in our struggle.²⁸

Accordingly, Vertov is also inclined—as was typical of the Soviet avant-garde, according to Boris Groys²⁹—to present the field of artistic conflict as homologous with the political-ideological field, so that access to institutional powers and resources of the Soviet state seemed legitimate means by which to carry out the struggles between artistic currents (and vice versa: aesthetic struggles were seen as analogous to the bitter conflicts internal to the Soviet political order). At best, pursuing this goal meant being drawn into endless factional squabbles between rival artist-leaders and state agencies over resources, commissions, censorship, and critical evaluations. At worst, during the atmosphere of terror during the purges of the later 1930s, such rivalries could be literally matters of life and death, as artists settled old scores with denunciations for ideological deviations, crimes against the state, and implausible contacts with fascist and imperialist enemies. Vertov's polemical battles over "artistic" cinema with rival Soviet filmmakers such as Sergei Eisenstein and Vsevolod Pudovkin, and critical arguments with left intellectuals such as Viktor Shklovsky and Osip Brik,³⁰ may be understood in this light, as can the repeated frustrations Vertov suffered when he came down on the losing side of this fusion of artistic politics and state power. If unlike many of his peers, Vertov survived the dangerous purges of the 1930s and the equally perilous last years of Stalin's reign after World War II, by the late 1930s this great artist had nevertheless been marginalized from serious film work and was broken in spirit.

One particularly important turn in Vertov's career, consequential for his making of *The Man with a Movie Camera*, was his being fired from his job at Sovkino at the end of 1926, for rejecting acted cinema and wasting state-funded film stock as he collected documentary materials for his feature films *Forward*, *Soviet* and *A Sixth Part of the World*. In the process, Vertov also lost access to archived newsreel footage and had to transplant to the Ukraine, where he made his next two films, *The Eleventh Year* and *The Man with the Movie Camera* under the imperative to collect a substantial amount of newly shot footage. The particular artistic qualities of these two films, undoubtedly among Vertov's greatest, are shaped, in part, by this seemly "extrinsic" factor, as Jeremy Hicks points out:

With no archive, the photography has to create fresh footage capable of supporting this incredible metaphorical weight. ... As a result, *The Eleventh Year* marks a higher stage in the creative partnership between the two brothers [Dziga Vertov and Mikhail Kaufman, his cameraman and brother]: Kaufman's own sensibility is more evident than ever before, which leads to heightened tension. ... Unquestionably, much of the film's allure lies in its photography: its beautiful shots of water, of scenery and of sky."³¹

Likewise, as Roberts indicates, *The Man With the Movie Camera* reused some limited footage shot in 1924–1925, but put these together with much new footage shot in 1928:

1. Moscow: material filmed for *The Cine-Eye [Kino-glaz]* during 1924 and 1925: e.g., the “magician and children” sequence and the famous sites of the capital, including Tverskaia Street, the Bolshoi Theatre and the square in front of it.
2. Kiev: material filmed throughout the preparation/montage period, i.e., May–September 1928: e.g., the cinema, the train station.
3. Donbas: material gathered during the filming of *The Eleventh Year [Odinnadtsati]* in the Spring of 1928.
4. Yalta and Odessa in the summer of 1928, e.g., the beach, the funfair, holiday camp, and firing range as well as the “Proletariat” cinema and the Workers’ Club.³²

The impetus to “avant-garde” innovation in *The Man with the Movie Camera* can thus be only partially ascribed to artistic factors such as Vertov’s evolving cinematic ideas and technical practices. Equally important to take into account are extra-artistic forces operating not through his heroicized cameraman and editor, but rather through the institutional arms of the Soviet state. Vertov’s avant-garde cinematic “art,” in sum, cannot be neatly separated from cinema’s *institutional* situation in the Soviet Union, and Vertov’s tensions with the Soviet state as it concretely evolved over the 1920s and 1930s.

Transition and Interval

The Man with a Movie Camera has been the object of a growing body of criticism and critical debate, which is especially focused on its dual nature as an innovative work of artistic avant-gardism in the film medium and its filmic articulation of political arguments for a particular vision of Soviet development, reflective of larger debates raging among Communist Party leaders during the 1920s and early 1930s. Critics such as Petrić, Seth Feldman, and Annette Michelson have made strong cases for Vertov’s film as an avant-garde masterpiece worthy of close formal attention and interpretation of its experimental artistic structure.³³ Roberts and (with a somewhat different slant) Hicks have in contrast argued for the film’s contextual significance within the transitions of early Soviet society, which passed in the 1920s from the New Economic Policy (NEP) introduced by Lenin to help rebuild the Soviet economy after the ravages of the Civil War to Stalin’s First Five-Year Plan, which entailed rapid industrialization, forced collectivization, “cultural revolution,” and heightened political repression.³⁴ If Michelson hails Vertov as a courageous political modernist foiled by the bureaucratized Stalinist state—metaphorically, as she would have it, “cinema’s Trotsky”—Roberts insists on Vertov’s properly Stalinist commitments to liquidate the

reemergent bourgeoisie of the NEP and accelerate socialist modernization according to Stalin's decrees.

Cutting across this critical debate about the relative weights of "modernism" and "politics" in Vertov's filmmaking is a second dichotomy between Vertov's alternating commitments to an immediate "sensory pedagogy" through rhythmic montage and his self-reflexive interrogation of representational discourse.³⁵ Already in the late 1920s, Walter Benjamin, following his own recent confrontation with Soviet culture, had similarly focused attention on the formation of a new space of experience in which actions and gestures could form a new language-like system of signals and gestures.³⁶ Analogously, MacKay suggests, Vertov's "cinema" can be thought of as a holistic space intended to transform sensory intensities into new gestural, dynamic, and material "alphabets" to communicate a superindividual "thought" coinciding with a collective vision of socialism—a suggestion that Vertov's own statement (in reference to his 1934 film *Three Songs of Lenin*) would seem to confirm: "The movement of thought, the movement of ideas, travels along many wires but in a single direction, to a single goal. Thoughts fly out from the screen, entering without verbal translations into the viewer's consciousness."³⁷

MacKay implies that this dichotomy can be understood in light of tensions within the experience of the Soviet Union's accelerated modernization itself, in which the speed of experience requires the filmmaker to aim to provoke immediate, embodied responses without the intermediary of narrative, literary language, or dramatic framing. The deliberate formal, metrical, and rhythmic elements of Vertov's filmmaking would thus function, dialectically, in the interest of evoking the new social world of the USSR as a technologically transfigured "second nature" awaiting its corresponding multimedial language. In an essay on *The Eleventh Year*, which immediately preceded *The Man with a Movie Camera*, MacKay also notes the connection of this dichotomy to an underlying issue of documentary film that Vertov confronts with particular intensity: its oscillation between its photographic basis, which establishes an indexical relation of the film to a pre-filmic reality, and the use of editing to order, arrange, and organize the photographic traces into meaningful, even conceptual or ideological or poetic relationships. Vertov reconciles these two aspects of documentary, MacKay argues, by conceiving an "energetist" model of reality in which all phenomena can be related to flows and pathways of mobile energy: "Within Vertov's mature film work, the task of documentary moving photography becomes to a significant extent one of registering as vividly as possible the traces of energy; the job of montage, by extension, is to narrate the trajectory of energy, the conversions it undergoes, including the forms that still-latent energy might adopt."³⁸ In other words, what may at first appear in Vertov's films poetic or merely bewildering may be grounded in hidden causal chains that are in themselves invisible but that may be rendered visible through the movement of montage. Vertov's films track the pathways of energy transfers, taking place at every imaginable scale, from the individual object to the factory that produces objects on a mass scale, and from the human individual to the city as a superindividual human mass. This conception of the formal and rhetorical work

of montage as “energy transfer” resonates not only with Vertov’s editing practice, but also with the thematic content of Vertov’s features of the later 1920s: “If we leap ahead to Vertov’s mature works, it is obvious enough that in at least three of them—*One Sixth of the World*, *The Eleventh Year*, and *Man with a Movie Camera*—processes of energy conversion, with human labor as a central relay point, provide crucial representational pretexts for the films’ rhetoric, in whole or in part.”³⁹ The experiential “energetics” of Vertovian cinema and the productive “energetics” of Soviet reality resonate in a common space, in which sensory immediacy and conceptual content may fuse in one unified arc.

To negotiate these two dichotomies (modernism/political commitment, self-reflexivity/sensual immediacy), it is also helpful to consider two additional concepts: *transition* (originating in the socialist debates of the early Soviet Union, which included Stalin, Leon Trotsky, Nikolai Bukharin, and Evgeni Preobrazhensky) and, from Vertov’s own theory of editing, *interval*.⁴⁰ The transition to socialism was one of the most vexed problems of the mid-1920s for Soviet intellectuals, lending impetus to considerable theoretical and practical-political inventiveness, for better or worse. It was also, I would suggest, a major spur for Vertov’s cinematic creativity in *The Man with a Movie Camera*. In order to render the historical moment of transition in the Soviet Union after 1925, Vertov sought a dynamic language that would capture the present’s overlapping movements rather than reduce them to static schema, generic narratives, or isolated facts. He would have found congenial Étienne Balibar’s observation in “Elements for a Theory of Transition” that “the transition cannot be a moment of destrukture, however brief. It is itself a movement subject to a structure which has to be discovered. . . . The forms of transition themselves are particular ‘forms of manifestation’ of this general structure: they are therefore themselves *modes of production*.”⁴¹ The moment of transition in which Vertov found himself was, following Balibar’s insight, itself a singular “mode of production,” which the filmmaker had to analyze and express in appropriate terms. The inherited languages of cinematic representation, Vertov concluded, must necessarily prove inadequate to capture the transitional present—insufficient not just artistically, but in a more fundamental sense as well. Insofar as these inherited cinematic idioms derive, materialistically, from relations of production that are already *residual* during a time of intense transition and change, they betray the *emerging* socialist mode of production that is beginning to be discernable already within the everyday reality of the transitional period.⁴²

Vertov’s theory of intervals dated back to his early newsreel work with the “Council of Three.” In 1922, he offered an important formulation, which indicates that he conceived the “intervallic” relations between movements as the fundamental units of cinematic language, akin to the alphabetic and lexical units of language, with which larger “phrases” of film discourse can be constructed:

Intervals (the transitions from one movement to another) are the material, the elements of the art of movement, and by no means the movements themselves. It is they (the intervals) which draw the movement to a kinetic resolution. The

organization of movement is the organization of the elements, or its intervals, into phrases.

[...]

A composition is made of phrases, just as a phrase is made of intervals of movement.⁴³

Just as structural linguists such as Roman Jakobson were taking up at this time Ferdinand de Saussure's view of language as a system of value relations based on differences, and just as Karl Marx had seen the commodity as a bearer of a value within the differentiated system of capital, so did Vertov, in his theory of intervals, seek the *systematic* basis of cinematic language in the metrical values *between* movements, rather than either in the movements themselves or in the particular objects depicted. Judith Mayne offers (in my view) an overly reductive understanding of Vertov's "interval," equating it simply to matching shots and noting his enumeration of shot correlations: "correlations of shot distances (long or close), angles of vision, movements within the frame, light and shadow, and speed."⁴⁴ Mayne, however, comes closer to the deeper importance of the theory of intervals when she quotes Vertov about creating a "rational itinerary for the spectator's eye" among the excessive, potentially overwhelming set of potential "intervals"—"interactions, interattractions, interrejections"—in the movements between intervals.⁴⁵ Here, interval appears not merely a cinematic technique (matching shot) or solely an audience-oriented means of creating effect or guiding understanding. It is an essential semiological and epistemological aspect of cinema images, their capacity to generate an indefinite, chaotic swarm of potentially meaningful interconnections. Michelson, too, emphasizes this richer theoretical intent of Vertov's notion of interval, although in her article "The Wings of Hypothesis," she rules out another important connotation of the term "interval," its musical sense, in favor of relating it to Einsteinian relativity. While relativity of space and time is certainly part of the underlying theoretical implications of Vertov's theory and practice, the musical sense, as John MacKay's archival research reveals, cannot be ruled out. In an archival document of a "diagram of a fragment of a montage phrase from *Man with a Movie Camera*,"⁴⁶ one sees Vertov working compositionally with an analogy to musical scoring, including his surprising use of an analog of musical "rests" to indicate the *non*-presence of a certain category of image in the segment. The notion of "interval" in Vertov thus embraces, we can conclude, a wide range of senses and applications, ranging from highly practical editing procedures for creating shot correlations, through the experimental application of scoring techniques for montage, to rich philosophical motifs within Vertov's theory of cinema and cinematic ontology.

Although the theory of intervals was formulated earlier, as Michelson argues, "in practice, it was most brilliantly illustrated in *The Eleventh Year* and especially in *The Man with the Movie Camera*,"⁴⁷ that is, in the films of 1928–1929, which represented one of the most intensive points of "transition" in early Soviet history. With his "inter-vallic" composition of *The Man with A Movie Camera*, Vertov experimented not only

with an unprecedentedly autonomous language of cinema (“100% cinematography”), but also with appropriate expressive means to explore this structure of transition, this singular and continually mutating “mode of production” on the way to socialism, such that the social struggles and industrial productivity unleashed by the Five-Year Plan could be translated into innovative cinematic forms.

Everything Turns: Circles and Spirals

Vertov’s focus on transition and the complex, overlapping intervals of time that compose a period of transition is expressed in *The Man with a Movie Camera* formally and thematically in a variety of ways, on which I can comment only briefly in conclusion. A key instance, however, is the framing of the film’s overall trajectory by two temporal “cycles,” the cycle of a day from sunrise to sunset, and the cycle of a single film screening, which, self-reflexively, is that of *The Man with a Movie Camera* itself. Implicitly, these two cycles are brought into relations of comparison, contrast, overlap, and contradiction. One of these cycles is natural and cosmological, as well as practical and lived in a literally “everyday” manner; the other is technological, variable, and capable of bringing forth aspects that are hidden from everyday life or that disclose the possibility of a Soviet “*novyi byt*” (new everyday life).⁴⁸ Thus we should see these two cycles as interacting in dialectical ways, inter-animating each other with each other’s qualities and fields of connotations.

For example, the cycle of the day in *Man with a Movie Camera* is an image of, literally, a “world revolution”—the rotating globe in its daily course—but also a metonymic piece of a socialist world revolution yet to come, though already taking place within the Soviet “one sixth of the world.” In Marx, and subsequently in socialist thought, the day constitutes one of the basic metrics of labor value. Under capitalism, the specific extraction and reproduction of labor power depends on changing proportions of time spent at work, leisure, and mandatory nourishment and rest; the temporal segments of the twenty-four-hour day thus become, through the mechanisms of capitalist production, objects of social contestation and class struggle between worker and employer. Yet just as Marx understood that the machine had revolutionized the natural diurnal unit, subjugating it to new organizational and technological forces, so does Vertov’s conjunction of the cycle of a film screening and the day’s cycle imply that cinema, too, will transform the day in unprecedented ways. An obvious respect in which this transformation is so is the temporal compression of the film—a little over sixty minutes in the case of *The Man with a Movie Camera*—compared to the twenty-four-hour extension of the day. He implies that under socialism, with the aid of socialist collectivism and technology, humanity will be able to experience or produce in an hour what at present would require a whole day. By extrapolation, days can become like whole months, months become like years, and the work of centuries can be performed in a decade or even within the span of a Five-Year Plan. And last, cinema already anticipates this transfigured future. In its particular space of

technologized labor, it is already capable of the socialist time compression that, with the victory of the world revolution, all humanity will soon experience.

Vertov picks up on an aspect of the daily cycle that also attracted modernist writers such as Joyce in *Ulysses* and Woolf in *Mrs. Dalloway* to a “circadian” structure for their novel: its relative compactness and abstraction allowed handling complex interlacings of themes, spaces, and motifs within its limited span. There is no contradiction between seeing Joyce’s *Ulysses* as one of the most complex texts of modern literature and noting that its temporal structure is much simpler than Homer’s *Odyssey*, which has many temporal layers, flashbacks, compressions, and ellipses that Joyce’s text does not have. Schematization at one level (the regular succession of hours corresponding to chapters) allowed Joyce to elaborate at other levels (style, lexicon, figures of consciousness, and so on). With a simple background, Joyce could explore the complicated counterpoint of temporal rhythms at different scales, ranging from daily work patterns (Bloom’s solicitation of advertising) to longer life patterns (the marriage of the Blooms) to impersonal rhythms of urban systems such as the transportation network, water and sewer channels, and postal network. So, too, Vertov utilizes these two simple and recognizable temporal patterns—the cycle of the day, the cycle of the film screening—to lend legible structure to a multifaceted, potentially chaotic richness of materials, rhythms, and interconnected elements.

Vertov’s use of these cycles as structural frameworks, however, is more apparent than real, since he also disrupts them in a symbolically significant way.⁴⁹ A cycle connotes a return to a starting point, a repetition, whereas a “revolution” suggests not cyclical return but breaking out of repetition to bring about the new.⁵⁰ Even within the analysis of the reproduction of capital that Marx put forward, which moves value from production through circulation back to new production, Marx emphasizes that capital does not just replicate itself in a circular fashion, but also must “accumulate” in constant “expanded reproduction.” The appropriate spatial figure for capital—including its tendency not to be able to sustain expanded reproduction and to go into crisis—is not the circle, but the *spiral* (outward bound in periods of expansion, inward bound in periods of contraction). This observation is pertinent to Vertov’s subversive use of “cycles” such as the day and the movie screening, which may be seen not as figures of *circular* return and repetition, but of Soviet expansion and intensification, the explosion of existing limits, and the bringing about of something new as the “cycle” recurs. Crofts and Rose point to Vertov’s use of reverse motion and freeze-frame shots to call into question the temporal order that would reproduce a cycle without disruptive forces disturbing the pattern.⁵¹ They also give instances of reiterations of the same motif in desynchronized ways, figuratively indicating that patterns do *not* repeat in a circular fashion, but rather are thrown out of phase by the powerful forces of development permeating Soviet society: “Linear time is again called into question in the duplication in horizontal split screen of a shot of typing pool so that the two halves are out of sync.”⁵² Finally, they point to Vertov’s presentation of “repeated” images and events that have been recontextualized, again undermining the implication that circular repetition is possible even in a society that is dynamically

developing. “Everything turns” in Soviet society, Vertov implies, but not in a circle. Rather in the motion proper to revolution: the outward-bound spiral of continuous transformation and growth (see Figure 8.4).

Vertov intended broadly the connotations of the new socialist society leaping out of seemingly fixed, natural bounds. Yet implicitly he also refers to the immediate circumstances of “transition” that the Soviet Union faced in the mid-1920s, a transition that led to the Five-Year Plan and the policy of building “socialism in one country.” Soviet leaders realized that the industrial sector, which, according to Marxist theory, should have led the transition to socialism, was still quite underdeveloped and constrained by the agricultural sector, which was peasant-based and preponderant in the Soviet economy. The economic debates of the 1920s circled around this problem, with “left” Bolsheviks such as Trotsky and Preobrazhensky arguing that the present equilibrium needed to be disrupted by “socialist primitive accumulation” feeding rapid industrialization at the expense of the countryside, while “right” Bolsheviks, most prominently Bukharin, argued for maintaining equilibrium and progressing slowly toward socialist development. Stalin, having first marginalized his political rivals, erratically borrowed from both sides in launching the First Five-Year Plan, which embarked on extremely rapid industrialization, forcible collectivization of agriculture, and a very violent attack on the social structures of Soviet society up to that time.



Figure 8.4 Spinning, Dziga Vertov, *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929)

Whether, like Roberts, we see Vertov directly celebrating the politics of Stalinism in *The Man with the Movie Camera*, or alternatively view him as expressing a more general sense of possibility that accompanied the Stalinist revolution of the late 1920s, it is hard to disagree with Roberts's conclusion:

The viewer should never forget that this film is a product of the period of, possibly manufactured but nonetheless real, crisis of 1928–9. That crisis engendered a complete overhaul of a state that covered “One-sixth the world” in a spirit of “There are no fortresses that Bolsheviks cannot storm.” ... *The Man with the Movie Camera* exemplifies the belief that all things were possible in economic and social transformation. ... For Vertov film-makers to that point had only interpreted the world in various ways; the point however was to change it. (Roberts, 104)

Vertov believed that a radically new society had begun with Stalin's Five-Year Plan, calling for a radically new cinema as well. History, it must be noted, all too quickly dashed Vertov's aspirations, as the realities of Stalinism became a brutal denial of his ideals and practical obstacle to his work. *The Man with a Movie Camera* now stands as a monument in place of the utopia his “chelovek” had once fleetingly caught sight of through his restlessly inquisitive “kinoapparat.” To the characterization of Vertov's film as a pioneering documentary, an avant-garde artwork, and a militant instrument of politics, we can, in conclusion, add one final image: it is a magnificent ruin of the 1920s, a ruin of that decade's dream of a new world in the making.

Notes

1. Philip Rosen, “Now and Then: Conceptual Problems in Historicizing Documentary Imaging,” *Canadian Journal of Film Studies/Revue canadienne d'études cinématographiques* 16, no. 1 (2007), 27.
2. Depending on the source or film edition, the Russian title *Shagay, sovet!* may be rendered in English as *Forward, Soviet!* or *Stride, Soviet!*
3. The Russian title *Cheloveks kinoapparatom* has been variably translated “The Man with a Movie Camera” and “The Man with *the* Movie Camera,” either of which is grammatically plausible. I have used the former throughout, except when quoting an author who uses the other. This choice accounts for occasional discrepancies in the titling. My stills and interpretative discussion refer to Dziga Vertov, *The Man with the Movie Camera*, DVD, 68 min. (New York: Kino International, 1997). This DVD was digitally mastered from a 35 mm nitrate negative and includes an original soundtrack composed by the Alloy Orchestra and based on musical instructions by Vertov. It is considered the canonical version of the film for current criticism.
4. Dziga Vertov, “From the History of the Kinoks,” in *Kino-Eye*, by Dziga Vertov; Annette Michelson, ed.; Kevin O'Brien, trans. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 95.

5. Opening titles to Dziga Vertov, *The Man with the Movie Camera* (New York: Kino International, 1997).
6. Dziga Vertov, "The Man with a Movie Camera," in *Kino-Eye*, 83.
7. Graham Roberts, "The Man with the Movie Camera" (London: I. B. Tauris, 2000), 72.
8. John MacKay, "Man with a Movie Camera" (Dziga Vertov, 1929), unpublished manuscript, quoted with permission of the author. This manuscript derives from a forthcoming three-volume study by MacKay, *Dziga Vertov: Life and Work* (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press), of which vol. 1, 1896–1921, was published in 2018.
9. Adapted from Stephen Crofts and Olivia Rose, "An Essay Towards *Man with a Movie Camera*," *Screen* 18 (1977): 15–16.
10. Roberts, "Man with the Movie Camera," 42ff.
11. Vlada Petrić, *Constructivism in Film: "The Man with the Movie Camera"; A Cinematic Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
12. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*, Caryl Emerson, ed. and trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1984).
13. Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, Anna Cancogni, trans. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).
14. Dziga Vertov, "The Birth of Kino-Eye," in *Kino-Eye*, 41.
15. Vertov, "Provisional Instructions to Kino-Eye Groups," in *Kino-Eye*, 69.
16. Vertov, "Kinopravda and Radiopravda," in *Kino-Eye*, 56.
17. Vertov, "The Factory of Facts," in *Kino-Eye*, 60.
18. Vertov, "Provisional Instructions," in *Kino-Eye*, 72.
19. See, for example, Vertov, "Birth of Kino-Eye," in *Kino-Eye*, 42.
20. Vertov, "WE: Variant of a Manifesto," in *Kino-Eye*, 5.
21. Vertov, "WE: Variant of a Manifesto," 7.
22. Vertov, "Provisional Instructions," in *Kino-Eye*, 77.
23. Vertov, "On Kinopravda," in *Kino-Eye*, 47.
24. For "Let's Murder the Moonlight!" (April 11, 1909), see *Futurism: An Anthology*, Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi, and Laura Wittman, eds. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 54–61; "A Slap In the Face of Public Taste"; see *Russian Futurism through Its Manifestoes, 1912–1928*, Anna Lawton, ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 51–52; "Art is Dead," from posted text at Erste Internationale Dada-Messe (First International Dada Fair), Berlin, June 30–August 25, 1920, photographed with Georg Grosz and John Heartfield.
25. Isaiah Berlin, "The Arts in Russia under Stalin" [1946], first published in *New York Review of Books*, October 19, 2000. Accessed online at <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2000/oct/19/the-arts-in-russia-under-stalin/>.
26. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Michael Shaw, trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
27. Opening titles to Dziga Vertov, *The Man with the Movie Camera*, DVD.
28. Dziga Vertov, "Kinopravda and Radiopravda," in *Kino-Eye*, 52.
29. Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, Charles Rougle, trans. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).
30. See, for example, Viktor Shklovsky, "Where Is Dziga Vertov Striding?" (1926), in *Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and the Twenties*, Yuri Tsivian, ed. (Sacile and Pordenone: Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, 2004), 169–70; Osip Brik, "Vertov's *The Eleventh Hour*" (1928), in *Lines of Resistance*, 310–11.

31. Jeremy Hicks, *Dziga Vertov: Defining Documentary Film* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 59.
32. Roberts, “*Man with the Movie Camera*,” x.
33. Petrić, *Constructivism in Film*; Annette Michelson, “*The Man with a Movie Camera*: From Magician to Epistemologist,” *Artforum* 10, no. 7 (1972): 6–72; Annette Michelson, “Introduction” to Vertov, *Kino-Eye*, xv–lxii; Seth Feldman, “Dziga Vertov’s *The Man with a Movie Camera*,” in *Documenting the Documentary: Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video*, Barry Keith Grant and Jeannette Sloniowski, eds. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 40–54; Seth Feldman, “Vertov after Manovich,” *Canadian Journal of Film Studies/Revue canadienne d'études cinématographiques* 16, no. 1 (2007): 39–50.
34. See Roberts, “*Man with the Movie Camera*”; Hicks, *Dziga Vertov*.
35. As, for instance, John MacKay argues in an interview entitled “Rhythm Machines,” on the occasion of a lecture on “Dziga Vertov and the Rhythm of the Proletariat”; see John MacKay, “Rhythm Machines,” *Idiom* (December 7, 2010), <http://idiommag.com/2010/12/rhythm-machines-john-mackay-on-dziga-vertov/>.
36. See, for example, Walter Benjamin, “Program for a Proletarian Children’s Theater” (1928), in *Selected Works, Volume 2: 1927–1934*, Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, eds. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 203–4.
37. Dziga Vertov, “Without Words,” in *Kino-Eye*, 118.
38. John Mackay, “Film Energy: Process and Metanarrative in Dziga Vertov’s *The Eleventh Year*,” *October* 121 (2007): 50.
39. MacKay, 2007, 58.
40. For an important critical discussion of the concept of interval in the film poetics of Eisenstein and Vertov, see Annette Michelson, “The Wings of Hypothesis: On Montage and the Theory of the Interval,” in *Montage and Modern Life, 1919–1942*, Matthew Teitelbaum, ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 60–81.
41. Étienne Balibar, “Elements for a Theory of Transition,” in *Reading Capital*, by Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar; Ben Brewster, trans. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970), 273.
42. The categories of “residual” and “emerging” social formations come from Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 121ff. Williams, in turn, derives these categories from the writings of Vertov’s Italian communist contemporary, Antonio Gramsci.
43. Dziga Vertov, “WE: Variant of a Manifesto,” in *Kino-Eye*, 8–9. A brief comparison of Vertov’s theory of interval and Eisenstein’s montage theory is useful at this point. Vertov was consistently critical of Eisenstein, but Vertov’s writings address their differences less at the specific level of montage theory and more with respect to what he saw as Eisenstein’s adherence to dramatic and literary conventions of the fiction film; see, for example, Vertov’s article of February 3, 1925, “Kino-Eye on Strike,” in *Lines of Resistance*, 125–26. Eisenstein’s response, in contrast, is more theoretically substantive; he considers Vertov’s montage (erroneously, in my view) to be the product of a passive impressionism that fails to utilize editing to “forcefully [disrupt] the causal links between [events], instead of defying their inevitable stasis . . . , instead of making a powerful social-organizational motive prevail over their inert flow” (Eisenstein, in *Lines of Resistance*, 127). In an essay from 1928 entitled “Beyond the Played and the Non-Played,” Eisenstein upheld Vertov’s *A Sixth Part of the World* as an abstract intervallic construction “like the balls of an abacus” bouncing between the intertitles, but upholds *The Eleventh Year* as an advance into a kind

- of musical notational structure: “The *Eleventh Year* moves into a series of fragments from a poem of facts into a symphony of facts.” Sergei Eisenstein, “Beyond the Played and the Non-Played,” in *Writings 1922–1934*, by Seregi Eisenstein; Richard Taylor, ed. and trans. (London: BFI Publishing, 1988, 102). Eisenstein backtracked on this relatively affirmative view of *The Eleventh Year* in his 1929 essay “The Fourth Dimension in Cinema,” in which he takes Vertov’s film as a negative example of “metrical montage,” in which “the metrical module is mathematically so complex that you can only determine its pattern ‘with a ruler in your hand,’ i.e. by measuring rather than perceiving” (*Writings 1922–1934*, 187). For a more detailed discussion of the Eisenstein/Vertov relationship, see Michael Levenson, “Art, Politics and the Kino-Eye: Vertov’s *The Man with the Movie Camera*,” *Modernist Cultures* 5, no. 1 (2010): 47–64.
44. Judith Mayne, “Eisenstein, Vertov, and the Montage Principle,” *Minnesota Review* 5 (1975): 120–21.
 45. Mayne, “Eisenstein,” 121.
 46. Reproduced in MacKay, “Man with a Movie Camera” (Dziga Vertov, 1929), unpublished manuscript, cited by permission of author.
 47. Michelson, “Introduction,” in *Kino-Eye*, xxx.
 48. For a broader discussion of “novyi byt” (new everyday life), see Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005) 40ff.
 49. It is at least partially because of Vertov’s rich utilization of circadian structure that Annette Michelson can make the interesting claim that Vertov haunted Eisenstein’s efforts to develop a theory of intellectual montage in his own engagement with the diurnal focal of Joyce’s literary and Marx’s theoretical masterpieces: “One is thus led to scrutinize the circumstances of this repression and elision, and to inquire, in particular, whether Vertov’s work constitutes an unwelcome redefinition of that ‘intellectual cinema’ which had so haunted Eisenstein, Vertov’s work producing the shadow text of Eisenstein’s unrealized projects, the planned film versions of *Das Kapital* and of Joyce’s *Ulysses*” (Michelson, “Introduction,” xxii). For more on Eisenstein’s project, see Sergei Eisenstein, Maciej Sliwowski, Jay Leyda, and Annette Michelson, “Notes for a Film of *Capital*,” *October* 2 (1976): 3–26; and Annette Michelson, “Reading Eisenstein Reading *Capital* pt. 1,” *October* 2 (1976): 26–38, “Reading Eisenstein Reading *Capital* pt. 2,” *October* 3 (1977): 82–89. See also Alexander Kluge’s sui generis film essay on Eisenstein’s uncompleted project, *Nachrichten aus der ideologischen Antike: Marx—Eisenstein—Das Kapital* (Frankfurt am Main: Filmedition Suhrkamp, 2008), which includes almost ten hours of segments filmed by Kluge and guests and further supplementary documents and texts.
 50. For an insightful analysis of this point, see Jeffrey Mehlman, *Revolution and Repetition: Marx/Hugo/Balzac* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977).
 51. Crofts and Rose, “Essay,” 27.
 52. Crofts and Rose, “Essay,” 27–28.

Luis Buñuel, Surrealism, and the Politics of Disorder

Michael Wood

Mortifying Reason

Surrealism, Luis Buñuel said late in his career, represented “an imperious and unrealizable wish” to “change the world and transform life itself.”¹ He certainly knew in 1929, when he met the group in Paris, how imperious André Breton and his companions could be. Did he know then that the wish was unrealizable? Probably not. He did know that the sense of confinement in old customs had (for some) become a conviction that the world and life couldn’t possibly stay as they were. The language of the surrealists had a curious way of preempting action too, as if saying were already doing. Breton announced that “*Le surréalisme … tend à ruiner définitivement tous les autres mécanismes psychiques.*”²

Buñuel shared the impatience and many of the destructive urges of the surrealists, but even his early works suggest a skepticism about the definitive event, and he knew a lot about the ability of psychic mechanisms to survive their apparent demise. His films do not express wishes or tendencies. Their modernism is elsewhere, and takes him some way from the surrealism he was in many ways so loyal to. I am inferring this distinction from the works themselves rather than applying ready-made categories, so it will help if I say right away what the inference is. Surrealism was a form of modernism, of course, but a programmatic form; and Buñuel’s films are complex mirrors of a world rather than parts of any plausible program to change it. In their restless irony, their ability to surprise and shock after any number of viewings, their refusal to summarize or judge, they offer portraits of recurring twentieth-century uncertainties and our favorite fantasies for dealing with them. They are radical in their capacity to upset our patterns of thought, conservative in their ironic assumption that patterns of some sort are unavoidable. Above all, they persistently present the very notion of meaning as the desperate recourse of frightened people, and what I am calling a politics of disorder is the politics of a necessarily incomplete resistance: an ongoing, losing battle against intelligibility. Moments from *Un chien andalou* (1929) are going to linger in the minds of all those who have seen it. This has been especially true of the initial scene showing the slicing of an eye, even if it may not quite be the case that “more has been written about [this] opening sequence … than any other two-minute

sequence in the history of film.³ But I want to pause over another moment in the film; less horrific and startling, indeed almost banal, but enduringly surprising and funny.

There is nothing funny about the verbal descriptions of the scene. The shooting script by Buñuel and Salvador Dalí says, “The cyclist has just stopped, below in the street. Out of inertia, without trying to keep his balance, he topples over into the muddy gutter.” The published account of the film version reads, “New tilt down on to the cyclist who stops abruptly and falls, still astride his bicycle, onto the pavement.”⁴ Some key elements of the final visual effect are here, but only as hints. The words “below” and “tilt” point to the high-angle shot, which is essential. “Topples” and “falls” get the man on to the ground, but he doesn’t just “stop” and “out of inertia” is a prospective, pre-filming guess.

What we see is this. A man rides a bicycle into the frame of a high-angle shot. We have had several images of him riding along before, at eye-level angles: from the front, from the back, from the side. In one instance a dissolve has made him transparent, so we view the street and houses through him. He has been steadily pedaling the whole time, and moving quite quickly. In the high-angle shot he gives up pedaling and just glides along. There is a cut to a woman at a window, watching him with something between concern and anger on her face. The next cut returns us to the cyclist, viewed from the same height as before. He is gliding still, but beginning to slow down. The cycle’s front wheel wobbles; the man falls over sideways without making any effort to dismount or to continue, as if he were asleep at the handlebars or had forgotten what one has to do keep a cycle upright. His head strikes the edge of the sidewalk. The woman rushes down into the street and kisses him repeatedly. He seems to be unconscious. We are not laughing yet, perhaps, but a sense of absurdity ruins all identification with the characters.

The next time we see the man he is in the woman’s room, as if he had never been anywhere else, except perhaps in the René Magritte drawing, *The Mysterious Suspicion* (1928), that his new posture imitates.⁵ Before this second appearance, if we are keen on narrative sense, we may well have thought he was dead. In such a reading the next sequence would represent an act of mourning or an attempt at resurrection through the force of the will: the young woman, alone and back in her room, places on the bed the bib and other frills the man was wearing, and stares earnestly at the display, as if a body might have emerged among the clothing. But the film makes this rationalizing guess and so many others like it seem not so much erroneous as signs of a very bad habit: not over-interpretation, just interpretation.

What’s funny here, and more than funny too, is the sense that a character out of a Buster Keaton film has ridden his bike into another world.⁶ People in silent comedies are always running into walls or objects or having trouble with machines, but their energies are formidable. They crash and get up; they manage the runaway train. Here our man has just faded away. “Inertia,” as the shooting script suggests? Why not? But what happened to his busy pedaling around the city, the close-up on the striped box he was carrying, his air of knowing what he was doing, where he was going? His mission? That is, the one he presumably had, and the one the film had for him, his role in

the film's implied narrative trajectory. There is no such trajectory. There are just bits of action that tempt us to look for meaning and consequence. The trouble is not that we fail to find them, but that they don't hold up when we do. They don't survive into the next frame.

Our laughter at the plight of the falling cyclist is not unlike the laughter provoked by the plays of Samuel Beckett, an especially appropriate connection, since the imagery of *Happy Days* (1961) seems to be announced in the film's final, still shot: a couple buried in sand with only their heads and torsos above the surface. Henri Bergson would recognize this laughter—the notionally adaptable person becomes rigid or mechanical⁷—but would have to complicate his analysis a little, since what happens in the film is that the previously purposeful and balanced person becomes a vacancy, a living phantom unable any longer to ride a bicycle or do anything else. Why is this funny? What else is it? It's funny because there is no reason for what has happened, and nothing has gotten in the man's way; because it so completely subtracts intention and meaning from a human event. We are laughing (partly) at an image of unqualified helplessness.⁸ And it is more than funny because we know we can't do without intention and meaning, however anarchic and surrealist we may imagine we are. We can, however, understand and combat our own conservatism rather than simply deny it or declare it dead, and this point is where a politics of disorder assumes its appeal.

Maurice Drouzy shrewdly notes “the sobriety of the technique” of *Un chien andalou* compared with other avant-garde films: no improbable points of view, a few high-angle shots, a few pans, slow motion in only one scene, no speeded-up projection, only two uses of an iris. But then all this modesty serves the task of what Drouzy calls “mortifying reason.”⁹ The task also involves the casually incoherent time frames indicated by occasional titles (“Once Upon a Time,” “Eight Years Later,” “Toward Three in the Morning,” “Sixteen Years Before,” “In the Spring”) and the whole concept of imagined film space. Drouzy remarks that we might see some of the strange shifts from shot to shot as indications of subjective vision, clues to what a character sees, but that theory doesn't help when a door we have already seen opening on to another interior opens suddenly on to a windy beach. Or when . . . there are too many instances. These things happen for the same reason the cyclist falls onto the sidewalk: for no reason we can see or believe.

Except that of course the desire to mortify reason is an excellent reason. Buñuel says he and Dalí, writing the script, worked according to “a very simple” rule: “No idea or image that might lend itself to a rational explanation of any kind would be accepted.”¹⁰ This rule is not an embrace of meaninglessness, however, but a concerted attack on conventional or comfortable ways of making meaning, including Buñuel's and Dalí's own and including those of surrealism at large. The attack is important, and unending, because meaning will always come back—we are “condemned to meaning,” as Maurice Merleau-Ponty said.¹¹ Buñuel's film was not “a desperate and passionate call to murder,” as he and Dalí romantically put it,¹² but a brilliant attempt to wreck, at least for a while, the very notions of sense and rationality.

These notions are closely associated with the idea of montage, and it's worth pausing over this connection. Robert Short's idea of an assault on "the very faculty which gives conviction to the cinematic illusion"¹³ is a good phrase, and helpful beyond its immediate context. Short is thinking of the slicing of the eye at the opening of the film, but of course what "gives conviction to the cinematic illusion" is not our sight but our ability and willingness to construct worlds and stories out of the paratactic signs we see and hear. Thus Buñuel writes of the heroine of Carl Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928), "she stops crying to watch some pigeons settle on the spire of the church."¹⁴ This is what the cinematic illusion says. What we see is an actress looking off screen, some birds settling on a church spire. The idea of watching, and indeed the idea that the birds are what she is looking at, is supplied by the viewer. Appropriately supplied, of course, because making this assumption is what the director wants us to do, and this principle is admirably defined as the Kuleshov effect: a single expression on an actor's face changes its meaning as the image is intercut with others: a plate of soup, a girl, a child's coffin.¹⁵ In *Un chien andalou*, though, the effect is being played with rather than directly employed, and Adan Falcon writes shrewdly of "a parody of the kind of poetic montage that dominated much of the filmmaking in the twenties."¹⁶

We see a cyclist on a street and a woman at a window. The assumption that she is watching him arise because of the proximity of the shots, and because we have learned to make such assumptions. The same goes for the slicing of the eye in the opening sequence, although our contribution here is more dramatic, perhaps more sinister, certainly more anxious. A man with a razor steps out on to a balcony and looks up. The screen shows a night sky with a full moon. We return to the man, smoking and looking. There is a dissolve to a woman's face, with a man's hand holding her eye open. Another hand holding a razor enters the shot and seems about to cut the eye. We see the sky again, where a thin cloud now passes horizontally across the moon. In the next shot the razor cuts across an eye in close-up, and in the same direction as the movement of the cloud. The cuts do not take us from woman to moon to woman, they take us from eye to moon to another eye. I thought for a long time that the second eye belonged to one of the dead donkeys who appear later in the film, but Bunuel identified it as being that of a dead calf with its eyelashes reduced.¹⁷ Less dramatically, but also interestingly, we shall have seen that the man, previously smoking and tieless, is now wearing a tie. The uncredited actor, whom we shall recognize if we see the film late enough in history for his face to have become known to us, is Luis Buñuel.

Here we have not only supplied narrative continuity but also made a supposition of identity: that eye and this eye are the same. Why would they not be, if this is some sort of story? Where would another eye come from? We could invert the questions. When and why are this and that the same, especially in a movie? Did we think we had seen a live woman's eye being sliced?

These montage questions are very elementary, the place where almost any sort of thinking about film needs to start. But Buñuel has, so to speak, turned Sergei Eisenstein ("Cinematography is, first and foremost, montage"¹⁸) upside down, or at least sent him off in a new direction. For both Eisenstein and Buñuel, film is an art of

making meaning, or presenting viewers with the materials for making meanings, but Buñuel wants the art to double as its own enemy. For every meaning we make there is another we miss; every story we find occludes a story we didn't see. This is how the narrative structure of Buñuel's late film *Le Fantôme de la liberté* (1974) works, in this instance, by taking minor figures in a story and following out their tales rather than what had seemed to be the main thread, and doing the same thing again and again.

Buñuel courts meaning as well as impedes it. He taunts us (and perhaps himself) with its inevitability—the inevitability, that is, not of a particular meaning but of a meaning of some sort or other. And then he makes the inevitable (briefly) impossible. The film insists on a whole series of recurring images (eyes, hands, diagonal stripes, a ubiquitous box, various grimaces of lust and desire), and surely we have to make something of this insistence. When we see ants crawling out of a man's hand, it's hard not to think of some form of symbolism, particularly if we suspect that Buñuel has any of the words associated with ants in mind: the French "*fourmiller*" (to swarm or be swarming with), for example, or the Spanish "*hormiguear*" (to teem or to tingle). The question is what to do with our thought.

The film offers much that is (all too) readable. It shows us a man slicing a woman's eye, another man (repeatedly) chasing a woman. That second man is visibly excited by a death in the street, a young woman run over by a car, and makes his boldest attempt at seduction as a consequence. He also has a second, younger self, played by the same actor in a different suit, who clearly disapproves of the frilly rig-out his older avatar has put on. Worries about masculinity? Not for long, because the older self shoots the younger self with a pair of books that suddenly turn into revolvers. But what have we done when we put together these stories? What are we to make of all the memorable images and gags that just get in the way of the stories, or tug them off track?

An eloquent comment by the filmmaker Jean Vigo illustrates how hard it is to resist reason, how enticing it is to slip away from the deeper politics of disorder. He writes,

Our cowardice, which leads us to accept so many of the horrors that we, as a species, commit, is dearly put to the test when we flinch from the screen image of a woman's eye sliced in half by a razor. Is it more dreadful than the spectacle of a cloud veiling a full moon?¹⁹

Well, yes, but why is he asking? Because he has to link the cutting to the cloud, even if the image of "veiling" already blurs the connection a little. Buñuel says he told Dalí "about a dream I'd had in which a long tapering cloud sliced the moon in half like a razor blade slicing through an eye." Dalí replied with the image of the ants swarming out of a man's hand.²⁰ The interesting point in this perspective is that the cloud and the moon come first; the razor and the eye appear only as analogy. The thought of the human act helps to catch the effect of the moon picture, and the moon, in consequence, becomes a model (female) victim, caught up in a masculine aggression scattered across the universe. This is effectively the connection Vigo has intuitively made, but the rhetorical flourish ("is it any more dreadful?") turns it into "poetry." And the

radical thought that the connection between moon and woman is *only* montage, a lure not only for our fantasies of cruelty but for our fantasies of connection itself, cannot survive the mania for meaning. Even without the poetry, the picture of aggression I have inferred is too cerebral, is too well made, takes us too far away from the disarray of shock.

The Tyranny of Order

“Accidents uncorrupted by plausibility” were what a surrealist manifesto found in Buñuel’s next film, *L’Âge d’or* (1930).²¹ It’s a fine phrase, but almost every word in it calls for quotation marks. The narrative logic of Buñuel’s films, or rather their constant dueling with such logic, outlaws the very idea of accident, and there is very little plausibility, corrupted or not. Still, *L’Âge d’or* does at first sight seem more coherent than *Un chien andalou*, if only because its narrative arcs are longer, and because the sequences opening and closing the film go together, framing it as a study in “natural history.” It begins with some mock documentary material on scorpions (patches of text courtesy of Jean-Henri Fabre) and ends with an evocation of the aftermath of Marquis de Sade’s *120 Days of Sodom* (written in 1785, but not published until 1904): four libertines—or three out of four—looking distinctly the worse for wear as they stagger out of their orgy. Civilization, the implication is, hasn’t made us less violent or poisonous, only more refined in our entertainments.

In between these sequences, natural history gives way to a satirical portrayal of social life and its defectors. A group of exhausted bandits living on a rocky coast wait for the arrival of a group they call (and that other characters in the film also call) the Majorcans—literally inhabitants of an island, metaphorically Buñuel’s and Dalí’s name for incorrigible reactionaries.²² They are coming to lay the foundation stone of the imperial city of... Rome.

There are a few irregularities here. The date on the stone is 1930, the date of the film’s first screening, and Rome is located on a barren shore that looks like (and is) that of Cabo de Creus in Catalonia. Everyone in the film seems to be placed in 1930, including the men dressed up as Sade’s characters, and the people leaving the foundation ceremony find themselves at once in a fully built-up city that has been there for some time.

Meanwhile, however—this is a genuine narrative “meanwhile,” not a temporal joke, like one created by the “Some Hours Afterwards” card that follows the ahistorical scorpions—there has been an interruption of the ceremony: squeals, howls, a man (Gaston Modot) and woman (Lya Lys) rolling in the mud, in the early stages of making love. We are going to follow this couple, apart and together, throughout most of the rest of the movie, and this persistence of plot, along with large doses of Richard Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde* (1865) in the soundtrack, is what has allowed so many critics and fans to see the film as an unequivocal ode to love, “that violent liberation”

according to the surrealist manifesto for the film: “For Love demands the sacrifice of every other value: status, family and honor. And the failure of Love within the social framework leads to Revolt.”²³

This is far too pious a proclamation for what happens in the film, since the ruthless comedian in Buñuel quickly ruins the idea of romantic love for anyone who isn’t determined to find it everywhere. The lovers can’t decide whether to sit together, or stand, or lie on the gravel; they fall on or off their chairs. They chew at each other’s fingers, and in one possibly subjective shot, the man’s fingers have disappeared; he has only a thumb and a palm left. The woman finally takes off with the aged conductor of the orchestra, and the man hits his head on a hanging plant, picking up the rhythm of American silent comedy as if he had been born to it.

Enraged by his lover’s infidelity, the man rushes to her bedroom, and tears a pillow to pieces, pulling out masses of feathers. We then see the window of the room (of a room) from outside, and various objects fall from it: a blazing fir tree, an archbishop, a wooden giraffe. The archbishop gets up and scampers off. And now we do revert—if we have ever left it—to Buñuel’s world of non sequiturs. A close-up of the feathers fills the screen, and a card says, “At the exact moment when these feathers, torn out by his furious hands, covered the ground below the window, at that moment, as we said, but very far away, the survivors of the château de Selliny were coming out, to go back to Paris.”

The insistence on the idea of simultaneity (“the exact moment,” “at that moment, as we said”) almost bullies us into seeing a large meaning here, but there is no meaning to be found, or rather there is only whatever meaning we find in the sly joke about the loose ways in which we use the word and the concept “meanwhile.” We see the feathers again followed by a screen filled with snow, a section of the mountain landscape where Selliny (as Silling was spelled in early editions of the book) is then seen. “Survivors,” used twice, is an odd word—not usually the one we employ for persons who are abusing others—that makes a scandalous equation between tormentor and victim. But Buñuel has other scandals lined up.

The first “survivor” to appear is the living image of conventional representations of Christ (the actor, Lionel Salem, had played Jesus in Julien Duvivier’s 1927 film *Revelation*), long hair, beard, white robe, although he is identified as Sade’s Duc de Blangis. He is not old, and seems completely unaffected by whatever experiences he has had. He looks rather pious. The other three men are dressed up in eighteenth-century costume, and one is walking with a crutch. Then a girl (Canidad de Laberdesque) appears in the doorway of the castle the men have just left. She looks terrified and her hands and clothes are bloodstained: another survivor after all, but not for long. Blangis goes back, and solicitously escorts the girl back into the castle. The door closes. Silence. Then a shriek is heard, and Blangis reappears—still looking unperturbed but now without his beard. The last shot of the film is a wooden cross covered in snow, with scalps hanging from it. The script says they are “the scalps of many women” but I don’t see how one would know this from the shot alone—it’s hard enough to see that scalps are what they are.

L'Âge d'or gathered an extravagant reputation among the surrealists and others because of the violent interruption of a screening by right-wing hoodlums in December 1930, and the film's subsequent banning. It wasn't shown again outside of film clubs until 1980. Its opponents thereby spared Buñuel a problem that had arisen with *Un chien andalou*. That film ran for eight months at the Studio 28 in Paris, and Buñuel had to face a trial by the chief surrealists for entertaining the bourgeoisie he was supposed to assault. His and Dalí's statement about the film, already quoted ("a desperate and passionate call to murder") was a belated attempt to claim that its success was based on a misapprehension: it wasn't seeking to create beauty or poetry, just to instigate violence. Buñuel did not acknowledge at that time, or his relations with the surrealists wouldn't allow him to acknowledge, that his humor was subversively impractical, or even that his film was radically based in subversive humor.

In the chapter on surrealism in his autobiography Buñuel glances at one of his later titles: "Your liberty," he says, addressing himself, "is only a phantom that travels the world in a cloak of fog."²⁴ He is thinking specifically of the showdown with the surrealists and his own anger at being told what he should do. "Are you with the police or with us?" Breton had asked. Buñuel felt he had a right to act freely but also that the surrealists were right to suggest that his freedom was more imaginary than he had thought. In various ways all of his work reflects this double understanding, intuitively grasped even before this quarrel. The political theory implied in Buñuel's films does not recommend action but it does represent vigilance and skepticism, the suspicion that all forms of order, including those we welcome or desire, can turn into tyranny. Through a kind of relentless, disciplined mischief, his films keep supplying cases for consideration. To the sense of so many modernists that the old order was finished and didn't know it, Buñuel brought a continuing allegiance and a couple of qualifications. The old order wasn't as finished as we thought it was, and we ourselves were part of the problem. Modernism was, among many other things, a story of authoritarian ghosts who refused to go away. Those ghosts loved the idea of meaning.

L'Âge d'or, in its careful, rather more elaborate way, is as devoted to disorder as the earlier film. Once it has gotten going—the sequence with the bandits is very straight except for one great joke, and involves a lot of hobbling over the landscape to no great effect—the longer narrative arcs I have described become littered with distractions, often a great deal more interesting than the story we are supposed to be following. It's not just that love interrupts the solemnities of civilization; it's also that love itself, as we have seen, can't keep its mind on the job.

Some gestures have a clear point but not the right point. The lover, our notional hero, breaks away from his captors to kick a small dog; when he sees a blind man waiting to cross the road, he goes out of his way to push the poor fellow over; and in what is perhaps the most startling of these acts of devotion to error, when he receives a telephone call telling him that many children, women, and old men have died because of his dereliction of duty, he says in a rage, "And you disturb me just to tell me that?" ("C'est pour ça que tu me déranges?")

In this regard *L'Âge d'or* has more obvious targets than *Un chien andalou* and its targets align it with the more blatant postures of surrealism, but even then there are complications. It consistently shows respectable society, for example, to be oblivious to shock, capable of ignoring the most extraordinary invasions of comfortable life. A horse and cart complete with drinking peasants makes their way through the ballroom at a party—"the guests stand chatting in groups," the script says, "as though the cart had never even appeared."²⁵ A fire breaks out at the same event, a maid faints, but no one else, apart from two other servants, pays any attention. And in the film's most violent moment, its equivalent of the scene of the eye in *Un chien andalou*, the guests at the party are not exactly indifferent to what has happened, but they do think it is embarrassing or inappropriate rather than anything that calls for immediate action. A gamekeeper, engaged in an affectionate conversation with a boy we take to be his son, gets angry when the boy knocks a half-rolled cigarette out of his father's hands. The man picks up his rifle, aims at the boy as he runs around in play, and shoots him—then shoots him again to make sure he's dead. When we see the gamekeeper explaining to his colleagues what has happened, we are too far away to hear anything, but his manner suggests he thinks he has done only what anyone would have done in such circumstances. The party guests discuss the disturbance then go back to the party. *C'est pour ça que tu me déranges?*

But if respectable society can't be shocked, what are the surrealists up to? Buñuel remembers Breton saying to him sadly, in 1955, "Le scandale n'existe plus," as if the good old violent days had been full of achievements of outrage.²⁶ Perhaps they were to some extent, but the film, already in 1930, is suggesting a tactical vulnerability in the idea of shocking your enemies. All they have to do is ignore you.

The blatant surrealist moments in the film are provocative rather than subversive, and the film is at its funniest, and its most subtly modernist, when it abandons sense and decorum rather than even bothering to attack them, a gesture we have seen in the image of the falling cyclist in *Un chien andalou*. An assault on an all-too-coherent old order becomes an oblique revelation of its secret incoherence. A dying bandit lists for his leader (Max Ernst) all the valuable possessions the group has: "you've got accordions, hippopotamuses, keys, climbing goats and painters." A well-dressed man kicks a violin along a street, and then stamps on it. A cow sits on the young woman's bed; she is not surprised to see it, just mildly annoyed, and she orders it to leave as one might a mischievous but not badly trained dog; the cow gets up and goes. The young woman's father's face is covered with flies; no one else's is, and the flies are not there when we see him again. A man commits suicide, and floats upward out of his shoes to lie on the ceiling as if it were the floor.

The most powerful of these social non sequiturs occurs when the awkward embraces of the man and woman in the garden grow a little less febrile. They find a restful way to sit and cling to each other, and everything seems calm. Then the woman says, out of nowhere, "What joy! What joy! To have murdered our children." We move to a close-up of the man's face, his eyes half-closed, traces of blood running from

one eye, his nose and his mouth. He groans, and says, “Mon amour” five times. It’s tempting to consider this scene in relation to the gamekeeper’s killing of the boy, and the children’s deaths the man is accused of causing, but to think so is to assimilate different deaths into an abstraction, and to deny the specific, local force of the woman’s claim and the image of the man’s face. The lovers don’t have any children, so the murders have to be imagined or prospective, the perceived price of freedom from procreation, perhaps, which has so often been the only excuse society and the church will accept for intercourse. We might think of Charles Baudelaire’s scornful mockery of such an apology for sex: “There was an impudent utopian who affirmed that the greatest pleasure in love was to form citizens for the homeland.”²⁷ But the repeated words “joy” and “love,” and the blood on the face, take us toward Christ and Sade at the end of the movie. I don’t think there is an easy rational reading here, or even a difficult one. We just have to do what we can with the clustered ideas of rapture, violence, suffering, sacrifice, innocence, desire, and crime.

Buñuel said—“sometimes,” as he noted—that surrealism had “triumphed in the incidentals and failed in the essential.”²⁸ And what did Buñuel say at other times? Well, that surrealism had been a discipline for him, that many of its hopes and aspirations had remained with him, and that “the call to the irrational, to the impulses that spring from the dark side of the soul” was something he would never wish to deny.²⁹ But then precisely because it was not declarative or finalizing, what I am calling his modernism—his dedication to subversion not as a program but as an enduring, ostensive practice—outlasted official surrealism, commonly thought to have fallen apart with World War II.³⁰ Buñuel used the conventions of cinematic narration, the wild collaborations of the mind invited by montage, to attack the cinema; but more importantly he used the cinema to put into question our favorite methods of constructing meaning, the secret tidiness of even the most unruly thought.

The result can’t be summarized, and it certainly doesn’t effect a disappearance of meaning—how could it? But we glean a handful of maxims, a sort of defense of permanent interruption, from so many of his films, early and late. Intention and meaning are not necessarily fictions but they are often too readily settled for. Disorder is not a desirable goal and many new orders are worse than the old, but it may help to think of the very idea of order as the perfect candidate for disruptive examination. The politics of such a thought requires something more sustained than an eloquent parade of imperious wishes.

Notes

1. Luis Buñuel, *Mon dernier soupir* (Paris: Laffont, 1982), 149. The first part of the phrase is elided in the English translation, *My Last Sigh: The Autobiography of Luis Buñuel*, Abigail Israel, trans. (New York: Knopf, 1983), 123.

2. André Breton, *Premier Manifeste du surréalisme* (Paris: Pauvert, 1962), 40. “Surrealism . . . tends to ruin once and for all other psychic mechanisms,” in André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane, trans. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 26.
3. Robert Short, *The Age of Gold: Surrealist Cinema* (London: Creation, 2002), 71.
4. Luis Buñuel, “*L'Âge d'or*” and “*Un chien andalou*,” Marianne Alexandre, trans. (London, Lorrimer, 1968), 85, 95.
5. This connection is made in Roman Gubern and Paul Hammond, *Luis Buñuel: The Red Years 1929–1939* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012), 7.
6. Buñuel and Dalí may be thinking of Federico García Lorca’s short text “El paseo de Buster Keaton” (1925), in which the actor falls off his bicycle, but of course the mood and the timing in the film are composed by Buñuel.
7. Henri Bergson evokes “une certaine *raideur de mécanique* là où l’on voudrait trouver la souplesse attentive et la vivante flexibilité d’une personne,” in *Le Rire* (New York: CreateSpace, 2015), 11–12. English version in Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Cloutesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell, trans. (London: Macmillan, 1911), 10: “a certain *mechanical inelasticity*, just where one would expect to find the wide-awake adaptability and the living pliability of a human being.”
8. Paul Sandro writes astutely of “the promise of pleasure turned into an object of derision and partially recovered at a distance through laughter,” in *Diversions of Pleasure: Luis Buñuel and the Crises of Desire* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 1987), 1.
9. Maurice Drouzy, *Luis Buñuel architecte du rêve* (Paris: Lherminier, 1978), 40, 42.
10. Buñuel, *Mon dernier soupir*, 125; *My Last Sigh*, 104.
11. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Colin Smith, trans. (London: Routledge, 2002), xxii.
12. Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí, “*Un chien andalou*,” *La Revolution surréaliste*, no. 12 (December 1929), 34.
13. Short, *Age of Gold*, 6.
14. Luis Buñuel, “Carl Dreyer’s *The Passion of Joan of Arc*,” in *An Unspeakable Betrayal: Selected Writings*, Garrett White, trans. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 122.
15. Lev Kuleshov, *Kuleshov on Film*, Ron Levaco, trans. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 48.
16. Adan Falcon, “The Monstrous Eye: Digression as Aesthetic in *Un chien andalou*,” *Portals* 13, 2016, 3.
17. Tomás Turrent and José de la Colina, *Buñuel por Buñuel* (Madrid: Plot, 1993), 70.
18. Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory* (New York: Harcourt, 1968), 28.
19. Jean Vigo, “Vers un cinéma social,” cited in Buñuel, “*L'Âge d'or*” and “*Un chien andalou*,” 75.
20. Buñuel, *Mon dernier soupir*, 125; *My Last Sigh*, 103–4.
21. Quoted in Buñuel, “*L'Âge d'or*” and “*Un chien andalou*,” 8.
22. See Paul Hammond, *L'Âge d'or* (London: British Film Institute, 1997), 18.
23. Buñuel, “*L'Âge d'or*” and “*Un chien andalou*,” 8.
24. Buñuel, *Mon dernier soupir*, 131–32; *My Last Sigh*, 109. Translation slightly modified.
25. Buñuel, “*L'Âge d'or*” and “*Un chien andalou*,” 8.
26. Buñuel, *Mon dernier soupir*, 137, 146; *My Last Sigh*, 114, 121.
27. Charles Baudelaire, *Journaux intimes* (Paris: Livres Généraux, 1910), 5.

28. Buñuel, *Mon dernier soupir*, 149; *My Last Sigh*, 123.
29. Buñuel, *Mon dernier soupir*, 149; *My Last Sigh*, 123.
30. See Andrew Hussey, “Paris: Symbolism, Impressionism, Cubism, Surrealism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms*, Peter Brooker, Andrzej Gąsiorek, Deborah Longworth, and Andrew Thacker, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 668.

Ozu Yasujirō's *A Story of Floating Weeds* and the Art of Being Behind

Carrie J. Preston

In Ozu Yasujirō's silent film *A Story of Floating Weeds* (*Ukigusa monogatari*, 1934), Kihachi (Sakamoto Takeshi), the aging leader of an itinerant kabuki troupe, repeatedly scratches his behind when he is distraught, confused, or lying (see Figure 10.1).¹ This gesture appears to be directed at the viewer's face because of Ozu's famously low camera position, the so-called *tatami shot*. As commonly described by film historians, Ozu's *tatami* shot was produced by fixing the camera at the eye level of a person kneeling on the *tatami*-covered floor of a Japanese room in the position of *seiza*, a formal posture associated with contemplation.² This association of camera height with the cultural practice of kneeling is used as evidence for another cliché about Ozu, that he is "the most Japanese" and "most traditional of Japanese directors."³ In seeming contradiction, other critics suggest that Ozu's camera work departs from the conventions of popular cinema and makes him "an experimental filmmaker, quite likely the greatest" to be applauded alongside European directors such as Robert Bresson and Carl Theodor Dreyer.⁴ Ozu's shot seems "traditional" when associated with the prevalence of kneeling in *noh*, *kabuki*, and other Japanese art forms. It seems "experimental" when compared to the work of European modernist directors who also rejected the conventions of popular Hollywood camerawork. Ozu's cinema undermines the common binary between tradition and modernist experimentation and its corollary binary between the so-called "East" and "West." Ozu establishes a form of modernist cinema that combines western art forms, innovative camerawork, and traditional Japanese arts, particularly theater, in films that subtly avoid political and cultural trends of Japan—and of the twentieth-century world more generally.

The appeal of the *tatami*-shot construct is so strong that it has blinded critics both to the exoticism in the term and to the actual height of Ozu's camera. It was sometimes higher and sometimes lower than *seiza*, as was memorably demonstrated when Ozu's trusted cameraman, Atsuta Yuharu, lay (not knelt) on the ground to demonstrate his work behind the camera for Wim Wenders's diary-documentary-tribute to Ozu, *Tokyo-Ga* (1985) (see Figure 10.2). Like most filmmakers around the world, Ozu based his camera height on the scene he was filming rather than the cultural practice of kneeling. As David Bordwell observes, Ozu usually "set the lens axis between halfway and two-thirds of the way down the object to be filmed."⁵ While Ozu's camera



Figure 10.1 Kihachi scratching his behind, Ozu Yasujirō, *A Story of Floating Weeds* (1934)

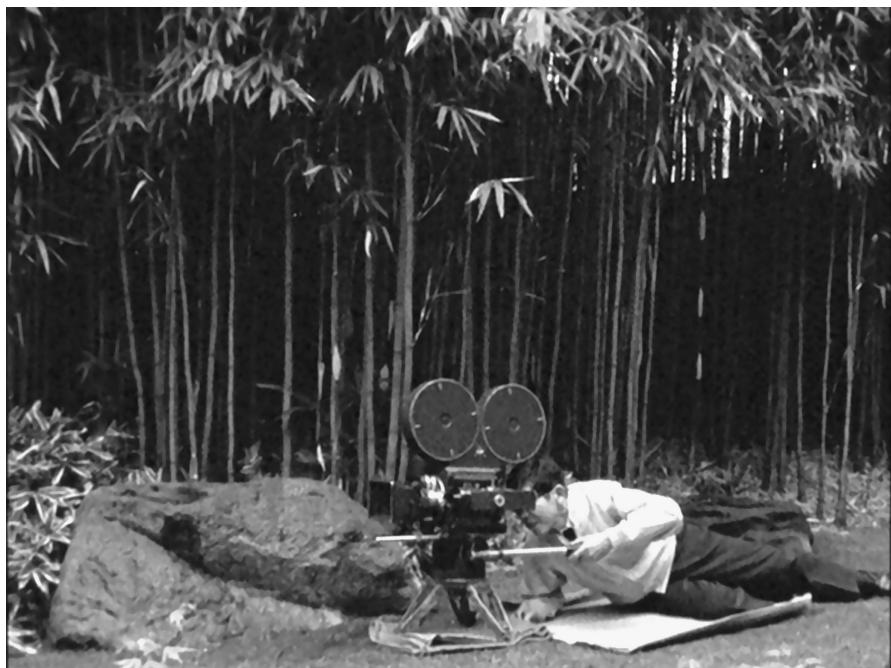


Figure 10.2 Atsuta Yuharu filming on the ground, Wim Wenders, *Tokyo-Ga* (1985)

was lower than that of many directors, proportion determined the height rather than a fixed perspective. If the object was a person in seiza, the camera would obviously be very low. If the object was the standing Kihachi, the camera would be centered on his rear end when he was directed to scratch by Ozu, who meticulously choreographed his actors' movements. It is tempting to read this scratch as Ozu figuratively turning his behind on the contradictory interpretations of his career as being bound to Japanese traditionalism or (European) modernist experimentation.

Ozu's *A Story of Floating Weeds* is particularly useful for breaking down the binary opposition between traditionalism and experimentation so often applied to Japanese filmmakers. The film is often cited as evidence for Ozu the traditionalist in that it is among only five of Ozu's fifty-four works not set in modern Tokyo; it is silent at a time when synchronized sound was possible; and its star, Kihachi, is a kabuki player who holds on to his craft (as well as his rear) after audiences have abandoned the show. Yet, as a loose adaptation of the American film *The Barker* (1928), directed by George Fitzmaurice, *A Story of Floating Weeds* might also seem to embrace western cinema and culture. But, by turning his camera on country kabuki performance, Ozu invoked a genre within Japanese film history, kabuki film, which created a mingled cinematic and live performance form that used traditional theater for modern innovation. He focused on kabuki at a time when the Japanese government began to exalt theatrical traditions for nationalistic and militaristic purposes. Japan encouraged cinematic representations of "Japaneseness" and reimagined popular "low" arts like kabuki as national treasures. The year Ozu directed *A Story of Floating Weeds* also saw the establishment of the Film Control Committee (*Eiga Tōsei Iinkai*) to oversee the "entertainment-propaganda function" of the medium.⁶ The film industry was tasked with depicting the glories of Japan's samurai past and rising empire. Films about pre-Meiji Japan and foreign locations could be used to advocate a return to a "pure" Japanese culture at home and imperialist pursuits abroad. But films about modern life, *gendaigeki*, were under intense scrutiny, particularly Ozu's specialty sub-genre, *shōshimingeiki*, dramas about ordinary people and low-class individuals negatively impacted by the Depression. In 1938, the Home Ministry Censorship Division banned all *shōshimingeiki* along with films "depicting the single-minded pursuit of private happiness," those presenting the "super-rich," and scenes of drinking or women smoking cigarettes.⁷

At a moment when being a Japanese patriot meant embracing western military technologies and forms of conquest but celebrating politically driven conscriptions of traditional arts, Ozu engaged the purportedly "western" art of film while refusing to deal with its most recent technological development of sound. Just before Ozu received his own marching orders in the military (1937–1939), *A Story of Floating Weeds* drifts behind the times, pauses to scratch at the new constructions of Japanese traditions, and then turns its back on them, along with some versions of European modernism.

Floating Plots

A *Story of Floating Weeds* focuses on rural life in Japan, and aside from some shots of trains and bicycles, there are few references to modernity, an approach that probably relaxed potential censors targeting *shōshimingeiki*. The film's title, *Ukigusa monogatari*, similarly appealed to the censors with its invocation of the Japanese literary form of the prose epic (as in the famous *Genji monogatari* by Lady Murasaki, c. 1021). *Ukigusa*, literally duckweed, also derives from Japanese classical literature as a metaphor for weeds floating aimlessly on the currents of life.⁸ Kihachi is floating in many ways, from town to town with his kabuki troupe and from woman to woman and back again—a pattern that is the source of the film's central problem. He returns to the mountain village where his former lover, Otsune (Iida Choko), is raising their son, Shinkichi (Mitsui Hideo), to believe that Kihachi is his uncle. To conceal his visits to their home from his current mistress and leading lady, Otaka (Yagumo Reiko), he tells the troupe that he is visiting a patron. Otaka learns of his deceit and his son by a former lover and in revenge pays another actress, Otoki (Tsubouchi Yoshiko), to seduce Shinkichi. Kihachi is furious when he discovers the plot, as typical as those of his plays, and typically, Shinkichi and Otoki fall in love. Otsune reveals to Shinkichi that Kihachi is his father, but the actor leaves again with hopes of becoming a great actor and making Shinkichi proud to claim him.

In the meantime, Kihachi has disbanded his troupe because he drifted into bankruptcy, a regular occurrence for the actor, as memorably figured by the moneybag that floats away in the film's famous fishing scene. Kihachi and Shinkichi cast their lines in choreographed unison until the actor drops his wallet in the river, a gag that disrupts the almost sentimental beauty of the scene. Kihachi claims to have had money in the bag, but Shinkichi wryly points out, "It's floating so no coins." Kihachi retorts, "Did you ever think it might be stuffed with bills?" He betrays the deceit by scratching his butt (see Figure 10.3). Kihachi is generally broke, and the final scenes of the film have him reconciling with Otaka and leaving town on a train with plans to start a new troupe, all part of a pattern for actors who float like weeds and empty moneybags on a river.

Kabuki marks the film's concern with theatrical traditions and shapes the performance style of the actors. Kihachi's signature gestures like scratching his butt and toyng with his fan or towel are similar to the codified poses called *mie* or *kimaru* that are struck at emotional moments in a kabuki play. Kihachi demonstrates a common *mie* after the little boy-dog, Tomi-boh (Aoki Tomio), has run off crying during the humorously bad show the troupe gives early in the film. Kabuki, noh, and other Japanese performance genres are all composed of *kata*: that is, movement patterns appearing throughout the repertory in different sequences. Ozu also generated *kata* for his actors, designating just when they were to perform a gesture and dictating their physicality with extreme precision. Kihachi and Shinkichi perform *kata* during the fishing scene when they cast precisely together and then bounce their poles exactly three



Figure 10.3 Fishing and scratching, Ozu Yasujirō, *A Story of Floating Weeds* (1934)

times. The actress Higashiyama Chieko described Ozu's choreography with her teacup in *Early Summer* (*Bakushu*, 1951): "He was most particular about where the cup should be in relation to each word ... If you did just the form [kata] without the spirit, then that was no good either."⁹ Ryu Chishu similarly remembers, "As to Mr. Ozu's way of direction, he had made up the complete picture in his head before he went on the set, so that all we actors had to do was to follow his directions, from the way we lifted and dropped our arms to the way we blinked our eyes."¹⁰ Ozu ruled over the performance of his actors in the manner of a master of a traditional theater troupe, dictating their physicality and prohibiting personal style.

Ozu not only adapted kabuki's strict troupe hierarchy and performance techniques but also translated working methods from theater to film. In keeping with the traditional theater's role structure, he gathered a group of actors and cast them in similar roles in film after film. In this sense, Ozu occupied Kihachi's position as troupe master. Ryu performed many of Ozu's father roles, including those with Hara Setsuko as his daughter Noriko in the *Noriko Trilogy*—so named not for any continuity of plot but because Ryu and Hara's characters remain consistent types in the three films.¹¹ The repetition of actors and roles creates familiarity, emphasizes the recursive structures within each film, and undermines assertions of individuality. *A Story of Floating Weeds* is part of the *Kihachi Series*, in which Sakamoto generally plays opposite Iida Choko and depicts a sympathetic failure with a tendency to drift away from a son.¹²

These character types in *A Story of Floating Weeds* are ironically juxtaposed to the standard kabuki roles: the *tateyaku* (“standing role”), or leading man, was probably played by Kihachi in his troupe’s productions, but in the play snippet included in the film, he appears to be a drunken swordsman. Unlike that of a true *tateyaku*, Kihachi’s daily behavior was not governed by the strict codes of the *samurai*. Kihachi repeatedly succumbs to the worldly attractions of women while shirking familial responsibilities, and his only battles involve hitting the two women in his troupe, Otaka and Otoki.

Shinkichi defends Otoki from Kihachi’s violence by pushing him onto his well-scratched rear. Shinkichi is a more typical *nimaime* (“second”), or good-hearted but flawed romantic character. By falling in love with an actress who is ostensibly beneath him, he causes her pain and damages his future prospects, but he is also repeating the patterns of his parents.¹³ In spite of the “*shin*,” or “new,” implied in his name, Shinkichi is as “fast with the women” as his father, and like his mother, he fell for an actor. Ozu uses kabuki’s stock roles and performance styles as part of the series of repetitions, that include Kihachi’s two mistresses, actresses with similar names, repetitive gestures, a pattern of bankruptcy, coming and going by train, and a son who repeats the mistakes of his parents.

Kabuki Film

Ozu’s focus on kabuki players in a silent film made as synchronized sound was transforming cinema around the world recalls the intertwined history of kabuki and Japanese cinema, a context that has been overlooked in discussions of *A Story of Floating Weeds*. The first cameras imported to Japan from the French company Gaumont brought the modern/western medium of film into contact with the traditional stage arts.¹⁴ Japan’s first commercial film, which was released in 1898 (just three years after the Lumière brothers first screened a film for a paying audience in Paris), was a central framing shot of three geisha dancing. Cameras in a fixed position focused on the stage for the next decade. There was a brief hiatus from 1904 through 1905 when 80% of all films released were documentaries or pseudo-documentaries on the Russo-Japanese War, a phenomenon that anticipated the Japanese government’s insistence that the cinema support the war effort during the 1930s and 1940s.¹⁵ Otherwise, early Japanese films primarily recorded scenes from a kabuki play, a historical entanglement that influenced Ozu’s themes, preferred acting technique, and working methods as well as his cinematography in *A Story of Floating Weeds*.

In the early silent period, kabuki was filmed with the camera imagined as an eye positioned in the audience. When Konishi Ryo shot *The Fifth Scene of the Loyal Forty-Seven Retainers* (*Chushingura godanme*, 1907) with kabuki star Kataoka Nizaemon, he attempted to reconstruct the apparatus of the theater on film—not create the illusion that events were taking place in the “real world.” Konishi claimed,

Because everything was supposed to be just like in a play, we purposely spread a scenic curtain or made a temporary stage . . . In order to fit everything happening on stage, I put the camera at about ten meters' distance, and using the method of *idokoro-utsushi* [setting the camera and filming], I would leave the camera as it was.¹⁶

The goal was not for kabuki films to take the performance outside the constraints of theatrical space, as in Euro-American conceptions of cinematic “realism,” but to mimic stage kabuki as closely as possible. Live musicians and a chorus performed next to the kabuki film screen, just as the musicians and chorus kneel on the kabuki stage but are separate from the play’s action. These figures serving narrative or diegetic functions are common in Japanese performance forms from kabuki to noh and bunraku. J. L. Anderson uses the term “commingled media” to describe the combination of storytellers or narrators, actors, onstage musicians and stage assistants, dances that are separate from the action, and visual elements like masks and pictures in Japanese performance.¹⁷ The long tradition of commingled media influenced many aspects of early Japanese film, including *rensageki*, chain dramas that were usually derived from the kabuki repertory but juxtaposed live performance and filmed scenes. After performing a live kabuki scene, the actors would, for example, dash backstage just as a film screen lowered over the stage, and then appear immediately in a previously filmed scene—as if they had literally run into the film. The appeal of *rensageki* was the movement from a live medium to a recorded, technologically mediated one, and the form dominated Japanese film production for twenty-five years. A 1915 poll showed that a third of Japan’s favorite actors worked only in *rensageki*.¹⁸

While kabuki films and *rensageki* had faded by 1920, another figure in Japanese film’s commingled media, the narrator called *benshi* or *katsuben*, was still celebrated when Ozu made *A Story of Floating Weeds*.¹⁹ One of Japan’s most distinctive cinematic institutions, the *benshi* stood or knelt to the left of the screen in full view of the audience, interpreted the film, read or improvised dialogue for the actors on screen, and served as a model for the audience’s response.²⁰ Celebrated *benshi* drew big crowds, sometimes receiving higher billing than the movie stars on the screen.²¹ *A Story of Floating Weeds* would have been screened with a *benshi* interpreter in 1934, and by refusing synchronous linked sound, Ozu encouraged the *benshi*’s art.²² While Ozu intentionally lagged behind advances in cinematic technology, the Japanese film industry as a whole was slower to incorporate sound than industries in Europe and the United States, which were primarily releasing “talkies” by the end of the 1920s. The first extant Japanese sound film, Mizoguchi Kenji’s *Furusato* (*Hometown*), was produced in 1930, but silent pictures were made for the rest of that decade.²³ In 1937, one fifth of Japanese films were still silent and narrated by one of the 3,695 professional *benshi*, whereas silent films had virtually disappeared in western Europe and the United States by 1931.²⁴ Sound technology arrived in Japan during an economic depression, so it was difficult for cinemas to raise the money needed to convert their equipment. The popularity of the *benshi* also delayed the transition to sound in Japan,

as they resisted with strikes and some rather ingenious media-mixing strategies of their own: *benshi* turned down the sound tracks of foreign-made talkies so that audiences could just barely hear the synchronous dialogue and then spoke over the sound.²⁵

The *benshi* who would have performed with *A Story of Floating Weeds* and the influence of kabuki and *rensageki* contributed to the theatricality of Ozu's films. Critics sometimes attribute this quality not to a specific Japanese film history but to an inherent theatricality in Japanese art, architecture, and everyday social interactions. Donald Richie suggests that houses in Japan resemble theaters with their elevated floors, screens sliding like curtains, and stage-like tokonoma alcoves displaying flowers or scrolls. He emphasizes Ozu's tendency to fix his camera in a central corridor of a home and use the square construction of Japanese architecture as a theater-like frame for the events of daily life.²⁶ Inhabitants move with what Richie calls "a degree of ceremony" that includes taking off street shoes and putting on house slippers and kneeling for conversations and meals. Of course, cultural practices that are "normal" for participants frequently seem ceremonial to outside observers, and any cinematic rendering can change the quality of mundane actions to make them seem ritualized. Appearing to overlook the influence of kabuki films, Richie suggests that Ozu's technique developed from American silent films, which were imagined as "filmed stage plays" before a more rigorous understanding of cinematic space emerged.²⁷ Keiko McDonald also suggests that cinema struggled to disentangle itself from the theater because "theatrical traditions in Japan were so strong that the new art could not at first imagine dramatic conventions as its own. This burden of tradition retarded the formation of a specifically cinematic grammar."²⁸ Yet the assumption of a teleological development into a cinema purified of theater's influence does not accommodate Ozu, who retained his interest in theater throughout his career. He worked as playwright and screenwriter, incorporated theatrical performance into films such as *A Story of Floating Weeds*, *Floating Weeds* (*Ukigusa*, 1959), and *Late Spring* (*Banshun*, 1949), and continued to use camera techniques associated with the early "theatrical" style in every film he made.²⁹

Ozu's Low, Still Shot

Ozu's cinematography became ever more static throughout his career, even as technology enabled more sophisticated camera movements. He began to avoid fades after 1930 and used only two in *A Story of Floating Weeds*. He gave up dissolves about the same time, claiming, "The dissolve is not an element of 'film grammar' or whatever, but is simply an attribute of the camera."³⁰ The central element in his "film grammar" is a shot of a single actor facing into a camera set at a relatively low height. Also the most common shot in kabuki film, it positions the viewer as if in an audience before a stage and contributes to a realism that mimics the experience of watching a play. Ozu's restriction of camera movement produced effects resembling those older

mixed stage/film forms, and his cinematography has been framed as a throwback to a time when movies were bound to the pre-cinematic aesthetics of Japanese theater. But the same techniques have also been read as indications of Ozu's modernist style. He engaged both kabuki traditions and the cinematography of kabuki films not as a burden of tradition but as an opportunity to create visual experiences mingling effects associated with the stage and screen, tradition and innovation. For Ozu, "film grammar" was not opposed to theatrical grammar but to the special effects of the camera as a moving apparatus rather than a recorder of visual compositions—the ordered compositions that are Ozu's distinctive art.

The term tatami shot problematically diverts attention from Ozu's visual composition to link his cinematography with a traditional floor covering as if it could be explained by Japanese interiors. Tatami shot implies that "foreign" cultural practices such as kneeling on mats determine cinematic practices, particularly camera height. It is hard to imagine that an American filmmaker who used a low camera position would become known for a "linoleum" or "recliner" shot. In fact, directors from John Ford to Orson Welles used low-angle shots, and even placed the camera in a hole below the floor, to produce desired effects. Critical explanations for Ozu's low camera position line up on one side of the dichotomy between retrograde traditionalism and modernist innovation. Tadao Sato argues that Ozu's shot is "ceremonial" and "purely traditional," as it turns the camera into a respectful and invisible Japanese observer kneeling on the tatami.³¹ Richie points to the influence of "traditional Japanese art," particularly the low angle in woodblock prints.³² Noël Burch takes the opposite side of the binary, claiming that Ozu attempted to produce a modernist disorientation with low camera settings and challenges to cinematic continuity.³³ Burch argues that Ozu's "bad" eyeline match produces a 'jolt' in the editing flow, a moment of confusion in the spectator's sense of orientation to diegetic space, requiring a moment's readjustment.³⁴ Eyeline matching, a standard feature of Hollywood-style "continuity" or "analytical" editing, is the presumed cinematic "rule" that the camera must follow the gaze of actors to show what they see and that cinematic space is composed of shots and countershots in which actors maintain consistent angles of vision. This rule is thought to be particularly important for shooting a conversation between two characters. If Shinkichi is standing directly to the right of Kihachi, as in the fishing scene, their conversation should be shot with Shinkichi always looking left toward Kihachi and vice versa. The establishing shots show father and son positioned in a line parallel to the riverbank as they perform their choreographed fishing kata. When Shinkichi speaks, he turns his torso to his left but looks diagonally off screen rather than to the position Kihachi should occupy. When the father responds, he turns over his right shoulder, as the eyeline match would dictate, but he turns almost ninety degrees rather than forty-five, and looks behind him, not in the direction Shinkichi should be. Ozu shoots this shot/reverse-shot sequence as if the actors were standing in a staggered line, diagonal to the riverbank, rather than next to each other (see Figure 10.4).

Kihachi's backward glance that goes too far might suggest that Ozu did not understand the cinematic principle of eyeline matching, but he knew he was breaking



Figure 10.4 Breaking eyeline match, Ozu Yasujirō, *A Story of Floating Weeds* (1934)

the rules. When his editor Hamamura Yoshiyasu confronted him about his failure to give eyeline matches during the shooting of a two-person reverse field sequence, Ozu decided to shoot the scene once with and then again without matching. After viewing both, he concluded, “There’s no difference.”³⁵ Ozu was right; in the fishing scene, viewers know that Kihachi and Shinkichi are engaged in conversation at the river and do not notice the eyeline mismatches. The anecdote suggests that Ozu was not, in fact, seeking to produce a modernist “jolt” of disorientation in the spectator. Instead, he composed each shot so that actors’ faces and bodies were angled in the most aesthetically pleasing way, often to parallel each other or create a “‘torquing’ of the figure,” as occurs in the torsos of both Kihachi and Shinkichi in the fishing scene.³⁶ While Ozu was not particularly concerned with eyeline matching, the actors’ positions in relation to each other and the set were well matched. Bordwell demonstrates that “‘false’ eyeline matches” during a conversation between Kihachi and Otsune just before the fishing trip allow their heads and torsos to be set at identical angles in successive close-ups of each character. That is, “Ozu’s shot/reverse-shot cuts create ‘graphic matches’ of figure position from shot to shot.”³⁷ The “reality principle” assumed by the rule of eyeline matching does not operate in Ozu’s films, just as the Euro-American concept of cinematic realism was not operating in kabuki films. Ozu was more concerned with compositional and pictorial qualities than a cinematic reality that, as his experiment with editor Hamamura Yoshiyasu suggested, was more

conventional than natural or real. Most viewers do not experience a jolt of disorientation thought to be distinctly modernist at Ozu's "lapses of continuity," as Richie calls them. According to Richie, these "lapses" can be explained only as disinterested negligence: "Ozu was meticulous about his script, rigid about his editing, severe with his actors, but relaxed when it came to the actual shooting."³⁸ In fact, Ozu's shots were meticulously designed to create a balanced visual composition.

Ozu's cinematography does not fit easily within either traditionalist or modernist categories. He refused to use new special effects, claiming they were merely "attributes of the camera" and not part of his "film grammar." His spare style echoes kabuki films, and his attention to pictorial effects in his shots also recalls stage aesthetics. If these qualities lend credence to claims that his camera height is quintessentially Japanese, like kneeling on tatami, other practices seem typically modernist: Ozu disrupted the rules of classical cinema when he refused eyeline matching. He also refused to lull audiences into the belief that they are watching the real world pass before them on the screen, a "realism" that would be, in any case, dependent on the spectator's familiarity with the rules of classical continuity editing. Ozu accepted the *benshi*'s commentary when he continued to make silent films after sound technology was available, and his cinematography sought additional distancing or alienating techniques. Such effects are part of traditional Japanese stage arts and the modernist stage arts of, for example, Bertolt Brecht and his followers, which were famously adapted from Asian theatrical forms. The divides between conservative tradition and modernist innovation, matched to "East" and "West" in the orientalist worldview, are effaced in Ozu's work.

Behind Traditionalism and Modernism

A Story of Floating Weeds looks back to kabuki and kabuki film at a time when the monikers "*shin*" and "*shinkō*" invoked by the son's name, Shinkichi, were common and controversial markers of the new or modern: the "*Shin shakai-ha*" was the "New Society" and "*Shinkō geijutsu*" was the "New or Modern Art."³⁹ Another term coined in the 1920s, *modanizumu*, described, according to William Tyler, "a powerful intellectual idea, mode of artistic expression, and source of popular fashion in Japan from approximately 1910–1940."⁴⁰ As a syllabic translation of the sounds of "modernism," *modanizumu* is obviously derived from Euro-American modernism and was written in the katakana form often used for imported words. But, *modanizumu* cannot be understood as a Japanese movement copying Euro-American aesthetics; for one thing, *modanizumu* usually designated forms of mass culture, including film, that have been excluded from western modernism until the turn of the 21st century. Tyler claims that another major difference is that the traditional arts of Japan were not as amenable to modernist renovation as in Europe, where the modernist "revolt against the past constituted a less problematic antithesis between tradition and modernity."⁴¹ Tyler assumes that modernism generally sought to "revolt against the past" and against "tradition," an overgeneralization exposed by Ozu's work and many examples in

Euro-American modernism.⁴² Ozu helps us see that *modanizumu* was indigenous and derivative, constituted by independent aesthetic ideas and transcultural influence, but the same could be said of *all aesthetic movements associated with modernization across the world*. Multiple vectors of cultural exchange characterized aesthetics in the period, including the profound influence of “traditional art” from Japan and other parts of Asia on Euro-American modernists. Some of these cultural crosscurrents were circular, as many Japanese artists advocating modernization were mimicking European modernists who had previously mimicked Japanese kabuki, noh, ukiyo-e, and haiku.

As in other areas of the globe in the period, both proponents and detractors of modernization in Japan understood film as an illuminating register of the impact of modernity on experience. In his important work on European and American film cultures, Michael Valdez Moses describes “the modernist cinema” as “among the most powerful and influential purveyors of a modern conception of everyday life.”⁴³ Modernity’s impact on conceptions of everyday life in Japan, as revealed by film, was distinctive from Euro-American contexts, but it was not dominated by the binaries of “East” versus “West” and tradition versus modernity that organize discussions of Ozu and Japanese film more generally. The literary critic Kobayashi Hideo (1902–1983) claimed in 1933 that, unlike the “previous generation, for whom the struggle between East and West figured crucially in their artistic activity,” his generation had already lost a feeling for “cultural singularity” and was unable to recognize “Western influence” anymore.⁴⁴ This “homeless” condition was evident in the Japanese fascination with foreign films and the *chanbara* (sword-fighting) genre set in the pre-Meiji period. *Gendaigeki*, the genre of film that represented so-called modern life in Japan, was less interesting. Katsumoto Seitiro “Characteristics of the Japanese Cinema” claimed that the extent of the Euro-American influence on Japanese film, however substantial, was no longer interesting, even a “moot question” by the 1930s. For Katsumoto, the Japanese cinema “provides images to the story-telling performance of the feudal age and the popular novels of today.” The “mental position assumed by Japanese poets of the *tanka* and *haiku* schools since ancient times” coexists with contemporary modes of narrative construction.⁴⁵ Katsumoto and Kobayashi, both writing in Ozu’s period, set aside the “East/West” divide and focus instead on the relation between Japan’s feudal period and popular modernity, the ways the idea of the “everyday” and the “modern” are composed of layers of time, with the past jostling against the present.

The itinerant actors in *A Story of Floating Weeds* usually played premodern samurai and their lovers in the plays, so Ozu’s *gendaigeki*, or film about everyday modern life, invokes the swordfighting *chanbara* genre as well as kabuki film. Ozu’s films rarely register interest in presumed conflicts between Japan and “the west,” and his portrait of rural itinerant kabuki in the 1930s also exposes the ironies in the presumed dichotomy between traditionalism and modernity—especially in relation to the Japanese cultural and political situation at the time. With the severe economic depression and consolidation of power in an imperialist, pro-militarist, totalitarian regime, Japan’s censorship of films intensified; the Fiftieth Diet passed the “Regulation for

Motion Picture Censorship" in 1925, moving oversight to the Home Ministry, which promptly suppressed Kinugasa Teinosuke's *Sun* (*Nichirin*, 1925) for "blaspheming the national essence."⁴⁶ What was an "unfamiliar charge" in 1926 became common after the Manchurian and Shanghai Incidents of 1931 and 1932. The government, media, and even film industry helped to orchestrate these dubious incidents to promote rage against the supposed Chinese perpetrators and justify Japanese colonialism in Asia.⁴⁷ When Agrarianist militants assassinated Prime Minister Inukai on May 15, 1932 and destroyed banks, power stations, and other signs of urban capitalism in an effort to return to a premodern Japan and reveal the true "spirit of the nation," the public responded sympathetically.⁴⁸ This supposed rediscovery of "Japaneseness" would, along with aggressive militarism, support the rise of fascism and promote films about the "pure" era of pre-Meiji Japan.

Ozu's *A Story of Floating Weeds* seems to invoke a setting that was far from the center of imperial nationalism and untouched by political pressures. But patriotic rhetoric in the 1930s emphasized the cultural purity of Japan's past and the small villages that had supposedly preserved simple, traditional lifestyles and patriarchal families. Ozu's representation of a rural mountain town complied with this aspect of the patriotism, and he gives a nod to militarism when Kihachi, upon meeting his son again, points out the boy's upcoming eligibility for the draft and confidence that he will be "first class." Yet the film undermined the notion of pure rural villages in scenes of actors drinking with local prostitutes and by depicting a family whose patriarch is floating.

Kihachi's profession in country kabuki would have been of questionable repute in an earlier cultural moment, but traditional performance arts, like kabuki, were being celebrated in the 1930s as part of the new "pure Japaneseness." Other filmmakers who specialized in films about modern Japan and the poor, including Mizoguchi Kenji, tried to avoid censorship by turning to *geidōmono*—films examining the traditional performance arts.⁴⁹ The year after making *A Story of Floating Weeds*, Ozu filmed a documentary about the famous kabuki *onnagata* actor, Onoye Kikugoro VI, performing the *Kagamijishi* lion dance. This documentary was one of the "cultural films" (*bunka eiga*) promoted by the Japanese government and sponsored by the Japan Cultural Association (Kokusai bunka shinkokai) for the purpose of celebrating indigenous traditions and fostering a national character. Half of the film was shot with a silent camera at Ozu's distinctive low position and used relatively static shots to document Kikugoro's dressing room with voice-over commentary. Ozu filmed the dance performance before an audience as his first attempt at synchronized sound and an unusually high (for Ozu) camera position.⁵⁰ Guests at the preview commented that the male actor's depiction of a female court dancer—the central feature of kabuki's *onnagata* tradition—was unrealistic, and the Cultural Association subsequently withdrew the film.⁵¹ Given that Ozu refused sound technology in his next two films, it seems likely that he was not pleased with *Kagamijishi*, either.

Ozu might have chosen to focus on kabuki players in *A Story of Floating Weeds* to participate in the new celebrations of agrarianism and Japanese "traditional arts." Yet,

his depiction of Kihachi and his troupe is far more ambivalent than his portrait of Kikugoro in *Kagamijishi* and hardly the kind of material that would have been sponsored by the Japan Cultural Association. Kihachi is likable, but he is certainly not a great man or actor. During the fishing scene, Shinkichi offers to attend his performance, but Kihachi replies, “Our show isn’t for you. You’re a student. Your job is to study.” Presumably, Kihachi’s troupe did not aim to perform for educated audiences. It is clear from the humorously bad snippet of the act that Kihachi’s troupe is not offering great theater, but the audience is delighted with, for example, the boy-in-a-dog-suit who misses his entrance because he is (tellingly) playing with theatrical devices that mimic the sound of clapping. Ozu spends less time on the show than on the actors in the wings who scan the audience for pretty women. This scan humorously parallels one of the few instances in which the camera moves in the film: a slow tracking shot on a low dolly shows the seated audience waiting for the performance to begin. The lingering camera suggests that even the audience is more interesting than the kabuki to come. A similar tracking shot later in the film proceeds in the opposite direction with the audience replaced by the actors watching the very different show of their theatrical properties being sold. The camera establishes visual and thematic continuity between kabuki and the performance of buying and selling. The supposedly exalted “traditional theater” clearly lacks financial support, since the troupe has been forced to disband and sell their props, and Kihachi manages to get only enough money from the auction to pay his actors’ train fares out of town. The recursive structure of the film’s beginning and ending, with Kihachi coming and going on trains, undermines his declaration that he will start a new troupe and become a great actor. Kabuki seems far more likely to lead Kihachi to yet another round of bankruptcy than to the greatness his son could embrace.

A Story of Floating Weeds adopts kabuki plot structures and acting styles in a film about kabuki actors cheating on one another and going broke. It subtly undermines kabuki’s new status as a sacrosanct element of Japanese culture without indicating any preference for, or even interest in, “western” art forms. A celebration of the foreign would have tipped off the Home Ministry Censorship Division, as would a more overt critique of kabuki. Ozu’s low, almost still camera and refusal of the latest cinematic technology suggest a wariness of modernist innovation to match his suspicion of tradition, which is frequently reinvented for modern purposes. He provides thematic, formal, and technological depictions of being behind, reinforced by repetitions across films. His remake of *A Story of Floating Weeds* (the 1959 film, *Floating Weeds*) offered another Kihachi who might scratch his butt less frequently but maintains other theatrical gestures along with the relevance of his kabuki-derived type in post-War Japan. Even the titles of many Ozu films signal belatedness: *Late Autumn* (1960), *The End of Summer* (1961), and *An Autumn Afternoon* (1962).⁵² *Late Spring* (1949), in the *Noriko Trilogy*, also uses traditional Japanese performance, in this case the noh theater, to precipitate Noriko’s belated marriage.

When asked about his repetitions of characters, plots, titles, and even camera shots, Ozu replied, “I always tell people I don’t make anything besides *tofu*, and

that is because I am strictly a *tofu*-dealer.”⁵³ A *tofu* dealer produces *tofu* year after year; it hardly makes sense to call it old or new, traditional or modern, as the ancient food became popular with vegetarians and then out of favor with environmentalists concerned with genetically modified soybeans. Ozu’s work indicates a suspicion of imported modernist innovation, with its flavor of foreignness, and antimodern traditionalism, too easily adapted for political purposes. Film studies, seeking to broaden its scope beyond Euro-American cinema, must reconsider its reductions of Ozu as the most Japanese of directors with his tatami kneeling camera or the most experimental of filmmakers with the modernist jolt of his camera work. The new modernist studies more generally could learn from Ozu’s disruption of the conflated binary oppositions between tradition and modernity, “East” and “West.”

Notes

1. Ozu Yasujirō, *A Story of Floating Weeds* (*Ukigusa monogatari*), originally produced by Shochiku Eiga, Tokyo, 1949, reissued with *Floating Weeds* (*Ukigusa*, 1959) by Criterion, New York, 2004. This chapter includes arguments about Japanese modernism first presented in my book, *Learning to Kneel: Noh, Modernism, and Journeys in Teaching* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).
2. Vincent Canby, “Film: Yasujiro Ozu, as Director and Subject,” *New York Times* (April 1, 1987), <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/04/01/movies/film-yasujiro-ozu-as-director-and-subject.html>.
3. These phrases appear in many discussions of Ozu and in Donald Richie’s influential *Ozu* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974), xi, 189.
4. David Bordwell, *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 6–7. For other formulations of Ozu as a conservative traditionalist, see David Desser, *Eros plus Massacre: An Introduction to the Japanese New Wave Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988). Ozu’s radical experimentalism and critique of Hollywood were advanced (in somewhat different ways) by Nöel Burch’s *To the Distant Observer: Form and Meaning in the Japanese Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979); and Paul Schrader’s *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dryer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).
5. Bordwell, *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema*, 76.
6. Peter B. High, *The Imperial Screen: Japanese Film Culture in the Fifteen Years’ War, 1931–1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 55.
7. High, *Imperial Screen*, 169.
8. Donald Richie, “Stories of Floating Weeds,” *Current: The Criterion Collection*, <http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/320-stories-of-floating-weeds>.
9. Richie, *Ozu*, 144.
10. Chishu Ryu, “Yasujiro Ozu,” in *Sight and Sound* (1964), 92; reprinted in *Yasujiro Ozu: A Critical Anthology*, John Gillett and David Wilson, eds. (London: British Film Institute, 1976), 38–39.
11. Ryu plays Shukichi Somiya in *Late Spring* (*Banshun*, 1949), Koichi in *Early Summer* (*Bakushu*, 1951), and Shukichi Hirayama in *Tokyo Story* (*Tokyo monogatari*, 1953) opposite

- Hara in the *Noriko Trilogy*. The English translations of Ozu's titles were sometimes quite different from the Japanese. *Bakushū* literally means "wheat autumn," or the time of year when wheat is harvested, which is actually early summer.
12. The *Kihachi Series* includes *Passing Fancy* (*Dekigokoro*, 1933), *A Story of Floating Weeds* (*Ukigusa monogatari*, 1934), *An Innocent Maid* (*Hakoiri musume*, 1935), and *An Inn in Tokyo* (*Tokyo no yado*, 1935). Kihachi's son is usually played by Kozo Tokkan (also known as Aoki Tomio), but he plays the boy actor Tomi-boh while Mitsui Koji (also known as Mitsui Hideo) plays the older Shinkichi in *A Story of Floating Weeds*.
 13. Tadao Sato, *Currents in Japanese Cinema*, Gregory Barrett, trans. (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1982), 15–17.
 14. Komatsu Hiroshi, "Some Characteristics of Japanese Cinema before World War I," in *Reframing Japanese Cinema: Authorship, Genre, History*, Arthur Nolletti, Jr., and David Desser, eds.; Linda C. Ehrlich and Yuko Okutsu, trans. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), 232.
 15. Komatsu, "Characteristics," 239.
 16. Komatsu, "Characteristics," 244–45.
 17. J. L. Anderson, "Spoken Silents in the Japanese Cinema; or, Talking to Pictures: Essaying the *Katsuben*, Contextualizing the Texts," in Nolletti and Desser, *Reframing*, 266.
 18. Anderson, "Spoken Silents," 272.
 19. Anderson, "Spoken Silents," 260. *Benshi* means "speaker or orator," whereas the more precise term *katsuben* "telescopes *katsudō shashin*" or "moving photographs" and "*benshi*." I will use the term *benshi* because it is better known in film studies. Anderson gives 1927–1931 as the "golden age" of the *benshi* (279).
 20. Anderson, "Spoken Silents," 284.
 21. Anderson, "Spoken Silents," 261.
 22. Donald Richie describes *benshi* as a "major obstacle to cinematic technique" because of their resemblance to theatrical narrators, but there is no evidence to suggest that Ozu resisted the *benshi*. Donald Richie, *Japanese Cinema: Film Style and National Character* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 6.
 23. Iwamoto Kenji, "Sound in the Early Japanese Talkies," in Nolletti and Desser, *Reframing*, 315.
 24. Anderson, "Spoken Silents," 292.
 25. Anderson, "Spoken Silents," 290.
 26. Richie, *Ozu*, 116–17.
 27. Richie, *Ozu*, 148. Richie writes that "the kind of mentality that created the Kabuki resembles the one that created the sword-fight film, which allows innocent critics to speak of the Kabuki's influence on the Japanese cinema when, in fact, none exists" (*Ozu*, 175).
 28. Keiko I. McDonald, *Reading a Japanese Film: Cinema in Context* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006), 2.
 29. Ozu wrote skits for the Imperial Theater, Mitsukoshi Hall, and Tokyo Theater from 1933 to 1946. Richie, *Ozu*, 117.
 30. Bordwell, *Ozu*, 103.
 31. Sato, *Currents in Japanese Cinema*, 37.
 32. Richie, *Ozu*, 116. In *Japanese Cinema: Film Style and National Character* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), Richie sets the "traditionalism of an Ozu" against "the adventuresomeness of a Kurosawa" (100).

33. For more on debates about Ozu's traditionalism or modernism, see Kathe Geist, "Playing with Space: Ozu and Two-Dimensional Design in Japan," in *Cinematic Landscape: Observations on the Visual Arts and Cinema of China and Japan*, eds. Linda C. Ehrlich and David Desser (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 283–98.
34. Burch, *Distant Observer*, 159.
35. Burch, *Distant Observer*, 159.
36. Bordwell, *Ozu*, 97.
37. Bordwell, *Ozu*, 91, 98.
38. Richie, *Ozu*, 112. Richie's "lapses" include the movement of objects in a scene between shots when there is no reason for them to have changed position.
39. William J. Tyler, *Modanizumu: Modernist Fiction from Japan, 1913–1938* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 3.
40. Tyler, *Modanizumu*, 19.
41. Tyler, *Modanizumu*, 37.
42. See my book, *Modernism's Mythic Pose: Gender, Genre, Solo Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) for examples of anti-modern works by Euro-American modernist artists, including H. D. (Hilda Doolittle), Ezra Pound, Isadora Duncan, and T. S. Eliot.
43. Michael Valdez Moses, "Introduction: A Modernist Cinema?," *Modernist Cultures* 5, no. 1 (2010), 1–8; 3.
44. Hideo Kobayashi, "Literature of the Lost Home," in *Literature of the Lost Home: Kobayashi Hideo—Literary Criticism, 1924–1939*, Paul Anderer, ed. and trans., 52–54 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 53–54.
45. Katsumoto Seitiro, "Characteristics of the Japanese Cinema," in *Japan Film Yearbook* (1936) quoted in Burch, *Distant Observer*, 148–49.
46. High, *Imperial*, 21.
47. High, *Imperial*, 21–35.
48. High, *Imperial*, 39–40.
49. High, *Imperial*, 164.
50. Bordwell, *Ozu*, 267.
51. Ozu-san.com describes the documentary and offers a short clip of the dance: <http://www.a2pcinema.com/ozu-san/films/docs.htm>
52. *Late Autumn* is the English translation for *Akibiyorī* (1960), which actually means "autumn day peace" (or calm or harmony). Translated as *The End of Summer*, *Kohayagawa-ke no aki* (1961) literally means "The Autumn of the Kohayagawa Family." *Sanma no aji* (1962) is translated as *An Autumn Afternoon*, but would more accurately be *Taste of Pike*, a fish (*sanma*) that is strongly associated with autumn in Japan.
53. Richie, *Ozu*, 10.

“That Saves Them the Blessings of Civilization”

John Ford’s *Stagecoach*, the West, and American Vernacular Modernism

Michael Valdez Moses

In the final shot of John Ford’s *Stagecoach*, the Ringo Kid (John Wayne) and Dallas (Claire Trevor) sit atop a buckboard harnessed to a matched pair of horses and ride off into the distance. The outlaw and prostitute light out for a new life together across the border in Mexico, where Ringo has a small spread. As the credits roll, their receding figures are framed by the landscape of Monument Valley, a place that Ford’s Westerns helped make iconographic, a visual synonym for the American west and the American Western.¹ It would seem that we could not be farther from the urban environs of European high modernism: London, Paris, Berlin, Vienna, St. Petersburg. That Ringo and Dallas flee the modern world is confirmed by the words of Doc Boone (Thomas Mitchell), who, along with Marshal Curley Wilcox (George Bancroft), has helped send the lovers on their way: “Well, that saves them the blessings of civilization.”²

For many critics, the American west has offered an escape from the sophistication, decadence, and complications of modern urban life, and the Hollywood Westerns of Ford have seemed the very antitheses of European modernity and Euro-modernism, respectively. When *Stagecoach* premiered in 1939, Frank S. Nugent, critic for *The New York Times* (and scriptwriter for several of Ford’s later Westerns) praised the epic scale, the wide-open spaces, the narrative simplicity, and the lack of artifice that for him distinguished Ford’s picture:

John Ford has swept aside ten years of artifice and talkie compromise and has made a motion picture that sings a song of camera. It moves . . . across the plains of Arizona, skirting the sky-reaching mesas of Monument Valley, beneath the piled-up cloud banks which every photographer dreams about . . . Mr. Ford is not one of your subtle directors, suspending sequences on the wink of an eye or the precisely calculated gleam of a candle in a mirror. . . . He hews to the straight narrative line . . . He takes no shadings from his characters. . . . He likes his language simple and he doesn’t want too much of it. When his [Apaches] bite the dust, he expects to

hear the thud and see the dirt spurt up. Above all, he likes to have things happen in the open, where his camera can keep them in view.³

Ford himself contributed to the myth that he was just a plain-spoken American craftsman who entertained the common folk, the opposite of a European sophisticate or avant-garde auteur: “My name’s John Ford. I am a director of Westerns.”⁴ And yet, in a career stretching over five decades, Ford made numerous films based on contemporary novels, stories, and plays inflected by the idioms of literary modernism, and the director’s most insightful critics note his lifelong engagement with contemporary developments in modern literature and the visual arts, including European cinema.⁵ Paradoxically, America’s quintessential Hollywood director exercised an outsized influence on several generations of auteurist filmmakers including the leading figures of the nouvelle vague, François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Jacques Rivette, and Eric Rohmer (who were among the first to celebrate Ford as an American auteur), to say nothing of Akira Kurosawa, Ingmar Bergman, Luchino Visconti, Federico Fellini, Alfred Hitchcock, Wim Wenders, and Satyajit Ray. Orson Welles, as well as many of the leading directors of the New Hollywood, including Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, Dennis Hopper, and Peter Bogdanovich, have openly acknowledged the powerful and lasting effect of Ford’s style on their own art-house and “independent” films.⁶

Stagecoach is, surely, a (if not “the”) classic Hollywood Western, a popular and commercially successful movie meant to entertain a mass audience.⁷ But is it also, however improbably, a subtle and sophisticated work of cinematic modernism? Might Ford’s film conceal its aesthetic pretensions and avant-garde characteristics in plain sight? If Ford’s film indulges its audience in an escapist fantasy and a historical romance set amid an American Wild West in which the Apaches have yet to be subdued by federal forces and “civilization,” if the movie offers a retreat from the ills of modern urban existence, might it nonetheless grapple, both formally and topically, with the political and social crises of modernity that beset the late 1930s? Despite its surface simplicity, might *Stagecoach* be helpfully placed alongside acknowledged “modernist” European cinematic masterpieces that dramatize the problems and challenges of twentieth-century urban life such as Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927), F. W. Murnau’s *Sunrise* (1927), or G. W. Pabst’s *Diary of a Lost Girl* (1929)?

In what follows, I argue that Ford understood his classic Western to have been rooted in a “highbrow” European literary tradition—French naturalism—a forerunner of literary modernism. I maintain that *Stagecoach* is very much a film about the temptations, corruptions, and ills of urban modernity, a complex set of social pathologies that are treated (diegetically), though not fully cured, by a kind of dramatic shock treatment: a therapeutic if necessarily dangerous journey into the American Wild West. I contend that Ford’s film, like so many other works of literary and cinematic modernism (especially of the 1930s), obliquely grapples with the interrelated “crises of modernity” that characterized the interwar years, a crucial and turbulent period in which the legitimacy and stability of liberal democracy was put to the test. *Stagecoach* comments, however

indirectly, on the economic and political challenges of the Great Depression, the decline of liberal tolerance and an alarming increase in official and unofficial forms of public censorship, and the troubling rise of authoritarianism in world affairs. Moreover, I maintain that under the influence of Murnau, Ford achieved in *Stagecoach* a middlebrow modernist style that integrated the formal devices of German expressionist cinema with a distinctive epic vision of the American west that became the signature of the American director and of the Hollywood Western. Finally, I argue that Ford's *Stagecoach* participated in a distinctive form of *vernacular American modernism* that emerged across the arts in the early 1910s, flourished in the 1920s and 1930s, and survived in an attenuated fashion into the post-WWII era.

Miriam Hansen introduced the term "vernacular modernism" in her 1999 essay, "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism."⁸ Challenging David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristen Thompson's influential definition of "classical Hollywood cinema," Hansen questioned "the polarization of classical cinema and modernism."⁹ Hansen argued that "classical Hollywood cinema could be imagined as a cultural practice on a par with the experience of modernity, as an industrially-produced, mass-based, vernacular modernism."¹⁰ According to Hansen,

American movies of the classical period offered something like the first global vernacular. ... This vernacular ... played a key role in mediating competing cultural discourses on modernity and modernization. ... Classical Hollywood cinema succeeded as an international modernist idiom on a mass basis, ... [though] it meant differ things to different people and publics, both at home and abroad.¹¹

It's not my aim here to examine in detail or criticize Hansen's influential thesis (which I find persuasive); instead I offer a different and more historically delimited definition of "*American vernacular modernism*." Whereas Hansen is concerned with how classical Hollywood cinema, tout court, offered to the world a potentially global iteration of a mass-produced and industrially based modernism, I read Ford's "classic" Western as representative of a culturally significant movement *within* early-twentieth-century American culture that has been insufficiently acknowledged and underappreciated. In contrast to what Hansen describes as a popular form of modernism produced by the Hollywood studio system that came to exercise a hegemonic if variable influence on world cinema, I identify a particular though broad-based and capacious artistic movement—at once *national* and *regional*—that comprehended not only American cinema, but also a wide range of other genres of American arts and craftsmanship.

The "Classic" Western, Literary Naturalism, and the Ills of Urban Life

While the concept of middlebrow modernism has gained increasing critical acceptance since the early 2010s,¹² it's worth recalling that the "great divide" between

high and mass culture was often taken as a given in the late 1930s when Ford began work on *Stagecoach*. A popular if not an artistically elevated genre during the silent era, the feature-length Hollywood Western had fallen on hard times with the advent of sound. By the time Ford and Merian C. Cooper unsuccessfully pitched their idea for a new kind of “classic Western” to producer David O. Selznick in 1937, arguing that *Stagecoach* would attain an elevated cultural standing for a downtrodden movie genre, the Hollywood horse opera had been reduced to B-movie status, a downmarket product comprised of low-budget serials made by poverty-row studios for an ancillary distribution circuit that served rural and small-town America.¹³ That the source for the screenplay of *Stagecoach*, Ernest Haycox’s short story “Stage to Lordsburg” first appeared in the April 10, 1937, edition of *Collier’s* suggests that Ford was drawn to material that appealed to more sophisticated middle-class American tastes: *Collier’s* had published Henry James’s “The Turn of the Screw” in 1898 and would feature fiction by Arthur Conan Doyle, Willa Cather, and Sinclair Lewis, along with such popular authors such as Zane Grey.¹⁴

Intriguingly, in an interview conducted in the 1960s, Ford told Peter Bogdanovich that *Stagecoach* “was really [Guy de Maupassant’s] *Boule-de-suif*, and I imagine the writer, Ernie Haycox, got his idea from there and turned it into a Western story.”¹⁵ Critics have been skeptical of Ford’s claim,¹⁶ but true or not, it speaks to the director’s enduring desire to elevate the cultural status of his popular Hollywood Western in the eyes of international film critics, to associate *Stagecoach* with “high” European literature and a literary movement—French naturalism—formerly in the avant-garde of the late nineteenth century, an important predecessor both of literary modernism and post-WWII cinematic neorealism.¹⁷ Ford’s career-long effort to present himself both as a popular entertainer lacking artistic pretensions and as a connoisseur working with or borrowing freely from high European art, his complicated negotiations between “lowbrow” and “highbrow” culture, all speak to the strategies and methods of Ford’s middlebrow modernism.

Ford’s commentators have dwelt upon the differences between Maupassant’s tale of a French prostitute traveling by coach with other refugees of the Franco-Prussian War and Haycox’s story, as well as on the many subsequent changes that differentiate “Stage to Lordsburg” from Dudley Nichols’s screenplay and the final cut of *Stagecoach*.¹⁸ This essay is not the place to examine all the variants, but it worth noting that some of the key changes that Ford ultimately made to the *Collier’s* story have the paradoxical, but intended, effect of giving *Stagecoach* a more cosmopolitan ambience than we popularly associate with a “mere” Saturday-afternoon Western adventure story. Whether or not Haycox was in fact influenced by French naturalism, Ford seems interested in recapturing the decadent social atmosphere of Maupassant’s “original” source material. In “Stage to Lordsburg,” Ringo (called Malpais Bill in Haycox’s short story) is not an outlaw. Neither Doc Boone nor the corrupt banker, Gatewood (Berton Churchill), is a passenger on the stagecoach (their places in Haycox’s story are assumed by an English gentleman-hunter and a prosperous American cattleman). While Ford’s final

cut features characters who have become archetypes of the Hollywood Western, it is significant that they are characters just as comfortably at home in a European (or eastern American) urban environment, one plagued with the ills and corruptions that help define the modern metropolis. The Ringo Kid is an escaped felon, a convicted murderer seeking to revenge himself on other criminals whom he (rightfully) blames for the murder of his brother. Dallas has spent her adult life as a prostitute in the brothels of western boom towns. Called “Henriette” in Haycox’s story, she has a name in Ford’s film that explicitly associates her with American urbanity.¹⁹ She is metaphorically, if not literally, the Woman from the City. The convivial Doc Boone is an alcoholic whose prolific drinking compromises his economic and class status, as well as his professional competence (though he will successfully deliver a baby in the course of the film). Samuel Peacock (Donald Meek) is an amiable whiskey drummer whose livelihood (and that of his respectable middle-class family back in Kansas City) depends on the sale of alcoholic spirits. Hatfield (John Carradine) is a disreputable professional gambler who allegedly shot another man in the back (though he was born the son of an old and aristocratic southern family). Ellsworth Henry Gatewood is a corrupt banker who has embezzled (or simply stolen) funds from his bank’s depositors. Lucy Mallory is the haughty bourgeois wife of a prominent and rising military officer, both of whom hail from the east. If all are stereotypes of the Hollywood Western, the seven passengers who ride inside the stagecoach also provide a diagnostic catalogue of the maladies of urban modernity: violent crime, prostitution, alcoholism, gambling, corrupt and criminal financial practices, social snobbery, and class divisions. Atop the stagecoach sit Marshal Curley Wilcox and the driver, Buck Rickabaugh (Andy Devine)—but even these “Western” types would not be out of place in the big city, as policeman and cabbie, respectively. In fact, all nine major characters in Ford’s ensemble film—with a costume change or two—are fitting subjects for Maupassant and Émile Zola, their American cousins Stephen Crane, Upton Sinclair, and Theodore Dreiser, or their modernist counterparts, James Joyce and Alfred Döblin.

One detail of Haycox’s short story that Nichols and Ford pointedly did choose to preserve—the geographically specific itinerary of the stagecoach—subtly reinforces the sense that the ills of urban modernity continue to shadow the passengers even as they travel through the American southwest. Traditionally, the action and narrative arc of the Hollywood Western move emphatically and predictably *westward* (as in even so hip and revisionary an instance of the genre as Jim Jarmusch’s 1996 acid Western, *Dead Man*). But curiously, Ford’s stagecoach travels *eastward and northward* from Bisbee, Arizona through Tonto, Dry Forks, and Indian Wells, to Lordsburg, New Mexico.²⁰ The passengers are heading toward rather than away from the American cities of the midwest and the eastern seaboard and their attendant ills. As we will see, Ford’s “noirish” and expressionistic vision of even tiny Lordsburg will reinforce our sense that the passengers have *not* escaped the blessings of modern civilization, but rather remain trapped within the gravitational pull

of urban modernity. Ford’s classic Western keeps returning, as it were, to its corrupt origins in European naturalism.

Historical Romance, Interwar Politics, and the Crisis of Modernity

I don’t wish to suggest that Ford is uninterested in the historical realities of the American west. The dramatic appearance of Geronimo (Whitehorse, aka Chief White Horse) and his Chiricahau Apache warriors carefully establish the setting of *Stagecoach* as the American southwest—Arizona and New Mexico—between the years 1881 and 1886.²¹ An avid reader of works of American history, Ford as a maker of Hollywood Westerns is seriously engaged in envisioning what he regards as a more truthful and historically accurate version of a crucial chapter in the making of the modern United States. But following in the footsteps of Walter Scott, author of *Waverley; or 'Tis Sixty Years Since* (1814) and an originator of the historical romance, Ford also makes use of a bygone historical era as a means to comment upon the pressing political and social issues of his own time. Like Lang’s *Die Niebelungen* (1924), Murnau’s *Faust* (1926), Thomas Mann’s *Joseph and His Brothers* (1933–1943), T. S. Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), or Sergei Eisenstein’s *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), Ford’s film dramatizes a past chapter in the history of the American west as a way of grappling with the so-called “crisis of modernity” and the political and social controversies of the interwar years and the Depression era. Edward Buscombe persuasively argues that Gatewood’s hypocritical and self-serving diatribe against the government should be understood as Ford and Nichols’s satiric comment on the commercial and banking practices of the 1920s that preceded the Great Depression and an implicit endorsement of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal policies of the early 1930s:

I don’t know what the government’s coming to. Instead of protecting businessmen it pokes its nose into business. Why, they’re even talking now about having bank examiners. As if we bankers don’t know how to run our own banks. ... I have a slogan which should be blazoned on every newspaper in the country. America for Americans. The government must not interfere with business. Reduce taxes. Our national debt is something shocking. ... What this country needs is a businessman for President.

Buscombe argues that Gatewood’s blustery and anti-immigrant rhetoric apes the (mainly Republican) critics of FDR’s New Deal; Ford’s contemporary audience would have understood the speech as a reference to Senate investigations of the early 1930s that revealed “widespread fraud and chicanery” on Wall Street, scandals that prompted the New Deal Banking Acts of 1933 and 1935, imposing stricter

federal regulations and accountability on the American financial industry.²² Whether Buscombe is entirely right about the specific political allusions (and the capacity of Ford's audience to identify them), such topical references to the Great Depression, the banking and Wall Street scandals of the early 1930s, and Roosevelt's New Deal help constitute a larger pattern of allusions in *Stagecoach* that obliquely but insistently address the global historical crisis of the interwar years that challenged the legitimacy and resilience of liberal democracy and laissez-faire capitalism.

In an early scene in *Stagecoach*, Marshal Wilcox and the ladies of the Law and Order League escort the prostitute, Dallas, out of Tonto. Joined by a drunken Doc Boone (evicted from his lodgings for nonpayment of rent—another trope of Depression-era literature and cinema), Dallas takes her place in the stagecoach headed to Lordsburg. Dallas asks Doc whether she hasn't a legal right to stay in town, but the social pressure of the Law and Order League, backed by the authoritarian efforts of the Marshal (who knowingly acts outside the law) is sufficient to compel Dallas. To be sure, the scene is played largely for comic and satiric effect. Warned that Geronimo is on the warpath and that the stagecoach journey will be dangerous, Dallas sardonically comments that there are "worse things than Apaches." Ford cuts immediately to a medium shot of the Ladies of the Law and Order League.

The scene hews to a historically realistic portrait of the Old West (in the spirit of Mark Twain), and yet an attentive viewer of the 1930s might have detected, in Doc Boone's moral solidarity with Dallas, his insistence that they are both victims of "social prejudice," and his mutual hostility toward the Ladies of the Law and Order League (who are only too happy to see the back of the alcoholic physician) another allusion to contemporary American politics of the interwar years: a backhanded reference to Prohibition, which had only recently ended in 1933 with the passage of the Twenty-First Amendment to the US Constitution. Ford, an epic drinker even in a Hollywood infamous for its excesses, relishes a dig at Tonto's bluenoses. They are stand-ins for those progressive social reformers of the temperance movement who for more than thirteen years had prevailed on the federal and state governments to ban alcoholic spirits in the United States. Ford's satire might seem a cheap shot at an already defeated foe; but if the historical counterparts of Tonto's disapproving ladies had by 1939 long lost the fight to enforce one form of abstinence, their moral descendants had infuriated Ford (and much of Hollywood) by having achieved another recent and highly public victory with the establishment of the Hollywood Production Code Administration (PCA) in 1934.²³ To be sure, the religious association that had most forcefully agitated for the censorship of Hollywood films was the (Catholic) National Legion of Decency, but the efforts of Catholic clergy, intellectuals, and parishioners were widely supported by the same sorts of Protestant religious associations and progressive social, educational, and scientific reformers who had spearheaded the temperance movement in decades past. Until its demise in the 1950s, the Production Code Administration would officially remain a privately administered system of censorship controlled by the American motion-picture industry, but Ford was well aware that the "Breen Office" (the unofficial name of the Production Code Administration

managed by Joseph I. Breen) had been forced upon the studios by senior officials of FDR's administration. Had the studios failed “voluntarily” to impose censorship on themselves, FDR's New Dealers were prepared to use the authority of the National Industrial Recovery Act to impose a government-run system of film censorship on Hollywood.²⁴ It is thus significant that the extralegal ostracism of Dallas (and Boone) from Tonto by forces religious, social, and even governmental is given a conspicuous and arresting visual focus by Ford: ascending the stagecoach, Dallas is captured in a medium shot as she reveals her stockinginged leg to the admiring gaze of Tonto's men-folk and the outraged one of the Ladies of the League. Ford's framing is a provocative (if sly) dig at the Breen Office and the Production Code. The shot was not transgressive enough to warrant a cut by the PCA, but it provides a brief show of defiance by Ford, whose film drew the wary attentions of Breen himself.²⁵

Ford's “classic” Western is thus craftily embedded within a complex set of visual and narrative allusions to contemporary political and social issues that complicate the director's relationship to American progressivism and its attempt to redefine American modernity. A hard-drinking Irish Catholic and a New Dealer, an avid supporter of many of FDR's financial and regulatory reforms of the 1930s and a self-described “socialist democrat” (at least in 1937),²⁶ Ford could also be a critic of the moral, religious, and scientific certainties undergirding an American progressivism that successfully advocated for Prohibition during the Wilson administration and a more rigorous form of film censorship under FDR. Ford's concerns here can seem parochial (those of a Hollywood director) or narrowly American. But it's worth recalling that the *global politics* of the interwar years, in which the viability of liberal democracy was cast into doubt, were characterized by the forceful efforts of governments of the left and right to create both a revolutionary modern polity and a “new man,” experiments requiring extensive forms of moral censorship and the imposition of illiberal and anticapitalist norms on whole populations, including, most conspicuously, artists: such was the case, for example, in Italy, Germany, Spain, the Soviet Union, and Japan.²⁷ Ford, like so many Euro-modernists (including his Irish and British counterparts), found himself having to take sides in this politicized atmosphere, if only to defend his own conceptions of the proper role of art and the committed artist in a modern (even revolutionary) society.

German Expressionism and Ford's Noir Western

By drawing our attention to Ford's debt to European literary naturalism, his sustained focus on the ills of modern urban existence, his desire to raise the cultural status of a downtrodden Hollywood genre, and his oblique but insistent engagement with the political and social problems of modern society—especially American society during the interwar years—I've tried to make the case for *Stagecoach* as a work of middle-brow cinematic modernism. But perhaps the most compelling if surprising reason to understand Ford's classic Western as a modernist work is its unusual integration

of formal styles. Ford employs at least three distinctive cinematic idioms: (1) a fairly conventional form of crosscutting scenes (shot on a sound stage) that epitomizes classic Hollywood cinema and continuity editing—the director, for example, intercuts medium close-ups of the passengers inside the coach with exterior shots of the moving stagecoach; (2) a monumental or “epic” style featuring spectacular and dynamic views of the western landscape (and the Apaches) that makes conspicuous use of (mainly) location shooting in Monument Valley, Muroc Dry Lake, and the Kern River; (3) an “expressionist” style borrowed from German cinema of the 1920s and 1930s that Ford characteristically uses to represent the last two stops on the stagecoach journey: Indian Wells and Lordsburg. I will presently return to Ford’s “epic” style, as it becomes a signature of the director’s personal (auteurist) idiom and will prove crucial to our appreciation of his contributions to American vernacular modernism. For the moment, however, I wish to focus on the “expressionist” elements within *Stagecoach*.

One of Ford’s most perceptive critics, Tag Gallagher, highlights the American director’s indebtedness to the German expressionist cinema of F. W. Murnau.²⁸ As Gallagher notes, Ford thought Murnau’s *Sunrise* the greatest picture yet made when it appeared in 1927. He subsequently studied the German director’s filmic techniques and production methods firsthand at the Fox Studios in Hollywood (Murnau immigrated in 1926) and in Germany. Murnau’s high-contrast lighting and stylized sets, his visual compositions and high-angle shots, his fluid camera movements and distinctive use of montage, his long static takes, and the expressive theatrical gestures of his actors all helped shape Ford’s emerging cinematic aesthetic.²⁹ Ford’s late silent films of the 1920s, such as *Four Sons* (1928) and *Hangman’s House* (1928), are the most clearly indebted to German expressionism (Ford even reused the Fox studio sets of Murnau’s *Sunrise* for *Four Sons*), but Murnau’s style continued to influence Ford’s films into the 1930s and 1940s, most notably those—*The Informer* (1935), *The Plough and the Stars* (1936), *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), *The Long Voyage Home* (1940), and *The Fugitive* (1947)—inspired by modern (and sometimes modernist) literature. Still, it may come as a surprise that *Stagecoach*, which Blake Lucas has called “the single film which did most to revitalize the Western in the sound period,”³⁰ should fall under the shadow of German expressionism.

The cinematographer of *Stagecoach*, Bert Glennon, had previously worked on Joseph von Sternberg’s *The Last Command* (1928), *Blond Venus* (1932), and *The Scarlet Empress* (1934), as well as on Mauritz Stiller’s *Street of Sin* (1928). Ford makes particularly vivid use of his cinematographer’s mastery of the expressionist style when photographing the interior and nighttime scenes at Indian Wells and the final Lordsburg sequence.³¹ Glennon’s extended tracking shots of Ringo and Dallas as they walk through the red-light district of Lordsburg to the brothel where the prostitute resides (see Figure 11.1) make ample use of the same cinematic style that Murnau, Sternberg, Stiller, Lang, and Pabst had so memorably employed to capture the oppressive physical environment of a modern European city such as Berlin. Glennon’s



Figure 11.1 Red-light district of Lordsburg, John Ford, *Stagecoach* (1939)

high-contrast and often low-angle lighting, the chiaroscuro effects that hide half the faces and figures of the actors in deep shadow, the stylized sets of the street in Lordsburg (as well as the ambient soundscape featuring honkytonk piano, the talk and laughter of the prostitutes and their customers) all help capture the moral corruption, physical decay, and psychic alienation of a “city” environment more typically associated with the cinema and paintings of German expressionists such as Otto Dix and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. Lordsburg is no Berlin, but it offers many of the same moral temptations and physical dangers of its cosmopolitan European counterpart.

The gunfight between Ringo and the three Plummer brothers (Tom Tyler, Joseph Rickson, and Vester Pegg) that provides the dramatic climax of the Lordsburg sequence (and of *Stagecoach*) exemplifies the originality, darkness, and subversiveness of Ford’s expressionistic vision. In contrast to the many classic gunfights of later Hollywood and Spaghetti Westerns—*High Noon* (1952), *Gunfight at the O.K. Corral* (1957), *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1966), *The Wild Bunch* (1969)—the entire sequence (photographed in five extended shots) takes place not in the blazing sun of the southwest, but rather at night in semidarkness and in heavy shadow. (Ford will borrow from the scene for the nighttime gunfight of his last great Western, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, 1962). In the first long shot, the tiny dark silhouettes of the Plummers slowly approach the camera along the main street of Lordsburg, which is diegetically lit by three modern gas lamps, including one prominently featured in the

extreme right foreground of the shot and occupying a disproportionately large area of the frame (see Figure 11.2). The relatively immense size and prominence of the gas lamp provides a visual measure against which the tiny figures of the Plummers seem diminished and insignificant, while its rather surprising presence in the frontier town of Lordsburg, New Mexico, in the 1880s visually announces the “urban modernity” of the scene.³² In the next shot, the camera is again positioned at the end of a street that (presumably) intersects the main thoroughfare of Lordsburg. The street is initially empty, but we see slowly appear on a wooden fence and on the side of the building at the far end of the road the long advancing shadows of the three brothers, followed by their tiny illuminated figures as they take their position (facing us) at the maximum possible distance from the camera. Rather than cut to a new shot, Ford allows the camera to roll. From the lower left of the frame, out of the darkness emerges the silhouette of the Ringo Kid, seen from behind, who only gradually walks into the minimal light cast, we are to presume, by yet another street lamp located on the right side of the street and slightly off center in the frame. As Ringo walks away from the camera, his own growing shadow slowly appears upon an adobe wall to his left and follows the Kid as he walks toward the slowly advancing figures of the Plummers. In the third (a reverse) shot in the sequence, Glennon continues to make explicit use of expressionist lighting. The camera is placed at an oblique angle to the street: the Ringo Kid re-emerges from the near-total darkness—it is almost as if, in the manner of Soviet montage, we were seeing the same action twice (though strict continuity is in



Figure 11.2 Gunfight in Lordsburg lit by gas lamps, John Ford, *Stagecoach* (1939)

fact preserved in this case). Ringo’s face and figure are briefly illuminated as he crosses the center of the frame (see Figure 11.3). He then disappears into the darkness that occupies the right third of the shot. Ford doesn’t quite “cross the line”—i.e., violate the 180-degree rule that is a standard principle of Hollywood continuity editing—with these two shots, though he famously does so earlier in the film when he photographs the Apache attack on the stagecoach. In the fourth shot of the scene, the Plummbers, moving right to left, now emerge from darkness that obscures the right of the screen and into light as they enter the middle of the shot. They are in medium close-up with the camera placed at a slightly low angle looking up at them as they pace by. They then slowly disappear into darkness on the left side of the shot. In the final (fifth) shot of the sequence, Ringo’s dark silhouette is seen at the far end of the dirt street, illuminated from behind by the lights of a two-storied columned building that provides the background. The camera is placed at an extreme low angle, level with the ground, and we see Ringo approach as he gradually looms over “us.” His figure grows ever larger, filling the center of the shot as he is briefly illuminated from the side and from below. In what might be an homage to *The Great Train Robbery* (1903)—Edwin S. Porter’s famous short, the first American Western ever made, which ends with Justus D. Barnes, playing the leader of an outlaw band, firing his pistol directly at the screen audience—Ringo dives forward and fires his rifle toward the camera, momentarily violating the fourth wall and one of the principal rules of classic Hollywood continuity editing. He, too, looks almost directly into the camera as he fires his weapon at the viewer.

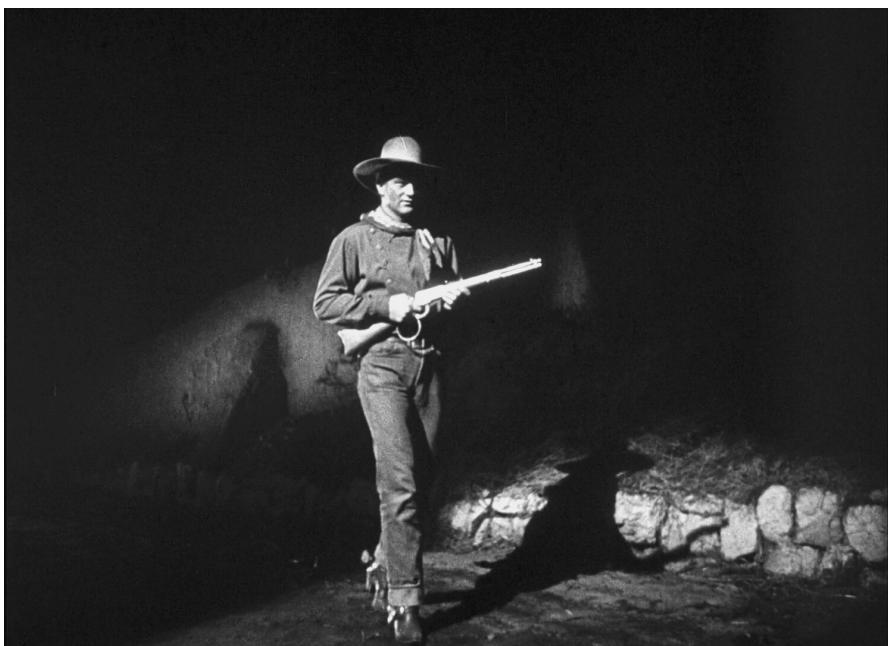


Figure 11.3 Expressionist gunfight: the Ringo Kid, John Ford, *Stagecoach* (1939)

The expressionistic Lordsburg sequence, including the walk through the red-light district of town and the gunfight just off the main street, along with several of the other noirish sequences at the stagecoach stops—the brief exterior scene at Indian Wells in which Ringo and Dallas take a moonlight walk along the wooden fence and among the cacti that mark the perimeter of the coach station (see Figure 11.4) and the interior scene of Dallas and Ringo in the hallway of the inn—help underline Ford's equivocal comment on the "blessings of civilization." Taken together, these sequences contribute to the sense that even such archetypal Western figures as Ringo and Dallas, who live outside the law and care little for bourgeois conventions, can't truly escape the ills of urban modernity even in the relatively small country towns of the remote American west. For much of the film they are ostracized by their social "superiors" (Mrs. Mallory, Gatewood, and Hatfield), bullied or pursued by the law (Marshal Wilcox), and apparently doomed to a life of violence, crime, financial and sexual exploitation, "legal" injustice, and social alienation. Were it not for the fact that Wilcox and Boone contrive their escape to Mexico in the penultimate scene, Ringo and Dallas would seem destined to lives fully as desperate as any of Zola, Joyce, O'Casey, or Crane's modern urban characters: caught in a vortex of prison and prostitution, (relative) poverty and social ostracism, they are doomed by the rigor of the law and the mores of the modern bourgeois world to remain the dregs of the social order. Not even the sympathy of the mild-mannered Peacock (who invites Dallas to visit him and his family in Kansas City), or the newfound if grudging respect of Lucy



Figure 11.4 Noir Western: Ringo and Dallas in moonlight, John Ford, *Stagecoach* (1939)

Mallory (who thanks the prostitute for her help), provides Dallas with a way out of a life in the brothels of Lordsburg. Likewise, Ringo succeeds in taking vengeance upon the Plummers (more violence in the streets!), but his actions would seem to guarantee him only a lifetime in prison, assuming he is not hanged for killing the brothers in Lordsburg.³³

Monument Valley, the Apaches, and Ford’s Epic Vision

By infusing the Hollywood Western with the noirish look, dramatic complexity, implicit social commentary, and dark subject matter associated with German expressionist cinema, Ford found a distinctive way to represent the problems of American modernity in the interwar years.³⁴ He succeeded in doing so, however, not simply by integrating the artistic forms of Euro-modernist culture in his film, but also, crucially, by radically recontextualizing and transforming them: the expressionist elements of *Stagecoach* become relatively inconspicuous because Ford has relocated them within the monumental landscape of the “Wild” West, which he renders via his own distinctive epic cinematic style. As it turns out, Frank S. Nugent wasn’t entirely off base in his praise of *Stagecoach*. For Ford to “have swept aside ten years of artifice and talkie compromise” and make “a motion picture that sings a song of camera” strongly suggests that the director’s singular achievement was to have recaptured the dynamic *visual* style of the silent era, one associated with the epic films of D. W. Griffith and Giovanni Pastrone.³⁵ Of course, the monumental sets of Babylon, Paris, Rome, and Carthage featured in such grand cinematic historical epics as *Intolerance* (1916) and *Cabiria* (1914) are conspicuously absent from *Stagecoach*, but in their place we find the colossal “architecture” of Monument Valley. It’s worth emphasizing that Ford’s use of the mesas and buttes he helped to make famous is anything but accidental. Located on the Arizona-Utah border near the Four Corners region, Monument Valley is in fact hundreds of miles to the north of the places where the historical action of *Stagecoach* is supposed to play out. Situated within the Navajo Tribal Park, the site was and is a remote, difficult, and expensive location in which to shoot a motion picture.³⁶ But Ford’s fabulous and self-conscious transposition of Monument Valley to southeastern Arizona and southwestern New Mexico enables him to harness the mythic power of this unique and visually arresting western landscape; it becomes a character in its own right, a force that ultimately transforms the lives and fates of Ford’s characters and provides a possible if only partially effective anecdote for the ills of urban modernity.

In fact, Ford’s awe-inspiring panoramic master shots of Monument Valley invite us to forget about the problems of urban modernity altogether. Ford and Glennon repeatedly photograph the stagecoach (sometimes accompanied by a troop of US Cavalry) from a vast distance and great height as the tiny vehicle containing the passengers winds its way through the distant floor of Monument Valley (see Figure 11.5). Among the most memorable and influential shots in the film, these epic vistas serve



Figure 11.5 Epic vista: the stagecoach in Monument Valley, John Ford, *Stagecoach* (1939)

to diminish the visual (and social) importance of those who represent the blessings of civilization. In fact, the stagecoach literally vanishes from sight on several occasions, leaving Ford's audience to stare at the epic grandeur of what at first appears to be a completely uninhabited natural environment.

Of course, that vast monumental landscape is most emphatically *not* empty: it is inhabited by native peoples, the Apache (played by local actors from the Navajo Nation), who pose a mortal threat to the passengers on the stagecoach.³⁷ Ford was justly famous in his mature films for the rarity with which he moved his camera, preferring a static shot that framed a defined space through which his actors moved. But in *Stagecoach*, Ford famously and conspicuously employs two successive "whip" pans. We have been watching, as it were from an Olympian perspective, the barely visible and isolated stagecoach make its slow way among the massive rock formations of Monument Valley. Suddenly the camera abruptly and swiftly pans upward and to the left to reveal a close-up of a monumentalized Geronimo and his Apaches upon their horses as the men look down upon the stagecoach from atop one of the buttes of Monument Valley. Ford then cuts to another apparently static master shot of the distant coach on the Valley floor, only to repeat the whip pan, once again revealing the mounted Chiricahua warriors who, presumably, now begin their menacing descent toward the stagecoach. Both

whip pans are punctuated by non-diegetic music (chiefly composed by Richard Hageman) that "imitates" native American musical motifs, especially the beat of Indian drums.

Ford's radical and memorable departures from his preferred "static" camera style shocks us into the recognition that the west already belongs to a native people with its own customs and practices, ones incompatible with those of the passengers from the east and its urban environs. The movement of Ford's camera thus momentarily shakes us out of our cultural cocoon and our easy confidence in the viability of modern society and its "civilized" norms and mores. With these two abrupt movements of the camera, Ford suggests that the immediate danger to the passengers is not modernity, but rather "savagery."³⁸ Momentarily, the threats of the town matrons of Tonto seem inconsiderable, even risible when compared to those of the "real" Apaches.

The journey through the epic landscape of the American southwest brings about dramatic changes in the passengers of the stagecoach. At least for a brief spell, the social prejudices, financial and class antagonisms, political and moral divisions that characterize their world are suppressed as they jointly defend themselves against the attack of the hostiles. As Jim Kitses, one of the most influential film critics of the Western has argued, the journey through the west has the effect of uniting and democratizing the passengers of Ford's film: "The action of *Stagecoach* has less to do with attacks or revenge than with the achievement of a community forged in the encounter with a primitive world. In the face of elemental tests, a transcendent America emerges beyond the differences of class, manners, morality, geography, and history ... Ford's vision is democratizing and egalitarian."³⁹ Importantly, however, the literal (and mythic) journey through the untamed west achieves a democratic community only by eliminating two of the more problematic stagecoach passengers (not to mention several of the unnamed Chiricahua warriors). Hatfield is killed during the Apache attack on the stagecoach. Gatewood is arrested in Tonto for stealing funds from his bank's depositors. But the journey also transforms Lucy Mallory. Her ordeal—giving birth to a child in Indian Wells, nearly being killed both by the Apaches and by Hatfield, who is prepared to shoot Lucy rather than see her violated by Indians—softens her. By the time she reaches Lordsburg, Mrs. Mallory takes a more accepting view of Doc, Dallas, and Ringo. Likewise, Peacock, who is wounded during the Indian attack, gains enough courage to break openly with the conventions of modern bourgeois society and invites Dallas to visit him and his family in Kansas City. The epic journey through the American west also provides Ringo, who is in custody during most of the trip, a critical opportunity to prove his social worth. Marshal Wilcox returns the Kid's rifle to him when the coach is threatened by the Apaches, and Ringo helps defend the passengers until they are saved by the last-minute arrival of the US Cavalry. The stop in Indian Wells, where he delivers Lucy's baby, allows Doc the chance momentarily to overcome his drunkenness and demonstrate his professional competence. As Doc's crucial assistant during the delivery, Dallas wins the thanks and affection of Lucy, while demonstrating to Ringo and the other men her fitness as a wife and mother.

Even Marshal Wilcox seems changed by the epic ordeal in the American wilderness; the man who has sought to return Ringo to prison is ultimately willing to set him free, to give the Kid and Dallas a fresh start in life. The confrontation with the inhospitable western landscape and with the Apaches thus has the ultimate effect of *nativizing* the stagecoach passengers, of making them westerners, Americans of a peculiarly Fordian-populist kind.

The transformative and nativizing potential of the western landscape is foreshadowed by one of the other, and even more famous, instances of Ford's epic visual style. Departing, conspicuously, from the static camera style that typifies his Westerns, Ford employs an extremely unusual rapid dolly-in close-up "(re)-introducing" his star, John Wayne, as the Ringo Kid. What is especially significant is that Wayne/Ringo is photographed (in the studio) against a monumental western landscape (evoking Monument Valley) that is presented via back-projection (see Figure 11.6). It's our first view of the criminal and escaped convict, but introduced by Glennon's spectacular camera movement, Ford's hero is transformed and monumentalized; it's as if he had become the human counterpart of the epic western landscape. Movie magic, to be sure. But by virtue of Ford's stylistic flourish, the Western hero emerges, as it were, out of the alien and hostile landscape of the west.



Figure 11.6 Introducing the Ringo Kid (John Wayne), John Ford, *Stagecoach* (1939)

American Vernacular Modernism

It's easy to dismiss this heroic and patriotic strain in *Stagecoach* as embarrassingly nativist, politically suspect, or historically retrograde. To assess properly the merits of Ford's film, however, we should consider its place within the broader cultural movement I have termed American vernacular modernism. Emerging before World War I, flourishing in the 1920s and 1930s, and lasting well into the 1940s, this homegrown movement in American art arose out of a revived interest in the natural landscape, flora, fauna, peoples, and regional cultures of the American west, most conspicuously those of the southwest. It was an interest that could, however, range over the whole continent from the Mississippi across the Great Plains to the shores of the Pacific Ocean and venture beyond the Rio Grande into Mexico, or momentarily fix on the American frontier of a bygone era, such as Appalachia. Besides John Ford, the most prominent American artists whom I am calling vernacular modernists were Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, Paul Strand, Georgia O'Keeffe, Marsden Hartley, Willa Cather, John Steinbeck, Mary Colter, Frank Lloyd Wright, Maria Montoya Martinez, Aaron Copland, Virgil Thomson, and Martha Graham.⁴⁰ These artists worked in an especially broad and varied range of arts and media: cinema, photography, painting, fiction, architecture, interior design, ceramics, music, and modern dance. But what they all shared was a common interest in the transformative potential of the American west, a semi-mythical place that promised an antidote to the problems of (European) modernity or at least an alternative form of New World modernity.

Like their famous expatriate contemporaries—T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Gertrude Stein—many of these vernacular modernists spent time in Europe or even resided there for a period, and nearly all of them immersed themselves in the avant-garde artistic movements that flourished in London, Paris, Berlin, and the great European cultural capitals. But as against the Eurocentric modernism, cultural elitism, and stridently cosmopolitan aesthetics of the “expatriates,” these vernacular modernists conspicuously embraced homegrown, assertively American, popular, and regionally rooted forms of art.⁴¹ American vernacular modernism can thus be regarded as one of those recurrent historical attempts on the part of eccentric, rebellious, and nonconforming New World artists to resist the temptations of the Old World, to re-found their own culture on home soil where “alien” species must adapt and evolve, or perish. Resembling in many ways their cultural cousins to the north and south—Emily Carr, Lawren Harris, and the Group of Seven in Canada; Diego Rivera and the Mexican muralists—these American artists did not so much reject Euro-modernism and the various continental forms of avant-garde art as appropriate, mainstream, and reground them in order to create a distinctively national, even regional artistic idiom.⁴²

Far from a single unified and organized artistic movement, American vernacular modernism inevitably encompassed a wide variety of artistic works, individual styles, sub-movements, and networks only loosely related to one another according

to Ludwig Wittgenstein's principle of "family resemblance."⁴³ Heterogenous, eccentric, and individualistic though they were, American vernacular modernists tended toward an egalitarian, democratic, and sometimes even progressive vision of their (imagined) country, though as our analysis of Ford has suggested, their individual political commitments and views could prove, upon close examination, to be extremely complicated if not self-conflicted. With some exceptions, these artists sought a broad public (rather than a coterie) audience and were critically and commercially successful. An impressive number of them were women.

The most striking thing, however, that connects this serendipitous group of artists and their works is their shared engagement with motifs, subjects, and representational modes suggested by the American frontier. The colored mesas and buttes, the sand dunes and cacti, the blasted and twisted trees, the adobe-style churches and buildings, even the rails and fences of the southwest, particularly those of New Mexico, Utah, Arizona, and California, are prominently featured in the Westerns of Ford, the paintings of O'Keeffe and Hartley, and the photographs of Adams, Strand, and Weston. A shared investment in the American west and a common concern for the prospects of a new life on the frontier link such seemingly disparate works of art as Ford's *Stagecoach*, Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), Wright's designs for Taliesen West (1937), and Copland's *Billy the Kid* (1939) and *Rodeo* (1942), as well as his famous collaboration with Martha Graham, *Appalachian Spring* (1944), and the choreographer's own *El Penitente* (1940).

Most importantly, along with a common faith in the salutary or even "revolutionary" possibilities of the American west, Ford and his fellow vernacular modernists shared a deep and enduring social anxiety generated by the ills of European modernity, which always remain just below the surface of their works. Consider one final example, the western landscapes of Georgia O'Keeffe, one of America's most beloved modern painters. O'Keeffe's canvas of a steep, blindingly white New Mexican canyon, *White Place in Shadow* (1941), depicts a beautiful, severe, and unpopulated place that couldn't seem more remote from "the blessings of civilization" (see Figure 11.7). And yet O'Keeffe's work compositionally echoes and reworks the dark shadowed "canyon" of the New York City skyscrapers in her earlier painting, *Street, New York II* (1926) (see Figure 11.8). Even in the wilds of the New Mexican desert, O'Keeffe's vision of the west is haunted by her past with husband and photographer, Alfred Stieglitz, in New York, where she established herself as an artist of that monumental, glittering, and oppressive cityscape that was becoming the icon of twentieth-century urban life. As we have seen in Ford's *Stagecoach*, the journey into the "uncivilized" west is also a (semi-secret) return to that place of darkness, the modern city. The epic power of Ford's vision of the west—made visible by its monumental landscape and the premodern indigenous people who inhabit it—suggest that the frontier is the place where the sins of modernity might be washed away (if damningly and tragically, by blood). We should keep in mind that Ford's final glorious shot of *Stagecoach*, in which Ringo and



Figure 11.7 Georgia O'Keeffe, *White Place in Shadow* (1941) © 2021 Georgia O'Keeffe Museum / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Dallas disappear into a landscape dominated by the massive buttes of Monument Valley, troublingly suggests that the transformation promised by the west is always deferred, always elsewhere. Ringo and Dallas, after all, don't intend to settle in the western United States: freedom from the blessings of civilization is possible only beyond the borders of the nation, in Mexico, the last, always mythologized frontier of the Hollywood Western. Ford's patriotic optimism, his vernacular embrace of Americanness, is in the end, shadowed by the darkness of an alienating modernity that can never be fully escaped, or fully illuminated.



Figure 11.8 Georgia O'Keeffe, *Street, New York II* (1926) © 2021 Georgia O'Keeffe Museum / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Notes

1. Ford featured Monument Valley in six subsequent Westerns: *My Darling Clementine* (1946), *Fort Apache* (1948), *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949), *The Searchers* (1956), *Sergeant Rutledge* (1960), and *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964). He made limited use of the location in *Rio Grande* (1950) and *Wagon Master* (1950). While Monument Valley was first used as a location for the silent Western, *The Vanishing American* (1925), directed by George B. Seitz, it was Ford who established it as the iconic landscape of the Hollywood Western. Many other films make use of Monument Valley (typically in homage to Ford and his Westerns) including Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968), Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* (1969), John Woo's *Windtalkers* (2002), Gore Verbinski's *Rango* (2011) and *The Lone Ranger* (2013), and the Coen brothers' *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs* (2018).
2. According to Ford's biographer, it was Ford who wrote this line, adding it to the script during production; see Scott Eyman, *Print the Legend: The Life and Times of John Ford* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1999), 194.

3. Frank S. Nugent, *New York Times*, March 3, 1939, as quoted in Edward Buscombe, *Stagecoach: BFI Film Classics* (London: British Film Institute, 1992), 81.
4. Ford offered this famous self-description at a special meeting in 1950 of the Directors Guild of America, which was called to discuss the alleged infiltration of Hollywood by communists and the need to insure the political loyalty of guild members, including the DGA president, Joseph Mankiewicz; see Tag Gallagher, *John Ford: The Man and His Films* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 340.
5. Ford directed films based on the literary works of Sinclair Lewis (*Arrowsmith*, 1931), Liam O’Flaherty (*The Informer*, 1935), Sean O’Casey (*The Plough and the Stars*, 1936), John Steinbeck (*The Grapes of Wrath*, 1940), Eugene O’Neill (*The Long Voyage Home*, 1940), Erskine Caldwell (*Tobacco Road*, 1941), Graham Greene (*The Fugitive*, 1947), and Lady Augusta Gregory (*The Rising of the Moon*, 1957).
6. Orson Welles, queried about cinematic influences on *Citizen Kane*, famously stated, “John Ford was my teacher. My own style has nothing to do with his, but *Stagecoach* was my movie text-book. I ran it over forty times.” See Gallagher, *John Ford*, 152, who in turn cites Peter Cowie, *The Cinema of Orson Welles* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1965), 27. Gallagher argues that “Welles’s visual style seems almost a hyperbolic parody of Ford’s; where Ford is subtle, Welles is cramped, exaggerated, and ostentatious. For the record, both directors exploit depth of field [deep focus], long takes, multiplane compositions [deep staging], avoidance of conventional intercutting, UFA-style expressionism, high-contrast lighting, low-level camera, sharp-focus objects near image surface between us and the main action, cameo cutting, bringing actors into close shots by moving them rather than the camera; broad characterizations, particularly of bit players,” 152–53. We can add to this list Ford and Glennon’s innovative shots of the interior ceilings of studio sets that lend verisimilitude to the scene. On Ford and Glennon’s cinematic influence on Hollywood film noir and on Welles and Gregg Toland’s *Citizen Kane*, see also Buscombe, *Stagecoach*, 56–58.
7. Negative production costs for *Stagecoach* were \$546,200, while grosses in 1939 alone were \$956,927. Ford was paid \$50,000 to direct the film, the equivalent of nearly \$946,000 in 2021 dollars when adjusted for inflation by the Consumer Price Index. See Buscombe, *Stagecoach*, 18, 82–83.
8. Miriam Bratu Hansen, “The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism,” *Modernism/modernity* 6, no. 2 (1999), 59–77. Significantly, Hansen offers Ford’s *Stagecoach* as an example of what she means by “vernacular modernism”: 62.
9. Hansen, “Mass Production,” 65. Also see David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).
10. Hansen, “Mass Production,” 65.
11. Hansen, “Mass Production,” 68.
12. On the relationship of modernism to the middlebrow, see for example, the special issue of *Modernist Cultures*, 6.1, May, 2011, “The Middlebrow—Within or Without Modernism” co-edited by Melissa Sullivan and Sophie Blanch; and Celia Marshik, *At the Mercy of Their Clothes: Modernism, the Middlebrow, and British Garment Culture* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2016).
13. On the disreputable cultural status of the Western in the late 1930s, see Gallagher, *John Ford*, 145. For a brief discussion of the meeting in which Ford and Cooper vainly tried to persuade Selznick to produce a new kind of “classic Western” that would elevate the

- genre, see Eyman, *Print the Legend*, 174–77; Ronald Haver, *David O. Selznick's Hollywood* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1980), 152; and Buscombe, *Stagecoach*, 14–15. In the end, *Stagecoach* was produced by Walter Wanger and distributed by United Artists. *Stagecoach* as the pinnacle of the “classic” era of the Hollywood Western was later championed by the influential French critic André Bazin; see André Bazin, “The Western: or the American Film *par excellence*,” in *What Is Cinema?*, vol. 2, Hugh Gray, ed. and trans. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 205), 140–57.
14. Buscombe notes that when *Stagecoach* was released, “it was described in the trade press as a ‘melodrama,’ not a Western at all,” *Stagecoach*, 15.
 15. Peter Bogdanovich, *John Ford*, revised ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 69.
 16. See for example, Gallagher, *John Ford*, 146; Buscombe, *Stagecoach*, 36–37; Jim Kitses, *Horizons West: Directing the Western from John Ford to Clint Eastwood* (London: British Film Institute and Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 50–51; and Joseph McBride, *Searching for John Ford: A Life* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), 284. Buscombe, Kitses, and especially McBride are more open to the possibility that Ford knowingly borrowed from Maupassant.
 17. The influence of French naturalism on James Joyce’s *Dubliners* and Joseph Conrad’s fiction is a critical commonplace. Suggestively, cinematic neorealism, in its Italian and many subsequent international iterations, was enjoying a critical vogue at the time that Ford gave his interview to Bogdanovich.
 18. See Gallagher, *John Ford*, 146; Buscombe, *Stagecoach*, 36–37; and Eyman, *Print the Legend*, 178.
 19. See Buscombe, *Stagecoach*, 35. According to US Census figures, between 1880 and 1890, the decade in which the action of *Stagecoach* takes place, the population of Dallas increased by over 245%, from 10,358 to 38,068 inhabitants. By 1940, the year after Ford’s film was released, the population of the city was 294,475. Thanks to Scott W. Klein, who astutely pointed out the larger significance of Dallas’s name.
 20. See Buscombe, *Stagecoach*, 46.
 21. See Buscombe, *Stagecoach*, 20.
 22. See Buscombe, *Stagecoach*, 28–31.
 23. For an in-depth study of the history of Hollywood censorship and the Production Code Administration, see Thomas Doherty, *Hollywood’s Censor: Joseph I. Breen and the Production Code Administration* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2007).
 24. On the crucial role that the New Dealers, including General Hugh Johnson, head of the National Recovery Administration (NRA) played in pressuring the Hollywood studios to adopt the Production Code Administration, see Doherty, *Hollywood’s Censor*, 58–63, 70. Doherty’s invaluable historical account properly emphasizes the widely shared moral conservatism of the Legion of Decency, as well as the Catholic clergy and intellectuals who spearheaded the effort to impose censorship on Hollywood. Nonetheless, he reveals that their efforts were supported not only by New Dealers, but also by a leading group of educators and social scientists, the Motion Picture Research Council, which famously issued the Payne Fund Studies, twelve volumes of empirical research demonstrating the adverse effect of pre-Code Hollywood films on children; see Doherty, *Hollywood’s Censor*, 59–60. On the decisive role that FDR, the New Deal, and the NRA played in transforming the Hollywood studio system in the 1930s, see also Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the*

- System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 160–61.
25. See Doherty, *Hollywood's Censor*, 235: “In 1939, when [Joseph] Breen [who oversaw the day-to-day operations of the Production Code Administration] looked at John Ford’s *Stagecoach* (1930), he fretted about the gold-hearted prostitute, the whiskey-drinking doctor, and the law-breaking sheriff.”
 26. See Gallagher, *John Ford*, 342.
 27. It would be unfair and inaccurate to include among this list of “illiberal” nations the country from which Ford proudly claimed descent and to which he repeatedly returned for the subjects and settings of many of his films. Nonetheless, it’s worth noting that in the 1920s and 1930s, and especially with the election of Eamon de Valera in 1932 and the adoption of a new Constitution in 1937, Ireland faced many of the same political, social, and economic challenges as the United States: an increase in official governmental and unofficial religious censorship, the statutory rollback of certain civil rights, the passage of protectionist legislation aimed at restricting free trade, and the troubling rise of a homegrown “fascist” movement (the Blue Shirts); see Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922 to the Present* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), especially 80–131. For a more positive view of Irish cultural politics of the period, see Brian Fallon, *An Age of Innocence: Irish Culture 1930–1960* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1999).
 28. Gallagher, *John Ford*, 49–61.
 29. Gallagher, *John Ford*, 49–50.
 30. Blake Lucas, “Saloon Girls and Ranchers’ Daughters: The Woman in the Western,” in *The Western Reader*, Jim Kitses and Gregg Rickman, eds. (New York: Limelight Editions, 1998), 303.
 31. Gallagher calls the Lordsburg sequence an “expressionistic melodrama,” *John Ford*, 148; see also 151.
 32. Gas lighting had been introduced in Rhode Island as early as 1803, so it’s surely possible that the historical Lordsburg, founded in 1880, could have boasted gas lamps on its streets by the middle of the decade. In any case, the unusual set design of Ford’s Lordsburg, as well as his and Glennon’s expressionistic manner of framing the action of the gunfight, emphasize that this frontier town is rapidly modernizing. By contrast, when, in *My Darling Clementine* (1946), Ford wishes to suggest the relative backwardness of Tombstone in 1881, we find a large saguaro cactus improbably rooted in front of the barber shop on the main street of town. I doff my Stetson to Scott W. Klein, who generously shared his knowledge of the history of American street lighting.
 33. One is tempted to suggest that the true if secret cinematic counterparts of Ringo and Dallas are Gypo Nolan and Katie Madden, the ill-fated ex-IRA man and his prostitute girlfriend in Ford’s 1935 expressionistic rendering of Liam O’Flaherty’s novel *The Informer* (1925).
 34. It’s a commonplace among cinema critics and historians that the distinctive look of American film noir, which emerged in the 1940s and 1950s, is indebted to German expressionist cinema.
 35. Nugent implicitly praises Ford for taking his camera and crew on location, thus liberating them from the sound stage, where the cumbersome and relatively primitive synchronized sound technology of the early 1930s had constrained movie production. Nugent also commends Ford for freeing his story from overmuch talk and recapturing the dramatic power and efficiency of quasi-silent storytelling. In this respect, Ford, who began as a silent

- film director, most closely resembles Alfred Hitchcock, who controversially defended the aesthetics of silent film long after its historic demise. In his interview with Truffaut, Hitchcock celebrated silent film as “a possibility of a purely cinematic film” . . . “the purest expression of a cinematic idea”; see Francois Truffaut, *Hitchcock* (rev. edn.) (New York and London: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 214; also see 348. (Originally published in France in 1983 by Éditions Ramsay under the title *Hitchcock/Truffaut*.)
36. In the 1930s, when Ford and his crew filmed there, Monument Valley was “the furthest place in the continental United States from a railroad—180 miles”; see Buscombe, *Stagecoach*, 40.
 37. The extras playing Ford’s Apaches lived in or around what is now the Monument Valley Navajo Tribal Park (formally established in 1958), which covers 92,000 acres within the Navajo Nation reservation. Curiously, Whitehorse (aka Chief Whitehorse), the actor who plays Geronimo, was born in Georgetown, Missouri, and though a Native American was not a Navajo.
 38. The charge of racism has frequently been leveled against Ford by many critics, most especially in regard to his treatment of American Indians in his Westerns. For the record, Ford always vigorously denied such accusations, and considered himself a friend and patron of the Navajo of Monument Valley. The issue is too complicated to be treated properly here, but suffice it to say that my characterization of the “savagery” of the Apache is merely my attempt to describe faithfully how Ford represents the Chiracahau and not an endorsement of Ford, Nichols, or Haycox’s views on the matter. For a critical consideration of the evolving portraits of Native Americans in the Hollywood Western in relation to classic philosophical efforts to distinguish “savagery” from “civilization,” see Michael Valdez Moses, “Savage Nations: Native Americans and the Western,” *Philosophy of the Western*, Jennifer McMahon and B. Steve Csaki, eds. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 261–90.
 39. See Kitses, *Horizons West*, 48. Kitses expands upon his thesis in the audio commentary he provides for the 2010 Criterion Blu-ray edition of *Stagecoach*. To be sure, the “democratizing and egalitarian” vision of America to which he refers has no place for the Chiracahau.
 40. Mary Colter, one of the foremost female architects in US history, designed several of the world-famous buildings in and around the South Rim of the Grand Canyon National Park, including the Hopi House, Hermit’s Rest, Lookout Studio, and Desert View Watchtower, as well as her masterpiece, La Posada Hotel in Winslow, Arizona. She also took a decisive hand in redesigning the interiors of La Fonda Hotel in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and Union Station in Los Angeles. Maria Montoya Martínez, of the San Ildefonso Pueblo of New Mexico, was one of America’s most important ceramists. Under the mentorship of Sarafina Tafoya and with the vital artistic contributions of her husband, Julián (Pocano) Martínez, she helped to resuscitate and perfect the “lost” (neolithic) art of black-on-black Indian pottery for which Santa Fe and the southwest are now internationally famous.
 41. Many of the expatriate modernists found their own ways of reasserting their “Americaness” in their mature works: consider Pound’s Jefferson and Adams cantos, Eliot’s homage to the Mississippi River in *The Waste Land* (1922) and his “The Dry Salvages” in *Four Quartets* (1943), and Stein’s *The Making of Americans* (1902–1911).
 42. We might include among the New World cousins of the US-based vernacular modernists not only the Mexican painters David Alfaro Siqueiros and José Clemente Orozco, but

also several other prominent artists from the Caribbean and Latin America: the composers Silvestre Revueltas and Carlos Chavez in Mexico, and the writers Alejo Carpentier in Cuba, José María Arguedas in Peru, and Jorge Luis Borges in Argentina.

43. Wittgenstein's term for this concept is “*Familienähnlichkeit*,” though he sometimes makes use of an alternative word, “*Ähnlichkeit*.” While he refers to the concept in his posthumously published *The Blue and Brown Books* (1958), Wittgenstein's best known discussion of the principle of “family resemblance” is in Part I of the *Philosophical Investigations*, sec. 65–71; see Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, G. E. M. Anscombe, trans. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 27–29 [Originally published as *Philosophische Untersuchungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1953)].

“*Tout le monde a ses raisons*”

The Problem of Impressionist Commitment in Jean Renoir’s *La Règle du jeu*

Jesse Matz

Jean Renoir’s *La Règle du jeu* caused riots when it premiered at the Colisée on July 8, 1939.¹ Audiences vigorously objected to the film and strenuously expressed their outrage, interrupting the screening, fighting with one another, even trying to set fire to the theater. Much of the audience was outraged by Renoir’s satire of French authority in the years leading up to World War II. His Popular Front ideology, only thinly veiled in the film’s farcical ruling-class antics, stoked violent feeling in those resistant to it. But there was also the film’s experimental complexity and its violation of what audiences had come to expect from the film industry—all things that unsettled and, together, inflamed the French cinema audience of this volatile moment in history.

La Règle du jeu focuses first on André Jurieux (Roland Toutain), the celebrated aviator, upon the completion of his heroic twenty-three-hour flight across the Atlantic. Addressing the public, Jurieux says nothing truly heroic, but rather that he did it all just for love: “*J’ai tenté cette aventure à cause d’une femme*” [“I undertook this adventure for a woman”], who, cruelly, is not there to welcome him home.² We then see the woman herself, Christine (Nora Gregor), wife of the Marquis de la Chesnaye (Marcel Dalio), as if from the point of view of her radio broadcasting the news. Christine dresses in her boudoir and then crosses palatial halls to see her husband, with whom she engages in the sort of ludic dialogue that becomes central to the social game the film will satirize. He knowingly chastises her for denying Jurieux “*ces petites marques d’amitié amoureuse*” [“small signs of loving friendship”]; she purports to be happily his wife, even as the two then part to pursue extramarital affairs (7:50). These chardes extend to other members of the household—Christine’s maid Lisette (Paulette Dubost) and her jealous husband, Schumacher (Gaston Modot), Jurieux’s comrade Octave (Jean Renoir), who also pursues Christine—and they reach a crisis during a weekend-in-the-country house party, where all these passions and intrigues become scenes of antic hysteria and, ultimately, serious violence. Throughout, allegorical implication associates absurd behavior with political corruption and failure; innovative camera work, editing, and choreography heighten this allegorical critique; and biting dialogue gives ringing voice to Renoir’s satirical intention. “*Tout le monde a ses raisons*” [“everyone has their reasons”], spoken by Renoir himself as Octave, may sound

like an expression of forbearance in the face of all this misbehavior, these empty and then broken rules, but it actually testifies to the terrible way personal desires could lead to recklessness, cruelty, and even violent disaster on a global scale (20:17). This was, Renoir would later say, culture dancing on a volcano.³

Just about everything at work here could have outraged the crowds at the film's public premiere. In the opening sequence, a radio reporter hustles to narrate Jurieux's heroic appearance, and right away the film abandons solid exposition. Any potential narratorial authority is then crowded out as the radio reporter gets shoved aside; the hero assumes control over his story, and he renders it questionable as he announces that his heroics in flight were all for a married woman. A public in need of heroes gets only a sordid romantic. Then when the film moves to Christine's splendid bourgeois rooms, she speaks with an Austrian accent, suggesting to a certain audience that she deserves her central position in the national microcosm that is her house no more than her husband, the Jew. And to see him occupy what was actually the Château de la Ferté Saint-Aubin would have been, for many, an affront, as it was to the fascist Union Sacrée, which staged persistent protests. In the allegory that ensues, France's national culture is a farce: childish and selfish, trivial and self-important, the partygoers who play by the rules of the game demonstrate the vapid corruption of a France doomed to disaster. And they get no punishment for it. No comeuppance brings *La Règle du jeu* to the optimistic closure of *La Grande Illusion* (1937), Renoir's prior film, so that the crowds at the film's premiere—and many others throughout the film's strange history—could feel disgusted by what Renoir had made of their culture.⁴ Not to mention what he had made of the art of film: as we will see, indiscriminate citation throws together dearly loved cultural artifacts; wooden performances and nonentities undermine the film's star power; classicism clashes with modernity. *La Règle du jeu* seemed certainly to earn the scandal that got it banned and made it, at first, such a disastrous failure.

But this was also scandal of the modernist variety. Renoir's abandonment of narratorial objectivity in favor of perspectival flux and mobile relativity was much like what we have come to expect from those painters and writers who made a similar shift the basis for modernist aesthetics. And his way of questioning national identity was something he shared with James Joyce, for example, who had also centered national allegory on a Jewish pretender. Modernist writers as diverse as Robert Musil and F. Scott Fitzgerald had made provocative satire out of the meritless endurance of failed aristocracies, and Marcel Proust, of course, had like Renoir parodied desire's complicity in heedlessness. To the extent that this heedlessness is responsible for world war, Renoir's film has much in common with allegories including Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts* (1941) and Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* (1924), which also suggest that the tragicomic rules of society invite the violations of global violence. Renoir's overdetermined allusiveness was very much that of *The Waste Land* (1922), even if it seemed to lack T. S. Eliot's total sense of failure, because it did not: Renoir, too, was implying that the great past had become a heap of broken images, and this

classic modernist motive had to provoke protest from crowds in need of a more united front. Wooden performances and human nonentities were very much of the 1930s late-modernist moment—to be found in Evelyn Waugh, Djuna Barnes, Alfred Döblin, Nathanael West, and Samuel Beckett, where they forced attention to inhumanity. And impressionistic realism, which Renoir had inherited from his father, was something he shared not only with his father's early-modernist world but also with the many artists and writers (Proust, Woolf, Fernando Pessoa) for whom the vitality of subjective flux was the key to a truly affective realism. Its subsequent iteration in the aesthetics of montage—the free variety, unrestricted by propagandist motive—makes *La Règle du jeu* parallel to that strain in experimental cinema that would develop into avant-gardist surrealism.⁵ And of course these and other technical achievements—most notably the film's deep focus and its long-duration shots tracking and panning across interior and exterior worlds—made *La Règle du jeu* a groundbreaking source text for the fully modernist cinema that would emerge after World War II. Finally, beyond these modernist affinities, there was the scene itself: the violent occasion of the first showing of *La Règle du jeu* was another instance of the scandalous eruptions in response to John Millington Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907), Igor Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du printemps* (1913), Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), and many other scenes of the modern. *La Règle du jeu* was in every possible way a modernist event.

How, then, to account for the fact that the film also seems *not modernist enough*? How to understand its strangely outdated, traditional, and belated qualities—those elements that have always made *La Règle du jeu* feel like a throwback even as it seems to advance film's experimental, timely engagements? Despite the compositional daring of Renoir's deep-focus views of bourgeois rooms in disarray, despite his innovative long-duration shots tracking signs of social breakdown across the landscapes of French privilege, *La Règle du jeu* tarries with old forms of pictorialism and stagey theatricality. And to say so is not simply to note something obvious about the film's deliberate effort to update Alfred de Musset's *Les Caprices de Marianne* (1833) and other classical sources. Despite its bracing Popular Front critique of a morally bankrupt ruling class, the film can also seem to involve only the sort of critique all too familiar by 1939—familiar to European followers of modernism since before World War I—and to undermine it with a very palpable affective fascination with aristocratic glamour. This stylistic and political indeterminacy might seem to assert a critical kind of modernist fragmentation, but it can also seem simply confused; formal and social complexity might just be a product of a persistent commitment to old forms despite the new. To put the point more bluntly, it is possible that the film's renowned potency is actually an accident of failed modernism—that its “monstrous cynicism,” for example, is actually fairly tame, and that its modernity is only the symptomatic kind produced when modernization disallows aesthetic coherence.⁶

This possibility is enacted in the relationship between the film's opening scenes. First, there is the novel activity of the aviator's return—the thrill of flight, the rush of crowds, the surprise of radio reportage, all suggesting in theme as well as form that *La Règle du jeu* will make a full commitment to filmic modernism. Crowds fill the screen

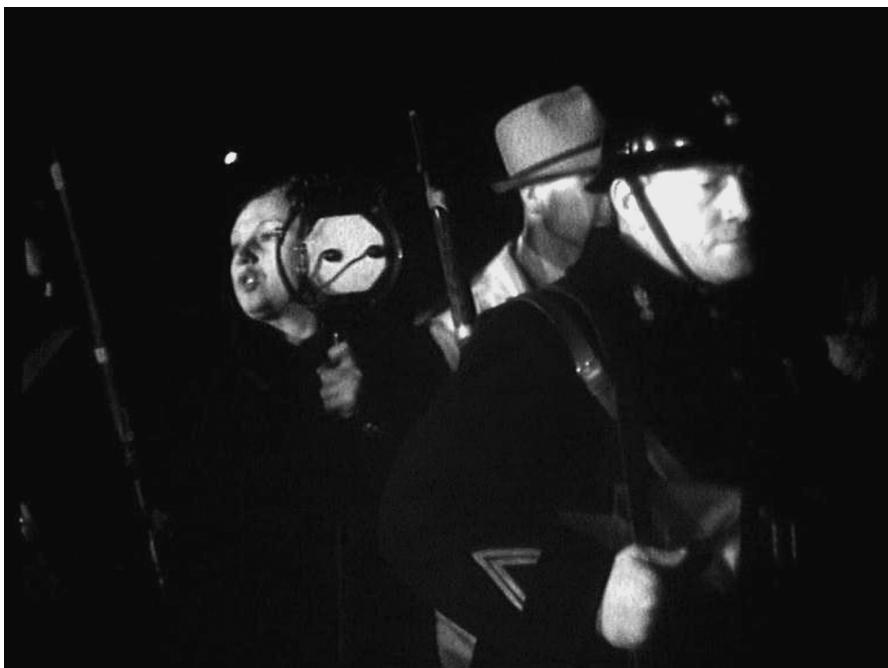


Figure 12.1 The aviator's return, Jean Renoir, *La Règle du jeu* (*The Rules of the Game*) (1939)

and rush it along to no clear destination; that destination turns out to be the aviator in powerfully subjective close-up, declaring himself to be no real hero at all. But then when the scene shifts to Christine's boudoir, the film seems immediately to give up on its modernity, not just because the scenario itself is so serene and stately, but also because it seems to reframe what has preceded it (see Figures 12.1 and 12.2). Of course, there is the modernity of the female glamour shot; Christine's vivid appearance as the object of our antihero's obsession evokes the gender of modernity by proposing to cede aesthetic centrality to a woman's fetishized face. The sheer mobility of Renoir's camera across diverse depths and distances and the drama of his radical, shifting camera angles assert the modernist priorities that do otherwise distinguish the film. But much else about the scene takes us back decades, even if the point is ultimately to assert that this all-too-familiar setting is a zone of allegorical critique. Renoir's *mise en scène* seems dutifully to respect the arrangements of haute-bourgeois privilege; style and perspective do not quite undermine bourgeois claims to authority, and even the film's celebrated long shots can seem to simulate something archaically theatrical, reproducing the feel of uninterrupted action watched on stage. This apparent retreat from the film's initial modernism could be the first instance of the heterogeneity that has given the film its reputation for modernist experimentalism, but it might just as easily herald an ambivalence that will persistently find the film backing off



Figure 12.2 Christine's boudoir, Jean Renoir, *La Règle du jeu* (*The Rules of the Game*) (1939)

its modernist commitments in order to shore up a retrograde conservatism both in form and in politics. And not just ambivalence, since, as in this case, conservatism might seem to win the day: with Christine's boudoir as its goal, the film's first scene of modern technological and social flux is contained, made to seem a fungible part of an outside world from which the privileged might yet find refuge.

Rather than allege that Renoir failed at modernist commitment, however, we should see his stylistic and political inconsistency as the result of a fundamentally modernist problem: the problem of impressionism. I wish to argue that the aesthetic project of *La Règle du jeu* was, fundamentally, an impressionist one—that Renoir intended mainly to push film further toward full development of its own aesthetic through the fuller realization of an impressionist aesthetic, the immediacy, subjectivism, and immersiveness that had for some time seemed best able to assert film's unique claim to artistic excellence. But the *problem* of impressionism throws him back upon theatrical and pictorial modes, producing inconsistencies that are finally the film's major claim to modernism.

Renoir had originally been party to the motives and efforts that loosely characterize French Impressionist Cinema. Like Abel Gance, Germaine Dulac, René Clair, and others, he had been drawn to the possibility that film might achieve a new verisimilitude while also distinguishing its claim to aesthetic value by advancing upon the forms of realism innovated by the impressionist painters. This is not to say that he inherited his father's impressionism, though that was indeed an important factor in

his penchant for the warm vitalism and lush plenitude of his version of this aesthetic. Rather, it is to say that Renoir took part in the 1920s revival of interest in the impression, which, at this later moment, tended to stress film's special power to instantiate the impression's still-powerfully dynamic modernity.

Of course, Renoir had his more objective political motives, and he would not have dedicated himself to everything impressionism entailed of late-nineteenth-century cultural values and optics, but he did persistently share in the complex of perceptual and affective effects that had first made impressionism revolutionary and continued to make it influential decades after its originary moment. Renoir did remain dedicated to the ideal of impressionism's unlikely plenitudes, its promise that even the most minimal or haphazard visual representations could entail full forms of recognition and understanding. That dedication, however, is no explanation of the failed modernism of *La Règle du jeu* until we recall that impressionism's promise had also always been a problem—a disruptive force for artists and writers whose pursuit of the impression's immediate plenitude ran afoul of the realities that reasserted mere fragmentation, brute sensation, and self-division. In so many cases, impressionists who hoped to achieve representational immediacy through the impression came to worry that its sensory, affective, or experiential bias could jeopardize the concepts, judgments, and abstractions necessary to art's fuller commitments; the ethical and cultural objectives of the work of art would be undermined, it could seem, by the impression, even if its special aesthetic status was all about the utopian synthesis of these standard oppositions. Most famously, the shift to a post-impressionist painterly aesthetic was a result of this inevitable reaction; Georges Seurat, Paul Cézanne, and others asserted the need to subject impressions to abstract design because they were uncertain the impression's own internal variety of abstraction could suffice—unsure that art's forms could simply develop out of immediate engagement. In literature, any number of writers who declared an interest in rendering impressions also tended toward ambivalence, often producing allegories in which full and immediate perception devolves into conflict between perceptions of opposite kinds. Renoir, too, registers this ambivalence; his true affiliation with modernism is here, in his participation in that problem whereby impressionism's affective and perceptual intensities are undermined and redirected into representations of and reflections upon the crisis of formal but also social and political division. In Renoir's case, this dynamic resulted in an impressionist text that resorts to old pictorialisms and theatricalities to solidify its visual claims. It also resulted in a political text that cannot help enacting allegories out of sync with the allegorical critique it wishes to launch against ruling-class hypocrisy. For impressionism lets loose into this allegory one of its own, in which collaborations work differently: high and low enter into relationships of wider conflict than anything the Popular Front would have deplored, and *La Règle du jeu* finds itself glamorizing the very excesses it seems explicitly to condemn.

To call Renoir an impressionist is to revert to an old, contested, and perhaps excessively biographical categorization.⁷ It was André Bazin who claimed that Renoir had inherited his father's aesthetic, and David Bordwell who confirmed Renoir's

impressionism in an account of French Impressionist Cinema that has never been fully and widely accepted.⁸ (Bordwell describes a movement that runs from 1918 to 1928 and is represented by the films and criticism of Louis Delluc, Abel Gance, Jean Epstein, Germaine Dulac, Marcel L'Herbier, and René Clair. For others, however, no such category really distinguishes these figures and their work from much cinema of this moment; Gilles Deleuze, for example, prefers to refer more generally to the “pre-war French school.”⁹) When critics including Annette Insdorf call Renoir an impressionist, it is typically in the mode of journalistic criticism, the kind that goes for romantic explanations in an effort to pique public interest.¹⁰ But each of these efforts to link Renoir to his father’s impressionism does contain a worthy element—a valid theory about French Impressionist Cinema and Renoir’s relationship to it. Bazin stresses Renoir’s impressionist inheritance in order to explain a certain suggestiveness developed through Renoir’s habit of framing—the way he evokes life beyond and before the camera frame and therefore achieves a heightened verisimilitude.¹¹ This dynamic verisimilitude is usefully compared to (or seen to be derived from) Pierre-Auguste Renoir’s painterly impressionism because he, too, achieved a fuller feeling of presence through the many techniques involved in impressionism’s verisimilar vitality. Insdorf, too, associates Jean Renoir with his father’s impressionism in order to explain his technical achievement. For Insdorf, his films feature the “relativity of human perception” and “extraordinary attention to detail” at work in his father’s painting.¹²

But it is Bordwell’s account that makes the strongest association, best justifying a return to what might otherwise seem to be a faulty way of categorizing Jean Renoir’s film aesthetic. Bordwell cites Renoir’s early films as examples of a French Impressionist Cinema he defines in terms of an array of techniques meant to heighten film’s engaging subjectivity and, through that enhancement, to define film’s emergent aesthetic specificity. For French Impressionist Cinema emerged at a moment in which filmmakers and film theorists sought to distinguish film from the other arts, and thereby to prove that it was an art of its own. They did so through focus upon the various determinants of filmic immediacy, in contrast to prior cinematic emphases (the pictorial, the theatrical) and to what would follow in more avant-garde (for example, surrealist) cinematic aesthetics. For example, interiority close-ups, which, as Bordwell notes, made full-screen faces suggestive of the life of the mind; rhythmic montage, which, in contrast to other montage forms, simulated patterns of mental recognition; optical subjectivity, achieved through such techniques as visual limitation and distortion; camera mobility also meant to simulate psychic or emotional process: these were techniques designed by French Impressionist Cinema in order to intensify film’s natural gift for immersive experience, and, in so doing, to bring out what was exclusively natural to film.¹³ This effort—to identify film’s claim to aesthetic specificity—resembles what Clement Greenberg would later do to clarify the terms of aesthetic modernism. Just as Greenberg would locate aesthetic distinction in each art form’s formal specialty, French Impressionist Cinema came into being as a movement through its effort to say what film could do that other art forms could

not.¹⁴ Perhaps ironically, this effort entailed an impressionist revival. But this revived impressionism was also original, because the idea was that cinema was the impression's true home: only with the advent of filmic technology could impressions now truly achieve representational activity equal to their potential. In other words, French Impressionist Cinema was no belated form of citation, even if it could seem that the term reflected a failed effort to co-opt the aesthetic distinction of a past moment. It more boldly asserted that a property essential to art itself was the special property of film.

Of course, such techniques can no longer be ascribed exclusively to French Impressionist Cinema, and of course Renoir had other priorities that favor other categorizations of his work. But this historical link between what were thought to be impressionist techniques and the effort at cinematic specificity provides us with a crucial framework for understanding the problem of failed modernism in *La Règle du jeu*. For French Impressionist Cinema, despite the decisive help it gave to film's development as a force in aesthetic culture, could not transcend the problem of impressionism. The impression may have been a fine focus for film's claim to special verisimilitude; these filmmakers may have been able to clarify their experiential, presentational advantages in the impression's compelling terms. But at the same time, the impression could limit film to the mere immediacy already threatened by camera mechanics: the worry that the camera would merely present life itself *without* necessary aesthetic transformations was actually compounded by the rhetoric of the impression. The more important avant-garde movements that would follow the short preeminence of French Impressionist Cinema were all about asserting interventions that could make a difference to what the camera might otherwise merely show. That reaction—again, a common one across the history of impressionism—explains the complex modernism of *La Règle du jeu*. It suggests that Renoir came out of a cinema culture context in which impressionism had been asserted as a faulty signature for film, a claim to specificity that actually undermined cinema's more timely projects. The conflict informs the aesthetic structure of Renoir's work in this instance. His impressionism, I will argue, was an ideal that not only failed in practice but also troubled the practical modernity of *La Règle du jeu*.

Renoir himself indicates this possibility in his own account of impressionism—his explanation of his father's complex relationship to the movement, and what he implies about his own, similar sense of impressionism as a dynamic problem. In *Renoir, My Father* (1958), Renoir rehearses the familiar story of Pierre-Auguste Renoir's rejection of the movement to which he had been so central. “For him the whole question of Impressionism was called into question,” Jean notes, by the problem of impressionism's excessive subjectivism, and Pierre-Auguste finally “loathed” the very name of the movement for what it suggested of inauthentically immediate appearances.¹⁵ But his attitude was more properly ambivalent; he was “one minute an impenitent Impressionist, determined to follow the same line as his friend Claude Monet; and the next, an intransigent classicist, a stubborn disciple of M. Ingres.”¹⁶ At one moment he celebrated impressionism's subjective individuality, but at others he looked back to

classical models for formal rigor—“direct perception, on the one hand, and tradition, on the other.”¹⁷ This ambivalence was nothing he could resolve: “The real dilemma which can be considered the central theme of his life—the contest between subjectivism and objectivism—Renoir always refused to put himself in the form of a direct question.”¹⁸ And the same might be said for Jean himself. He, too, reacted against his own impressionist subjectivism in favor of a more classical model of objectivity, and he, too, refused to pose any direct question about the relationship between them. Just as Pierre-Auguste achieved his signature modernity through registrations of this ambivalence, Jean’s *La Règle du jeu* becomes a modernist text as a result of its anxious departure from impressionist plenitude into classical forms.

A further advantage to this way of thinking about the film, however retrograde impressionism might seem as a category for film criticism, is the way it might also actually refresh our attention to another old problem in film studies: that of the conflict between Renoir’s auteurism and his commitment to film’s role in politics. For much of the twentieth century, critics were divided between interpretations of Renoir that stress his heroic and individual artistry and those that stress his participation in a social project of committed aesthetics. Martin O’Shaughnessy explains that this debate about Renoir grows out of an essential duality in the director’s work over a long career.¹⁹ Moreover, this division within Renoir criticism has expanded to a division without, as Renoir’s case has come to be important to this sort of debate more generally: anti-auteurist theories of various kinds will often cite Renoir as a leading example of what is to be gained by insistence upon contextual interpretation. To read *La Règle du jeu* as an impressionist film—or, rather, a film troubled by the problem of impressionism—is to locate another promising crux of interaction between auteurist aesthetics and political commitment: Renoir may have tried to employ his own aesthetics of immediacy, but the result was such that it conflicted with his Popular Front commitments—not directly, since this is not simply a case of pure aesthetics conflicting with political engagement, but indirectly, in the way the problem of impressionism brings out the social conflicts latent in what might seem to be purely aesthetic intent. As we will see, impressionism’s way of reviving the difference between what is primal and what is not enters into participation with the social politics that are the thematic concern of *La Règle du jeu*, rendering the film’s politics even more fundamentally fraught than Renoir’s commitment intended. To discover this peculiarly aesthetic politics is to resolve the question of Renoir’s auteurist commitment in a new way: whereas critics have puzzled over the “fundamental apoliticism” of *La Règle du jeu* despite its obvious political allegory, and whereas critics have also alleged that Renoir’s commitment here and elsewhere is merely affective rather than truly active, the problem of impressionism provides the strange link whereby the auteurist aesthetic and political commitment enter into modernist engagement with each other.²⁰

Further to explain this difference we might reconsider yet another old argument about Renoir: Marcel Oms’s 1962 critique of Renoir in *Premier Plan*. Oms felt that Renoir’s problem was not his inadequate commitment to the Popular Front but the Popular Front’s own peculiar conservatism, which Renoir did not transcend. If Renoir

could seem only superficially committed to social justice, it might have been because of “*les mystifications du Front Populaire*”; it, too, engaged in essential deceptions, so that Renoir could be committed to its causes without being a truly committed artist, in, for example, *La Marseillaise*, about which Oms writes, “*Il ne contient aucune mise en garde contre l’exploitation du soulèvement populaire au profit de la bourgeoisie*” [“It contains no warning against the exploitation of the popular uprising to the profit of the bourgeoisie”].²¹ Oms cites the assertion implicitly central to *La Règle du jeu* that all men are motivated only by *erotic* desire to question the film’s speciously democratic politics: this universality is merely affective, much the way Renoir’s politics was only a politics of feeling, a sentimental solidarity with the working classes. So, too, with the Popular Front, which substituted affective ideals for practical leftist measures—and so, too, with Renoir’s impressionism, which immersed itself in life more for the feeling of it than for any social realities the immersive camera might discover. In a sense, impressionism was an aesthetic parallel to the Popular Front itself, sharing its uneasy coalition of realisms of life and feeling, primed to break down and undermine politics and aesthetics alike.

How, then, does the problem of impressionism play out across *La Règle du jeu*, becoming a problem at once for the film’s aesthetic and for its political commitments? Most fundamentally there is the way the impressionist aesthetic becomes a sort of switching post between film’s past and its future—its past technical forms and the future of innovation for which *La Règle du jeu* tends to get credit. As I have noted, the film makes an impressionistic start, with its dynamic movement, anti-narratorial subjectivism, and interiorizing close-ups. Other tendencies including lurching movement, swinging continuity, immersive intensity, and reactive motivation continue to make *La Règle du jeu* an impressionist film, but the work reverts to older cinematic styles that preceded French Impressionist Cinema, thereby responding anxiously to the clash between Renoir’s impressionist aesthetic and his political allegory. For every moment in which impressionism helps to foster a modern style of filmmaking, there is a moment of retrogression—the boudoir *theatricality* of Christine’s first appearance, for example, and other scenes of theatrical stolidity and *pictorial* scenery that suggest that impressionism actually prompts an urge toward film’s earlier dependence upon these other artistic genres. It is a well-known fact that early film took its cue from the stage and classical painting before it began to seek its own proper aesthetic. Ian Aitken’s introduction to film theory surveys the “pictorial naturalism” important to the earliest French cinema, the “concern for landscape and the picturesque” that characterized the compositions of such filmmakers as André Antoine.²² And Siegfried Kracauer cites Film d’Art’s 1908 *Assassination of the Duc de Guise* as an example of the early “trend in favor of the theatrical story” (however “uncinematic” or “saturated with stage traditions” and therefore “uncinematic”) as that which could justify the art of film.²³ Ironically, the aesthetic of impressionism, so important to cinematic specificity in the 1920s, became in Renoir’s 1939 film a reason to return to these earlier filmic modes. Theatricality and pictorialism reassert themselves in nearly every scene in which some social conflict has undermined the relationships

Renoir's camera has framed; his mise en scène actually stabilizes conflict, pictorially and theatrically, even as the energy of his filmmaking would seem to drive impressionistic vitality. For all the impressionistic experimentalism of *La Règle du jeu*, there is, simultaneously, an emphatic conventionality.

The result can be slapstick or merely pretty—stagy but lacking the reflexive kind of performativity for which *La Règle du jeu* has often drawn praise. The film is often celebrated for its reflexive theatricality, its critical performativity—Leo Braudy, for example, stresses the knowing critique Renoir achieves by these means, as do Keith Reader and Alexander Sesonske—but it is possible that the theatricality in question is not reflexive enough.²⁴ That is, it can seem to have a surprising sincerity, as if Renoir were happy to fall back upon a familiar and favorite style of gestural action. Likewise, Renoir's pictorial grace, which has rightly been admired as a talent of his forward-looking eye, may look backward to a moment in which scenic beauty was presumed to have a less contested claim upon natural human attention.

Two examples reflect this difference between, on the one hand, critically parodic pictorialism and theatricality (which would give the film a modernist edge) and, on the other, Renoir's more anxious, more direct dependence upon these modes.

Theatricality is dominant in the long sequence that follows hustling house guests in their antics around the halls and rooms of the chateau—a sequence that might have immersed itself in the affectivity of these explosive social contretemps but instead keeps a settled and even distance, the camera tracking at a constant level and even remaining stationary as figures enter and leave the scene (see Figure 12.3). This distance might seem to be a critical one; indeed, the absurdity of the scene of leisure-class hyperactivity is heightened by the camera's even eye. But criticality here is not that of full contemporaneous engagement; rather, it feels traditional, holding its characters to old standards of behavior and decorum. Bazin argued that Renoir earned his pivotal place in the history of cinema by helping to move film from the theatrical to the cinematic.²⁵ Historians of French cinema note that the move (as it was accomplished by Renoir but also more generally) was important for the way it got cinema beyond its early dependence on what at first seemed to be its necessary mode of filmed theater. Early filmmakers had a tendency to presume that film would be filmed theater—if not a mere recording of the stage itself, then something still based upon the scene of staged drama.²⁶ Change came with the realization that film could work differently, taking advantage of its unique aesthetic specificities both to move drama in a new direction and develop new forms of performative representation. It is this change that Renoir sometimes seems to reverse. The misbehavior mocked by *La Règle du jeu* in these scenes is that of stage villains and dramatic types, lost in classic theatrical misadventure. Indeed, the antic mobility of this unreconstructed theatricality even seems to undermine the film's potential political critique, if those involved in it seem to be endearing reminders of the kind of hapless buffoonery that can only now seem far less threatening than real contemporary misbehavior. Which is to argue that the film's “*fantaisie dramatique*” does not achieve its goal of updating, for modern purposes, the comic business of Alfred de Musset's *Les Caprices de Marianne*, but that it harkens



Figure 12.3 Social contretemps, Jean Renoir, *La Règle du jeu* (*The Rules of the Game*) (1939)

back to Musset, Molière, and Pierre de Marivaux in order to find in them aesthetic refuge from the implications of Renoir's own impressionist aesthetic. As we will see, it does so not out of any uninteresting archaism or traditionalism, but because his modernist impressionism itself requires premodernist supplementation, a return to cinema's former ways of getting help from other art forms.²⁷

Outdoors, a naturalist painterly pictorialism provides this help, in the film's celebrated hunting scene.²⁸ Here, gorgeous scenery seems to establish something like the irony achieved indoors by the critical distance of Renoir's camera; here again we might seem to have a critical contrast between the foolish behavior of Renoir's characters and the natural harmonies of the beautiful heritage landscape. Indeed, this contrast might seem to make the film's argument on its own: France itself is what it has always been of blessed space, but its ruling class can now only move aimlessly and with violence within it. Visually this difference distinguishes the durable value of a natural nation from the failures of its present cultural occupation. But the visuals are too splendid to maintain this critical contrast; natural beauty is overdetermined, and it actually ends up enhancing the look of those it ought to make look foolish by contrast. Something too pictorial overstates the durability of the natural nation, and lends that value to the faces and bodies of the people Renoir otherwise subjects to satire. When, for example, amorous intrigue meant to draw a critical eye to Christine and her lover actually frames them



Figure 12.4 Pictorialism and the hunt, Jean Renoir, *La Règle du jeu* (*The Rules of the Game*) (1939)

with rich aesthetic regard, or when glamour shots frame Christine herself from below up against a mellowing sky, pictorial unities exclude some of the critical energies of film—this film, and also film itself as a form of inquiry. Similarly, figures grouped in the landscape and even women poised for violence are simply too picturesque (see Figures 12.4 and 12.5). Just as a traditional theatricality seems to make *La Règle du jeu* give up on impressionist means of registering physical business, this traditional pictorialism gives up on the impressionist methods by which French Impressionist Cinema had entered the landscape more aggressively, with fuller efforts to subject the landscape to cinematic prerogatives. For just as theatricality could be a throwback for a film aesthetic that had given up its dependence on stage dynamics, pictorialism was an old habit—another preliminary measure that film had at first taken, presuming that an artful camera eye must see things in the manner of traditional landscape imagery. Once again, Renoir seems to back away from impressionist methods just when they could make his medium consistent with the project of his film.

What is responsible for this tendency to retreat from impressionism and commitment alike into outdated forms of satire—and forms of satire that are, finally, inadequate to the film’s own critical objectives? Why does Renoir revert to theatrical and pictorial filmic forms when they make his social politics seem only as timely as old plays and pictures? Even the elements singled out by psychoanalytic critics interested



Figure 12.5 Violence versus the picturesque, Jean Renoir, *La Règle du jeu* (*The Rules of the Game*) (1939)

in Renoir's profound demonstrations of the cultural imaginary can seem less incisive when seen this way. The film's much-admired danse macabre, for example, and the massively symbolic appearance of the *limonaire* that plays music for the film's most performative moments seem less interesting psychoanalytically and more insulated from filmic subjectivity.²⁹ Anything suggestively unconscious about them seems mediated by historicality—the histories of century-old theatricals and set-piece conventionality. What accounts for this preference for old standards over sign-system opportunities? In a way, these are all questions about Renoir's fundamental choice of stylistic inheritance—his reason for wanting to film an updated version of a theatrical classic and for thinking that old style would be right for his present critical purposes. Of course, he hoped to show that “the rules of the game” as played in classic terms were yet being played, to disastrous effect and with no real respect for them, by a merely ludic aristocracy. But such a one-joke form of satire could not sustain a film in 1939, and it could certainly not sustain a powerful political critique. What does make the film's mode valid is the way it enables Renoir to register sociopolitical conflict at the level of a complex stylistic dynamic: enacting visually his own retreat from impressionism into outdated pictorial and theatrical modes, Renoir dramatizes a crucial problem that is at once aesthetic and political, one that makes *La Règle du jeu* a masterpiece of modernist cinema.

Here, we need to recall in greater detail the problem of impressionism—what we have learned from theorists who, writing about impressionism across the arts, emphasize its ambivalent and self-defeating tendencies. In early work by Georg Lukács and Arnold Hauser and, more fully, later analysis by Fredric Jameson, Michael Levenson, Richard Brettell, and Paul Willemen, among others, impressionism has been seen as a charismatic aesthetic project most important for the way its incoherence (both theoretical and practical) only drives further productive ambivalence.³⁰ On the one hand, impressionism aims at immediate plenitude, a play of appearances that becomes instantly and fully meaningful in its own register of sensory or affective verisimilitude. On the other hand, it distracts and confuses, disallowing real engagement and feeding impulses detrimental to everything from true art to social justice to human happiness. Impressionism might seem to entail a utopian synthesis of sensation and thought, of appearance and reality, fact and feeling, but it also always threatens to devolve into worse-than-ever distinctions among these categories, robbing each paired part of any natural dynamic link to its opposite. This ambiguity value—to refer to Jameson's account of the way impressionism at once restores sensory plenitude and distracts from real efforts to solve the problem of perceptual (and political) alienation—is a problem, but that does not mean it has put a stop to impressionism.³¹ Rather, it only gives impressionism more cultural power—more provocative energy, and ever greater allegorical agency. That is, the problem of impressionism is more broadly fundamental enough to elicit representations—stories, imagery, aesthetic techniques—that perform in order to try to master the valuable ambiguity of the impression's immediate plenitude. In post-impressionism, for example, dialectics of composition and opticality leading ultimately to cubism and beyond develop around this problem, and in impressionist literature from Walter Pater to Marcel Proust and beyond there are similar stories in which avatars of immediate sense and reflective recognition enter into dynamic contestation.

I have argued elsewhere that a main variety of the story of impressionism's ambiguity value is a social plot in which the fraught collaboration of the impression's paired parts enter into conflict.³² What impressionism would unite in a utopian synthesis, impressionist stories often divide, in key works of modernist narration. Ideally, impressionism entails instant unities in which other forms of attention and representation go through stages of first, primary recognition, secondary understanding, and higher thought or artistry. Impressionism is a wish for sensations that themselves become thoughts—brute facts that are subtly felt without the need of any interventions that are different in kind. But this wish must face the truth about epistemological and aesthetic process as they interact with human expectation: moments in perception have always already been allied with types of human life, so that any wish to yoke together sensation and perception, thought and feeling, appearance and essence also becomes a fear of what these unities might destroy, fear of the loss to the parallel social distinctions upon which social life is built. In the work of Joseph Conrad, for example, mute colonial bodies and idealizing imperial minds come together only to provoke profound anxiety about the result. Especially when the work of art has for its content

certain problems of social distinction in social lives fraught with conflict, impressionism's utopian aesthetic becomes a matter of allegorical strife even as it achieves unities of intense experiential plenitude.

It is this form of allegory that Renoir enacts in *La Règle du jeu*: his wish to give film the affective immediacy of the impressionist aesthetic runs afoul of the problem of impressionism because his thematic concern—the sociopolitical farce of France's cultural leadership—stresses divisions where impressionism hopes for wholes. This problem throws him back upon film's older aesthetic methods, and the resulting aesthetic heterogeneity heightens the effect of crisis at the level of theme. This is a modernist crisis for the way it registers at once the problems of aesthetic and cultural modernity. It provides us with a way to rethink the ideology of perception in Renoir's modernist cinema, a different way to argue, in the spirit of Christopher Faulkner's sense that *La Règle du jeu* engages in an “interrogation of an ideological mode of perception,” that the film's “deformation of convention” enacts a reflexive critique of the modernist ambition to intervene aesthetically in the political world.³³

For this is the wonderful, modernist thing about *La Règle du jeu*—this reflexively critical, formally incisive relationship among aesthetics, politics, and the history of modernity. Of course, this relationship was not Renoir's auteurist plan. His plan had been to draw upon the heritage of classical French drama in order to show up the extent to which contemporary French culture now conducted itself hypocritically and self-destructively according to outmoded rules of social behavior; the goal was to liken prewar France to a drawing-room farce, with allegorical elements designed to make comedy capable of the bitterest social criticism. But that goal cannot explain the aesthetic form through which Renoir intensifies farce into inconsistent experientiality—the immersive form that gives this farce the feel of lived reality. Clashing with its content, this form reflects an impressionist motive, and one that does not simply abet the effect of the farcical content it would mediate. Instead it introduces a content of its own, especially to the extent that its formal problems strangely match those at work in the political allegory Renoir's film enacts. In other words, the ambiguities of impressionism itself—the way its immediacy can seem to threaten proximities that are social as well as aesthetic, a matter of conflict among social types as much as tension among moments in the process of aesthetic perception and production—becomes part of the allegorical project.³⁴ But with confusing results: whereas the content of the film enacts troubling reversals among ruling-class authority and lower-order subversion, its impressionist aesthetic leads to anxious reversion to outdated styles (pictorialism, theatricality), and, consequently, allegorical meanings other than those Renoir might seem to intend. More specifically, this aesthetic allegory confuses Renoir's attempt at critique. The aristocratic and haute-bourgeois characters he would satirize actually gain in authority and credibility for being presented in traditional aesthetic terms. Framed pictorially and theatrically, Christine achieves a kind of glamour that reads as an endorsement; housed in interiors left intact despite the impressionist mobility that might have destabilized them, this milieu seems to get the respect of the camera eye, and this regard makes Renoir's message allegorically incoherent.

To understand better the stakes of this incoherence, we might consider an example of its most extensive reiteration, in a screen text that is very much a legacy of *La Règle du jeu* understood in this way. Robert Altman largely remade the film in his *Gosford Park* (2001), well known to be a kind of homage to Renoir. Whereas Altman's film sharpens the point of Renoir's critique, more vigorously containing the incoherence that threatened, in the source text, to undermine it, the next legacy in this line of succession pushes it to the breaking point: Julian Fellowes, who wrote *Gosford Park*, went on to write the television series *Downton Abbey*, the hit nostalgia throwback of the mid-2010s (2010–2015, sequel film 2019), which simplifies the aesthetics of this micro-genre but also aggravates the complexity of it. *Downton Abbey* exaggerates the inadvertent conservatism of Renoir's own aesthetic by heightening experiential vivacity at the expense of critical distance; the show would seem to put visual aesthetics in the service of historical objectivity, but it idealizes what it would critique, and does so in part as a result of the immersive camera eye learned from the conflicted impressionism of *La Règle du jeu*. Claude Gauteur wrote of the film that “the class-struggle can be read here with the naked eye.”³⁵ In fact, class struggle has been re-aestheticized, due to the incoherence enforced by the mode of filmic immediacy through which Renoir and his successors in class-struggle aesthetics would depict it.

It was this incoherence more than anything else that determined the film's reception history. The uproar at the first screenings was never that of a focused outrage but rather a mixed one, a confused response to the film's confused critique. The subsequent sense that *La Règle du jeu* was at once a masterpiece (worthy of its persistent appearance at the top of lists of all-time best films) and a disaster to be forgotten also may have been a product of the film's status as a complex combination of incompatible allegorical motives.

“*Tout le monde a ses raisons*,” the film's notorious motto, itself comprises this problem of impressionist commitment. For that is ultimately the essence of the conflict here: Renoir aims to enact a committed satire of ruling-class failure, a political critique essential to the committed political outlook of the late 1930s, but his subjectivist impressionism suggests that political failures are individual ones—that all have their reasons not really with the effect of political chaos but with the justification of impressionist theory. We may watch selfish motives destroying the social microcosm, but we are also watching aesthetic immediacies that justify very personal points of view. If, as Daniel Serceau notes, *La Règle du jeu* dramatizes “the triumph of unbridled egotism, the social community breaking up into a myriad of individuals who recognize only their subjective interests,” the blame may lie only with the individuals rather than the social system—impressionistic rather than systematic failures.³⁶ And yet insofar as Renoir allows these incompatible modes to confuse each other, we get the very interesting problem of impressionist commitment—the peculiar ambiguity value of an aesthetic mode that questions itself in sociopolitical terms to make itself a matter of great allegorical perplexity. Once Renoir's impressionism has devolved into other modes that undermine his political critique, and once the resulting critique has become only more trenchant as a result, “tout le monde a ses raisons” resonates

with all the confounding power of the great modernist mottos, those which bespeak profound uncertainties about what happens when aesthetic and political motives together transform the cultural work of art.

One character gives voice to the problem of impressionist commitment: Octave, who, of course, stands in for Renoir himself. As the figure who mediates among the different social actors who make up the social panorama of *La Règle du jeu*, the one who connects everyone, Octave is Renoir's onscreen representative, orchestrating the activity that creates the drama of the film. Insofar as Octave presides regretfully over the film's final sequences—even going so far as to say, “*Je suis un raté*” [“I am a failure”] (1:31:08)—he expresses Renoir's own regret over the necessary failure of art to redress the social and political conflicts that so far outstrip it in the coming of world war. But Octave also figures the differently mediatory intention of Renoir's aesthetic mode—the way impressionism would hold together disparate aspects of aesthetic engagement. Energizing so many different varieties of dramatic action, appearing viably in many different scenes of social performance, Octave is a unifier—until he is not one. Octave motivates forms of unstable togetherness, which ultimately become the scenes of crisis he must regretfully depart. Critics who note that Octave serves as Renoir's onscreen representative tend to attribute to him an ironic auteurism: Octave gets so involved that he loses authority, and his comprehensive significance among the figures with whom he interacts spreads him too thin. This overextension guarantees the sort of breakdown, at once aesthetic and social, essential to the problem of impressionist commitment. In a sense, Octave represents the impression itself—that aesthetic entity that would unite the aesthetic process but ends up causing a good deal of social trouble. But it is worth noting that Renoir has succeeded where Octave fails. For the problem of the impression has been given a transformative field of action in Renoir's film, which achieves highly influential modernist complexity through its enactments of this problem's simultaneously aesthetic and political working out.

La Règle du jeu is often seen as a turning point for Renoir. Before it came the Popular Front films and the avant-garde experiments—commitments to political and aesthetic representation. After it followed the American exile, in which Renoir capitulated to the demands of Americanized mass culture and entered into more miscellaneous engagements with cinematic culture more broadly construed. If film's aesthetic became more fully modernist after the war, Renoir's version of it left modernist ideals behind, moving away from formal innovation and social critique and, more importantly for the purpose of the present argument, their complex and unstable interaction. Renoir may have maintained an impressionist passion for life itself and the vital, mobile power of cinematic experience, but that passion did not founder upon the sort of conflicts that made it so reflexively productive before the war. A film such as *French Can-Can* (1954), for example, is an extravagant homage to the impressionist dynamic, but it has settled into a surer confidence in what that dynamic means for cinematic pleasure. It registers nothing like what Renoir shows us in *La Règle du jeu*: the exciting clash of commitment and impressionism as a modernist form of art,

the strange effect of an unsettled collaboration which, like so much of modernism, poses the very question of the arts in modernity.

Notes

1. The film premiered at two theatres, the Colisée and the Aubert-Palace, with gala screenings on July 7 and the public premiere on July 8.
2. *La Règle du jeu*, dir. Jean Renoir, 1939, Nouvelles Editions Françaises; restored 1959, 1998 by Jean Gaborit and Jacques Durand, Les Grandes Films Classiques, DVD, British Film Institute, 2003, 4:30.
3. Renoir quoted in Peter Wollen, “*La Règle du jeu*,” in *Paris Hollywood: Writings on Film* (London: Verso, 2002), 152.
4. “*À la veille de la guerre, l'opinion était ainsi mise en condition et les sentiments tricolores de l'Union Sacrée amenèrent le grand public à manifester bruyamment sa réprobation devant *La Règle du jeu**” (On the eve of the war, public opinion was thus shaped and the tricolor sentiments of the Union Sacrée led the general public to loudly express its disapproval of *The Rules of the Game*). Author unknown, “*La Règle du jeu*,” in Bernard Chardère, *Premier Plan* 22–24 [Jean Renoir] (1962), 274–296; 289).
5. This point seems true despite Theodor Adorno’s claim that montage was a total departure from impressionism. Adorno wrote that “montage originated in antithesis to mood-laden art, primarily impressionism,” and he expanded upon this claim by noting that “impressionism dissolved objects . . . into their smallest elements in order to synthesize them gaplessly into the dynamic continuum,” to “redeem the alienated and heterogeneous,” whereas montage protested against this redemption. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, Rolf Tiedemann, ed.; Robert Hullot-Kenter, trans. (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 211. As David Bordwell makes clear in his study of French Impressionist Cinema, there are many forms of montage, some of which extend upon impressionism’s dynamic continuum. See David Bordwell, *French Impressionist Cinema: Film Culture, Film Theory, and Film Style* (dissertation, University of Iowa, Department of Speech and Dramatic Art, 1974).
6. Keith Reader, “*La Règle du jeu*” (London: I. B. Taurus, 2010), 80. Reader offers a comprehensive account of the film’s many histories (its reception, the critical heritage), to which I am indebted. Reader’s account pointed me in the direction of some of the critical texts (Oms, Sesonske, and others) essential to my argument.
7. For the best argument against calling Jean Renoir an impressionist, see Leo Braudy, *Jean Renoir: The World of His Films* (New York: Doubleday, 1972), 19–20.
8. André Bazin famously claimed that “Jean made the ideal movies which Auguste himself would have made if he had abandoned his brushes for the camera.” *Jean Renoir*, François Truffaut, ed.; W. W. Halsey II and William H. Simon, trans. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973, 84; Bordwell, *French Impressionist Cinema*, 12, 242).
9. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberajm, trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 41.
10. Annette Insdorf, “Before Neo-Realism or Robert Altman, There Was Renoir,” *New York Times* (September 25, 1994), www.nytimes.com/1994/09/25/movies/film-view-before-neo-realism-or-robert-altman-there-was-renoir.html, accessed September 13, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/09/25/movies/film-view-before-neo-realism-or-robert-altman-there-was-renoir.html>.

11. Bazin writes that “the principle of a director’s style lies in his way of giving reality meaning” and that Renoir gives meaning through a screen that is “the very opposite of a frame,” one that reveals the reality of what lies beyond it. Bazin, *Jean Renoir*, 87. Renoir performs the limitations of subjective filmic vision, and “this revolution was not without analogies to Impressionist painting.” Bazin, *Jean Renoir*, 108.
12. Insdorf, “Before Neo-Realism.” See also Roger Leenhardt: *Dans l’impressionnisme qui est à la base de sa formation artistique, Jean Renoir a trouvé plus qu’une esthétique de la lumière: il a reconnu un moment, un aspect de la sensibilité française qui a formé son style et fait la théme principal de son inspiration* (In the impressionism that is at the foundation of his artistic formation, Jean Renoir found more than an aesthetic of light: he recognized a moment, an aspect of the French sensibility that formed his style and created the principle theme of his inspiration). Leenhardt, “*Jean Renoir et la tradition française*,” in Chardère, *Premier Plan* 22–24 (1962), 32–36; 32.
13. See Bordwell, “A Paradigm of Impressionist Film Style,” in *French Impressionist Cinema*, 135–217.
14. Bordwell notes that the central goal of the theoretical advocacy performed by proponents of French Impressionist Cinema was to “persuade the public that the cinema was an art” and to do so by identifying its special aesthetic characteristics (51).
15. Jean Renoir, *Renoir, My Father* (1958), Randolph and Dorothy Weaver, trans. (New York: NYRB Classics, 2001), 220, 149.
16. Renoir, *Renoir, My Father*, 229.
17. Renoir, *Renoir, My Father*, 228.
18. Renoir, *Renoir, My Father*, 99.
19. “Critics have too often dealt with the complex discontinuities of Renoir’s output by forcing it into reductionist moulds, making the object of analysis fit the analytical frame. … Auteurists almost invariably use the politically non-aligned, post-war Renoir to rewrite the pre-war politically committed films. … Critics of the left … set out to demonstrate that the later Renoir’s ‘reactionary’ ideas were always lurking beneath the surface.” Martin O’Shaughnessy, *Jean Renoir* (Manchester, UK, and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), 33.
20. Colin Crisp writes that although Renoir had produced work commissioned by the Communist Party and funded *La Marseillaise* through popular subscription, “a more fundamental apoliticism still shows through in most films of the time, such as *Grande Illusion* and *La Règle du jeu*.” *The Classic French Cinema, 1930–1960* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 182.
21. Marcel Oms, “*Renoir, revu et rectifié*,” in Chardère, *Premier Plan* 22–24 (1962), 44–51; 51, 48.
22. Ian Aitken, *European Film Theory and Cinema: A Critical Introduction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 69–71. Aitken argues that pictorialist naturalism gave way to impressionist pictorialism and then to a second phase of cinematic impressionism after 1922. It seems important, however, to distinguish pictorialism from the impressionism that succeeded it, given the impressionist’s penchant for mobility and subjectivity.
23. Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), 216.
24. Reader writes, “Theatricality, a key trope for Braudy as for other auteurist writers on the film, spreads beyond the domain of the aesthetic to which it can never be entirely confined

- and into the ‘recalcitrant reality’ of the film’s broader socio-historical context” (“*La Règle du jeu*,” 98). Sesonske notes that in *La Règle du jeu*, “life has become theatre.” Alexander Sesonske, *Jean Renoir: The French Films* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 408.
25. Bazin’s claim, which is also relevant to this essay’s larger argument, is that “no one has grasped the true nature of the screen better than Renoir; no one has more successfully rid it of the equivocal analogies with painting and the theater. Plastically the screen is most often made to conform to the limits of a canvas, and dramatically it is modelled after the stage. . . . Renoir, on the other hand, understands that the screen is not a simple rectangle but rather the homothetic viewfinder of his camera” (Bazin, *Jean Renoir*, 87).
 26. See the material usefully collected in *Theater and Film: A Comparative Anthology*, Robert Knopf, ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), most notably the classic work by Bazin (“Theater and Cinema” [110–33]) and Sergei Eisenstein (“Through Theatre to Cinema” [239–50]), as well as Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs, *Theatre to Cinema: Stage Pictorialism and the Early Feature Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3–17.
 27. By contrast, other readings of the tension between Renoir’s traditionalism and his experimentality, for example, Christopher Faulkner’s, claim that the film “thrives on just this tension between its traditional inheritance and its experimental excesses” because the “generic uneasiness” at work here produces a “wholly unsettled narrative that threatens to explode the security of its borrowed frame.” Christopher Faulkner, *The Social Cinema of Jean Renoir* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 110. Faulkner argues, as I do here but for a different reason, that “this tension within the film’s process of signification between tradition and innovation may be seen as an aspect of its modernism” (*Social Cinema*, 111).
 28. My use of this term corresponds to Alan Williams’ “pictorialist naturalism,” a term Williams uses to describe the early-cinematic deference to painterly pictorialism and its contrast with French Impressionist Cinema. *Republic of Images: A History of French Filmmaking* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 112–20.
 29. See Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire VIII: Le Transfer* (Paris: Seuil, 2001), 164, cited in Reader, “*La Règle du jeu*,” 68.
 30. See Georg Lukács, “The Ideology of Modernism,” in *Realism in Our Time: Literature and the Class Struggle*, John Mander and Necke Mander, trans. (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 17–46; Georg Lukács, *Studies in European Realism* (1950), Edith Bone, trans. (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1964); Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art: Naturalism, Impressionism, the Film Age* (New York: Vintage Books, 1958); Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981); Michael Levenson, *A Genealogy of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Richard Brettell, *Impression: Painting Quickly in France, 1860–1890* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, in association with the Sterling and Francine Clark Institute, Williamstown, MA, 2000); Paul Willemen, “Photogénie and Epstein,” *Looks and Frictions: Essays in Cultural Studies and Film Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 124–33.
 31. Jameson, *Political Unconscious*, 206–80.
 32. Jesse Matz, *Literary Impressionism and Modernist Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
 33. Faulkner, *Social Cinema*, 111.

34. In a way, this argument is analogous to Bazin's foundational claim that the film synthesizes "realist plenitude" and a critique of the cinematic "sign system." The problem of impressionist commitment develops a similar relationship between full representation and reflexive critique.
35. Gauteur quoted in Reader, "*La Règle du Jeu*," 92.
36. Daniel Serceau, quoted in Reader, "*La Règle du Jeu*," 41.

13

“You Must Speak”

Silence, Scale, and Power in Charlie Chaplin’s
The Great Dictator

Scott W. Klein

Charlie Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator* (1940) ends with a startling and controversial sequence. Throughout the film, which he also directed, Chaplin plays two roles. The first is a poor Jewish barber, whom the film follows from his days at the front in World War I through his persecution in the ghettos of the lightly fictionalized “Tomania,” a version of Germany. The second is the dictator of Tomania, a short, mustached tyrant named Adenoid Hynkel—a broad lampoon of Adolph Hitler. By the end of the film the two characters become confused with each other. Hynkel, while in civilian clothes, is arrested by storm troopers who believe that he is the barber, escaped from a political prison. The barber, who has stolen a Tomanian uniform, is confused by soldiers for the dictator himself, and they bring him to the newly invaded country of Austerlich (a scarcely disguised Austria) to present an address to the troops. Caught in an untenable circumstance, the barber takes the stage in the guise of the dictator. He speaks for several minutes: but rather than speaking in character to the soldiers, Chaplin, as actor and director, breaks the fourth wall of the film. In a quiet voice that gradually increases in intensity, he speaks as himself, delivering a plea for tolerance and for hope for the future, addressed simultaneously to the massed soldiers, who cheer the message; to the barber’s distant young Jewish friend Hannah (Paulette Goddard), who had escaped from Tomania only to find herself once again under the Tomanian regime; and to the international audiences of the day, who were presumably watching the film in theaters around the world (at least in countries where the film was not banned for political reasons).

Reactions to this sequence have always been mixed. Chaplin himself wrote an essay for *The New York Times*, explicitly defending the final speech.¹ Some critics find the speech bathetic, such as John Kimber, who calls it “painful to watch. It is probably the most embarrassing thing Chaplin ever did, and committing himself to it was a major misjudgment.”² Others, however, such as filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard, saw in it nothing less than the invention of cinéma-vérité, while French critic Jean Narboni, who wrote an entire book on the film, calls it a “coup de force” (“masterstroke”).³ My interest here is less in the content of this closing peroration—which, as with much else in Chaplin, is open to criticisms of sentimentality—but to its status as a speech

act in a film devoted to interrogating, first separately and then together, both voice and cinematic visual scale as carriers of political power. For *The Great Dictator*, which premiered in 1940, thirteen years after the introduction of synchronized sound to the American cinema, is the first of Chaplin's fully talking films. As such, this closing sequence resonates in a number of nested contexts that link Chaplin as actor and as director with more general considerations about the use of sound and speech in his career and in cinema more widely. Given Chaplin's dual roles as director and actor, the comic and cinematographic framing of the film raises questions about speech and about the politics of visual proportion in the modernist period. The final speech becomes the flashpoint for the film's underlying treatment of the relative size of voice and image, and how in the modern media age sound and visual scale—in fiction film, in documentary, and in propaganda—can become stylistic analogs for how power and aesthetics function politically inside and outside of cinema proper.

The final sequence of the film begins with two explicit references to speech. Before the barber ascends the platform, a Tomanian soldier says to the supposed dictator, "The world awaits your word." While on the platform, the panicked barber whispers back and forth with his Tomanian protector Commander Schultz (Reginald Gardiner), a dissident who escaped with the barber from prison. The barber is trapped in his mistaken identity, and has no escape but to pretend to be the dictator before the massed soldiers. Schultz whispers to him, "You must speak." When the barber whispers back, "I can't," Schultz urges him on again: "You must: it's our only hope." These comments resonate beyond the film's immediate plot. The soldier who says that "the world awaits your word" refers proximately to the lampooned (although all too real) political situation of the barber: the world awaits the speech of the supposed dictator as he invades Austerlitz. Yet attentive members of the cinema audience could interpret the statement as a self-reflexive reference to Chaplin's status as an international celebrity. The world, indeed, presumably awaited his statement on the world political situation, a statement largely made by dark comedy throughout the film. When Schultz whispers to the barber, "You must speak," and Chaplin replies, "I can't," those who had followed Chaplin's career would have realized that the exchange has both aesthetic and ethical significance. For the closing sequence of *The Great Dictator* represents the longest speech that Chaplin had ever made in public on film to that time.

That this speech is in fact overtly political merely underlines the vexed relationships among speech, image, and cinematic representations of power that were already in play in the first half of the twentieth century. Chaplin had achieved unique cultural status as a performer in the Modern period, as well as a peculiar position, by 1940, in the cinema industry. Since his debut in one- and two-reel shorts produced by Mack Sennett for the Keystone Film Company in 1914, he had achieved international celebrity. The character he invented at Keystone, who came to be known as the Little Tramp, became the most recognizable fictional creation in the world. By 1915, Chaplin himself reported, toys and statuettes of his character were sold in department stores and drugstores in New York.⁴ The film companies for which he worked—Essanay and Mutual after Keystone—had to print vastly more copies of his films than for any other

performer in order to satisfy what became worldwide demand for his work. In his later career, when he began to direct his own independently produced longer-form films, each premiere became a mass public event. The premieres of *City Lights* (1931) and *Modern Times* (1936) led to near-riot conditions in Los Angeles and New York.⁵ He had many friends among the world's great thinkers. In his *Autobiography* (1964) Chaplin tells of many meetings with H. G. Wells, and Albert Einstein was his guest at the Los Angeles premiere of *City Lights*.⁶

By 1940 Chaplin was firmly entrenched both in the popular and the intellectual imagination. Within the world of cinema, however, he had become an anomaly. Having come up through the world of vaudeville and pantomime, and having made his fame and fortune in silent films, Chaplin resisted talking on screen, even after 1927 in America, when the advent of synchronized sound film had rendered its silent fore-runners technologically if not aesthetically obsolete. At the beginning, Chaplin was not alone in this resistance. Studio executive Harry Warner supposedly asked, "Who the hell wants to hear actors talk?"⁷ There were also practical economic concerns. Many silent film actors, as such later meta-films about this period as *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) and *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) reflect, did not have the dramatic skills or appropriate voices for the new technology. Retrofitting silent studios for sound proved enormously expensive, and early microphone techniques were often inadequate. Sets had to be reengineered without parallel walls, to reduce echoes. New and much bigger cameras made the fluid cinematography typical of the best silent films no longer easily feasible. In addition, there was the practical problem of the new language barrier for foreign sales. As a reader's letter to *Film Spectator* in May 1928 opined, "How is our poor Abyssinian to enjoy [cowboy star] Tom Mix?"⁸

Initially, Chaplin was also concerned about the qualities of his speaking voice, but for an unusual reason. Although he was raised in poverty, his mother had been an actress who trained Chaplin to speak with an educated accent. Chaplin was concerned that his actual voice—as viewers of his later films would discover—was mismatched to his public character. If the economics of film required the Tramp to speak, he decided that he might explain his cultured voice with a backstory suggesting that the Tramp was a gentleman who had fallen on hard times.⁹ But Chaplin's insistence on keeping his character silent went beyond merely personal reasons. At one point Chaplin turned down an offer of \$650,000 to speak on the radio, saying, "I believe in maintaining the illusion of the tragic-comic little man I first gave the world. He has been a voiceless person from the first. His woes have had a heightened comedy significance because of the fact he had no tongue with which to bewail them."¹⁰ His refusal to make talking pictures, combined with his tremendous popularity and influence, made him an enormously successful statistical outlier after 1927. As one commentator wrote, "He is probably the one artist in the whole of the motion-picture industry who can stand out against 'Talkies' and still remain as popular as ever as the perfect mime. He dislikes 'Talkies' immensely, seeing in them nothing but a menace to motion-picture art."¹¹

It should not surprise us that many considered sound to be a "menace" to motion-picture art, for the transformation of film from a silent to a sound medium was the single largest technological shift that affected any art form of the modern era. Yet the movies were never truly silent. From their earliest days films were accompanied by various kinds of live music or spoken commentaries, which carried over from such earlier forms as vaudeville or the magic-lantern show.¹² What films lacked, however, was audible synchronized speech. In early cinema, semantic content had to be presented by printed language on intertitles or, in the case of an experimental film without title cards such as F. W. Murnau's *The Last Laugh* (*Der letzte Mann*, 1924), not even that. When characters in silent films were seen to talk their dialog was inaudible to the audience, the content left either to the lip reader or to the imagination. For this reason, many languages refer to "silent" film more literally as "mute" film—"cinéma muet" in French, "el cine mudo" in Spanish, "Stummfilm" in German.¹³ This distinction underlines the degree to which early film, although deriving much of its acting style from various national theatrical models, was a cognitively different form of art from theater, and why many considered the increased "theatricality" of early sound films—their talkiness and boxy staging—to be a step backward for a medium that had told stories in purely visual terms. Few aside from entrepreneurs, who saw in the talking pictures a highly profitable novelty, immediately welcomed the talking fiction film as an aesthetic improvement.

Valuation of sound was different, however, in the parallel cinematic world of the newsreel. As early as World War I members of the public gained access to silent moving images of newsworthy events and of public figures.¹⁴ From the early 1920s the radio similarly brought sound, and particularly distant voices—of singers, of political and other public figures—into the private realm of the home. Never before the sound newsreel, however, had the image and sound of public figures been brought into coordination with each other. An early adherent of this technology was George Bernard Shaw, who noted wryly in the late 1920s that the then-new Movietone sound-newsreel process would be of inestimable benefit to public speakers. "Movietone," he predicted, "will supersede the present plan of dragging lecturers around the States from one town to another and shaking hands with them, finally returning them to their homes in a badly damaged condition."¹⁵ Indeed, one of the most interesting artifacts of the early sound era is a Movietone newsreel that Shaw made in 1928 that specifically deals with the relation between celebrity image and sound. The film begins by showing Shaw strolling down a path. He then feigns surprise at the presence of his implicit audience, and addresses the camera directly:

You know, I'm very glad you've come. Because I like people to see me. I don't know how it is, but people who only know me from reading my books, or sometimes even from seeing my plays, get a most unpleasant impression of me. And the people who really meet me—as you have been kind enough to meet me, and to meet me now—well, they see that I am a most harmless person. I'm quite a kindly person, you know.¹⁶

The supposed casualness of Shaw's genial address directly to the audience is not unlike one of his live lectures in a theater, to be sure, but the staging underwrites the film's more general message. Shaw finds himself misunderstood by the public, because they know him only from his published words and reputation, not from meeting the man himself. What the newsreel presents, he implies, is his "real" self: an impression that is reinforced both sonically by Shaw's lilting Irish brogue and visually by his smiling delivery. This combined representation of the self is, implicitly, an "accurate" version of the public figure. "I like people to see me," Shaw says, and the illusion that the sound film reveals the "real" Shaw is underscored by his denial of the realities of the medium implicit in his comment: "I'm very glad to see you." For the audience can see him, and hear him, but he cannot, under any circumstances, see them.

What does Shaw's cinematic self-presentation have to do with Chaplin? Shaw and Chaplin were public figures in the same English (and Irish) intellectual world. Shaw accompanied Chaplin to the London premiere of *City Lights*, where afterwards the crowd demanded that they take bows together. But Shaw and Chaplin, both men of the stage, had distinctly different ideas about the relations that obtain among language, image, and authenticity. Shaw, a playwright and a founder of the Fabians, believed implicitly in the efficacy of language to represent social reality and political interrelationships. But the newsreel also establishes that for Shaw visual and printed impressions, even of himself, were misleading. This tension could be at least nominally resolved through blending the moving image with voice on film. In this belief Shaw was modern, but not modernist. He found it plausible to consider the individual, the image, and language to be integrated holistically in film, if not completely.

Chaplin, on the other hand, had a most modernist distrust of language per se. In the dream sequence to his earlier *The Gold Rush* (1925), for instance, he performs his famous comic dance of the dinner rolls only after his imagined female dinner guests demand an after-dinner address. They urge him on, saying, "Speech! Speech!": but he offers his silent gag as an evasion of speech. Once Chaplin had begun to integrate sound into his films, his avoidance of meaningful language becomes even more pointed. *City Lights* begins with a sequence in which politicians orate at the unveiling of a statue—but Chaplin substitutes the mocking sounds of a kazoo on the soundtrack for the actual words of the dedications. In *Modern Times*, until the film's conclusion, technological mediation detaches speech from speakers. The audience hears the voice of the boss of the factory, and the voice on the instructional record that attempts to explain the workings of a machine intended to feed workers automatically. But both prove to be part of a system of mechanistic abuses that triggers the Tramp's nervous breakdown.

Only at the end of *Modern Times* does one finally hear Chaplin's voice as performer. His character has found a job as a singing waiter, but when he is expected to perform, the words to his song, which he has scrawled on his removable sleeve, fly off at the point of performance. His friend the Gamin (Paulette Goddard) warns him that he has to sing in order to keep his job—"never mind the words," she says in an intertitle.

And sing he does: a virtuoso music hall turn the lyrics of which are empty nonsense. At long last Chaplin vocalizes on film—but he does so under the double force of an economic threat that is shared on different ontological scales by both character and by actor. The character must speak or lose his job. Possibly Chaplin the film actor must do so as well. When he vocalizes, however, he thumbs his nose at the idea that speech must be meaningful to be revelatory of character.

Before *The Great Dictator*, then, for Chaplin language and speech were suspect to the point of aversion. They were not transparent additions to the visual, as they were implicitly for Shaw, but threats, a falsification of the self, and—most importantly—weapons used in Chaplin’s filmic world only by those in power, by bosses and politicians. In this context only language emptied of sense—as for the Dadaists of the decades directly preceding—could be an appropriate rejoinder to language’s misrepresentations. This idea is key to the first substantial set piece of *The Great Dictator*, in which Chaplin parodies Leni Riefenstahl’s documentary *Triumph of the Will* (*Triumph des Willens*, 1935), lampooning in particular Adolph Hitler’s public and filmic persona, at the infamous 1934 Nuremberg rally. Chaplin had seen Leni Riefenstahl’s documentary and had been struck by Hitler’s ridiculousness, as well as by Hitler’s partial appropriation of Chaplin’s own persona—the little man with the mustache. Much of the humor of this sequence depends on Chaplin’s physical comedy, as he struts and brays before banks of microphones, while the crowd roars its approval.

Hynkel’s manipulation of language, nonetheless, is the main subject of the sequence. An unseen announcer on the soundtrack (the narrator for this supposed “newsreel” insert) introduces the rally sequence by intoning, “Liberty was banished, free speech was suppressed, and only the voice of Hynkel was heard.” Surely enough, Hynkel shows himself throughout to be in total control of sound, not only in his rhetorical virtuosity, but also at the point where he raises his hand suddenly and the crowd falls abruptly and comically silent. Yet even as his voice and gestures are treated as all-powerful, Chaplin exposed Hynkel’s language as porous and absurd. Like the Little Tramp’s pseudo-Italianate nonsense song at the end of *Modern Times*, the mock German of Hynkel’s speech is composed of a farrago of vaguely foreign-sounding neologisms mixed with the names of stereotypical German foodstuffs. Its guttural sounds emerge not so much as a mode of communication but as a mode of gumming up the human organism—his language often leaves Hynkel sputtering and coughing. Adding to the disjunction between sound and content is the passionless voice of the simultaneous translator, who provides wholly insufficient translations for the supposed “content” of the speech, at the end of the sequence, for instance, providing three different euphemistic interpretations for the single nonsense term “*schtunk*” (as “fragrant,” as “odious,” and as “objectionable”). Chaplin lampoons Hitler’s mannerisms, and satirizes Riefenstahl’s manner of capturing them visually, but his main attack is on the misuse of language by power, and how media can turn a blind eye to or even magnify that misuse—how the sound of words divorced from their content can both dangerously misrepresent reality and lead to dangerous and propagandistic excitement.

Where Chaplin chiefly differs from Riefenstahl, however, is in his treatment of visual scale. Throughout *Triumph of the Will* Riefenstahl suggests political power cinematically through great perceived size, and political subjection through relative smallness. Her panoramic shots from enormous heights of the Nuremberg rally emphasize both the power symbolized architecturally by fascist buildings and the degree to which individuals in the state may be seen as insignificant parts of an aggregate whole. Riefenstahl frequently frames Hitler, a small man in life, with low camera angles shot with sky as background, making him look larger than life—as the human image in fact typically appears when projected on the cinema screen (see Figure 13.1). Techniques of visual aggrandizement or diminishment are, of course, a basic part of cinematic vocabulary. Many films of the period and since depend extensively on the shooting of miniature sets to provide the illusion of full scale, or, alternately, sets of enormously outsized scale could be shot from above to make human figures appear as though they were tiny.¹⁷

In his earlier films Chaplin demonstrated his awareness that camera angles could affect social perception. The opening shot of *The Gold Rush*, with its seemingly endless line of prospectors crossing the Chilkoot pass, subordinates the immense line of tiny men to the harsh panorama of the natural world that they hope to conquer. The opening shots of *Modern Times* portray the workers flooding to the factories as literal sheep, first from a sharp angle above, and then juxtaposing the visually diminished workers against the stark size of the factory in which they work. (Later in that film one catches a glimpse in the background of a sign advertising, simply, “Big Scale Manufacturer.”) Such intentional dwarfings of the human figure can carry different political valences, depending on the work that frames them. In *Triumph of the Will*



Figure 13.1 Adolf Hitler saluting, Leni Reifenstahl, *Triumph of the Will* (1935)

subordination of the multitude to the state represents social "health." However, in Soviet films such as Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (*Bronenosets Potemkin*, 1925) and Aleksandr Dovzhenko's *Earth* (*Zemlya*, 1930), manipulations of cinematic scale register very differently. When the doctor examines the rotten meat in *Potemkin*, a shot of the maggots from above—themselves examined through a magnifying glass—serves as a corollary for the devaluation of the sailors, and the people in general, by the Tsarist regime: the sailors are metonymized as little more than those in power than the vermin crawling on their food. In *Earth*, on the other hand, manipulation of cinematic scale gives the common people a dignity that exceeds their socio-political reality. Dovzhenko frames rural individuals against nature with low camera angles, their faces and their animals filling the visual field (see Figure 13.2). Such enhancement of the common man, Dovzhenko implies, is the visual antidote to totalitarianism. The camera can grant a dignity to the individual that is too often ignored in the political world.

Riefenstahl, on one hand, and Eisenstein and Dovzhenko on the other, then, were canny practitioners of cinematic manipulation of apparent scale to underline their analyses of social power—techniques that Chaplin had also used in his earlier silent films. So it is noteworthy how little *The Great Dictator* manipulates cinematic visual scale as a commentary on power. Relative size remains a significant issue within the world of the film; but that size operates diegetically as a function of the scale of actors and props, not as a function of cinematic technique. This use of size also grew from Chaplin's earlier work. His physical smallness had always been a staple of his comedy. Many of his early shorts, from *Mabel's Married Life* (1914) to his Mutual two-reelers, had made significant play with Chaplin's confrontation with enormous



Figure 13.2 Close-up of peasant woman, Alexander Dovzhenko, *Earth* (1930)

antagonists. This was part of his popular appeal, the fact that he was literally as well as metaphorically the “little man.” Much of the comedy at the beginning of *The Great Dictator* plays conventionally upon his diminutive stature. In an early shot of the prologue that shows the little barber serving in the Tomanian front lines in World War I, for instance, Chaplin appears at the visual mercy of an enormous cannon. He is also the butt of a gag wherein he appears at the end of a line of progressively shorter soldiers who pass along an unpleasant duty until it reaches Chaplin, who as the smallest among them has no subordinate upon whom he can fob off the assignment.

In these sequences Chaplin as the barber is neither diminished nor heightened by camera angles. Indeed, even the film’s opening shot, of combatants fighting in the trenches, shows the soldiers from above merely because of its literal truth, as they as fighting from below ground. Most notably, even in the rally sequence Chaplin does not use his camera to aggrandize Hynkel. Chaplin does not shoot the dictator with the kinds of inflating angles that Riefenstahl typically used in presenting Hitler. Instead, the film regularly emphasizes Hynkel’s smallness, without overt cinematic exaggeration, as a sign of his ethical nullity. The fascist architecture of his office dwarves him. He is shown bumbling in military robes several sizes too big. In one scene he claims to be “scared of himself” and scampers absurdly up the curtains.

Diegetic size and height remain key to the world of Hynkel’s power. In one of the film’s most memorable sequences the dictator Benzino Napaloni (Jack Oakie)—a parody of Italian dictator Benito Mussolini—visits Hynkel to broker an agreement on the invasion of Austerlich. Hynkel’s advisor Garbitsch (Henry Daniell)—a parody of Joseph Goebbels—warns him that he must always position himself so that Napaloni needs literally to look up to him as a sign of Hynkel’s superiority. In this scene of slapstick one-upmanship, Hynkel and Napaloni attempt ridiculously to outdo each other in their relative height, furiously cranking themselves almost to the ceiling in barber chairs (see Figure 13.3). Yet such horseplay can be double edged. In perhaps the film’s best known scene, Hynkel performs an elegant pas de deux with a globe that ultimately reveals itself to be a balloon (see Figure 13.4). If Hynkel is shown as being the same size as the world, then has the world grown small, or is Hynkel actually dangerously more massive than we have been led to believe? Can a buffoon, and a small buffoon, distract us by the comicality of his size to the point where we might miss the fact that he is capable of destroying the world?

Throughout much of *The Great Dictator* Chaplin consistently diminishes Hynkel’s malignity by lampooning both his speech and his physical size. Hynkel’s public language emerges as degraded nonsense, and his physical size as a man undercuts his pretensions to power. But about two-thirds of the way through the film Chaplin reverses those registrations of voice, scale, and power in a sequence that suddenly subverts the film’s apparent comedy. Hynkel has suspended persecution of the Jews, hoping to negotiate a loan from a wealthy Jewish Tomanian to finance the invasion of Austerlich. When he fails, he cracks down on the Jews with renewed violence. Chaplin shows the barber and Hannah on a street, making a casual purchase on what seems to be an ordinary happy and sunlit day, when Hynkel’s voice suddenly booms from



Figure 13.3 Duel with barber's chairs, Charlie Chaplin, *The Great Dictator* (1940)



Figure 13.4 Ballet with the globe, Charlie Chaplin, *The Great Dictator* (1940)

loudspeakers attached to the top of a streetlamp. Hynkel's voice permeates the ghetto in a farrago of pseudo-German. But where the fake German of the film's earlier rally had consisted largely of comical words and non sequitur phrases, here Hynkel malevolently repeats the all-too-interpretable word "*Juden*." Chaplin underlines this tonal shift with two changes in the film's technique. He abstracts Hynkel's voice from his body at the very moment when his buffoonery can no longer be seen as even vaguely funny. We hear Hynkel for the first time on the soundtrack before we see him, his voice become demonic. Its force as pure sound shakes the post that holds the speakers.¹⁸ And only after Chaplin establishes the newly serious malignity of his voice, he associates it with Hynkel's distorted face, which he shows enraged and in unprecedentedly extreme close-up (see Figure 13.5). Read against Chaplin's earlier uses of voice and visual scale, this sequence suggests that Hynkel may be a buffoon, but he is a dangerous buffoon—and that his power resides largely in his voice, particularly when it is magnified by the technology of broadcasting. Once that voice has been primally unleashed, it reveals also the visual truth behind the man. He is monstrous, inflated, enormous, despite the rest of the film's comedy at the expense of his physical size. In cinematic terms, if only for these brief moments, he becomes an uncanny but recognizable cinematic image of the 1930s—the enormous talking head as trope of power.

Giant disembodied heads had embodied iconographic power in earlier films, including Chaplin's own. In the early part of *Modern Times*, the panoptical head of the factory director, with his commanding voice, interposes itself via an enormous television screen even during the Little Tramp's deserved break from work in the



Figure 13.5 Hynkel in extremis, Charlie Chaplin, *The Great Dictator* (1940)

washroom. And when Chaplin suddenly unveils the dictator as the monster he is he may also have been thinking of the climax of Victor Fleming’s *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), which had been released a year before. Partway through that film, Fleming reveals the Great Oz (Frank Morgan) as a terrifying head projected into midair. His power resides both in the uncanny division of his head from his body, and in the stentorian magnification of his voice.¹⁹

Chaplin’s uncanny presentation of the “real” dictator may also allude to Fritz Lang’s explicitly anti-Nazi film *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* (*Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse*, 1933). In this film, which was banned by the Nazis, a Hitler-like master criminal haunts the screen visually, never speaking; but his voice is heard on the soundtrack, always disembodied, even after death, when his schemes—through his voice—begin to haunt the psychiatrist who becomes the attempted inheritor of his “testament” of criminality. As theorist of film and sound Michel Chion has noted, the uncanny separation of voice from body in this film helps create its eerie power, as occurs at first in Chaplin’s sequence, when Hynkel’s voice thunders across the ghetto before we see him. This is an early version of the way voice abstracted from the speaking figure creates a frisson of strange force in later films such as Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960) and Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968).²⁰

What Fleming’s and Lang’s films ultimately demonstrate, however, is the reverse of what they initially seem to reveal. *The Wizard* and *Mabuse* present themselves as giant faces and giant voices, their ability to divide voice from self a sign of their immense power. In both cases, however, this self-presentation is debunked as a technologically enhanced illusion. Toward the end of *The Wizard of Oz*, Fleming reveals the “man behind the curtain” as a meek con artist who manipulates his image through projection. In Lang’s film the gangster Thomas Kent (Gustav Diesel) discovers that the criminal figure who has been giving him instructions from behind a similar curtain is a mere cardboard cutout: the voice he has been hearing had been broadcast into the room through radio technology. The outsized head and the outsized voice represent not the “truth,” but the harnessing of propaganda to technological mediation. How, then, to think about Chaplin’s shift in presentation of the Dictator’s voice and media “image” in the later parts of *The Great Dictator*?

It is an important question, because it brings together a wide range of representational issues that prepare for the barber’s final speech, as well as raising an uncomfortable question that has long been asked of *The Great Dictator*. Is the film, after all, a comedy? Is it enough to suggest that the largely parodic first two-thirds of the film has misdirected and minimized what has been deeply important: that what has appeared to be nonsensical or minuscule can hide matters of the utmost seriousness? Certainly Theodor Adorno considered the film to be politically suspect, particularly criticizing as “obscene” the broad slapstick sequences in *The Great Dictator* that deal with storm troopers.²¹ Yet ripping the curtain away from propagandistic inflation, showing that the large is actually small, has been a fundamental tool of political satire from Jonathan Swift to the “Cyclops” chapter of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922).²² How does a Hitler or, for that matter, a Chaplin, who is using his own celebrity as a bully

pulpit from which to weigh in on world affairs, use media representations of himself to forward, or perhaps paradoxically to disguise, his “real” self?

A potential answer to these questions, and one that can help viewers shape their response to Chaplin’s ultimate speech in the film, is provided by the Shaw Movietone newsreel. After its opening sequence it takes an unexpected turn. As the transcript to this section shows, Shaw continues to discuss the gap between what he considers to be his authentic self and its media representation, by imitating for the camera, startlingly, the public persona of Benito Mussolini:

Still, it’s not necessary for me always to look as genial as I’m trying to look now, of course I can put on the other thing. I, for instance. [Covers face with hands; imitates Mussolini’s glower to the camera, with hands on hips; relaxes again]. Now, that is what I call my Mussolini stunt. By the way, I think in justice to Signor Mussolini I ought to tell you that he has a very wonderful head. He has a wonderful brow which comes down to here. [Gestures with both hands above his eyes]. But the difficulty is, that he can’t take it off. Now if you watch me, I can put on that imposing look that terrifies you, the Mussolini look. [Glowers again; performs a fascist salute]. But now just watch: [relaxes his face into a broad grin] I can take it off. Now Signor Mussolini *cannot* take it off. He is condemned, although he is a most amiable man, he is condemned to go through life with that terrible and imposing expression which really does a great deal of injustice to his kindly nature. But I—I can put it on, and I can take it off, and do all sorts of things. [See Figure 13.6]

In this sequence, twelve years before *The Great Dictator*, a widely recognized European intellectual mimics the public persona, including the fascist salute, of a European dictator.²³ The target of Shaw’s satire, in the first instance, is himself. Too many people think that because he can glower like Mussolini, that he, too, is terrifying and imposing. Yet Shaw points out the difference between the public image of the political figure and of the artist. The political figure is locked in the accidents of physiognomy. The performer has the option of taking such an image on—but also of putting it off. Shaw’s imitation is intended to tell us more about him than about Mussolini. But his takeaway message, at least for himself, is that his voice is ultimately a truer reflection of character than his image.²⁴ Mussolini may have a “very wonderful head,” but he is locked in by his public persona. Shaw, on the other hand, can put on the Mussolini face and he can take it off. Ultimately it is Shaw’s voice, not his face, that guarantees the authenticity of the speaker’s “geniality.” To Shaw, the artist, unlike the politician, is a player of roles: he can do “all sorts of things,” whereas the dictator is condemned to be merely what he is.

Such is the intellectual matrix that Chaplin’s brings to his final speech in *The Great Dictator*. After a career of believing that visual performance provided greater truth than language, which misrepresents and coerces, and after using the power of his celebrity to skate around the economic requirements of speaking on film, Chaplin,

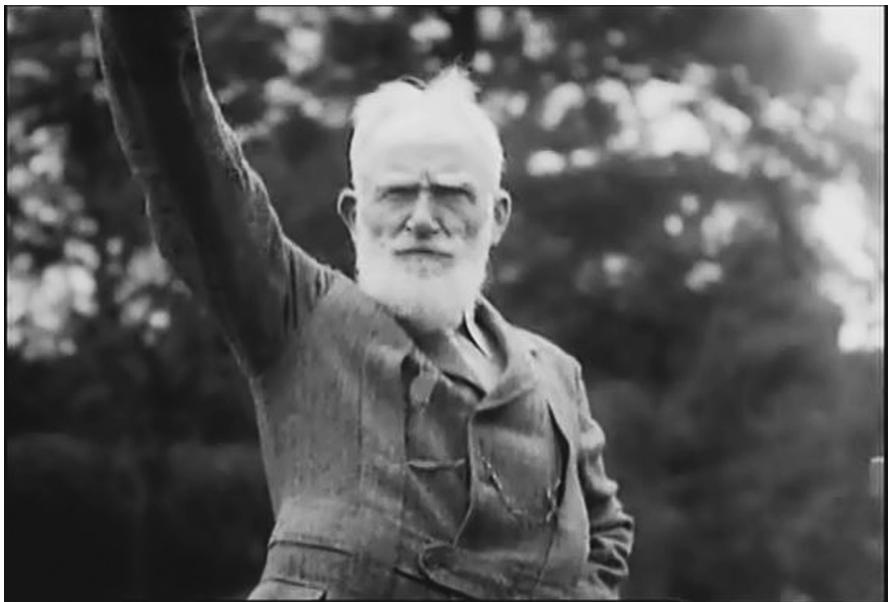


Figure 13.6 George Bernard Shaw imitates Benito Mussolini, *Greeting by George Bernard Shaw*, Fox Movietone News, England (May 1928)

when confronted with Hitler, is confronted by the fact that he “must speak.” All of the different aspects of his career—as a director, as a performer, and as a public figure—converge upon his ethical and aesthetic decision to drop all pretense. He breaks the implied fourth wall of the cinema and speaks directly to the public—as does Shaw in the newsreel—not apparently as the little barber, or as Hynkel, but as himself. Once he has revealed Hynkel as the monster that he is—his face filling the screen and loud-speakers shrieking violence against the Jews—only language can counter language. Chaplin faces the camera and speaks directly to the audience:

I’m sorry, but I don’t want to be an emperor. That’s not my business. I don’t want to rule or conquer anyone. I should like to help everyone, if possible, Jew, Gentile, black man, white. We all want to help one another. Human beings are like that. We want to live by each other’s happiness, not by each other’s misery. We don’t want to hate and despise one another. In this world there is room for everyone, and the good earth is rich and can provide for everyone. The way of life can be free and beautiful—but we have lost the way.

Greed has poisoned men’s souls, has barricaded the world with hate, has goose-stepped us into misery and bloodshed. We have developed speed, but we have shut ourselves in. Machinery that gives abundance has left us in want. Our knowledge has made us cynical, our cleverness, hard and unkind. We think too much and feel too little. More than machinery we need humanity. More than cleverness

we need kindness and gentleness. Without these qualities, life will be violent and all will be lost.

The aeroplane and the radio have brought us closer together. The very nature of these inventions cries out for the goodness in men, cries out for universal brotherhood—for the unity of us all. Even now my voice is reaching millions throughout the world, millions of despairing men, women, and little children, victims of a system that makes men torture and imprison innocent people. To those who can hear me I say: do not despair.

This speech—of which this is only a partial transcript—is, one must admit, both Utopian and sentimental. But Chaplin's staging of the speech underlines the contexts, both internal and external to the film, that determine his stepping forward in propria persona. At the speech's beginning we are not sure if we are listening to the barber or to Chaplin himself. His first statement may be taken literally, that he does not want to be an emperor, because "that's not my business"—it is not his job. For if this is the barber talking, we understand that he earns his living by cutting hair. (Although as the film has shown, barbers' chairs may themselves be fine platforms for skewering the pretensions of power and scale.) But if we understand that the speaker is Chaplin himself, he is saying two things at the same time. It is idiomatically none of his business—that is, he does not know enough of politics to concern himself with it. But Chaplin's literal business is acting and directing. As he continues to speak, it becomes increasingly clear that the man who speaks is all three: character, actor, and director. An artist taking on politics may be "none of his business," but he has finally taken off, like Shaw, the mask of the tyrant.

And in so doing, Chaplin offers a kind of humanistic counter-modernism to the world of technology and media innovation that, ironically, has underwritten his own medium of cinema. His excoriation of technologies of speed is a kind of anti-futurist screed presented years after the 1909 *Manifesto of Futurism*, and four years before the death of its author, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, in 1944. But Chaplin is also conscious of the power of aesthetic technology—both radio and cinema—to act as a counter to disunity. "Even now my voice is reaching millions," he says. Internal to the film, he is Hynkel speaking on the radio, and as the camera ultimately pulls back from his figure during this speech we finally see him positioned against an array of microphones. To the worldwide audience, however, he is Chaplin himself speaking to them through the technology of the cinema. For the first time in Chaplin's career, his voice rather than his image carries his message—and in one of the longest unbroken speeches in a fiction film of the sound era. He may still look like Hynkel or Hitler—or Hynkel or Hitler may look like him—but he has "taken it off." He uses his voice to stand against the political and technological misuse of voice.

The final scene thus resolves the film's ambivalence toward voice and power, toward visuality and scale. There is finally no difference between the "big man" and "the little man"—Chaplin as director and as barber is both. We remember that a great dictator, etymologically, is a great speaker (from the Latin, *dictare*, to speak), and that

being a director carries with it some of the responsibilities and the ethics of control as being a dictator. And ultimately, for both the small and the large, visuality is shown to be a blind. By looking one cannot tell the difference between barber and dictator. Only Chaplin’s voice, mystically audible at an impossible distance, communicates to the barber’s friend Hannah, who is abased at the film’s end in a field in newly invaded Austerlitz. He directs the end of his peroration directly to her, and although she is far away from the technological apparatuses of politics and propaganda, she still “hears” his message of hope. Hannah and the barber’s older Jewish friend Mr. Jaeckel (Maurice Moscovitch) stare upward and outward into the distance, as Hannah faces an uncertain future with renewed hope (see Figure 13.7).²⁵

The film thus ends with a final valorization of sound and of speech. But with a final turn of technique, Chaplin ultimately places voice and sound into balance with the politics of the human image. “Did you hear that?” Mr. Jaeckel asks her, and the last spoken word in the film is Hannah’s response, “Listen!” Yet at the same time as the film has moved, like Chaplin himself, from silence to speech, it ends by framing Hannah alone in close-up, as a representative figure for the oppressed peoples of Europe. Chaplin, however, with a mind to the propagandistic possibilities of distorted scale, films her not from below as Dovzhenko frames his peasants in *Earth*, but from slightly below eye-level—enough to give her a measure of dignity, but stopping short of transforming her into an outsized symbol. And if Chaplin undeniably still glamorizes her in the style of late 1930s Hollywood film, her face, together with the voice of Hynkel, offers the film’s last impressions. Chaplin has told us through her to “listen,” not to “watch,” to attend to the truth of voice rather than the distortion of image in



Figure 13.7 Hannah gazes to the future, Charlie Chaplin, *The Great Dictator* (1940)

public life, to the representative individual, not to the crowd, to the human being, not to the often corrupt state.

In the novel *Zeroville* (2007) by Steve Erickson, a filmmaker character who is at work on a propaganda film about the death of Spanish dictator Francisco Franco says of his work, “Cinema is metaphor, and this is one of the things that cinema has in common with politics, which often is metaphor as well.”²⁶ Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator*, with its various interrogations of the political and cinematic image, of both political and cinematic uses of silence and speech, visuality and scale, might add the following: when politics and cinema use the same metaphors, perhaps only cinema can offer an imaginative landscape in which those metaphors can be exposed, and perhaps nullified on their own grounds. If Chaplin was late to speech, he came to understand in *The Great Dictator* that talking in movies was not simply an economic and aesthetic imperative, rendered necessary by modernism and its technologies. It was also the only way in which a major public figure, director, and actor could put on, and then take off, the mask of a comedian while also confronting the words of an increasingly tragic Europe.

Notes

1. “Mr. Chaplin Answers His Critics,” *New York Times*, October 27, 1940, sec. 9, 5.
2. John Kimber, *The Art of Charlie Chaplin* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 211.
3. Jean-Luc Godard, “Dictionary of American Film-Makers,” in *Cahiers du cinéma* 150–51, special US issue, December 1963–January 1964; reprinted in Godard on Godard; *Critical Writings by Jean-Luc Godard*, Jean Narboni and Tom Milne, eds. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1986), 202; Jean Narboni, . . . *Pourquoi les coiffeurs? Notes actuelles sur “Le Dictateur”* (Paris: Capricci, 2010), 80.
4. Charles Chaplin, *My Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1964), 173.
5. His fame also led to enormous and widely recognized wealth. When Colonel Blount writes Adam Symes a fake check for a thousand pounds in Evelyn Waugh’s *Vile Bodies* (1930) he signs it with Chaplin’s name. *Vile Bodies* (New York and Boston: Little, Brown, 1958), 109.
6. See photo in Chaplin, *Autobiography*, 331.
7. Alexander Walker, *The Shattered Silents: How the Talkies Came to Stay* (London: Elm Tree Books, 1978), 6.
8. Cited in Walker, *Shattered Silents*, 77.
9. Walker, *Shattered Silents*, 132–33.
10. “Charlie Chaplin, Leaving on World Cruise, Declares He’ll Never Make Talkies,” *Decatur Herald*, February 15, 1931, quoted in William M. Drew, *The Last Silent Picture Show: Silent Films on American Screen in the 1930s* (Lanham, MD; Plymouth, UK: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 15.
11. John Scotland, *The Talkies* (London: Crosby Lockwood and Son, 1930), 187.
12. See, for instance, Rick Altman, *Silent Film Sound* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

13. For this reason Michel Chion has suggested that “silent film” should really be called “deaf film.” *The Voice in Cinema*, Claudia Gorbman, ed. and trans. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 7.
14. Both Rebecca West’s novel *Return of the Soldier* (1918) and Virginia Woolf’s essay “The Cinema” (1926) register these novelties and their impact on the public psyche.
15. Walker, *Shattered Silents*, 48.
16. *Greeting by George Bernard Shaw* (Fox Movietone News, UK, May 1928; see *More Treasures from American Film Archives, 1894–1931* [Image Entertainment, 2004]).
17. In Fritz Lang’s *Destiny* (*Der müde Tod*, 1921), for instance, a horde of miniature warriors appear to emerge from under the robes and between the feet of a magician: the effect was achieved by constructing an enormous set of the lower part of the magician’s body.
18. This effect repeats an earlier comic image in a far more serious mode, demonstrating the pure “power” of Hynkel’s speech—the bending backward of one of a bank of microphones as he speaks during the rally sequence.
19. Fleming took this conceit directly from W. W. Denslow’s illustrations for L. Frank Baum’s original book of 1900, in which the abstraction of the wizard’s head is perhaps even more notable. See L. Frank Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (Chicago and New York: G. M. Hill, 1900), plate between 126 and 127.
20. See Chion, *Voice in Cinema*. For a discussion of this effect specifically in *The Great Dictator*, see also Michael Chion, *Film: A Sound Art*, Claudia Gorbman, trans. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009) 24–27.
21. Adorno writes that the film “loses all satirical force, and becomes obscene, when a Jewish girl can bash a line of storm troopers on the head with a pan without being torn to pieces. For the sake of political commitment, political reality is trivialized: which then reduces the political effect.” Theodor Adorno, “Commitment,” in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt, eds. (New York: Urizen, 1978), 300–18; 308.
22. See the play with political scale between Lilliput and the Brobdingnag in chaps. 1 and 2 of Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726), and the “giganticism” of Joyce’s treatment of his hyper-nationalist character The Citizen.
23. For the filmic origin and political force of Mussolini’s self-portrayal, see Chapter 1, “Giovanni Pastrone’s *Cabiria*, Gestures, Modernism,” by Enda Duffy and Maurizia Boscagli in this collection.
24. It is an entirely different story to understand how Shaw went from being a Fabian to being sympathetic to the “amiable” Mussolini and to Italian fascism. Shaw’s many apparently pro-Mussolini statements in 1927 (after his visit to Italy) were immensely controversial at the time and were roundly attacked by other Fabians and socialists, as were Shaw’s other seemingly positive endorsements of dictatorial measures to bring about progressive political change. See Gareth Griffith, *Socialism and Superior Brains: The Political Thought of Bernard Shaw* (London, New York: Routledge, 1993), 252–57; and Michael Holroyd, *Bernard Shaw: Volume III—1918–1950, The Lure of Fantasy* (New York, Random House, 1991), 143–46.
25. One notes that the film ends not, however, in silence but in music—film music influenced by Wagner, as though the film had repurposed the overture to *Lohengrin* (1850) that accompanied Hynkel’s dance with the globe without its associations with Nazism for a post-WWII democratic world.
26. Steve Erickson, *Zeroville* (New York: Europa Editions, 2007), 136.

Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi Neoclassicism

Olympia (1938)

Elizabeth Otto*

Leni Riefenstahl (1902–2003) is easily the most successful female director of the earlier twentieth century, as gauged by the size of her audience and the scope of her influence. She is also the most infamous. A former modern dancer and star of mountain adventure movies (*Bergfilme*), Riefenstahl had but one directorial credit to her name when, in 1933, Adolf Hitler selected her to translate his cult of personality to the screen. She did so in three National Socialist-funded propaganda films, *Triumph of the Will* (*Triumph des Willens*, 1935) most notorious among them.¹ Riefenstahl was arguably Nazi Germany's most powerful image-maker, a director who created an innovative and a distinctive film genre that mixed documentary and propaganda. Her Hitler films stage fascism as a sublime spectacle and as a resonating call and response between the embodied nation—personified in surging crowds and synchronized troops—and the larger-than-life body of the Führer. Riefenstahl's work lives on in part because of the public's continuing fascination with the Nazi regime, but also because of her rarely paralleled ability to project idealized representations of power. Her visual tactics have inspired emulation in surprising quarters, from *Star Wars* (1977) to *The Lion King* (1994), both of which make direct allusions to *Triumph of the Will*.²

Seemingly less controversial and even more visually experimental than her Nazi propaganda is Riefenstahl's epic two-part film of the 1936 Berlin Olympics, *Olympia* (1938), which is widely regarded as the most influential sports documentary ever made. It has now been rereleased in its original form after decades in which it was available only with some of its overtly propagandistic shots missing.³ Whereas *Triumph of the Will* is a chillingly obvious vehicle for glorifying Hitler and the Nazi party, *Olympia* draws on modernist filmmaking techniques and foregrounds its own internationalism; it appears to delight in the athletes' national and ethnic diversity, and it is dedicated to "the Honor and Glory of the Youth of the World" through an animated marble plaque in the opening credits. Riefenstahl would later point specifically to *Olympia* and the fact that she was never a Nazi Party member as evidence that she was not a Nazi propagandist, but merely a filmmaker, an artist, who was thrust into a particular historic context.⁴

Yet, in various ways, all of Riefenstahl's films of the Nazi period furthered the goals of the fascist state and promoted its ideology; indeed, *Olympia* is an exceptionally

insidious work of Nazi propaganda.⁵ On its surface, the film is a celebratory extravaganza, equal parts reportage on Olympic events and mediated representation of perfect, youthful bodies. But through its repurposing of avant-garde film technologies and combining these with a visual vocabulary that Riefenstahl had developed in previous films—*Triumph of the Will* above all—it serves Germany's bid to stand as the new and yet timeless Reich. As I argue in this essay, the symbolism, camerawork, and montage strategies that Riefenstahl utilized in *Olympia* rely on the latest technologies to invite viewers to make particular connections, while at the same time discouraging them from critical viewing. In *Olympia*, she created a film that accomplished exactly what the state attempted with the Olympic games themselves: to project an image of an international, modern Germany while still symbolically conveying Nazi Germany's power and even superiority.

Like her films, Riefenstahl has been the subject of endless debates. Should she be celebrated as a pioneer who succeeded in the boy's club of film directors (not to mention the equally male-dominated Nazi party) or condemned as a self-serving fascist collaborator, officially designated Nazi "fellow-traveler" (*Mitläuferin*), and even the embodiment of "the Feminazi Mystique"?⁶ Her gender made her exceptional from the start; even Nazi Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels noted that, although Hitler opposed the presence of women in public life, he found it useful to have exceptions such as Riefenstahl to give as examples in international contexts.⁷ Throughout her career, Riefenstahl traded on her femininity and beauty. She often had herself photographed while directing, as if even when she was behind one camera, she had wanted to make an impression in front of another one. A large-format photobook she produced to accompany the *Olympia* film shows a glamorous Riefenstahl directing her crew, singularly focused on her craft (see Figure 14.1).

Analysis of Riefenstahl and her work reveals her as a profoundly morally ambiguous figure, and this ambiguity is nowhere more apparent than in *Olympia*, which unites aspects of modern technology and classical aesthetics to create arguably her most powerful political film, one that appears deceptively apolitical.⁸ *Olympia* creates a series of monumental viewing experiences that deploy modernist techniques to serve Nazi ideology. The importance of visual culture—both art and mass media—within the Nazi regime cannot be underestimated. After all, Hitler, a failed artist, repeatedly wrote and spoke of art, architecture, and film as essential battlegrounds for the full realization of an enduring and truly German culture.⁹ *Olympia* poses as a groundbreaking documentary film about a peaceful international event—a conceit that is all the more powerful because it is in part true—the film glorifies the fascist German state and its leader through the latest technology upon which no expense was spared. In the photobook that she published to accompany the film, Riefenstahl wrote that, while it might have taken her a year and a half to complete, "the value of this film will not change with time—it is a timeless document of a great idea—a hymn to beauty and struggle."¹⁰ As I argue, the film's hypermodern claims to timelessness seek to undergird the Nazi state.



Figure 14.1 Leni Riefenstahl and members of her crew during the filming of *Olympia*, 1936. Reproduced from Leni Riefenstahl, *Schönheit im Olympischen Kampf* (Berlin: Deutschen Verlag, 1938)

This essay engages Riefenstahl's *Olympia* as a powerful admixture of contradictory currents of modernist culture, as I demonstrate through contextualization and close analysis of the extremely heavy framing that Riefenstahl constructs in the film's opening and closing sequences.

Through *Olympia*'s reliance on visual allusions to the Classical era, it retools the emerging iconography of the relatively new Olympic movement for a Nazi regime that likewise posed as the inheritor of classical tradition—not the least by referring to itself as the "Third Reich."¹¹ *Olympia* promulgates a myth of its own timelessness, indeed of its own status outside of a specific historical moment. But no expense was spared on this film that relied on all the latest technologies, and Riefenstahl frequently borrowed her techniques from the international filmmaking avant-garde to make a film that is thrillingly of the moment. This practice might have alarmed Riefenstahl's Nazi backers, had she not shrouded it in classical majesty. As I will argue, in addition to its classicism and modernism, *Olympia* also draws from established visuals of Nazi ideology and uses devices that Riefenstahl had established in her own propaganda films, above all *Triumph of the Will*. By blending these seemingly opposed cultural currents, *Olympia* is a Janus-faced film that could simultaneously appeal to different publics in different ways. According to Cooper C. Graham, *Olympia* demonstrated Nazi Germany's efficiency and organizational capacity, its accomplished athletes—in

contrast to a poor showing at the previous Olympics—and its internationalism and good will.¹² It played to a nationalist audience at home while allaying the fears of an international audience that was rightly wary of the new regime. In this way, *Olympia* became the dream product of the Nazi film industry, which, in 1933, Joseph Goebbels had nationalized and purged of “undesirables” such as communist and Jewish actors; he also outlawed independent film criticism and effectively banned foreign films.¹³

Long before filming of it began, controversy surrounded the 1936 Olympics. Nazis officials initially were uninterested in the 1931 deal to host the Olympics that had been struck between the International Olympic Committee and the government of the Weimar Republic. The Olympics’ internationalist and pacifist rhetoric clashed directly with Nazism’s ideology of nationalism and racial superiority. But officials soon realized that the games were a prime opportunity to project an image of a powerful yet peaceful Germany and decided to proceed with the games on a lavish scale never before seen. They even successfully lobbied to hold the 1936 Winter Olympics in Garmisch-Partenkirchen.¹⁴ Because of the Nazis’ racist rhetoric and policies, many partner nations were concerned about the safety of their Jewish and Black athletes and considered boycotting Berlin.¹⁵ In the end, most were persuaded to participate, and members of the United States’ media even claimed that earlier reports of new Germany’s racism had been exaggerated.¹⁶ To maintain the charade, the Nazis removed anti-Semitic propaganda from public view in Berlin and ensured that press coverage was never anti-Semitic but instead emphasized German high culture.¹⁷ Meanwhile, the regime used the Berlin makeover to further its true goals, and unregistered prostitutes, homosexuals, Roma, and “asocial elements” were rounded up and detained in locations including the newly opened Sachsenhausen concentration camp.¹⁸ Germany banned athletes of Jewish descent from its own Olympic team, including record-breaking high jumper Margaret Bergmann.¹⁹ Against this backdrop, it was all the more meaningful that an unexpected star of the games was four-time gold medalist Jesse Owens, the African American son of a sharecropper whose own father had been enslaved.²⁰ In addition to international concern about the regime’s racism, there was equal apprehension about its militarism, particularly after it remilitarized the Rhineland in March 1936. The government knew that the spectacle of a peaceful summer Olympics would help to allay fears of a bellicose Germany, and a grandiose Olympic film could do the same on an even grander scale.²¹

An entire year prior to the Olympics, in the summer of 1935, Riefenstahl was approached to make *Olympia*. Riefenstahl always asserted that the request came from Carl Diem, Secretary General of the Berlin Olympics’ Organizing Committee; that she had full artistic control of *Olympia*; and that it had served no ideological purpose.²² In fact, it was Goebbels who approached her, because he was so pleased with the success of *Triumph of the Will*, and *Olympia* was solely and generously funded—to the tune of 1.5 million Reichsmarks, an enormous sum for any film of the time—by his Reich Ministry for People’s Enlightenment and Propaganda. In order to maintain an illusion of Riefenstahl’s artistic independence, she and her brother, Heinz Riefenstahl, created a front production company, Olympiade-Film GmbH, a trick that suited the

Reich as well. A confidential 1936 letter from the Propaganda Ministry specified that it would be the film's exclusive funder and that *Olympiade-Film GmbH* was established "because the government does not wish to appear publicly as the producer of this film. It is planned to liquidate the company when the production of the film is concluded."²³ However, once the film was complete, its success was sure, and the Nazi regime was at the height of its powers, Riefenstahl dispensed with this ruse. In a 1938 issue of *Staatspolitische Filme* (State Political Films) dedicated to *Olympia*, Riefenstahl proclaimed that "in the fall of 1935, I was appointed by Reichsminister Dr. Goebbels to make the film. He trusted me with what then seemed a completely unmanageable duty because of the strong successes of my films *Victory of Faith*, *Triumph of the Will*, and *Day of Freedom*, and because—through my involvement with many mountain and ski films—I know sports and techniques for filming them."²⁴

Original as it was, *Olympia* drew on important precedents, including several short films that were in cinemas within a year of the summer Olympics.²⁵ The most notable of all was already out in the spring of 1936, months prior to the Olympics in Berlin: Carl Junghans's *Youth of the World: Report on the 1936 Winter Olympics in Garmisch-Partenkirchen* (*Jugend der Welt: Bericht über die Winterolympiade 1936 in Garmisch-Partenkirchen*).²⁶ *Youth of the World* almost exclusively comprises preexisting newsreel footage with a few additional shots made with cameramen Hans Ertl and Heinz von Jaworsky, both of whom subsequently worked on *Olympia*. Junghans employed his distinctive style of editing—"symphonic cut" montage—to create a dramatic storyline for the games.²⁷ Riefenstahl saw *Youth of the World* in May 1936, during a crucial phase of her planning and scriptwriting.²⁸ Its influence on *Olympia* is obvious, from its opening shots dominated by a ringing bell and animated flags to its concluding scenes of airborne ski jumpers shot against the sky, a clear inspiration for Riefenstahl's famous diving sequence. Additionally, several techniques now attributed to her—rapid sequence cutting, subjective camera, and metaphorical imagery—already appear in Junghans's film.²⁹

Still, *Olympia* is a pioneering work by any measure. To make it, Riefenstahl orchestrated a crew of almost 300 that included dozens of the best cameramen and assistants, some with whom she had already worked on her *Berg* films or *Triumph of the Will*. She hired cameramen who specialized specifically in slow motion, photographing ancient Greek architecture and sculpture, or the filming of Hitler.³⁰ Her sound chief recorded the live audience to capture, among other things, their encouragement of their nations' contenders.³¹ She tricked out her crew with the latest technologies: a special 600 mm purpose-built telephoto lens, a homemade underwater camera, and a slow-motion camera that could take up to ninety-six frames per second.³² They positioned cameras in dugouts and on dollies and tracks around the multiple stadiums and venues; they fixed cameras to boats, rafts, a blimp, a balloon, even a catapult mechanism that glided along an inner railing of the Olympic track next to the runners. Riefenstahl used over two dozen kinds of film stock to capture the diverse scene types and lighting conditions.³³

With months of planning and film tests already under their belts, Riefenstahl and her team filmed the sixteen days of the August games under difficult conditions and extreme time pressure. When filming was completed, she spent months cataloguing and reviewing the 400,000 meters of footage—about 250 hours—that her cameramen had shot.³⁴ In October she showed some rough cuts to Goebbels, who hated them. “Riefenstahl has made a sow’s business of it. Intervene!” he noted in his diaries.³⁵ But when she requested another half million Reichsmarks the following month, to make two *Olympia* films from her footage, he grudgingly approved.³⁶ Riefenstahl then spent a year and a half of exhaustive work to turn the vast amount of material from multiple Olympic events, training sessions, and scenes filmed on location and in studio into a highly engaging film.

Olympia premiered on April 20, 1938, which was Hitler’s forty-ninth birthday, having been delayed from its originally scheduled March date because of the annexation of Austria. *Olympia* ran 226 minutes in the German original and was released simultaneously in English, French, and Italian export versions with slightly different content.³⁷ The film won multiple awards, including the Venice Film Festival’s first prize, though this win was rather unsurprising, since Italy was a fascist ally. Since its release, various state censors and even Riefenstahl herself have recut *Olympia* to redeem it for a range of ideological positions.³⁸

The film’s two parts, *Festival of the Nations* (*Fest der Völker*, 126 min.) and *Festival of Beauty* (*Fest der Schönheit*, 100 min.), show the games through condensed reportages of specific events that often create the nail-biting tension over close competition that is quintessential to the experience of sport spectatorship. Interspersed are snippets of medal ceremonies or poetic shots of synchronized dancing. The opening sequence of Part II, *Festival of Beauty*, shot by Riefenstahl cameraman Willy Zielke, features idyllic scenes of the Olympic village—Berlin was only the second-ever Olympics to have one³⁹—interspersed with slice-of-life sequences of training, frolicking in the sauna, and skinny dipping. *Olympia* is not a documentary as the genre is currently understood, a nonfiction film that records actual historic events. Constantly changing weather and light conditions and the dual imperatives that the cameras capture the feeling of live competition through perilous and dramatic shots while also never impeding competition meant that significant events were restaged for the camera and that Riefenstahl sometimes used training sessions to represent official competition.⁴⁰ Even *Olympia*’s diegetic sound was created almost entirely in the studio, where it was painstakingly recorded and mixed to make it seem crisp and true to life. Also shot in studio are the actors dressed as announcers who give dramatic, blow-by-blow commentary with footage of Olympic crowds projected behind them. This practice of mixing actual and recreated footage and sound was not uncommon for documentaries of the time. But Riefenstahl utilized these techniques to an extreme in order to create an Olympics more perfect, more thrilling than the actual event and to idealize an overtly politicized games. As Cooper C. Graham argues, “the film is so dangerous because of its apparent fairness, not in spite of it.” Further, he finds, it is almost

impossible to see such a beautiful documentary, “and not be conned into believing that living in National Socialist Germany might not be so bad after all.”⁴¹

In addition to *Olympia*’s unparalleled camerawork, it is above all through cinematic montage that the film creates the chains of ideas, symbols, and associations that make it so powerful. In the 1920s, artists and filmmakers had developed montage into a complex, creative, and often self-reflexive visual language. Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein created techniques to counter film’s indexical power—its perceived credibility as a window onto the world—and to make their own interventions evident to viewers. In *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), Vertov famously includes a scene from the editing room that shows strips of film moving and stopping, so that it reveals how modern media creates and shapes the reality it claims only to represent.⁴² Eisenstein’s “dialectical montage,” theorized and created in the mid-1920s, thematized opposing points of view to allow viewers a new, synthesized understanding.⁴³ In response to the success of *Triumph of the Will*, the Nazi press cast Riefenstahl as Germany’s answer to Eisenstein. Contemporaneous critics called her technique “Absolute Film” through which “the camera is enabled to capture its single object on film in unusual diversity.”⁴⁴ In other words, in direct contrast to Eisenstein’s montage, which disrupted visual and narrative flow in order to engage the viewer in political meaning-making, Riefenstahl’s techniques appealed to Nazi commentators for their emphasis on continuity and monumentality. And in contrast to those of both Eisenstein and Vertov, Riefenstahl’s montages avoid harsh breaks, instead rendering transitions as smooth and orchestrated with almost ponderous gravity.⁴⁵ One particular passage of *Olympia* reads as an homage to Vertov, the magnificent diving sequence, in which bodies fly through the air at ever increasing speeds and sometimes even with the film running backward, in an orchestral montage sequence that leaves off any pretense of reporting and dissolves nearly to abstraction. Yet even this gesture does not invite viewers to see this segment as a filmmaker’s individual take on the Olympics. It is merely a whimsical moment delighting in the athletes’ physical perfection.

This dramatic move away from disjointed forms of film montage finds a parallel in the shift in the body’s visual deployment during the Weimar era and the Nazi period. More than a decade and a half had passed since the end of World War I, but this most brutal of technologically armed conflicts had lived on in the 2.7 million disabled soldiers who returned home.⁴⁶ These wounded veterans were often represented in avant-garde visual culture immediately after the war. Under Nazism, such art was officially declared “degenerate” and had even been the subject of the Degenerate Art Exhibition (*Entartete Kunst Ausstellung*) in 1937, the year Riefenstahl was hard at work on *Olympia*. It drew millions of viewers to venues throughout Germany.⁴⁷ With these “degenerate” bodies excised from public art collections, Nazi officials promoted a visual culture of the whole and beautiful body in the annual Great German Art Exhibition (*Grosse Deutsche Kunstaustellung*). In both its seamless technique of montage and its unblinking focus on the whole and beautiful body, Riefenstahl’s *Olympia* is entirely a fascist film.

Olympia's twenty-six-minute prologue is a sequence of distinct parts that establish the film's central themes. Their imagery serves as a kind of visual Esperanto that harkens back to film's pre-sound era and establishes the film's twin visual themes: the classical and the timeless perfection of the youthful body. It also relies on a mixture of general and specific symbols, so that Nazi supporters could see it as celebrating party ideology, an interpretation that other viewers might easily have missed.

The film commences with triumphant music by composer Herbert Windt, a Nazi favorite and party member with whom Riefenstahl had already worked on films including *Triumph of the Will*.⁴⁸ In contrast to the visuals of *Olympia*, which blend modernity with tradition, Windt's compositions give the film a strikingly classical soundtrack with little trace of modern experimentation. After the opening credits—animated to appear carved in stone—the music quiets and the screen goes dark. Clouds appear, a striking gesture with which Riefenstahl had introduced Hitler descending from the heavens by airplane in *Triumph of the Will*. *Olympia*'s clouds become a primordial mist that evokes the dawn of time and dissolves into a series of dolly shots of the Acropolis; these were made on location and function as an extended establishing shot for the Olympic games to come. The viewer is led into the Parthenon's sanctuary to discover mist- and shadow-enveloped Classical sculptures as if they were in situ in Greece, what Brigitte Peucker calls a "staged re-birth of myth and perfect beauty" that evokes male and female ideals.⁴⁹ One sculpture's image recurs more than any other, the reclining, highly erotic Barberini Faun (c. 220 BCE) (see Figure 14.2). Riefenstahl deploys the figure, originally a representation of a drunken satyr, as a symbol of physical perfection. His inebriated sleep evokes the concept of struggle (*Kampf*), which, along with beauty (*Schönheit*), was one of Riefenstahl's organizing principles for *Olympia*.⁵⁰

Riefenstahl's choice to dwell on the Barberini Faun hints at Riefenstahl's eclecticism in her sources of inspiration for the film, in this case, the work of American ballet dancer turned painter Hubert Stowitts. In September 1936 she saw an exhibition in Berlin of his muscular and often overtly homoerotic male nudes while she was conceptualizing the opening sequence.⁵¹ Stowitts's paintings caused a sensation, and the authorities shut the show down, probably for several reasons: above all the works' glorification of the bodies of Black, Native American, and Jewish athletes from the US Olympic team, but possibly also because of Stowitts's open homosexuality and the paintings' tendencies to expressionism, a "degenerate" art form, according to Nazi ideology.⁵² By contrast, Riefenstahl was deeply impressed and enthusiastically told Stowitts that she wanted to use shots of his paintings shrouded in mist for *Olympia*'s opening sequence.⁵³ While Riefenstahl scrapped plans to use Stowitts's work for the prologue, his paintings haunt her scenes of sculpture, the Barberini Faun above all, as a muscular, perfect male body that emerges from the mist. The Barberini Faun had impeccable classical credentials as a sculpture held in the Glyptothek in Munich. Yet the figure, with its thighs akimbo and face in ecstasy, calls to mind the raw sexuality evident in Stowitts's paintings. The camera next comes to rest on the ancient Greek sculptor Myron's *Discobolus* (c. 460–450 BCE).⁵⁴ Riefenstahl breathes life into the



Figure 14.2 Aphrodite and Faun, Leni Riefenstahl, *Olympia* (1938)

stone figure through a dissolve, and he becomes the German decathlete Erwin Huber, who functions as a kind of tableau vivant as he turns and throws in slow motion (see Figure 14.3).⁵⁵ The *Discobolus* scene renders a leap between ancient sculpture and living athlete nearly invisible and thus represents a continuity between ancient Greece and Nazi Germany. This representation is a visualization of a key element of Nazi propaganda that was articulated by Hitler and evoked in popular spectacles and even documentary films of the period: namely, that the ancient Greeks were a branch of the same Aryan race from which the Germans also descended.⁵⁶

Of course, Riefenstahl was not the first to blend neoclassicism and the modern, a thread through modernist culture from Pierre Louÿs's "Chansons de Bilitis" (1894) to James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and Natalie Clifford Barney's salon held in Le Temple de l'Amitié (1909–1960s). Further, Riefenstahl's neoclassicism proposes a revival of ancient Greece culture that is entirely akin to the Olympic movement that had begun recently, in the nineteenth century. But Riefenstahl's film very specifically suggests that these games bring the legacy of ancient Greece to life in modern Germany. Since the late eighteenth century, Berlin had been nicknamed the "Athens on the Spree." In the 1930s, commentators like the sportswriter Max Ostrop argued that, because of their archeological and scholarly traditions, "the German people ... have a unique understanding of the Hellenic nature."⁵⁷ Nazi Germany, *Olympia* shows from this crucial scene of the *Discobolus* dissolving into a living German athlete, is the inheritor and



Figure 14.3 Erwin Huber in the pose of *Discobolus*, Leni Riefenstahl, *Olympia* (1938)

culmination of this monumental and heroic western classical tradition. This argument was evident in the neoclassical turn of Nazi architecture and in Hitler's push for a "timeless" German art akin to classical sculptures in German art collections.⁵⁸ In its prologue, *Olympia* thus offers film as the kind of new classical art that Hitler was calling for, a technological *Gesamtkunstwerk* powerful enough to embrace both the culture of the ancients and the youth of the present in a single view. As in the *Discobolus* dissolve, *Olympia*'s neoclassicism alternates between clearly representing specific athletes and creating abstractions that show them as archetypes.

Riefenstahl's stillness in motion is also the method of the next phase of the prologue, which continues with more slow-motion shots of individual nude male athletes. They are shot from below against the sky to render them monumental as they perform heroic feats in a natural setting. They first throw a discus and put the shot;

they subsequently gain speed by running and project further by hurling the javelin. After this action, the music becomes abruptly more lyrical, and a montage of hands and legs moves rhythmically to toss a ball, skip a rope, or sway with a hoop. This montage introduces a sequence of nude female dancers, backlit and in soft focus to emphasize their status as archetypes. While, like the men, they are initially filmed from below and against the sky, Riefenstahl transitions to a series of soft-focus shots from above that link them with the earth, rippling wheat fields, waves striking the shore, and the sea.

When the women are again filmed against the sky, it is as a series of images of silhouetted dancers shown from only the waist. The dancers' figures eventually collapse into a single silhouette with multiple arms circling up and out in staggered rhythm that ignites and embodies the flame that is superimposed over their collective body. Their image begins to fade as the flames grow and engulf them in fire. The flame is, of course, the Olympic flame, but the iconography of fire as purifying and renewing was also a commonplace in Nazi propaganda, from the 1933 book burning in Berlin, to the rituals of solstice celebrations popular with the Hitler Youth and SS.⁵⁹ Fire was consistently evoked in Nazi propaganda, as in Goebbels's speech that Riefenstahl included in *Triumph of the Will*; "may the bright flame of our enthusiasm never be extinguished. It alone gives light and warmth to the creative art of a modern political propaganda. It arose from the depths of the Volk, and to the Volk it must always return to seek its roots and find its strength." Peter Zimmermann has written that the dancers-dissolving-into-flame passage of *Olympia* recall representations of Indian gods and ancient sun worship, part of the widely publicized origins of the Nazi swastika symbol.⁶⁰ Riefenstahl's multi-armed goddess dissolves into the Olympic flame and, in a scene entirely restaged by Riefenstahl, a mythic torchbearer lights his torch and begins the relay that will carry it to Berlin, fire in motion. The lighting of the Olympic flame in Greece—now seen as a standard feature of every Olympics—was invented for the 1936 Berlin Olympics by their organizer, Carl Diem.⁶¹

Once the flame has been lit, upbeat orchestral music carries the prologue into its next stage, animations by Svend Noldan that trace a fantastical journey of the torch from east to west through landscapes marked with names of countries and cities, and punctuated by city models and national flags. While the place names emphasize national sovereignty, this borderless flow from Greece to Germany reifies a logic of continuity that, by the time the film was complete in early 1938, would be in wide circulation to legitimate Germany's covetous eastward glance: namely, that space was needed for the *Volk ohne Raum*.⁶² Only a few years later, the Nazi takeover of Europe would extend as far as Greece itself, which was annexed by the Axis powers in April 1943.⁶³ At the German border, Riefenstahl cuts to a large swastika and the word *Deutschland*. This new brand of Germany is then elaborated through four pictorial symbols presented by means of a series of dissolves and superimpositions: a landscape, the Olympic stadium (shot from the *Hindenburg* zeppelin), the Olympic bell, and a medium close-up of Hitler in profile, who raises his arm in the Nazi salute. It is no surprise that Hitler, as Chancellor of the host country, appears in the film.

But Riefenstahl makes his image mythic and pairs it with Nazi Germany's symbols to provide the event's context. The ringing bell is clearly marked with a German eagle and linked Olympic rings; it is superimposed over the stadium, as if the latter, too, were ringing out (see Figure 14.4). Periodically *Olympia* cuts to Hitler watching the events to convey a sense that the games are unfolding before him. The message is clear: under the watchful gaze of Hitler, this film projects the Berlin Olympics from the stadium to the world.

In the prologue's final portion, we enter the stadium for the opening ceremony. Flags are raised, and the athletes march in, many of them giving the Nazi salute to a clearly delighted Hitler. Hitler then declares the Games officially open, the first spoken words in *Olympia*, and the only synchronous sound element in the entire film.⁶⁴ Then the Olympic torch arrives, held high by a blond runner who traverses the playing fields to light the massive trough of the Olympic flame. German weightlifter Rudolf Ismayr stands at a high podium to represent all athletes as he takes the Olympic oath. But he holds the Nazi swastika flag as he does so, rather than the Olympic flag.⁶⁵ The prologue concludes with a vision of the sun shimmering in the heat as it melds with the Olympic flame, now burning brightly in Berlin.

Powerfully setting the tone for the rest of the film, the prologue reveals *Olympia*'s ideological mechanisms, which draw deeply if subtly on Nazi symbolism. Riefenstahl's Nazi neoclassicism points to the one symbol that was for many decades

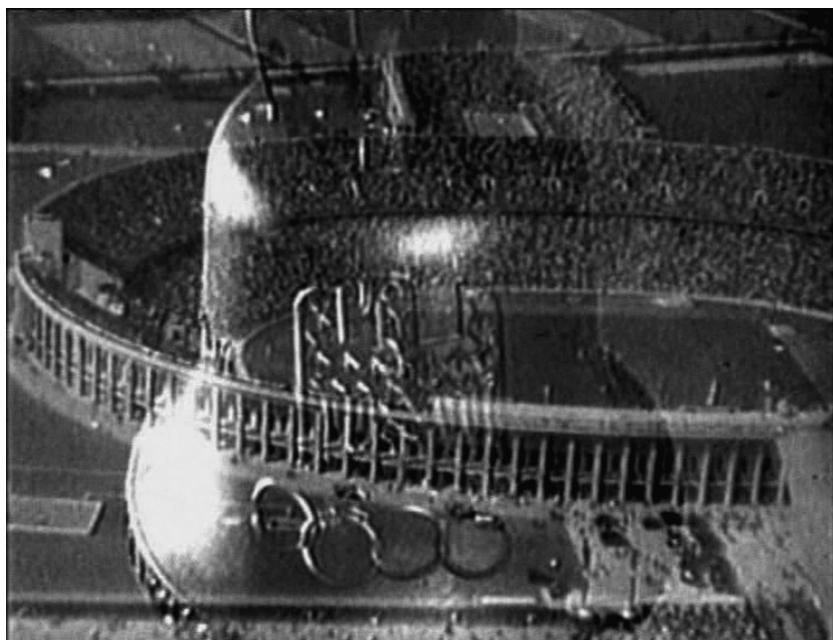


Figure 14.4 Bell with eagle and Olympic rings superimposed upon stadium, Leni Riefenstahl, *Olympia* (1938)

cut from available prints of the film, the “swastika,” a nineteenth-century term for one of the oldest and most widely distributed human symbols. In the early twentieth century, consensus developed that it depicted a revolving wheel or “sun wheel.”⁶⁶ While it would be reductive to posit *Olympia*’s representations of sun and fire as merely hidden swastikas, it is clear that Riefenstahl’s simplified glyphs tap into the powerful symbolic world of Nazism under *Gleichschaltung*. This “synchronization” of all state institutions, including, and especially so, the arts and media, was enacted at the start of the Nazi regime and extended steadily during the dictatorship’s early years. It resulted in what Walter Benjamin has famously referred to the “aestheticization of politics” by the mid-1930s, in which dialectical opposition no longer functions to activate the viewer or reader’s critical faculties, but merely to convey the regime’s ideology.⁶⁷ While the swastika is remembered as the divisive symbol of a racist regime, within the context of Nazi Germany it was posited as a unifying force that, like *Gleichschaltung* itself, would bring an end to class division.⁶⁸ Similarly, the prologue’s powerful, projectile-throwing male athletes and its sun-worshiping female dancers are pure bodies, examples of a racialized collective at home in the landscape of Germany. *Olympia*’s prologue is drenched in the regime’s symbolism and ideology, and yet it was general enough that international viewers might view it, like the Olympics themselves, as merely celebrating the youthful body.

Olympia opens by bringing classical bodies from the darkness of the past into the bright light of Berlin’s Olympic now. The rest of *Olympia* focuses on its ostensible subject, friendly international competition. In many portions it highlights particular athletes’ feats with their names and nationalities specifically mentioned. Yet in some of its most memorable passages, *Olympia* is an overpowering spectacle of sublime corporeal perfection that stands as the most viewed example of a Nazi aesthetics of the body. Athletes are frequently filmed by using a low camera angle to monumentalize them. Riefenstahl creates visual feasts, as in the stunning diving sequence, with unnamed and unrecognizable bodies flying across the sky against her signature clouds.⁶⁹ Such bodies stand in for the Youth of the World, but *Olympia* also stakes a claim on them for Germany through techniques that deprive them of specific identities and subsume them within the National Socialist body politic through framing and context.

This same type of ideological framing occurs at *Olympia*’s other extreme, three and a half minutes of visual high drama that bookends the film’s start. The games themselves concluded with closing ceremonies in Berlin calling the Youth of the World to the 1940 summer Olympics in Tokyo, games that would in fact be canceled because of World War II. Riefenstahl does not include this call, which would have rendered Berlin one in a series, rather than as the archetypical *Olympia*. Instead, she concludes with a passage that starts with dark primordial mist, as in the prologue. This time, it resolves into the night sky above the stadium. Again the Olympic bell rings out, superimposed on the screen. Then the stadium emerges once more and the highlight of the closing ceremonies, the “Cathedral of Light,” materializes around it. High-powered antiaircraft searchlights shoot straight up into the sky, colossal modern versions of classical

columns. First created by Albert Speer for a 1933 event in Berlin featuring Hitler, such “Cathedrals of Light” had become standard Nazi spectacles and an annual highlight of the Nuremberg Nazi Party Congresses from 1934 through the regime’s fall.⁷⁰ These displays were incredibly impressive for viewers of the 1930s, many of whom still did not have electricity at home. Pamela Swett explains the Nazi state’s goal of achieving “mass electrification, which was deemed critical to the preparations for war and in the domestic sphere as a symbol of the dictatorship’s modern worldview that promoted rationalized living, greater hygiene, and leisure opportunities for its people as readily as it built (electrified) prison camps.”⁷¹ The antiaircraft searchlights also gave both foreign and domestic spectators a false sense of Germany’s military readiness; Speer later reported that searchlights had to be gathered from throughout Germany to create the illusion that “the Wehrmacht possessed an overabundance of this tool of modern warfare.”⁷² The “Cathedral of Light” was visible from miles away, and witnesses described it as akin to being inside an unfathomably large building made of ice.⁷³ Electric light spectacles were both primitive and futuristic, a form of religious pageantry perfectly suited to the peculiar needs of this dictatorship.⁷⁴

For *Olympia*’s grand finale, Riefenstahl cuts solemnly to a model of the Olympic flame, shown with the light beams projecting into the sky behind it. Upraised flags of the participating nations appear, each parallel to a light beam. After shots of the flags being crowned with laurel wreaths and the massive Olympic flag blowing against the night sky, the Olympic flame slowly extinguishes itself. The camera tilts upward to follow the flame’s smoke and the light columns into the night sky until it reaches the radiant, sun-like apparition at the intersection of the searchlight beams. This dazzling sight projects brilliantly across the screen as the orchestra plays full force, with horns, strings, and kettle drums, before sound and image are simultaneously extinguished. It’s a dramatic conclusion to fit the monumentality of these classicized games. At the same time, like the rest of the film, it emphasizes the modern technological skill not only of the filmmaker, but also of the Nazi state, which can put on a lavish Olympics, and create the mass spectacle of the Cathedral of Light—effectively materializing a massive building of ice crowned with its own electric sun. The Olympic flame may be extinguished in the stadium, but Riefenstahl has transferred its light to the military-grade electric beams that project from Berlin out to the rest of the world.

Olympia continues to appeal to many audiences. But it must always be viewed as a film extravagantly funded by the Nazi state and intended to serve its ends by fostering the regime’s nationalist agenda at home and serving as soft power abroad. Goebbels’s diaries give a clear picture of what Riefenstahl’s film meant for the regime upon its April 1938 premiere:

Evenings to the Ufapalast am Zoo theater. Premier of the Olympia film. Major affair. Both parts of the film roll. They leave behind a singular impression. One is carried away by the force, the depth, and the beauty of this project. This year’s film prize belongs to it for sure. A masterpiece from Leni Riefenstahl.

The Führer too is completely enraptured. Huge ovations.⁷⁵

The next day Goebbels reports that “the *Olympia* Film dominates the entire press. Everywhere one hears only boundless praise. I’m transferring another 100,000 marks to Leni Riefenstahl.”⁷⁶ From that day forward, Goebbel’s support of Riefenstahl never wavered. In July, he notes that, despite some minor international controversies, “the film carries the day everywhere with explosive success. This is pleasing. That Riefenstahl is a courageous broad.”⁷⁷

There is a chasm between their viewing of *Olympia* in 1938 and our watching Riefenstahl’s film today. We know where history is going. World War II begins in 1939 when Germany invades Poland. Through its modern state apparatus, the Nazi regime systematizes its genocide, most powerfully with the 1942 Wannsee Conference, where functionaries hashed out the mechanics of a “Final Solution” to murder Europe’s Jews, along with Sinti, Roma, homosexuals, and those with intellectual disabilities. When we look back across this chasm, it is difficult for us to understand how the Nazi movement could possibly have appealed to so many young Germans as a sort of “youthquake.”⁷⁸ And yet, as historian Wendy Lower has recently pointed out, “terror regimes feed on the idealism and energy of young people.”⁷⁹

Riefenstahl’s Nazi neoclassicism masquerades as an apolitical celebration of human beauty and triumph that claims the Olympic idea for the Youth of the World. Yet her film simultaneously conveys other powerful messages: that Nazi Germany is the true inheritor of the classical ideal and the master of modern technologies—both visual and military; that Hitler is a leader who deserves worldwide respect and even reverence; and that the youth and beauty assembled in Berlin and captured on film are a tribute to the Nazi Olympics and thus to the regime itself. These messages remain nearly always just beneath the surface of *Olympia*; they are more powerful for the film’s seeming lack of dogmatism. Riefenstahl constructs it by making wide use of the technologies and techniques of the avant-garde, but she removes the structures that would allow audience members to achieve distance in viewing and to reflect critically on what they are seeing. *Olympia* is beautiful, but ultimately its immersive qualities are suffocating. Viewers are subsumed en masse into its experience, just as Riefenstahl’s glamorized athletic bodies also lose their individuality. In the end, *Olympia* reveals Riefenstahl as a master propagandist who used modern technology and modernist techniques to create the visuals of Nazism’s youthquake and to legitimize a regime whose greatest crimes were already on the horizon.

Notes

- * I am grateful for the insights generated in conversations with Daniel Magilow, David Culbert, Scott W. Klein, and Michael Valdez Moses. Unless noted, translations are mine.
- 1. The other two films were *Victory of Faith* (*Sieg des Glaubens*, 1933) and *Day of Freedom: Our Armed Forces* (*Tag der Freiheit: Unsere Wehrmacht*, 1935). See *The Wonderful Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl* (*Leni Riefenstahl: Die Macht der Bilder*), dir. Ray Müller (1993). Her sole pre-Nazi directorial credit was for *The Blue Light* (*Das blaue Licht*, 1932).

2. Thomas Elsaesser asserts that “the coverage of presidential elections, political summits, the staging of the Olympic Games can all be traced back to Riefenstahl’s invention of the ‘photo-opportunity’ which is *Triumph of the Will*.” Thomas Elsaesser, “Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman,” *Sight and Sound* 3, no. 2 (February 1993): 15. See also David Bathrick, “The Afterlife of *Triumph of the Will*: The First Twenty-Five Years,” in *Riefenstahl Screened: An Anthology of New Criticism*, Neil Christian Pages, Mary Rhiel, and Ingeborg Majer-O’Sickey, eds. (New York: Continuum: 2008), 73–97; and Valerie Weinstein, “Reading Rammstein, Remembering Riefenstahl: ‘Fascist Aesthetics’ and German Popular Culture,” Pages et al., *Reifenstahl Screened*, 130–48.
3. A fully restored *Olympia* is included in the forty-three-disk set: *100 Years of Olympic Films: 1912–2012* (Criterion, 2017).
4. See *Leni Riefenstahl: A Memoir* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992. Originally published Munich: Albrecht Knaus Verlag, 1987), and *The Wonderful Horrible Life*. Women rarely joined the male-dominated National Socialist Party, so Riefenstahl was no exception. She did apply for membership in the Nazi Reichsfilmkammer (Reich Film Chamber) in August 1933, the month after it was founded. See Jürgen Trimborn, *Leni Riefenstahl: A Life* (2002), Edna McCown, trans. (New York: Faber and Faber, 2007), 78.
5. Siegfried Kracauer was the first to observe that “all Nazi films were more or less propaganda films—even the mere entertainment pictures which seem to be remote from politics”; Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1947), 275. Eric Rentschler documents the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei’s (NSDAP’s) Ministry of Propaganda’s intense control exerted over the entire film industry; Eric Rentschler, *The Ministry of Illusion: Nazi Cinema and Its Afterlife* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 8–9. See also Susan Sontag, “Fascinating Fascism” (review essay of *The Last of the Nuba* by Leni Riefenstahl and *SS Regalia* by Jack Pia), *New York Review of Books*, February 6, 1975, reprinted in Susan Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980), 73–105.
6. Riefenstahl was thus designated during her denazification proceedings in 1949; most historians agree the sentence was too light. See Steven Bach, *Leni: The Life and Work of Leni Riefenstahl* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 232–35; bell hooks, “The Feminazi Mystique,” *Transition* 73 (1997), 156–62.
7. Joseph Goebbels, diary entry, April 27, 1944, cited in Mario Leis, *Leni Riefenstahl* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 2009), 64.
8. Elsaesser points out that Riefenstahl was consistently shamed while more obviously guilty male colleagues were simply reintegrated into the film industry after 1945 (18). In *The Wonderful Horrible Life* Riefenstahl expresses regret for making *Triumph of the Will*, but states, “I was never anti-Semitic, and [therefore] I never joined the Nazi Party. So what am I guilty of? [...] I didn’t drop any atom bombs. I didn’t denounce anyone. So where does my guilt lie?”
9. Already in *Mein Kampf* (1925–1926), Hitler argued that “the picture in all its forms up to the film” is superior to text; “Here a man needs to use his brains even less; it suffices to look, or at most to read extremely brief texts, and thus many will more readily accept a pictorial presentation.” Adolf Hitler, extract from *Mein Kampf*, *The Weimar Republic Source Book*, Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 130.
10. Leni Riefenstahl, *Schönheit im Olympischen Kampf* (Berlin: Deutschen Verlag, 1937), 5.

11. David Dennis, *Inhumanities: Nazi Interpretations of Western Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 127–41.
12. Cooper C. Graham, “A Historical and Aesthetic Analysis of Leni Riefenstahl’s *Olympia*,” dissertation (New York University, 1984), 7. Part of the dissertation was published as Cooper C. Graham, *Leni Riefenstahl and “Olympia”* (New York: Scarecrow Press, 1986).
13. Gary Jason, “Film and Propaganda: The Lessons of the Nazi Film Industry,” *Reason Papers* 35, no. 1 (July 2013), 204; and Laura Heins, “Introduction: Melodrama in the Nazi Cinema: The Domestic War,” in *Nazi Film Melodrama* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 1–12.
14. David Clay Large, *Nazi Games: The Olympics of 1936* (New York: Norton, 2007), 110–46.
15. Guy Walters, *Berlin Games: How the Nazis Stole the Olympic Dream* (New York: William Morrow, 2006), and Large, *Nazi Games*, particularly chap. 3, “Boycott Berlin!,” 69–109.
16. Harry Hirsch, “The Playing Fields of Nazi Germany,” *Literary Digest*, November 17, 1934, 22; reprinted in *The Third Reich Sourcebook*, Anson Rabinbach and Sander Gilman, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 698–70.
17. David Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema, 1933–1945* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1985, revised edn., 2001), 93–94. See also Peter Zimmermann, “Die Parteitagesfilme der NSDAP and Leni Riefenstahl,” in *Geschichte des dokumentarischen Films in Deutschland*, Peter Zimmermann and Kay Hoffmann, eds., vol. 3, “Drittes Reich,” 1933–1945 (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 2005), 523. Large describes the technology employed and city beautification efforts (157, 160–61).
18. Large, *Nazi Games*, 219–22.
19. Michael Mackenzie, “From Athens to Berlin: The 1936 Olympics and Leni Riefenstahl’s *Olympia*,” *Critical Inquiry* 29, no. 2 (2003), 305.
20. John Allemang cautions against any facile understanding of Owens that poses American racial harmony as the contrast to Nazism’s strict hierarchical eugenics. John Allemang, *The Globe and Mail*, August 9, 2012, A2.
21. Mary-Elizabeth O’Brien details how the games gave Hitler cover to implement secret war plans with German industry and the military. O’Brien, *Nazi Cinema as Enchantment: The Politics of Entertainment in the Third Reich* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2006), 125.
22. Riefenstahl, *Memoir*, 167–78; Rainer Rother, *Leni Riefenstahl: The Seduction of Genius*, Martin Bott, trans. (New York: Continuum, 2002), 81.
23. Letter from Minister Counselor Otto of the Propaganda Ministry to the Berlin-Charlottenburg Court, January 30, 1936, in Hans Barkhausen, “Footnote to the History of Riefenstahl’s *Olympia*,” *Film Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (Autumn 1974), 10.
24. Riefenstahl in *Olympia*, Dr. Walter Gunther, ed., special edition of *Staatspolitische Filme* 8–9, 1938, 27; cited in Ursula von Keitz, “Blickmacht und Begehrten: Zur Körperdarstellung und ihren paradoxen Effekten in den Olympiafilmen,” in *Riefenstahl Revisited*, Jürn Glasenapp, ed. (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2009), 103. Other publicity materials trace *Olympia*’s commissioning to Hitler; see “How the Olympia Film Arose,” *Hakenkreuzbanner*, April 19, 1938, in Welch, *Propaganda*, 98.
25. *Die KDF-Stadt* (1936, 7 min., dir. Otto Geiger) featured the temporary tent and cabin city built by the Nazi “Kraft durch Freude” (“Strength through Joy”) leisure program, affordable accommodations for German visitors to the games. The 1937 *Olympiastadt Berlin 1936* (*Olympia City Berlin 1936*) (12 min., dir. Fritz Boehner) was a short about the

- metropolis's attractions. Zimmermann and Hoffmann, *Geschichte des dokumentarischen Films in Deutschland*, 523, 780, 784.
26. Carl Junghans's *Youth of the World* (38 min.) is likewise included in *100 Years of Olympic Films*.
 27. Paul Griesebner, "Spiele für den 'Führer': Zur Dramaturgie des 'Olympia'-Films von Leni Riefenstahl," *Relation, Medien, Gesellschaft, Geschichte* 2, no. 2 (1995), 143.
 28. She began working on her manuscript and hiring cameramen in May. Graham, *Riefenstahl and Olympia*, 31.
 29. Griesebner, "Spiele," drawing on Hans Bennett (144–45).
 30. Graham, *Riefenstahl and Olympia*, 27–74.
 31. Graham, *Riefenstahl and Olympia*, 85–86.
 32. In *The Wonderful Horrible Life*, Riefenstahl discuss the technology with two of her most important cameramen, Walter Frentz and Guzzi Lantschne. See also Taylor Downing, *Olympia* (London: Palgrave/British Film Institute, 1992), 52.
 33. Graham, *Riefenstahl and Olympia*, 35. As Graham documents, on July 2, just days before the August 1 start of the Olympics, the International Amateur Athletic Federation forbade use of the catapult mechanism in competition (65–68). However, a few days later, the crew was permitted to use it without its motor for the 5,000 m run; it was pushed by a young athletic member of the film crew (96–97).
 34. Graham, *Riefenstahl and Olympia*, 35.
 35. Goebbels, *Tagebücher*, pt. I, Aufzeichnungen 1923–1941, vol. 3 (April 1934–February 1937), pt. 2, Jana Richter, ed. (Munich: K.G. Saur Verlag, 2001), October 25, 1936, 225.
 36. Goebbels, *Tagebücher*, pt. I, vol. 3, pt. 2, November 6, 1936, 240.
 37. Downing, *Olympia*, 13; and Zimmermann and Hoffmann, *Geschichte des dokumentarischen Films in Deutschland*, 784. The German version contained additional pro-Nazi material and even exaggerated German competitors' feats, as when Willy Schröder is shown as a discus finalist when he was not (Graham, "Historical and Aesthetic Analysis," 524–25).
 38. Downing, *Olympia*, 11.
 39. Michael Mackenzie, "From Athens to Berlin: The 1936 Olympics and Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympia*," *Critical Inquiry* 29, no. 2 (2003): 302–36; 325.
 40. Riefenstahl freely admits reconstructing, for example, the men's pole-vaulting event; Riefenstahl, *Memoir*, 196–97. Zimmermann discusses a restaged medal ceremony with Jesse Owens, Zimmermann and Hoffmann, *Geschichte des dokumentarischen Films in Deutschland*, 526.
 41. Graham, "Historical and Aesthetic Analysis," 525.
 42. Carsten Strathausen, "Riefenstahl and the Face of Fascism," Pages et al., *Reifenstahl Screened*, 41. On this point, see also Tyrus Miller, "Intervals of Transition: Dziga Vertov's *The Man with a Movie Camera*," chapter 8 in this volume,
 43. Sergei Eisenstein, "A Dialectic Approach to Film Form" (1931), *Film Form* (New York: Harcourt, 1949), 45–63.
 44. Author unnamed, "Schule Riefenstahl: Der absolute Film," *Film-Kurier*, January 25, 1936, cited in Rother, *Leni Riefenstahl*, 95.
 45. Likewise, the mess of Dada montage is transformed into the smooth continuities of Nazi propaganda; see Benjamin Buchloh, "From Faktura to Factography," *October* 30 (1984), 82–119.

46. Sabine Kienitz, "Die Kastriertendes Krieges: Körperbilder und Männlichkeitskonstruktionen im und nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg," *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* 95, no. 1 (1999), 63–80; Deborah Cohen, *The War Came Home: Disabled Veterans in Britain and Germany, 1914–1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
47. Olaf Peters, *Degenerate Art: The Attack on Modern Art in Nazi Germany, 1937* (New York: Prestel, 2014).
48. Carola Schormann, "Mittler zu sein zwischen Realem und Irrealem": Herbert Windt und Leni Riefenstahl," Glasenapp, *Riefenstahl Revisited*, 147. Celia Applegate calls Windt's musical drama a sort of "triumph of the will" in sport that contributes to *Olympia*'s fascist nature. "To Be or Not to Be Wagnerian: Music in Riefenstahl's Nazi-Era Films," Pages et al., 195–96.
49. Brigitte Peucker, "The Fascist Choreography: Riefenstahl's Tableaux," *Modernism/modernity* 11, no. 2 (2004), 288.
50. Riefenstahl, *Schönheit im Olympischen Kampf*, 5.
51. Graham, *Riefenstahl and Olympia*, 136–38.
52. After 1934's Night of the Long Knives, the regime aggressively enforced anti-homosexual laws, including Paragraph 175. Yet Nazism's idealization of the male body and its overt homosociality were prominent features in art, as sculpture on the grounds of the Berlin Olympic stadium showed clearly. For more see Günter Grau, ed., *Hidden Holocaust? Gay and Lesbian Persecution in Germany, 1933–45*, Patrick Camiller, trans. (London: Cassell, 1995), esp. 5.
53. Hubert Stowitts, letter to Blanche Stowitts, September 19, 1936, in Graham, *Riefenstahl and Olympia*, 137.
54. This copy of Myron's *Discobolus* in Rome was made for the "Sport der Hellenen" exhibition, held concurrently with the Olympics; Mackenzie, "From Athens," 318.
55. Graham, *Riefenstahl and Olympia*, 141, 142, 158.
56. Kerstin Stutterheim, "Germanenkult und Okkultismus," in Zimmermann and Hoffmann, *Geschichte des dokumentarischen Films in Deutschland*, 359–66. Albert Speer testified to Hitler's belief in the ancient Greeks' connection to the Germanic tribes; see Welch, *Propaganda*, 94–96. Anton Kutter's 1939 documentary, *The Germanic Tribes versus the Pharos* (*Germanen gegen Pharaonen*, 24 min.), goes even further by attributing the building of both the Great Pyramid and Stonehenge to Germans.
57. Max Ostrop, "Olympische Spiele deutschen Gepräges," *Westermanns Monatshefte* 159 (October 1935), 194, reprinted in Rabinbach and Gilman, *The Third Reich Sourcebook*, 697.
58. For Hitler, unlike the passing fashions of modern art, "German Art" would be eternal. Adolf Hitler, "From Speech Inaugurating the 'Great Exhibition of Modern Art,' Munich 1937," in *Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents*, Vassiliki Kolocotroni, Jane Goldman, and Olga Taxidou, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 560–63. For more on Riefenstahl's neoclassicism, see Graham, "Historical and Aesthetic Analysis," 489–513.
59. For example, Party-sponsored *Winter Solstice* (*Wintersonnenwende*, dir. Gerhard Hattula), a documentary short, featured young women dancing around a fire and was shown widely in cinemas from 1936 to 1938. Stutterheim, "Germanenkult und Okkultismus," 361–62.
60. Zimmermann, "Die Parteitagesfilme," in Zimmermann and Hoffmann, *Geschichte des dokumentarischen Films in Deutschland*, 525.

61. The 3,000 metal relay torches were manufactured by Krupps; Mackenzie, "From Athens," 317. Riefenstahl restaged the torch lighting because her team missed capturing the actual, rather chaotic event; Downing, *Olympia*, 70–71.
62. Hans Grimm, *Volk ohne Raum [People without Space]*, 1926. This title became a Nazi slogan to justify conquest and genocide.
63. *Olympia* became useful propaganda in the Nazis' eastern campaigns. Welch, *Propaganda*, 99.
64. Downing, *Olympia*, 75.
65. Graham, "Historical and Aesthetic Analysis," 348.
66. Malcolm Quinn, *The Swastika: Constructing the Symbol* (London: Routledge, 1994), 72, 75.
67. Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer" (1934), in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Michael Jennings, eds., vol. 2, 1927–1934 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 774–75.
68. Quinn, *Swastika*, 18–19.
69. Windt has placed a sonata allegro here to build tension and excitement. Graham, "Historical and Aesthetic Analysis," 444–56.
70. See Anne Hoormann, *Lichtspiele: Zur Medienreflexion der Avantgarde in der Weimarer Republik* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2003), 291–300; and Dietrich Neumann, "Lichtarchitektur and the Avant-Garde," *Architecture of the Night: The Illuminated Building*, Dietrich Neumann and Kermit Swiler Champa, eds. (Munich: Prestel, 2002), 47.
71. Pamela Swett, *Selling under the Swastika: Advertising and Commercial Culture in Nazi Germany* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), 103.
72. Albert Speer in 1969, quoted in Hoormann, *Lichtspiele*, 293.
73. Hoormann, *Lichtspiele*, 296.
74. Hoormann, *Lichtspiele*, 290, 298.
75. Goebbels, *Tagebücher*, pt. I, Aufzeichnungen 1923–1941, vol. 5 (December 1937–July 1938), Elke Frölich, ed. (Munich: K.G. Saur Verlag, 2000), April 21, 1938, 266.
76. Goebbels, *Tagebücher*, pt. I, vol. 5, April 22, 1938, 267.
77. Goebbels, *Tagebücher*, pt. I, vol. 5, July 8, 1938, 373.
78. Dwight Garner, "Nazism's Feminine Side, Brutal and Murderous," review of Wendy Lower, *Hitler's Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013), *New York Times*, October 9, 2013; accessed August 15, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/09/books/hitlers-furies-by-wendy-lower-examines-german-women.html>.
79. Wendy Lower, *Hitler's Furies*, 15.

On Auratic and Sentimental Objects

High and Low Modernism in Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane*

Douglas Mao

In an episode from season 7 of the television program *Columbo* (air date April 5, 1978), a psychologist and collector of movie memorabilia, Eric Mason (Nicol Williamson), takes cunning revenge on a friend (Joel Hunter) who has had an affair with his late wife. Having trained his dogs to attack a dummy emitting the word "Rosebud," he arranges for the betraying friend to be at his (Mason's) house at a certain time. He rings his kitchen telephone; the friend picks up; and Mason, claiming to need support in an argument, asks the friend to confirm the inscription on the sled from *Citizen Kane* (1941), which improbably hangs in Mason's den.¹ The friend answers "Rosebud" and is duly dispatched by the Dobermans.

There may be a lesson here for anyone tempted to add to the literature on that sled. Surely, a kind of critical fatality by now hangs on the uttering of "Rosebud"; surely, one does best to remain silent about this most discussed object in the history of film, if not to save one's own life, then to spare others being bored to death. Yet in the context of the present volume, the sled on which "Rosebud" is imprinted seems to cry out for attention, abiding as it does at the intersection of two major modernist preoccupations: the relation between high culture and mass culture, and the meanings of objects and objecthood in the modern world. Welles's masterpiece is, of all Hollywood films, the one in which a tension between artistic and commercial imperatives is most famously and most polyvalently active, while the sled (in company with the staggering hoard of possessions amid which it surfaces at film's end) poses with some insistence the question of how people come to vest significance in inanimate things. But *Citizen Kane* is not merely exemplary of how these concerns can cross paths in a given text. It also has a tale to tell, even an argument to make, about how this intersection speaks to the condition and possibilities of film.²

To hear this story, we might begin by turning to the tension between popular culture and high art, which in both *Citizen Kane* itself and the history of that picture's making takes the form of a tension between modernist and anti-modernist impulses. On the modernist side, the film is the child of a Hollywood outsider³ who, given the chance to make a movie on the basis of his high-art credentials in theater and radio,⁴ initially planned a screen adaptation of that Ur-modernist text, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899).⁵ *Citizen Kane* is well known, too, for what we might call

its modernist temperature—its debt to German expressionism and its exuding of a froideur associated with early-twentieth-century avant-gardes at their more severe.⁶ No less securely modernist a feature is its wealth of formal innovations, which include novel deployments of ceilinged sets, of the wide-angle lens, of extreme depth of field, of deep staging, of overlapping dialogue, and of dissolves and other optical printer effects, not to mention its construction of a life narrative through flashbacks from the points of view of several different characters.⁷ And then there is its influence—its service as a touchstone of artistic integrity for trailblazing filmmakers of the 1960s and beyond, its canonization by a cinema studies keen to affirm the art in film and the art of film.⁸

For every entry on the modernist side of the ledger, however, *Citizen Kane* harbors an opposing item on the anti- or non-modernist side. If the film was the work of an outsider to the Hollywood machine, it was also made under that machine's auspices, and it was always fashioned with the goal of attracting large numbers of viewers, never a fit audience though few. If it bespeaks the influence of expressionism at many points, it owes at least as great a debt to warmer modes such as melodrama and (in Pauline Kael's well-known argument) commercial Broadway comedy.⁹ If its innovations make it one of the most formally groundbreaking films to issue from Hollywood, it never partakes of a will to disorient but rather conveys its tale lucidly, making full use of the Hollywood "continuity style." And if it has mattered to film's experimentalists and connoisseurs, it has also proven enduringly popular with broader audiences, becoming the kind of accessible "classic" that attracts even those with small interest in old movies.

Within *Citizen Kane* itself, a mixing of the non-arty and low cultural with the arty and high cultural (if not the modernist *per se*) is to be found in the collection assembled by that peerless hoarder, Charles Foster Kane (Orson Welles). In the partly disingenuous yet enormously illuminating press release issued to counter accusations that Kane was a fictionalized William Randolph Hearst, Welles notes that he wanted the film to conclude with "objects of art, objects of sentiment, and just plain objects."¹⁰ And so it does. The final scenes in the great hall of Kane's palace, Xanadu, reveal articles that would have had sentimental value for Kane jumbled together with countless objets d'art and a few items that seem more banal and utilitarian. What solicits our attention here is that the triad of desiderata Welles names in the press release neatly disrupts the artwork-commodity binary that has been so central to thinking about the relation between high and low forms. The category of the commodity presumably covers the "just plain objects"—headboards, sofas, lamps, a Victrola—while excluding statues, urns, and paintings. But what of "objects of sentiment"?

In the final sequence, we can make out among other bric-a-brac a doll, another toy, and family photographs, as well as the momentous sled. Presumably these are not to be classed as "objects of art," and presumably they count as commodities insofar as they were purchased or could in theory be sold. In the press release, Welles indeed refers to "Rosebud" as "the trade name of a cheap little sled on which Kane

was playing on the day he was taken away from his home and his mother.”¹¹ Yet as that sled and the other items recall, there is an intuitive sense in which the commodity and the object of sentiment are simply opposed. While a given object’s carrying of sentimental charge may in theory affect the feature that makes a commodity a commodity, its value in exchange, sentimental feeling seems a thing apart from rational calculation and indeed—because it depends on an individual’s history with a particular item—runs athwart the very notion of (that item’s) exchangeability. Sentimental value thus holds a vexed relationship with exchange value and constitutes a use value having little in common with use as ordinarily understood, which is to say that Welles’s “objects of sentiment” trouble the binary of art and commodity not because they threaten to become works of art but because they seem distinct from the commodity in a manner of their own. Welles’s classification aptly registers how these personal relics seem not quite “just plain objects” but not “objects of art,” either.

Of the sentimental objects, the sled is of course the eventual cynosure of the film audience’s eyes: as it burns, it reveals itself to be the referent of Kane’s dying exclamation, thus resolving the mystery pursued for the preceding two hours by Thompson (William Allard), the reporter who serves as a focalizer for most of the film, and by the film’s viewer along with him. Not the least significant of this resolution’s consequences is that it retroactively casts the whole of *Citizen Kane* as plausibly anti-modernist, which surely helps to explain its success with viewers of not especially modernist sensibilities. In Kane’s “subconscious,” the press statement continues, the sled (which “Kane had certainly forgotten” in “his waking hours”) “represented the simplicity, the comfort, above all the lack of responsibility in his home, and also it stood for his mother’s love which Kane never lost.”¹² The sled’s naming by Kane in his last moments thus implies that even ruthless tycoons remain bound by familiar emotions and simple needs—that the hard man has a soft center, and that a tender heart beats beneath this film’s tough carapace. From the point of view of what we might call accessibility, it does not hurt that the moral evidently clinched by “Rosebud” aligns with another Hollywood staple: what James Naremore, in one of his treatments of *Citizen Kane*, calls “a sentimentalized, money-can’t-buy-happiness mythology that has long been promulgated by the movies” or what Kael cites as the “convention that the rich were vulgarly acquisitive but were lonely and miserable and incapable of giving or receiving love.”¹³

Yet the sled does not function as an object of sentiment only for Kane. In a sense independent of Kane’s feelings, it bids fair to become one for the viewer, to accrue a sentimental resonance on its own behalf. This gathering of affective charge is predicated partly on its death by fire at the end of the film, but at least as essential to this effect is an earlier obliteration by snow. After the young Charles (Buddy Swan) is taken away from his boyhood Colorado home, the viewer is treated to a twelve-second shot (or rather pair of shots, with a dissolve between) of snow covering the abandoned sled (see Figure 15.1). As critics have observed, this sequence is a brilliant bit of deception, since the audience takes its purpose to be to communicate time’s passing,



Figure 15.1 Abandoned sled in snow, Orson Welles, *Citizen Kane* (1941)

only to learn at the end that the object used to mark time and loss was also the answer to the riddle (and thus a marker of time and loss in a different sense).¹⁴ Yet if the shots are evocative of Kane's distancing from his childhood world, they also bespeak the object's own loneliness and abandonment. The sled seems itself a waif lost in the weather, even more bereft than the young Charles.

There are other sentimental objects in the film, too, most eminently the snow globe that can be seen, but will probably not be noticed by the first-time viewer, in the apartment of Kane's mistress (and later wife), Susan Alexander (Dorothy Comingore). On confronting this object in Susan's room at Xanadu after she walks out on him, the enraged Kane will desist from tearing that room apart and utter the word "Rosebud" for the first time in the *fabula* of the film (and for the first time in the *syuzhet* since the opening sequence). The many connections between globe and sled need not be reiterated here; what does require remarking is that Kane himself uses the word "sentimental" in reference to objects from his past on the night he meets Susan for the first time. He explains that before he crossed paths with her, he was on his

way to the Western Manhattan Warehouse in search of my youth. You see, my mother died a long time ago. And her things were put in storage out West. There wasn't any other place to put them. Thought I'd send for them now. And tonight I was gonna take a look at them. You know, a sort of sentimental journey?

For the viewer watching *Citizen Kane* for the second time or more, this explanation may conjure an alternative fate in which Kane, not having been waylaid by his chance meeting with Susan, would instead have continued to the warehouse, there to be reunited with the sled or some other nostalgia-suffused element from among his mother's "things." In this unrealized reality, in other words, Kane might have resumed contact with an object having a metonymic relation to his mother rather than attaching himself to a person who seems a metaphoric substitute for that lost love.¹⁵ Who knows what might have resulted from such a restoration?

Nor is this the only occasion on which sentimentality is evoked in proximity to Kane's collection. In the closing sequence of the film, Kane's not-so-endearing butler, Raymond (Paul Stewart), tells Thompson that he knows all about Rosebud and will spill for a thousand dollars. But Raymond offers no information Thompson deems useful—only the recollection that he heard Kane say "Rosebud" twice (after the assault on Susan's things and then on his deathbed). Of the second time,

he just said, uh, "Rosebud," then he dropped the glass ball and it broke on the floor. He didn't say anything after that, and I knew he was dead. He said all kinds of things that didn't mean anything.

To which Thompson: "Sentimental fellow, aren't you?" Raymond: "Mmm ... Yes and no." After Thompson tells Raymond that the information is not worth a thousand dollars, the camera pans left to the amassing of Kane's possessions, for boxing or burning, in the great hall of Xanadu.

Before digging further into that hoard, we might hit pause for a moment to ask what Raymond's "yes and no" could signify. A different performer might have wielded the line to intimate real care for Kane or some other psychological nuance, but Stewart (a character actor who elsewhere specialized in self-contained gangsters) permits Raymond no such shades of feeling. As Stewart delivers it, the line seems to point, if it points anywhere, to a certain affiliation between the sentimental and the mercenary—to Raymond's assistance in constructing a tale (aspirationally unfolded by Thompson, actually unfolded by Welles and his co-writer Herman Mankiewicz) whose profitability would arise in part from its sentimental appeal. The sentimental is thus aligned with the commodified here, but not in a way that implies that objects of sentiment are to be categorized as commodities tout court. Rather, it highlights how the persistent difference between the object of sentiment and the commodity makes possible commodification at a different level. Under certain circumstances, the object of sentiment (or its story) gains added market value precisely because the object is not *just* a commodity.

If this effect sounds familiar, the reason is that it is precisely the effect that numerous studies of the selling of modernism have examined with respect to the work of art—another kind of thing whose evident resistance to, or excess over, the commodity form underwrites a commodification of the putatively uncommodifiable.¹⁶ What is perhaps surprising about the objects of art and objects of sentiment in *Citizen*

Kane is that the unapologetic emperor of yellow journalism who acquires them resists rather than exploits their value in exchange. In the scene—early in the film, late in his career—in which Kane cedes authority over his publishing empire to his dessicated former guardian, Thatcher (George Coulouris), the latter remarks that Kane “never made a single investment, always used money to . . .,” which Kane completes with, “To buy things, hmm? To buy things. My mother should have chosen a less reliable banker.” Whether or not Kane’s collecting is a way of compensating for the loss of his mother (Agnes Moorehead), as Laura Mulvey argues,¹⁷ his obsession is certainly improvident, driven by the heart rather than the brain—a point nicely captured in a stray comment from one of those present at the pack-up in the great hall: “Another Venus, twenty-five thousand bucks. That’s a lotta money to pay for a dame without a head.”

Having thus returned to the crating of Kane’s collection, we can now unpause and follow the pan from Raymond to the masses of possessions that record Kane’s mania: “the junk,” as another assistant says, “as well as the art.” Among the works of art, what stand out most are statues, predominantly classical sculptures acquired in Europe that have been presented throughout the film as the kind of treasure to which Kane is most drawn. At the party for the *Inquirer* (Kane’s newspaper) that precedes the tour from which he will return with his first wife (Ruth Warrick), his general manager, Bernstein (Everett Sloane), solicits a promise that he cease acquiring art with the line “there’s a lotta pictures and statues in Europe you haven’t bought yet.” To which Kane replies (before making the promise, which he will then break), “You can’t blame me, Mr. Bernstein. They’ve been making statues for two thousand years, and I’ve only been buying for five.”¹⁸ Much later, Susan’s retort to Kane’s avowal of incomprehension at her pastime of assembling jigsaw puzzles is “makes a whole lot more sense than collectin’ statues.”

There are several good reasons to make statues Kane’s particular passion. One, of course, is that Kane’s amassing of representations of the human form underscores his preferred way of dealing with flesh-and-blood people, his urge to collect and control them. Another is that statues in profusion are especially suited to the indication of demented acquisitiveness. An early scene derives some of its comedy from Bernstein’s difficulty in making his way through the haul of sculptures taking over the offices of the *Inquirer*, after which he delivers the ironic verdict “good thing he promised not to send back any more statues” (see Figure 15.2). Similarly, Susan’s late complaint about Xanadu, “forty-nine thousand acres of nothing but scenery and statues,” would lose much of its pithy logic were “statues” replaced with some other kind of visual art. Still more important to the mise en scène of *Citizen Kane*, however, is that a statue can reveal something of its form and its representational content to the camera eye in a way that other kinds of artworks cannot. As the camera tracks past statues in number, or dollies back (in the Great Hall sequence) to reveal statues presiding over the cataloguing of Kane’s possessions, it permits viewers to see a head or an arm here, a whole figure there, and thus to obtain a sense of the work’s form and subject matter even where the camera does not linger. To achieve anything similar with paintings



Figure 15.2 Bernstein among Kane's statues, Orson Welles, *Citizen Kane* (1941)

or drawings, the camera would have to proceed more or less two-dimensionally, tracking along a wall, say, where the art objects would perforce look more ordered—and more cared about.

In avoiding such an appearance, the film makes clear that Kane's relation to the things he buys, although not motivated by commercial greed, is nonetheless a surprisingly detached attachment. Kane does not seem to bestow meaningful attention on any of the individual things he collects, instead resembling the biographical Hearst in acquiring troves of articles that may not even be unpacked—in being wont to pay, as Susan complains, “a hundred thousand dollars for a statue you're gonna keep crated up and never even look at.”¹⁹ As Jeffrey Knapp observes in a recent article, “we never see [Kane], or anyone else for that matter, admiring his art,”²⁰ to which we might add that we *do* often see Kane and others ignoring his art. This motif emerges very early on: in the newsreel that introduces us to Kane and Xanadu, the narrator's “alone in his never-finished, already-decaying pleasure palace; aloof, seldom visited” accompanies a shot of Kane poolside, concentrating on some writing in his lap while a statue stands behind him, out of the range of his gaze (see Figure 15.3). Only sculptures, among high-art objects, can be disposed in a way that readily permits the film's viewer to apprehend their approximate form and content while also appreciating how form and content go unregarded.

Another way of putting this would be to say that statues are best poised, among kinds of works of art, to communicate to the filmic gaze the dissolution of their



Figure 15.3 Kane detached among artworks, Orson Welles, *Citizen Kane* (1941)

aura—that elusive element of experience sketched by Walter Benjamin (and later by Theodor Adorno) in a series of writings now central to the theorization of the art object in the modernist era. Debates on what aura encompasses are not merely ongoing but finally impossible of resolution, since the meaning of the term shifted over the course of Benjamin's writings and to some extent in Adorno's as well.²¹ One thing that does seem clear, however, is that aura is grounded in concentration on the object of attention, which maintains a certain felt remove from the subject even as it and the subject remain vitally embedded in the “here and now.”²² In a passage from “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” (1936), Benjamin defines aura as

a strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be. To follow with the eye—while resting on a summer afternoon—a mountain range on the horizon or a branch that casts its shadow on the beholder is to breathe the aura of those mountains, of that branch.²³

In the same essay, Benjamin associates aura with Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's remark that the “beautiful is neither the veil nor the veiled object but rather the object *in its veil*” and links it to the reposeful reception of high art (as opposed to the distraction sought by the modern masses); in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” (1939), he

asserts that to “experience the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look back at us.”²⁴

Citizen Kane might be said to evoke the decline of aura simply in being littered with works of art that are deprived of the ability to look back because no one looks at them. Yet in deploying *statues* as its preferred class of ignored thing, the film converges with the “Work of Art” essay in a more specific way. For classical sculpture of the human form is, as it happens, precisely the artistic genre that Benjamin, following in the footsteps of German aesthetics at least since Gotthold Lessing’s *Laocoön*, invokes when elaborating on aura. “The uniqueness of the work of art,” Benjamin observes,

is identical to its embeddedness in the context of tradition. Of course, this tradition itself is thoroughly alive and extremely changeable. An ancient statue of Venus, for instance, existed in a traditional context for the Greeks (who made it an object of worship) that was different from the context in which it existed for medieval clerics (who viewed it as a sinister idol). But what was equally evident to both was its uniqueness—that is, its aura. Originally, the embeddedness of an artwork in the context of tradition found expression in a cult. . . . The artwork’s auratic mode of existence is never entirely severed from its ritual function.²⁵

For Benjamin, the decline of aura is tied up with the modern urge not only to get closer to things but also to overcome their uniqueness, to prefer the copy or the work that can always be upgraded. Such an urge is diametrically opposed to the inclination of the ancient Greeks, “whose art depended on the production of eternal values” and for whom “the pinnacle of all the arts was the form least capable of improvement—namely sculpture, whose products are literally all of a piece. In the age of the assembled artwork, the decline of sculpture is inevitable.”²⁶

What abets the decline of aura more powerfully than any other phenomenon, moreover, is film, “*the artwork most capable of improvement*” (presumably because available for re-editing) and thus the one that most radically renounces eternal value.²⁷ For Benjamin, the technology of art reproduction

substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to reach the recipient in his or her own situation, it actualizes that which is reproduced. These processes lead to a massive upheaval in the domain of objects handed down from the past—a shattering of tradition which is the reverse side of the present crisis and renewal of humanity. Both processes are intimately related to the mass movements of our day. Their most powerful agent is film.²⁸ (emphasis in the original)

This statement does not mean, however, that Benjamin regards film as the motor only of a lamentable decline in civilization. On the contrary: in his view, “technological reproducibility emancipates the work of art from its parasitic subservience to ritual.” And where the “[c]ontemplative immersion” associated with aura “became a

breeding ground for asocial behavior" as "the bourgeoisie degenerated,"²⁹ film opens liberatory possibilities precisely by virtue of its capacity to demystify social relations in a medium conducive to collective reception.³⁰

Citizen Kane would therefore seem to enact the destruction of aura in two ways. Within the diegetic world of the film, there is (again) Kane's and everyone else's way of relating, or rather not relating, to the statues. Catalogued, mocked, or registered by peripheral vision they may be, but they seem unable to exact sustained contemplation from any character.³¹ At the level of the film's relation to its own audience, meanwhile, there is a supplanting of the statues by the sled, inasmuch as the closing scene hints that all the objets d'art amassed by Kane are simply substitutes for the thing he really cares about, whether that ultimate sentimental object be his mother, his childhood home, or the sled itself. The consignment of the statues to insignificance (and even affective inauthenticity) seems designed not to provoke outrage on their behalf but, if anything, to confirm the viewer mistrustful of high art in that mistrust. The resolution of the mystery of Rosebud intimates, consolingly, that Kane was far closer to the average Joe than one might have thought—perhaps even someone free, deep down, from suspect aesthetic proclivities. We might, then, say that the anti-high-culturism of the film is strongest along the vector of objects, where the statues never enjoy a chance to be taken seriously. And we could then cap this reading by interpreting the sled's affective victory over the statues as an allegory of Welles's own move to a new professional domain, from the world of experimental east-coast theater to the art-suspicious Hollywood of the 1940s, international capital of the medium that for Benjamin cut most decisively against eternal values, tradition, and aura.

Given modernism's powerful associations with high culture, such a reading would bear meaningfully on the modernism/anti-modernism tension in *Citizen Kane* even if aura as such somehow had nothing to do with modernist art. In fact, however, aura's connections with modernism run deep, and not only because the Frankfurt School theorists who developed its concept were immersed in art we would identify as modernist. Hovering at the edges in Benjamin, and emerging explicitly in Adorno, is a suggestion that aura lives on in challenging works that continue to be produced.³² As Robert Kaufman puts it, Adorno came to see modernism as the latest among key stages "in the development of an ... auratic artistic *experimentalism* dedicated to critical perception of 'the new,'" where the new would mean "the not-yet-grasped features of the mode of production and ... of all that is emergent in the social."³³

Adorno certainly did not align aura with difficult high art alone: he admits a critical potential in film itself (though film's usual subservience to the "culture industry" remains an obstacle) and asserts that *within* high art "the aural element of the work is declining ... above all because of the fulfillment of its own 'autonomous' formal laws."³⁴ Nonetheless, if we recall Adorno's tendency to associate freedom in general with a liberty of the object that includes (and even privileges) the physical thing's non-domination by the subject,³⁵ we can see how the modernist art he values could be especially hospitable to aura by virtue of its maintenance of a thing-y distance against the viewer's urge to draw near. J. M. Bernstein indeed argues that for Adorno the

"experience of aura" is "attained in modernist works of art" through a negation of all elements "that might with some justification be regarded as projections of the human on to the inanimate."³⁶ In a gloss added to the third version of the "Work of Art" essay, Benjamin observes that "the definition of the aura as the 'unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be,' represents nothing more than a formulation of the cult value of the work of art in categories of spatiotemporal perception. . . . The *essentially* distant is the unapproachable. Unapproachability is, indeed, a primary quality of the cult image."³⁷ We might say that what renders the cultic aspect of aura valuable for Adorno is its way of grounding the object's freedom in a felt unapproachability.

Given all this, the auratic object might seem to stand at the furthest possible remove from the sentimental object, as what most vividly withdraws would stand at the furthest remove from what permits itself to be drawn close. Yet a little reflection reveals that sentimental feeling for objects entails a distance of its own. No matter how genuinely felt, sentimental attachment perhaps never quite shakes itself free from the inauthenticity that defines sentimentalizing in a negative sense. And the reason, surely, is that at the heart of the sentimental relation is a certain failure of reciprocity, an incapacity of the sentimentalized object to meet the feeling of the subject. Indeed, I would argue that the object of sentimental regard is not something that refuses feeling for the sentimentalizer (as the beloved refuses feeling for the unrequited lover) but rather something that *cannot* feel anything for the subject for some fundamental structural reason—because it belongs to the past, say, or because it is inanimate, or because it appears immitigably distant or radically powerless in some other sense.

With this consideration in mind, we can discern that the intense efficacy of the sled stamped "Rosebud," qua sentimental object, has everything to do with the *lost* object's capacity to be sentimentalized in all these registers at once. Non-sentient and thus never capable of loving Kane literally, the sled is also something retrievable only in memory (as far as Kane knows) and thus serves as a reminder of the limits of his power and of its own. Of course, many physical objects that become repositories of sentimental feeling are close at hand, not (assumed to be) out of reach. Yet sentimental attachment to such keepsakes perhaps inevitably contains a measure of anxiety about their potential future loss—a sense of their fragility or capacity to be taken away—as well as gratitude for their durable commemoration of the past. Thus, although objects of sentiment are powerless over the sentimentalizer in an immediately functional sense, the combination of their affective claim with their own vulnerability renders the sentimentalizer (emotionally) vulnerable to forces that would threaten the object's existence or availability. This vulnerability is nicely figured in the rending of young Charlie Kane from the sled, in which an accession to wealth and power begins with the lesson that, for a time at least, others will be able to do with him as they like, parting him from the things he loves.

If the specter of loss is constitutive of the sentimental object's frisson of distance, however, this feature must only enhance our sense of that object's odd convergence with the auratic work of art. For aura, too, is bound up with loss. In "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," Benjamin holds that the auratic experience of a thing able "to look

back at us" in fact "corresponds to the data of the *mémoire involontaire*"—which data, as Miriam Hansen notes in her magisterial charting of aura's career in Benjamin's writing, are marked by "an essential inapproachability and unavailability, related to an irre recuperable absence or loss."³⁸ A no less crucial contribution of loss to the character of aura, meanwhile, arises from the fact that aura's materialization as a concept coincides with the announcement of its departure. Emerging in Benjamin's essays themselves, Benjaminian aura is consciously registered only in the moment of its potential extinguishing, unthinkable without reference to some apprehension of historical passing away. And this loss of aura seems to hold something more than a contingent relation to the loss *in* aura. When Benjamin refers to Goethe's "object *in* its veil," he gestures to the concept of *schöner Schein*, or "beautiful semblance," which as Hansen notes always "marks the object as not just absent in the work but always already *lost*"—so that the "assertion of an internal, structural belatedness of beautiful semblance ties in with and comes to support the thesis of the historical erosion of aura."³⁹ In Benjamin (and arguably in Adorno as well), the threatened loss of aura as a part of human experience is complexly intertwined with the self-distancing of the thing in any auratic encounter.

But did Benjamin believe that aura was doomed absolutely? In spite of his references to its historical decline, a number of scholars have made the case that he closed the door on aura's future no more than Adorno did—that although he refers in a footnote to "the age of auratic perception that is now coming to an end [*dem Zeitalter der auratischen Wahrnehmung, das seinem Ende zugeht*]," this formulation does not rule out the emergence of a new regime of auratic perception.⁴⁰ The thrust of Kaufman's argument is that "in the eyes of Brecht, Benjamin, and Adorno (the very figures who in the Left tradition are so frequently said to have helped set the stage for the collapse of aesthetic distance) there really was—and there really was intended to have been—aura, still."⁴¹ Hansen meanwhile contends that Benjamin's less narrow delineations of aura, in essays other than "The Work of Art," imply a possibility for its continuance even in film: "Whether or not Benjamin ultimately believed that the cinema ... could ever actualize its utopian, surrealist potential ... he was able to think salient features of auratic experience ... as asymmetrically entwined rather than simply incompatible with technological reproducibility and collective reception."⁴²

Of the many elements in film that might be understood to harbor auratic possibilities, the most significant for our purposes here is its array of associations with loss. Writing on late 1920s film criticism by Robert Herring and Eric Elliott, Laura Marcus observes that the "movement that defines cinema (as it comes so often to define modernity itself)" is in part a "fragile and unstable ephemerality that inheres at every level, from the fleeting nature of the projected images to the vagaries of cinematic exhibition."⁴³ Prior to the advent of home video, to be enamored of a film whose run had ended was to wonder how many years might pass before one could see it again; during a particular viewing, one may be attuned both to the diaphanousness of a thing made of light and to the evanescence of a thing that moves toward its end with every frame. Discussing the permeability of the boundary between photography and film, Hansen

refers to the filmstrip's *défillement*, its "simultaneous production of and negation by the projected illusion of movement," while Knapp asks, apropos of the newsreel screening-room scene in *Citizen Kane*, "What qualities do smoke and movies share that allow them to intermingle so dramatically? Ephemerality, for one."⁴⁴ Similarly, Lesley Stern wraps up a discussion of the filmic cigarette (in the seminal "Things" issue of *Critical Inquiry*, from 2001), with the observation that things in films

do not turn out only in the end; they turn and turn, from moment to moment; as the effect of the real is conjured so it is unraveled.... Rosebud endures not because it is the key to understanding *Citizen Kane* but because, in the moment when the word materializes as thing (at the end of the film), when it comes within reach, it burns up. Like a cigarette.⁴⁵

Whether or not we want to be quite so categorical about why "Rosebud" endures, we can acknowledge the force of Stern's point: that the fate of the sled confirms film's rapport with loss. And we might add that while the sled in its burning does not especially look like a cigarette, it does interestingly evoke something else. When first thrown on the pyre at Xanadu, the object of Thompson's quest is seen as it could be by any workman glancing into the furnace—lying at a diagonal on top of other objects, its head tilted up and to the left. This naturalistic perspective gives way, however, to a shot in which the sled is positioned full-front while the camera pulls closer, and by the end of which the sled's blackened front end occupies the whole frame (see Figure 15.4). The word "Rosebud" and its ornament thus take on the look of a title card—or rather, since by this point the sled's surface is bubbling and charring, of an image of a title card on melting celluloid. What we can see of the sentimentalized object, in other words, resembles a frame of film as it burns—a likeness the more voluble not only because the present film is now drawing to its conclusion (as Bernard Herrmann's score assures us) but also because *Citizen Kane* was shot on highly flammable nitrate stock, which would not be displaced from studio use by stabler "Safety" film for another few years.⁴⁶ (As if to confirm the prescience of Welles's film in yet another register, its original camera negative would later be destroyed by fire.⁴⁷)

In its way of highlighting film's ephemerality, then, *Citizen Kane* affirms that this medium's distinctive modes of loss arise in part from its thingly aspect. Not only is film something that moves toward its demise as it unfolds, withdrawing in its very appearing; it is also something capable of being destroyed in a way that a theatrical performance (which has no durable physical substrate) is not. Film may not possess aura under Benjamin's most restrictive definition, since it does not inhabit only one physical space at a given time, but it blends retention and dispossession, felt proximity and felt distance, in a fashion unavailable to forms of art that are either less or more materially embedded. The burning sled speaks, in other words, to film's distinctive intensification (or figuration) of aura considered as, in Jan Mieszkowski's phrasing, "unapproachability incarnate," as a confirmation "that the authentic art object has always-already taken leave of its viewer, always-already being on its way."⁴⁸

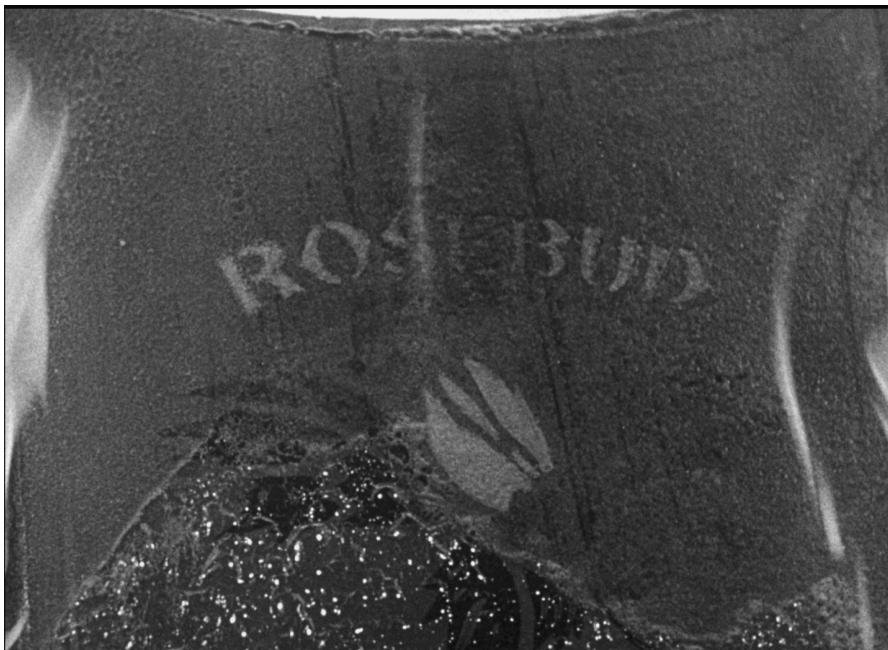


Figure 15.4 “Rosebud” as “title card,” Orson Welles, *Citizen Kane* (1941)

One further complexity of the end of *Citizen Kane* requires mentioning in this regard. In spite of the weight of sentimental feeling the sled is made to bear, the prevailing mood of its burning cannot be described as sentimental. Reaching its climax, Herrmann’s score implies not tender yearning but high drama, in keeping with the plot development now transpiring: the permanent loss, to those inhabiting the film’s diegetic world, of the answer to the riddle of Rosebud. Effectively rearing up in its last moments (thanks to the change in camera angle), the sled reminds us that it keeps its secret unto death, that in its very destruction it retains a power of mystery. And this power, of course, extends beyond the world represented in the film. With Thompson’s valedictory judgment that the revelation of Rosebud’s identity “wouldn’t have explained anything” ringing in their ears, viewers are compelled to acknowledge that the provenance of “Rosebud” resolves less than every question about the life of Charles Foster Kane. Withholding something to the last, the sled now ending, like the film now ending, seems as much to say, “Watch me, I withdraw” as to cry out for rescue.

This intimation of deliberate departure is then reinforced by the three shots that follow the sled’s incineration: first, of black smoke rising from a chimney at Xanadu; second, of the “NO TRESPASSING” sign with which the film began; and finally, of the estate’s K-initialed gate, with Kane’s palace distantly in the background. These sights are there, of course, to remind us yet again that our access to Kane’s story has been

limited, that we would be foolish to think we now possess the whole truth. But the sign's banality may still seem out of key with the grandeur of Kane's dying "Rosebud" (at the start) and of the dying Rosebud (at the close)—unless we understand its two appearances as framing everything that happens in between. We may, in other words, take the sign as a marker of the viewer's distance not just from Xanadu but also from *Citizen Kane*. And with this figuration in mind, we might be tempted to construe these final shots as a sort of grasping at aura, an anxious or imperious removal to the domain of high art after a dalliance with mass forms. Having given us the resolution to a gimmicky quest in the form of a multiply sentimentalized object (such a reading would suggest), the film now tries to salvage its own aesthetic majesty by thrusting the consumer of mass entertainment beyond the gates once again.

The problem with such an interpretation is that it comports poorly with Welles's evident ambitions for the film. The cast of *Citizen Kane* was made up mainly of players from the Mercury Theatre, which Welles and John Houseman founded in 1937, and as Michael Denning has shown, the film is well understood as the highest achievement of that company, whose goal was to produce serious art for the people, not in sequestration from mass predilections.⁴⁹ The problem confronting Welles, then, was how to make a picture that could be embraced by mass audiences while yet preserving (auratically, as we might say) a certain unassimilability—the kind of residue that for Adorno, but also surely for Welles, distinguished art from other things and gave it its essential social value. Welles's general approach, which we noted at the beginning of this essay and which was certainly not unprecedented, was to mix the challenging with the established, even at the risk of a certain internal dissonance. But as the foregoing analysis suggests, a more specific innovation within this strategy was to exploit the deep continuities between sentimental feeling and what we would call aura, as if the sweetly familiar combination of distance and proximity in the former could provide a bridge to these elements' rather different interplay in the latter.

It matters enormously, of course, that the focus of this operation, the famous sled, is a physical object. For only an inanimate thing can really seem to say, "Rescue me!" and "I withdraw!" at precisely the same moment. It is just because we know, at some level, that an object cannot have a conscious intention vis-à-vis its fate that we can imagine it as radically ambivalent (or inscrutable) with respect to its own fragility, departure, or destruction. Given that no major theorists of art have staked more on a solicitude for threatened objects than Benjamin and Adorno, one direction these considerations point is toward the large and strange question of whether the experience of aura as these writers conceived it is not finally rooted in something like the psychology of sentimentality. For our purposes here, however, it will be enough to note that the experiment in film-as-popular-art undertaken by *Citizen Kane* involves an exploration of the intersection between, on the one hand, sentimental feeling and, on the other, aesthetic feeling at some remove from the popular, and that what stands at this intersection is the inanimate object's capacity to solicit and to repel simultaneously. Welles's film thus attests in a particularly striking way to the entanglement, in modernist-era cultural production, between approaches to the object, conceptions of

the opposition between high culture and mass culture, and ideas about film's possibilities. The final human utterance in *Citizen Kane* is Raymond's "throw that junk!" But the initialed gate, the sign that says "No Trespassing," and the sled that says "Rosebud" have the final word.

Notes

1. Several versions of the sled were constructed, at least one of which was, of course, burned up in filming. The version put up for auction (at Sotheby Parke Bernet on June 9, 1982) was purchased by Steven Spielberg. See Frank Brady, *Citizen Welles: A Biography of Orson Welles* (New York: Anchor, 1990), 552, 577–78. See also Robert L. Carringer, *The Making of "Citizen Kane"*, rev. edn. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 49–50.
2. Readings of modernist art's relation to the high culture–mass culture divide go back to the early twentieth century and are simply too numerous to mention here. Book-length studies in which modernist literature's treatment of the thing or thingness figure prominently include my own *Solid Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998); a landmark special issue of *Critical Inquiry* on *Things*, Bill Brown, ed. (vol. 28, no. 1, 2001); Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Robert Chodat, *Worldly Acts and Sentient Things: The Persistence of Agency from Stein to DeLillo* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008); Jessica Burstein, *Cold Modernism: Literature, Fashion, Art* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012); Lisa Siraganian, *Modernism's Other Work: The Art Object's Political Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); and Saikat Majumdar, *Prose of the World: Modernism and the Banality of Empire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); and Noëlle Cuny and Xavier Kalck, eds., *Modernist Objects* (Clemson: Clemson University Press, 2020). This scholarship has attended especially strongly to the calls that physical things make on human beings apart from relations of instrumentality, exchange, and possession; it thus resonates in key ways with, though it has not often explicitly engaged, work in other disciplines associated with "the speculative turn," "object-oriented ontology," and "the new materialisms" (as by Bruno Latour, Graham Harman, Quentin Meillassoux, and Jane Bennett).
3. The convention of this essay is to refer to *Citizen Kane* as Welles's film, in accordance with the more or less universal acknowledgment of Welles's strong hand in its creation. Many critics have, however, stressed that its achievement is the result of collaboration, Welles's most formidable sharers in the enterprise being the screenplay's coauthor, Herman Mankiewicz, and the pathbreaking cinematographer Gregg Toland. See for this point of view, for example, Carringer, *Making of "Citizen Kane,"* x; Pauline Kael, *Raising Kane and Other Essays* (London: Marion Boyars, 1996), 255; and Simon Callow, *Orson Welles: The Road to Xanadu* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995), 571.
4. Welles's pre-*Kane* connections to what we would now call modernism were centered on his collaborations with John Houseman, who had created a sensation with Gertrude Stein's *Four Saints in Three Acts* and enlisted Countee Cullen and Zora Neale Hurston in his work for the Negro Theatre Project (NTP). Welles directed an all-Black *Macbeth* for the NTP in 1936 and then a series of innovative productions for the Mercury Theatre, which he and

- Houseman founded together. These included a 1938 production of George Bernard Shaw's *Heartbreak House*. For more on the Mercury and *Citizen Kane*, see the end of this essay.
5. On the brief life of the *Heart of Darkness* film project, see Brady, *Citizen Welles*, 203–16, and Callow, *Orson Welles*, 464–81.
 6. In a review on its release, Bosley Crowther described the film as “cynical, ironic, sometimes oppressive, and as realistic as a slap” (quoted in *Focus on Citizen Kane* [Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971], 48; this review also appears in Ronald Gottesman, ed., *Perspectives on “Citizen Kane,”* [New York: G. K. Hall, 1996], 33–37). Welles himself told Mankiewicz's biographer Richard Merriman that “from the very beginning” he felt that *Citizen Kane* “had a curious iciness at its heart” (quoted in Callow, *Orson Welles*, 565).
 7. Scores of critics have discussed the technical innovations of *Citizen Kane*. For the cinematographer's own brief account of some of its breakthroughs, see Gregg Toland, “How I Broke the Rules in *Citizen Kane*” in *Focus on “Citizen Kane,”* 73–77. (This piece also appears in Gottesman, *Perspectives*, 569–72.) For the most extensive discussion of the film's crafting, see Carringer, *Making of “Citizen Kane.”*
 8. For a concise tracking of the rising reputation of *Citizen Kane* through the mid-1980s, see Carringer, *Making of “Citizen Kane,”* 117–21. For a rich consideration of *Citizen Kane* in relation to experimentalism and modernism, see Paul Arthur, “Out of the Depths: *Citizen Kane*, Modernism, and the Avant-Garde Impulse,” in *Orson Welles’s “Citizen Kane”: A Casebook*, James Naremore, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 263–84. (This essay also appears in Gottesman, *Perspectives*, 367–82.)
 9. Kael, *Raising Kane*, 160.
 10. Quoted in Brady, *Citizen Welles*, 285. The press release, which was issued in January 1941, first appeared in print in complete form in Brady, *Citizen Welles*, 283–85. It appears also as an appendix in Laura Mulvey, *Citizen Kane*, 2nd edn. (Hounds-mills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 95–97; and in Gottesman, *Perspectives*, 23–25.
 11. Quoted in Brady, *Citizen Welles*, 285.
 12. Quoted in Brady, *Citizen Welles*, 285.
 13. Naremore, “Introduction,” in Naremore, *Casebook*, 10; Kael, *Raising Kane*, 249.
 14. See, for example, Robert Garis, *The Films of Orson Welles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 50.
 15. On this point see, for example, David Bordwell, “*Citizen Kane*,” in *Focus on Orson Welles*, Ronald Gottesman, ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1976), 112; and Mulvey, *Citizen Kane*, 78.
 16. On this crucial line of argument see, for example, Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999).
 17. Mulvey, *Citizen Kane*, 10.
 18. In the film, Bernstein may seem to be soliciting a promise that Kane *continue* to acquire works of art. The shooting script, however, includes the line “nine Venuses already we got, twenty-six Virgins—two whole warehouses full of stuff—promise me, Mr. Kane” (quoted in Mulvey, *Citizen Kane*, 78), which makes clear that Bernstein is asking Kane to desist, and which jibes better with Bernstein's subsequent line, “good thing he promised not to send back any more statues.”
 19. In one of his famous interviews with Peter Bogdanovich, Welles describes Hearst as “a man who spends his entire life paying cash for objects he never looked at” (Orson Welles and

- Peter Bogdanovich, *This Is Orson Welles* [New York: Harper Collins, 1992], 50). The interviews on *Citizen Kane* are also reprinted in Naremore, *Casebook*, 19–69.
20. Jeffrey Knapp, “Throw That Junk! The Art of the Movie in *Citizen Kane*,” *Representations* 122, no. 1 (2013), 110–42; 111. For more on this superb article, with which the present essay converges in several ways, see footnote 44.
 21. It would be an understatement to say that there has been extensive critical debate about the parameters of aura for Benjamin. Lise Patt observes that “it is hard to think of any other Benjaminian concept that is more problematic” (“On Blind Spots,” in *Benjamin’s Blind Spot: Walter Benjamin and the Premature Death of Aura* [Topanga, CA: Institute of Cultural Inquiry, 2001], xiv); Fredric Jameson describes it and *mimesis* for Adorno as “magical terms, which are evoked to explain everything without ever themselves being explained” (*Late Marxism: Adorno, or, the Persistence of the Dialectic* [London: Verso, 1990], 64); Miriam Hansen notes that it is “[a]nything but a clearly delimited, stable concept,” being rather something that “describes a cluster of meanings and relations that appear in Benjamin’s writings in various configurations and not always under its own name” (“Benjamin’s Aura,” *Critical Inquiry* 34, no. 2 [2008], 336–75; 339). The present essay aligns with Benjamin’s emphasis on “the unique appearance of a distance” in those passages where he actually defines aura and with Hansen’s contention that “aura is not an inherent property of persons or objects but pertains to the *medium* of perception, naming a particular structure of vision (though one not limited to the visual)” (“Benjamin’s Aura,” 342).
 22. Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Edmund Jephcott et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), vol. 3, 112.
 23. Benjamin, *Selected*, vol. 3, 104–5. This repeats closely a passage in the earlier “Little History of Photography” (1931); see *Selected*, edited by Howard Eiland, Michael W. Jennings, and Gary Smith, translated by Rodney Livingstone and others, vol. 2, 518–19. The version of “Work of Art” quoted here (in all but one case, as will be presently noted) is the second German version, completed early in 1936 and first published in 1989 in Benjamin’s *Gesammelte Schriften*. This version, which Benjamin called his “urtext” (Hansen, “Benjamin’s Aura,” 337) is fuller, on the whole, than the other widely cited version, the third.
 24. Benjamin, *Selected*, vol. 3, 127; Benjamin, *Selected*, edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, translated by Edmund Jephcott and others, vol. 4, 338.
 25. Benjamin, *Selected*, vol. 3, 105.
 26. Benjamin, *Selected*, vol. 3, 109. Another important intertext for Benjamin’s association of aura with the classical statue of the human figure is surely Rainer Maria Rilke’s “Archaic Torso of Apollo,” which concludes, “for there is no place / that does not see you. You must change your life” (*New Poems: The Other Part*, Edward Snow, trans. [San Francisco: North Point Press 1987], 2–3). Yet a third is the fifteenth of Friedrich Schiller’s *Letters on Aesthetic Education*, in which Schiller writes that “while we allow ourselves to melt in the celestial loveliness” of the Juno Ludovisi, “the celestial self-sufficiency holds us back in awe. The whole form reposes and dwells within itself” (*On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, Reginald Snell, trans. [New York: Continuum, 1989], 81). Laura Marcus has meanwhile pointed out that early film critics often invoked Lessing’s *Laocoön* (1866), with its distinction between art forms that capture a moment in time (such as sculpture) and arts that unfold temporally (such as poetry), “in their attempts either to provide a definition of film as an autonomous art, or to represent it as a partial combination … of other, established

- forms.” See Laura Marcus, *The Tenth Muse: Writing about Cinema in the Modernist Period* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 253.
27. Benjamin, *Selected*, vol. 3, 109.
 28. Benjamin, *Selected*, vol. 3, 104.
 29. Benjamin, *Selected*, vol. 3, 106. On film’s emancipatory dimensions, see Benjamin, *Selected*, vol. 3, 109–22.
 30. “*The representation of human beings by means of an apparatus has made possible a highly productive use of the human being’s self-alienation*” (*Selected*, vol. 3, 113, emphasis in the original); “*The extremely backward attitude toward a Picasso painting changes into a highly progressive reaction to a Chaplin film. . . . [In art forms such as painting, the] conventional is uncritically enjoyed, while the truly new is criticized with aversion. Not so in cinema*” (*Selected*, vol. 3, 116, emphasis in the original).
 31. Kane is thus quite unlike the collectors who interest Benjamin in “Unpacking My Library” (1931), “Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian” (1937), and *Arcades Project*—collectors transfixed by the individual entities in their collections, obsessed by their collections’ overall shape. Limitations of space forbid further discussion of Benjamin on the collector here.
 32. In a well-known letter to Benjamin of 1936, Adorno charges Benjamin with “transfer[ring] the concept of magical aura to the ‘autonomous work of art’ and flatly assign[ing] to the latter a counter-revolutionary function,” whereas in his own view the autonomous work is “inherently dialectical; within itself it juxtaposes the magical and the mark of freedom.” Theodor Adorno, “Letters to Walter Benjamin,” in Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Bertolt Brecht, and Georg Lukács, *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 2007), 110–33; 121. Adorno then goes on to make the kind of case for the political significance of modernist art that he would advance repeatedly in his writings over the following decades—as in the *Aesthetic Theory*, published posthumously in 1970, where he notes that the “condemnation of aura easily becomes the dismissal of qualitatively modern art that distances itself from the logic of familiar things; the critique of aura thereby cloaks the products of mass culture in which profit is hidden and whose trace they bear.” Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, Robert Hullot-Kentor, trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 56.
 33. Robert Kaufman, “Aura, Still,” in *Walter Benjamin and Art*, Andrew Benjamin, ed. (London: Continuum, 2005), 123.
 34. Adorno, “Letters,” 122–23.
 35. As Bill Brown summarizes in his introduction to the *Things* issue of *Critical Inquiry*, “Adorno, arguing against epistemology’s and phenomenology’s subordination of the object and the somatic moment to a fact of consciousness, understood the alterity of things as an essentially ethical fact. Most simply put, his point is that accepting the otherness of things is the condition for accepting otherness as such” (Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 [2001], 1–16; 12). Discussion of this aspect of Adorno can also be found at several junctures in my *Solid Objects*.
 36. J. M. Bernstein, “Why Rescue Semblance? Metaphysical Experience and the Possibility of Ethics,” in *The Semblance of Subjectivity: Essays in Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory*, Tom Huhn and Lambert Zuidervaart, eds. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 177–212; 205.
 37. Benjamin, *Selected*, vol. 4, 272.
 38. Benjamin, *Selected*, vol. 3, 338; Hansen, “Benjamin’s Aura,” 344.
 39. Hansen, “Benjamin’s Aura,” 354.

40. Benjamin, *Selected*, vol. 3, 127. German: Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, eds., vol. 7 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1989), 368.
41. Kaufman, "Aura," 147.
42. Hansen, "Benjamin's Aura," 35. For comparison, see "The Cinema and the Classics," a tripartite essay of 1927 for *Close Up* in which H. D. avers that, prior to the (baleful) advent of Movietone, the "cinema palace... became a sort of temple.... The cinema has become to us what the church was to our ancestors. We sang, so to speak, hymns, we were redeemed by light literally. We were almost at one with Delphic or Elucinian candidates, watching symbols of things that matter, accepting yet knowing those symbols were divorced utterly from reality." *Close Up 1927–1933: Cinema and Modernism*, James Donald, Anne Friedberg, and Laura Marcus, eds. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 116. My thanks to Michael Moses for calling my attention to this essay's resonance with Benjamin.
43. Marcus, *Tenth Muse*, 183.
44. Hansen, "Benjamin's Aura," 348; Knapp, "'Throw That Junk!'" 135. In his article, Knapp takes Kane's hoard of things to be key to the film's examination of "the complexities in claiming artistic status for film" (113)—much as the present essay does. More specifically, Knapp argues that *Citizen Kane* turns for self-reflection to "a snow globe and a sled" because its effort is to "discard the notion that objects must be *adequate* to the investments made in them" (119). The credo for which Rosebud stands might be "*no art but in junk*" (131), but with the proviso that the junk must be mass produced (131), "a plaything before it can count as art" (131), "designed to *move*" (133), and "insubstantial" (135). With regard to this last feature, Knapp concludes, "Attempting to rise to an elite aesthetic standard that it simultaneously represents as a thing of the past, *Citizen Kane* depicts film as an *objet* that is barely an object at all" (137).
45. Lesley Stern, "Paths that Wind through the Thicket of Things," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001), 317–54; 354.
46. My gratitude to Chip Wass for his help in thinking through the relation between the burning sled and burning film.
47. See Tom McGreevey and Joanne L. Yeck, *Our Movie Heritage* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 135–36. As Michael Moses points out, "Safety" (cellulose acetate) film in fact continued the story of film's enmeshment with material loss, since it deteriorates rapidly (shrinking, losing color, becoming brittle) and has thus necessitated efforts to preserve post-1948 films by means such as film-to-film transfer and digitization.
48. Jan Mieszkowski, "Art Forms," in *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, David S. Ferris, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 35–53; 40.
49. "[W]hat Houseman and Welles meant by a people's theater... was less an ideological theater... than a theater marked by a new and wider audience. This theme runs throughout the Mercury manifesto." Michael Denning, "Towards a People's Theater: The Cultural Politics of the Mercury Theatre," in Gottesman, *Perspectives*, 63–81; 72.

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