Dynamic of the Metropolis:
The City Film and the Spaces of Modernity

Anthony Kinik
Department of Art History and Communication Studies
McGill University, Montreal
August 2008

Acknowledgements

First of all, I'd like to thank Will Straw, who saw the Graduate Program in Communications through some difficult times, and then steered it with a steady hand into what has proven to be a hugely successful merger with our friends in Art History. More importantly, he has been an invaluable advisor for many of us who've passed through the department over the years, and he was there when it counted.

Secondly, I'd like to thank Steven Jacobs for reviving a conversation about "city films" and "city symphonies" some years back. His timing couldn't have been better.

Love and respect are due to Michelle Marek, who somehow managed to stick by me through thick and thin (mostly thin), and who has proved herself to be both a tireless proofreader and a true believer.

A number of friendships were instrumental to seeing this project through to completion—in particular I'd like to thank Marc Furstenau, Christine Strähle, Ira Wagman, and Peter Urquhart, all of whom led by example, and provided much-needed encouragement down the final stretch.

***

***

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my father, John Kinik (1938-2008).

Abstract

Dynamic of the Metropolis: The City Film and the Spaces of Modernity

For some time now the realm of film studies has been profoundly shaped by two separate but overlapping tendencies. On the one hand, a "spatial turn," or concern with social geography, which has been particularly attracted to cinema's complex relationship with urban space. On the other, a concern with cinema's origins, its early history, and its relationship with a complex of forces, many of them emphatically urban, that has come to be known as "modernity."

This thesis concerns itself with the history of the "city film," a hybrid genre, at the crossroads between documentary, experimental, and narrative modes of filmmaking, that sought to capture the dynamics of the modern metropolis and that emerged out of the artistic avant-garde's embrace of cinema in the 1910s and early 1920s. As such, these films are situated directly at the intersection of the film's "spatial turn" and its "modernity thesis," but for some reason they remain largely overlooked (certainly no book-length studies have emerged). This is all the more surprising given the fact that although the "city film's" classical period was relatively brief, ranging from around 1920 until the outbreak of World War II, this genre continues to have an interesting, if diffuse, afterlife.

Dynamic of the Metropolis looks at this history through lens of this afterlife, and quite specifically through the work of the contemporary British filmmaker Patrick Keiller, whose films, essays, and interviews reveal a great deal about the emergence of this genre, its great potential, and its missed opportunities. In this manner I accomplish two goals: I provide a thorough and much-needed analysis of the "city film's" emergence and its contexts, one that takes into consideration four cities in particular: New York, Berlin, Moscow, and Paris; and I place Keiller's work in this larger history in a way that's never been done, while giving his two most celebrated films—*London* (1994) and *Robinson in Space* (1996)—a level of attention they have yet to receive.

***

Depuis un certain déjà, le domaine des études cinématographiques est profondément influencé par deux tendances distinctes, mais qui se recoupent néanmoins. On retrouve d'un côté un « tournant spatial » ou un intérêt pour la géographie sociale, particulièrement attirée par la relation complexe du cinéma avec l'espace urbain. De l'autre, un intérêt pour les origines du cinéma, ses balbutiements, et sa relation avec toutes sortes de forces – beaucoup d'entre elles extrêmement urbaines – connu à présent sous le terme de « modernité ».

Cette thèse s'attache à l'histoire du « cinéma urbain », un genre hybride à la croisée des films documentaires, expérimentaux et de fiction qui a cherché à capturer la dynamique de la métropole moderne et qui a émergé de l'approche avant-gardiste du cinéma des années 1910 et du début des années 1920. En tant que tels, ces films sont situés directement au point de rencontre du « tournant spatial » du cinéma et de sa « thèse moderniste ». Étonnamment, ils restent cependant largement négligés (il n'existe en tout cas aucun livre sur le sujet). Ceci est d'autant plus surprenant que bien que la « période classique » du cinéma urbain ait été relativement courte – de 1920 au début de la seconde guerre mondiale – ce genre se perpétue encore de façon intéressante, quoique diffuse.

Dynamic of the Metropolis observe cette histoire à la lumière de cette renaissance, et plus particulièrement à travers l'œuvre du cinéaste britannique Patrick Keiller, dont les films, les essais et les entrevues sont très révélateurs de l'émergence de ce genre, de son grand potentiel et des opportunités manquées. De cette façon, j'atteins deux buts : d'une part, je propose une analyse approfondie et nécessaire de l'émergence du « cinéma urbain » et de son contexte, en prenant en considération quatre villes en particulier : New York, Berlin, Moscou et Paris. D'autre part, je replace l'œuvre de Keiller dans ce contexte historique d'une façon encore inédite en donnant à ses deux films les plus acclamés – *London* (1994) et *Robinson in Space* (1996) toute l'attention qui leur est due.

Table of Contents

Introduction

It is a society, and not a technique, which has made the cinema like this. It could have been historical examination, theory, essay, memoirs. It could have been the film I am making at this moment.—Guy Debord, *In Girum Imus Nocte Et Consumimur Igni*

In 2004, Patrick Keiller, the British filmmaker, critic, scholar, and former architect, published an article entitled "Tram Rides and Other Virtual Landscapes" in Toulmin, Popple, and Russell's *The Lost World of Mitchell and Kenyon*, an anthology dedicated to a recently rediscovered treasure trove of early British films from the first few years of the twentieth century now known as the Mitchell & Kenyon films, after the Blackburn-based company that produced them.[1] Most of the article concerns Keiller's interest in the collection's tram films—*actualités* with self-explanatory titles such as *Tram Journey into Halifax* (1902)—and his experience of revisiting the locations documented by these films in Nottingham and Halifax a century later (193). This simple experiment in time travel allows him to get a sense of just how the built environment of these cities has changed over the course of a century, and his conclusion, which was motivated by a project he was working on at the time entitled "The City of the Future"—a project that became an experimental found film by the same name in 2005—is presented rather modestly:

> The spaces of the films were dynamic, subject to tensions as
> unsettling as (and sometimes surprisingly similar to) those we
> experience today. Cities are increasingly seen as processes structured
> in time. In these remarkable films, we can explore some of the spaces
> of the past, in order to better anticipate the spaces of the future. (199)

---

[1] Keiller's essay appeared in a slightly different form in Webber and Wilson's *Cities in Transition* (2008) under the title "Urban Space and Early Film."

The essay's introduction, on the other hand, is something altogether different. Here, he begins by talking about how, "the spaces and spatial experiences characteristic of industrialised economies underwent significant transformation" between the opening decade of the twentieth century and the outbreak of World War I, before including a passage from Henri Lefebvre to illustrate his point:

> The fact is that around 1910 a certain space was shattered. It was the space of common sense, of knowledge (*savoir*), of social practice, of political power, a space hitherto enshrined in everyday discourse, just as in abstract thought, as the environment of and channel for communications; the space, too, of classical perspective and geometry, developed from the Renaissance onwards on the basis of the Greek tradition (Euclid, logic) and bodied forth in Western art and philosophy, as in the form of the city and the town… Euclidean and perspectivist space have disappeared as the systems of reference, along with other 'commonplaces' such as the town, history, paternity, the tonal system in music, traditional morality, and so forth. This was truly a crucial moment.

Interestingly, Keiller approaches this quote not from the opening chapter of *The Production of Space*, where it first appeared, but from the geographer David Harvey's afterword to the 1991 English edition, and he notes that Harvey had already quoted this exact passage once before in his *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1990). In any case, Keiller then continues by describing a number theorists and writers—Stephen Kern, John Berger, and Reyner Banham among them—who've also pointed to this very same period as being pivotal in the "evolution of modernist thinking" (191-2). Here, as Berger has put it, was a period defined by,

> an interlocking world system of imperialism; opposed to it, a socialist international; the founding of modern physics, physiology and sociology; the increasing use of electricity, the invention of radio and the cinema; the beginnings of mass production; the publishing of mass-circulated newspapers; the new structural possibilities offered by the availability of steel and aluminum; the rapid development of the chemical industries and the production of synthetic materials; the

appearance of the motor car and the aeroplane. (Keiller, "Tram Rides" 191)

Add to this list massive social upheaval, especially the effects of large-scale emigration, the end of empire, and world war, to name just a few of the pressures that characterized this period, and is it any wonder that Lefebvre claimed, "a certain space was shattered"? Not surprisingly, given the complex of forces at play, Keiller notes that these late-twentieth-century critics weren't the first to depict the period "around 1910" in this manner, and that, in fact, a number of intellectuals who had lived through the repercussions of this moment came to very similar conclusions some decades earlier, in the 1920s and 1930s. Keiller singles out Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and Walter Benjamin in particular, and he proceeds by quoting a famous and oft-cited passage from "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (taken from Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity* again, instead of directly from one of Benjamin's texts):

> Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling.

Now, Keiller introduces this material in order to establish a foundation for his own idiosyncratic take on a series of pre-1910 electric tram films produced by the Mitchell and Kenyon company in a number of British cities, such as Nottingham, Halifax, Sheffield, and Manchester, one which compares images of these Edwardian cities with images of those same cities today towards an analysis of their spatial structures and their transformation over time (193-199). But his comments also

address the intersection between two tendencies that have been central to film studies for some time now: its "spatial turn" and its "modernity thesis." Quite explicitly, in fact, for Keiller discusses these cultural shock waves in terms of "evolving concepts of space," and soon afterwards he ties them directly to Moholy-Nagy's *Dynamic of the Metropolis* (1921-2), his sketch for a film, two later Moholy-Nagy films, *Berliner Stilleben* (1926) and *Marseille, Vieux Port* (1929), and Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929).

The "spatial turn" in film studies emerged in the wake of a similar development in the humanities and social sciences more generally, one which was associated most closely with the work of geographers like David Harvey and Edward Soja, as well as with the release of Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* in English in 1991. For the most part, this shift has meant an increased attention to cinema's complex relationship with urban space (and the suburban space that surrounds it), although there have been exceptions to this rule, such as Fowler and Helfield's recent anthology *Representing the Rural: Space, Place, and Identity in Film about the Land*, which takes such discussions, "away from the bright lights and hectic shifts of the big city and toward a less illuminated, slower, more natural scene" (1). Roughly simultaneously, there has been intensive turn towards the study of cinema's origins, its early history, and its relationship with a complex of forces, many of them emphatically urban, that has come to be known as "modernity," and that the John Berger passage above captures quite succinctly. Clearly both trends are closely related and have overlapped considerably. In fact, one can say that the latter is largely a subset of the former, because, as Ben Singer has argued, this resurgent

interest in early cinema was defined by, "an interest in unearthing or rethinking cinema's emergence within the sensory environment of urban modernity, its relationship to late nineteenth-century technologies of space and time, and its interactions with adjacent elements in the new visual culture of advance capitalism." According to this school of thought, film was much more than just a byproduct of this moment—it played a central role in what was a period of epochal change, and thus, "stands out as an emblem of modernity," an argument we see quite clearly in the quote from Benjamin's "Work of Art" essay above (Singer 101-2). Thus, outstanding books in the area of cinema and modernity have included Thomas Elsaesser's *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative* (1990), Anne Friedberg's *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (1993), Leo Charney and Vanessa Schwartz's *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life* (1995), Ben Singer's *Melodrama and Modernity* (2001), and Murray Pomerance's *Cinema and Modernity* (2006). Meanwhile, books that have looked at cinema and the city more generally include David Clarke's *The Cinematic City* (1997), James Donald's *Imagining the Modern City* (1999), Giuliana Bruno's *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film* (2002), Mark Shiel and Tony Fitzmaurice's *Screening the City* (2003), and Andrew Webber and Emma Wilson's *Cities in Transition: The Moving Image and the Modern Metropolis* (2008). And, finally, one might also mention the renaissance in work on film noir, including such sophisticated studies as James Naremore's *More Than Night* (1998), which has a great deal to say about the city of modernity, and Edward Dimendberg's *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity*

(2004), which introduces theories of social space into its periodization of noir, as being a prime expression of the vitality of the cinema and the city trend.

What Keiller only hints at in his "Tram Rides and Virtual Landscapes" essay, but which is nevertheless suggested by his references to Moholy-Nagy's *Dynamic of the Metropolis* and Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*, is that the city film, that hybrid genre that both Moholy-Nagy and Vertov's texts are primary examples of (one fully realized, the other only sketched out in text and photos), was a product of this very moment "around 1910," this moment of "shattered space." In fact, he baldly claims that Benjamin's "now" in the quote above, "refers to film as it had evolved after the mid-1900s" (although he then goes on to to qualify this statement slightly, saying, "it is less clear at what date 'came the film…'"). It's obvious that this cycle of films is the very embodiment of "cinema and modernity," "cinema and space," and its overlap, but the idea that these films also embody Lefebvre's "shattered space" and its repercussions is a tantalizing one. The city film, which combines documentary, experimental and avant-garde, and narratives modes of filmmaking, is commonly understood as being a product of either lyrical and abstract tendencies within the non-fiction filmmaking community, or realist tendencies within the experimental filmmaking community, and sometimes a combination of the two. But the reality of the matter is that at the time that the first full-fledged city film emerges, the documentary film as such doesn't yet exist (Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* has yet to be released, and the term "documentary" is still years away from being coined), and the experimental film is just then coming into existence. For that matter, feature-length narrative filmmaking is still in its childhood (if not its

infancy) and has yet to fully displace an earlier form of cinema with roots in the variety show and other forms of sensationalistic popular entertainments that Tom Gunning has famously labeled "the cinema of attractions" (see Gunning [1986], for instance). In other words, the city film, the "city poem," and (the genre's most famous incarnation) the city symphony were not so much offshoots as they were active participants in the cinematic debates of the day. But more importantly, Keiller's remarks beg a number of questions: If the city film's roots stretch back to that moment "around 1910," to that moment that, "many historians of modernism… point to as crucial in the evolution of modernist thinking," how so? What role did cinema play in this sense of "shattered space" and how did it respond? And might not we see the fragmented, modernist views of a city film such as *Manhatta* as being a representation of this "shattered space" and the complex of forces that created it? If so, how would this shift our understanding of these films? Furthermore, how would a revisionist account of the emergence of the city film and its contexts affect one's understanding of Keiller's films, with their frequent references to the artistic avant-garde movements of the 1910s and 1920s and their clear interest in the film theory and critical theory of the 1920s and 1930s?

This thesis is in a number of ways a product of Keiller's opening argument in "Tram Rides and Other Virtual Landscapes." It begins with a cultural history of the origins of the city film and its contexts, one that traces its roots back to the "evolution of modernist thinking" that developed "around 1910." As indicated above, this subgenre emerged in the 1920s at a time when the film industry in both the United States and Europe was undergoing an enormous amount of change: the

consolidation, expansion, and systematization of Hollywood; the reconstruction of European film industries after World War I and the revolutions of 1917 and 1918; the emergence of documentary film and experimental film as alternatives to the hegemony of the narrative feature film and its middle-class values. The city film combined a documentary eye, an experimental and avant-garde approach to visual aesthetics, and a sense of narrative (no matter how unorthodox), with the conviction that the modern city was the ultimate emblem of modernity and the key to understanding modern life. The most famous of the city films (and the one that gave the subgenre its most famous moniker) was Walther Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a City* (1927). *Berlin* triggered something of an international phenomenon— quickly becoming the most successful experimental film of its time, as well as one of the most successful documentaries of the period, influencing how the modern city was represented both in Germany and abroad, and inspiring many others internationally to make their own city films. Similarly influential, if endlessly more controversial, was Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*, his ode to the revolutionary energies of the Soviet Union and to the dynamism of its cities. By the late 1930s, however, with the fascist takeover in Germany and the Stalinist clampdown in the Soviet Union (perhaps the two most dynamic laboratories for the city symphony), combined with the fear and loathing that preceded the outbreak of World War II, the city film's "classical" period came to an end.

The second part of the dissertation consists of an in-depth study of Keiller's films—especially *London* (1994) and *Robinson in Space* (1997)—as well as the extensive amount of literature that Keiller has generated over the years, including

essays, interviews, and one heavily annotated *ciné-roman*, the book version of

Robinson in Space (1999). Both of these films are city films in their own right—

including elements that are city-poetic and elements that are city-symphonic—but

what makes them even more unique is the way they consciously engage with the

history of the city film, from classical-era films like *Man with a Movie Camera* and

Joris Ivens' *Rain* (1929), to post-classical-era films like Chris Marker and Pierre

Lhomme's *Le Joli Mai* (1963), much in the same way that essays like "Tram Rides

and Virtual Landscapes" have. Keiller began making films in the early 1980s, and

while these early experiments with representing the built environment and landscape

were clever, low budgets and tight shooting schedules resulted in films with a

severely limited scope. By the early 1990s, however, Keiller had managed to secure

the backing necessary to expand upon his method and shoot a feature-length film

over a period of several months—in color, no less. The result was *London*, a film

that is true to the city film tradition both in terms of its fixation on London and its

built environment, and in terms of its hybrid form, which is part documentary, part

fiction, part essay, and part minimalist experiment, defying standard categorizations

and recalling the early history of the city film when film's genres were still taking

shape and things were still more or less up for grabs. *London*'s (relative) success led

to *Robinson in Space*, an even more adventurous film, this time exploring the

landscape of England more generally, including the built environment in and around

several cities: London, Reading, Oxford, Cambridge, Bristol, Birmingham,

Liverpool, Manchester, Halifax, and so on. The two films are companion pieces—

Robinson in Space was designed as a sequel to *London*—and they remain Keiller's

most daring experiments with the potential of the city film, articulating a critique of modernity that links 1990s England with early-twentieth-century modernity and its antecedents.

While the city symphony—and especially its two most famous and most accomplished examples, Ruttmann's *Berlin* and Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929)—are fixtures of canonical film history, and Vertov in particular was treated to a full revival after decades of neglect (Godard and Gorin's Dziga Vertov Group notwithstanding) beginning in the late 1970s, the city film subgenre has never really been much more than a colorful footnote to film history. Individual films have received some attention (especially *Man with a Movie Camera* and *Berlin: Symphony of a City*), but the city film movement overall—both modern and postmodern—remains neglected.[2] And, again, this is all the more surprising considering the recent interest in cinema and the city and cinema and modernity and the continuing efforts of filmmakers like Keiller. This thesis is by no means a comprehensive study of the city film phenomenon—ultimately it begins and ends with Keiller's films and scholarship—but it does seek to create an understanding of the subgenre's complicated international genealogy and the politics, aesthetic theories, and urban critiques that informed it, and, obviously, it also contributes to

---

[2] I'm thinking here of such overlooked classical-era city films as Mikhail Kaufman's *Moscow* (1926), Joris Ivens's *Rain* (1929), and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's *Berlin Still Life* (1931), as well as an "aftermath" that includes Helen Levitt and James Agee's *In the Street* (1948), Arthur "Weegee" Fellig's *Weegee's New York* (1948), Frank Stauffacher's *Notes on the Port of St. Francis* (1952), Rudy Burckhardt's *Under the Brooklyn Bridge* (1953), Agnes Varda's *L'Opera Mouffe* (1958), and Chris Marker and Pierre Lhomme's *Le Joli Mai* (1963) (all of them film and/or art world luminaries), and carries on to this day in the films of people like Jem Cohen, Christopher Petit, and Patrick Keiller.

the abiding interest in cinema and the spaces of urban modernity mentioned above. If this method seems unorthodox, one must remember that we are now decades into the "film studies era," decades into the institution and promotion of film history and film theory as a discipline, and we should hardly be surprised if this era has produced the occasional filmmaker who is not only well-versed in the wide-ranging debates that make up the field (including art history, architectural history, film history, literary history, and urban theory), but who is willing to actively take part in these debates with texts both literary and cinematic. In other words, if films are more frequently merely the objects of debate, it is only because film has tended to shy away from the realms of "historical examination, theory, essay, memoirs" described by Guy Debord at the outset of this chapter.

Among other things, this approach, this structure, makes possible an analysis that is both spatial and historical, geographical and historiographical, and that is linked to two thinkers whose work is crucial to both areas of study. Not only are the writings of Walter Benjamin and Henri Lefebvre crucial to Keiller's "Tram Rides and Other Virtual Landscapes," but their respective methodologies are built in to *London* and *Robinson in Space*, to the extent that we can say that *London* is an explicitly Benjaminian film that nevertheless displays an approach to studying urban space that is implicitly Lefebvrian, while *Robinson* is an explicitly Lefebvrian film that maintains an implicitly Benjaminian approach to history and its creation. Thus, on the one hand, Robinson, Keiller's chief protagonist in *London*, is a scholar who is openly familiar with the work of Benjamin, and who is engaged in the creation of a research project that on some level is his very own *Passagen-Werk*, right down to its

pursuit of arcades-like settings for his writing. More importantly, though, is the way Keiller draws from Benjamin himself, so that Benjamin's influence is felt both within the narrative and exterior to it (i.e. on a documentary level). Thus, for one thing, while Benjamin drew inspiration from montage and especially cinematic montage, and explicitly sought a "cinematic" form for such works as *One-Way Street* and *The Arcades Project*, Keiller incorporates a "literary montage" aesthetic into his film, including a considerable number of quotations, in a manner that calls to mind aspects of *The Arcades Project* directly. As a result, one gets a very strong sense of the city-as-palimpsest, the city that is both "geological" and composed of many layers, as well as the textual city, the city literally composed of layers of text, qualities that are once again reminiscent of *The Arcades Project*. While the form of Keiller's film in no way resembles Benjamin's famous "dynamite of the tenth of a second," its use of visual montage is consistent with Benjamin's interest in shock effects (if oftentimes subtle ones), and its pace, its seriality, its attraction to the city's "detritus," and its compositional eye display an interest in the work of Eugène Atget shared with Benjamin, his friend and colleague Siegfried Kracauer, and the Surrealists. On a related note, the film is very consciously a "flâneur film," and while Keiller's notion of the flâneur is itself palimpsestic, consisting as it does of elements that are Baudelairean, Rimbaldian, Surrealist, and Situationist, it is also very clearly Benjaminian, part of a project that involves urban space, literary montage, and history, with flânerie being a means, an instrument, towards the interpenetration of the present with the past. In this way, Keiller's film articulates a vision of modernity that one might describe as "Baudelairean," a modernity

composed of the "coexistence of temporalities" (McDonough 100). This vision of modernity, as developed by Benjamin, includes a sense of history that is dialectical, features a scathing critique of progress, and is an open rejection of a vision of modernity that dominated much of the West between 1910 and 1940 and that one might label Futurist-Constructivist. In the case of Keiller's films and writings, this "Baudelairean modernity" is part of a historical project that connects the late twentieth century with the early twentieth century, the mid- to late nineteenth century, and beyond, and therefore can be seen as participating in a cultural-historical project alongside works such as Susan Buck-Morss's *The Dialectics of Seeing* (1989), Anne Friedberg's *Window Shopping* (1993), Anke Gleber's *The Art of Taking a Walk* (1999), Anthony Vidler's *Warped Space* (2000), and Janet Ward's *Weimar Surfaces* (2001).

On the other hand, Keiller's protagonists (Robinson and the Narrator) appear to be just as well versed in the writings of Henri Lefebvre, and especially *The Production of Space*, as Keiller himself is, because this time around, in *Robinson in Space,* the project at hand is much more Lefebvrian in nature. The reasons for this are twofold: the film's attempts to come to terms with "the problem of England" inevitably lead to the post-industrial landscape outside the city centers, to the freeways, shopping centers, and industrial parks synonymous with the shift in spatiality that is the focus of so much of Lefebvre's work; they also lead to an analysis of how such spaces are *produced* and re*produced*. The film's narrative begins on a pessimistic note, the one passage from Lefebvre that appears in the film only augments this pessimism, and it's safe to say that the overall tone of the film is

one of melancholy, but the film itself tempers any sense of defeatism with a display of how postmodernity's "layered spatialities" can be deciphered, its "abstract spaces" appropriated and transformed with the camera. "To change life…, we must first change space," Lefebvre argues in *The Production of Space*, and while the context is one of social revolution, Keiller provides an example of how the camera might point towards the "preconditions of another life" (Lefebvre 189-190; Keiller, "Architectural" 37). Much of the impetus behind *Robinson* had to do with locating industrial activity that had once been an important part of England's cities but had evidently moved elsewhere—as a result, Keiller's film amounts to an in-depth study of the prevalence of "centrifugal" spatial arrangements in modern-day Britain, as opposed to the heavily concentrated centripetalism that had once defined urban-industrial modernity there (Dimendberg 6). It therefore goes a long way towards explaining the source of the "absence" that *London* closes with, and it provides a striking juxtaposition with the "culture of congestion" which New York epitomized around the time that *Manhatta* was made, some seventy years earlier. In this way, Keiller's work participates in a discussion of the space of capitalism that includes Kristin Ross's *The Emergence of Social Space* (1988), Edward Soja's *Postmodern Geographies*, David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity* and *Spaces of Capital* (2001), and Edward Dimendberg's *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity*.

Chapter 1 focuses on *Manhatta* and the New York-based city films that followed in its wake. It begins with a discussion of the prehistory of Sheeler and Strand's film, one which places the film in a cultural stream stretching between 1900

and 1920 and encompassing the Photo-Secession, the Armory Show, New York Dada, and Precisionism. In this manner, it charts the development of a particular discourse of modernity, Americanism, one that was rough, uneven, and inchoate, but undeniably dynamic, within the very specific context of New York City, during a period when America's great metropolis assumed the title of "Capital of the World," and the skyscraper emerged as its ultimate emblem.

Chapter 2 covers the dissemination of this Americanist discourse within the European avant-garde and its influence on specific artistic movements (Italian Futurism, Berlin Dada, Russian Constructivism, etc.) and specific artistic developments (photomontage, photography and the "new vision," etc.) that would prove to be of crucial importance to the development of the city film in Europe. One of its central themes has to do with the separation of this discourse from the very real material conditions of New York City and its transformation into image, style, *spectacle*.

Chapter 3 examines the influence of this discourse, this vision of modernity, on the development of the two most important examples of the European city film, Ruttmann's *Berlin* and Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*, films that were technically impressive, extraordinarily dynamic, and, in the case of *Man with a Movie Camera* in particular, intellectually stimulating, but films that were frustratingly site-non-specific and largely ahistorical, and whose portrayal of centripetal modernity was literally dizzying.

Chapter 4 deals with the development of a counter-image of modernity in the work of writers like Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer, one that rejected that

of the New York-Berlin-Moscow axis and instead gravitated towards Paris, one that featured a scathing critique of progress and whose vision was both spatial and historical, and one that posited a new city film aesthetic along these lines.

After a brief introduction to Keiller's work that deals with the development of his aesthetic in his early works, Chapter 5 focuses on *London*. Beginning with an account of how *London* participated in British film's critique of Thatcherism, the chapter goes on to show how the idiosyncratic cultural projects of both Robinson and Keiller are an inextricable part of this critique of "the problem of London" and a vehicle for the film's spatio-temporal critique. Individual subsections discuss the presence of a number of "ghosts" and "specters": Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Apollinaire and the Surrealists, Benjamin, Humphrey Jennings, and the Situationist International.

Chapter 6 follows the centrifugal movements of Keiller's protagonists (literally out from London, the film's point of departure) in pursuit an answer to the "problem of England." This chapter pays particularly close attention to Keiller's depiction of a number of different types of space—country houses, "old" and "new" industrial sites, and "new space," the spaces of the post-industrial economy—as well as his engagement with the issue of landscape more generally. These cases allow Keiller to develop a Lefebvrian cinematic aesthetic, one that he then ties to his continuing interest in "radical subjectivity."

In the epigraph at the outset of this introduction, Guy Debord questions the direction that cinema took over the course of its first century and suggests what it might have been. Film as history. Film as theory. Film as essay. Film as memoir.

And, given the nature of the film that the passage came from, *In Girum Imus Nocte Et Consumimur Igni*, with its meditation on "the destruction of Paris" ("…whatever others may wish to say about it, Paris no longer exists."), one might add "film as spatial examination." A great deal of this thesis focuses on the sense of possibility that characterized the city film's emergence. It also has to do with the missed opportunities of its early history and those who sought to redeem the situation. Part of what makes Patrick Keiller's engagement with the early history of the city film and the period that created it so compelling, is his conviction that cinema still holds that sense of possibility.

Chapter 1: Manhattan Project

That Baudelaire was hostile to progress was the indispensable condition for his ability to master Paris in his verse. Compared to his poetry of the big city, later work of this type is marked by weakness, not least where it sees the city as the throne of progress. But: Walt Whitman??—Walter Benjamin, "Central Park"

<u>Genesis</u>

As is so often the case with cultural history, a pivotal moment appears to be just that—a moment: singular, unconnected. It's only later that a larger constellation comes into view. In this case, the story begins like this…

One day towards the end of the year 1919, the photographer Paul Strand ran into the painter and photographer Charles Sheeler. According to Strand, Sheeler said to him, "You know I've just bought a motion picture camera. It's a beauty. It's a Debrie camera, a French camera. It cost $1600." Strand was excited about his friend's new purchase and said, "I'd like to see it." They went to Sheeler's place, saw "this very handsome instrument" that Sheeler had just acquired, and began to discuss potential projects, including "the idea of making a little film about New York." "Who developed it, whether it was he or both of us together, I don't recall," Strand later said (Horak, "Modernist Perspectives," 57). The two artists made an ideal pairing for such a project. Sheeler was a painter and photographer who was fascinated with the abstract tendency in modern art and who had recently relocated to New York, the American Mecca of modern art. Strand was a pure photographer who had become the undisputed star of Alfred Stieglitz's artists' circle by 1917, with sharp-edged "straight" photographs of New York being his forte, and he was eager to make the leap to filmmaking.

Strand and Sheeler had known each other for a couple of years at the time of this encounter. They had met in 1917 at Alfred Stieglitz's 291 gallery at a time when Stieglitz was championing and mentoring both artists, but Sheeler still hadn't left Philadelphia for New York and Strand was on the verge of induction into the military. Strand was only gone for a year and he never saw combat, but during the time he was away Stieglitz made a point of keeping his two protégés in some kind of contact, detailing Sheeler's artistic progress and developments in the New York art world more generally in his letters (Stebbins and Keyes, 17). When Strand returned to New York, his friendship with Sheeler really took hold, as the two bonded over their mutual interest in photography and modern art and their fascination with "cityscape architecture and its application to visual design." But it was Sheeler's purchase of the Debrie camera that became the event that brought the two together to work on a collaborative project. It is likely that Sheeler already had a New York film project in mind at the time that he bought the camera, because the Debrie L'Interview Type "E" camera was a very particular choice: it was an extremely lightweight wood-cased camera that was easy to thread and operate, and therefore very popular with cameramen working "on location" or shooting newsreels outside a controlled studio environment (Horak 57). Regardless, the camera Sheeler had chosen was the ideal camera for the project that Sheeler and Strand created together.

The project in question, of course, was the film that would eventually become known as *Manhatta*, a film that would prove to be something of a landmark. Sheeler and Strand shot the film in the spring and summer of 1920, then edited it in the months that followed—by October of that year they were already able to give a

private screening of the final cut of the film in California. The problem then was how to get the film exhibited, and the difficulties encountered by Sheeler and Strand in this area, as well as the film's subsequent history of trials and tribulations, underline the film's unique position within the American film industry at the time that it was made, both because of its independent, small-budget production and because of its modernist aesthetics—not only was it a film that emerged from outside the established system of the day, but it treated the *actualité* subgenre known as "views" or "scenics" in an unorthodox manner. The film's first public screening was at the Rialto Theater on Broadway on July 24, 1921 and it ran there for one week as part of a high-class 8-part variety bill that included a British feature film (*The Mystery Road*), a ballet, and a "Marche Pontificale" as the closer. Sheeler and Strand's film filled in as the "scenic" on this bill, coming between the ballet and the vocal, and the film was advertised under the title *New York the Magnificent*. Despite a number of enthusiastic reviews[3] the film found itself out of place—too ahead of its time to find a proper home.   It folded after only one week and Strand's disappointment was clear in a letter he wrote to Stieglitz not long afterwards: "In spite of these [positive notices], I fear we will not be able to distribute it generally. Apparently everybody has been making a reel of New York" (Horak, "Paul Strand's" 270-1).

Two years later, however, the film's fascinating afterlife began to take shape when it received its first Paris screening as part of Tristan Tzara's notorious Dada festival, "La Soirée du Coeur à Barbe," where it played alongside the music of Erik

---

[3] The fact that a mere scenic should receive mention was already quite a coup. The fact that it received some relatively substantial coverage was astounding.

Satie and the poetry of Guillaume Appollinaire (Kuenzli 3; Tashjian, *Skyscraper* 222). It was Marcel Duchamp, the former kingpin of the New York Dada scene, who had helped bring *Manhatta* to Paris, and presumably it was he who renamed the film *La Fumée de New York* for this screening, picking up on one of the film's signature motifs. In 1926 the film received more engagements in New York, first at the Cameo Theater and then later at the Film Guild, where, having received the approval of the Parisian avant-garde, it began to be understood differently—and it was only then that the film was first referred to as *Manhatta* (Stebbins and Keyes 18; Horak, "Paul Strand" 271). The following year the film was requested for a screening as part of the 18th London Film Society annual, and once again it carried the title *Manhatta*. Soon afterwards, Sheeler and Strand lost all contact with the film for a period of two decades after they naively handed over the negative and print for the film to a dubious distributor. The film went missing until 1950, when "a miracle happened," as Strand would later put it: the British Film Archives contacted the two American artists to tell them that a copy of their film had been unearthed (Stebbins and Keyes 18). This marked the beginning of *Manhatta*'s eventual canonization— or, more accurately, its elevation to the status of a footnote to the canon.

Epicenter

Manhatta has been called "the first genuine avant-garde film produced in the United States," a film whose rhythmic, musical, and poetic form and boldly modernist style anticipates the symphonic organization of urban iconography and avant-garde aesthetics that became known as the city symphony after Walter

Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a City* (1927), and that developed into an international phenomenon from the mid-1920s until the mid-1930s (Horak, "Modernist" 55). Because of its status as a precursor to the city symphony subgenre, and to avant-garde filmmaking in America more generally, and because of the fact that the film was directed by two prominent American artists, *Manhatta* is a film that isn't entirely overlooked, but because of its short length, its relative amateurism, and the fact that it appeared years before the ciné-club system that would help support later avant-garde film production had even taken shape, it's also a film that's perhaps never gotten the attention it deserves. After all, if the 1920s are characterized by a change in perception that sent shock waves around the world, affecting everything from the arts, architecture, and music, to fashion, photography, and film, *Manhatta*, shot in 1920 and released in 1921, was right at the epicenter. Not only did the city symphony not yet exist at the time, but *Manhatta* was produced before the advent of the abstract experimental film, led by Hans Richter's *Rhythmus 21* (1921), and before the transformation of the *actualité* into the documentary film (Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* appeared only in 1922, while it was not until 1926 that John Grierson coined the term "documentary"). *Manhatta* also anticipated a trend towards metropolitan settings and urban iconography in filmmaking that would develop into a full-blown international fixation within years, culminating in everything from the spectacle of 1930s big city musicals to the avant-garde (and claustrophobic) angularity of film noirs, both of which were directly influenced by the city symphony movement. That said, *Manhatta* wasn't all innovation—far from it. Rather, this was a film that in many ways was the culmination of an entire history

of modernism and modernity in New York, one dating back some twenty years to the turn of the century. And it's by tracing this history and by seeing how *Manhatta* grew out of it that we can begin to see the film's true significance—not because such investigative work provides it with a trumped up sense of significance, but because such a history can help us get beyond mere aesthetic concerns and towards an analysis that takes into account New York's startling transformation during this period, and how artists and others responded to it.

1900

By 1900 there was no question that New York was America's great metropolis. Over the course of the previous two decades, the Beaux Arts renaissance had succeeded in providing New York with the stature it needed to stand up to and compete with London and Paris, but in the wake of the amalgamation of 1898, which vastly increased the city's population, its area, and its wealth overnight, New York began to show outward signs of a more assured, more modern outlook. In contrast with its European rivals, New York was a technological dream come true, the very embodiment of what David E. Nye has called the "technological sublime" (see Nye [1994]). "Its telephone system, steel-framed skyscrapers, elevators, subways, railroads, palatial department stores, and electrical lighting [were the very] embodiment of modern urban life"—it had only to embrace them (Scott and Rutkoff 16). And as 1904 came to a close and 1905 came to life, that's exactly what the city did: it celebrated the recently completed Times Building, the expansion of Broadway's entertainment and communications complex, and the emergence of a

new, emphatically modern city center with a technological pageant of the highest

order. Later that year, in the pages of *Scribner's Magazine*, the writer H.G. Dwight

was prepared to officially anoint New York as the quintessential modern city, a city

whose streets were so vibrant, whose people were so dynamic, whose landscape was

so dramatic, so markedly vertical that it literally overwhelmed visitors from Europe

accustomed to the more deliberate pace, the relative ethnic homogeneity, and the

historic architecture typical of European cities. In fact, according to Dwight, New

York was a machine that literally altered one's perception, "[forcing] the observer to

see in modernity—poor, noisy, untoned, inchoate, incoherent modernity—its own

value as the factory of the future and the past in embryo." This placed New York at

the vanguard of the new vision: "It is a pioneering eye, even now, that can see the

picturesqueness of steel and steam" (Scott and Rutkoff 20).

Stieglitz

In 1902, the photographer Alfred Stieglitz responded to this changed

environment by splitting with the Camera Club of New York—a club he himself had

helped form in 1896 by "calling forth a live body" out of two previously existing

photographic societies, the Society of Amateur Photographers and the New York

Camera Club—and forming a new "advanced Pictorial photography" group that

would be free of the outdated restrictions typical of America's pictorialist camera

clubs and photographic societies at the time (Hoffman 166, 201; Stieglitz, "Four

Happenings" 119). Stieglitz had just returned from spending two years in Paris,

during which time he'd come into contact with the work many of many of the

leading European artists, including Pablo Picasso, Constantin Brancusi, and Henri

Matisse, and drawing inspiration from European secessionist movements in vogue at

the time, Stieglitz named his new movement the Photo-Secession (Hoffman 196,

202). The following year, at the behest of the editor of *Camera Craft*, he outlined its

basic beliefs:

> Like all secessions the Photo-Secession is but an active protest against
> the conservatism and reactionary spirit of those whose self-
> satisfaction imbues them with the idea that existing conditions are
> akin to perfection, and that the human race cannot improve upon the
> attitude and accomplishments of the good old days… The object of
> the Photo-Secession is not, as is generally supposed, to force its ideas,
> ideals, and standards upon the photographic world, but an insistence
> upon the right of its members to follow their own salvation as they see
> it, together with the hope that by force of their example others, too,
> may of their own free will see the truth as we see it. (Hoffman 203)

The founding of the Photo-Secession seemed to open the floodgates for Stieglitz. In

1903 he founded *Camera Work*, a periodical that functioned as the mouthpiece for

the new movement. In 1905 he upped the ante further, opening the Little Galleries

of the Photo-Secession with his colleague Edward Steichen at 291 Fifth Avenue, a

space Steichen had just vacated for a larger studio next door at 293 Fifth Avenue.

Frustrated by the difficulties they were having getting New York art galleries to

exhibit photographs, the gallery was a simple attempt to circumvent the status quo,

but Stieglitz's expectations were low and initially he only signed on for one year

(Lowe 125-6). Of course, the Little Galleries became something of a sensation—

later known simply as 291, the space became a major catalyst in the New York arts

scene (and as such, a major source of controversy). In January 1907 Stieglitz

installed his first non-photographic show—a selection of drawings by Pamela

Colman Smith—at the Little Galleries, and he defended his decision adamantly in

the pages of *Camera Work*, arguing that this broader, more inclusive approach to the arts realized the original vision of the Photo-Secession movement (Hoffman 227-8). Later that same year he pushed *Camera Work* itself in the same direction, expanding its editorial outlook to include painting, sculpture, music, literature, poetry, and theater, in addition to photography, to create a fully rounded picture of early twentieth century modernism (Hoffman 44). If *Camera Work* developed into something of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the Little Galleries were its "laboratory," its "experimental station" (Hoffman 44, 229). In 1908, Steichen once again vacated his studio, and Stieglitz once again took over his lease. Though the address was now 293 Fifth Avenue, Stieglitz kept the old address, 291, as its name. 291 was the first gallery in America to show the work of European modernists such as Rodin, Matisse, Toulouse-Lautrec, Rousseau, Cézanne, Picasso, Picabia, Brancusi, and Braque, as well as American modernists such as Marin and O'Keefe, and virtually all of these exhibitions were staged before the Armory Show of 1913, the show that supposedly introduced modern art to America (Lowe 126-7). As Stieglitz put it himself: "It was in those *Photo-Secession* rooms that the ice was broken for modern art in America" (Stieglitz, "Four Happenings" 125).

Not surprisingly, Stieglitz's work changed quite significantly in the years that followed the formation of the Photo-Secession. For one thing, Stieglitz began to develop the harder-edged look of what would come to be known as the "straight" photographic style, and he did so, in part, by embracing the mobility that came with the "hand camera" and allowing himself to shoot (and then publish) "snapshots" that were more spur-of-the-moment. For another, he began to focus more intently on

New York's modernity, on its stark contrasts, dramatic vistas, sweeping changes, and unparalleled industry, and in doing so he developed the aesthetic that would become his greatest legacy to photography. As William B. Scott and Peter M. Rutkoff have argued:

> Stieglitz saw New York as a great modern machine, which, if carefully observed and recorded, offered artists a unique opportunity to comprehend the modern. Stieglitz's almost religious commitment to "straight," unmanipulated photography reflected his quest to behold the modern soul encased in its machines and machinelike cities. Stieglitz stalked the alleys and byways of New York, hoping to capture the city's unsuspecting soul. (50)

Two episodes in Stieglitz's early-twentieth-century development will suffice to illustrate the origins of this bold new aesthetic.

1902, the year of the formation of the Photo-Secession, was also the year that the Flatiron Building was completed. Designed by Chicago's Daniel Burnham, the Flatiron (Fuller) Building was a 22-story steel-framed office building that was built over the course of 1901 and 1902, and although Stieglitz had been very much aware of its construction, previously it had left him strangely unimpressed. Then one day in the winter of 1903, some months after its completion, Stieglitz encountered the Flatiron Building in a snowstorm and everything changed for him. The "scissors-like intersection" where the Flatiron Building stands—Broadway and Fifth Avenue at 23rd Street—was known to be the windiest corner of the city, and apparently the combination of snow and wind animated the building's wedge-like form: "It appeared to be moving toward me like the bow of a monster ocean steamer" (Federal Writers' Project 204-5; Lucic 24). Suddenly, the structure's daring, its sturdy modern elegance, made sense to the former engineering student, and he later referred

to the building as an American Parthenon, a building as significant to modern

American engineering as its forebear had been to Greek post-and-lintel architecture

(Kiefer 229-230). Here, in the Flatiron's "thoroughly modern" form, which requires

its viewers to "complete the picture," Stieglitz found, "a picture of a new America

still in the making," and framing it from the other side of Madison Square Park so as

to obscure it just enough to make his vision conceivable, he promptly committed it to

a photographic plate (Nash 7; Lucic 24). Later that year, Stieglitz published *The*

Flatiron Building in *Camera Work* no. 4, accompanying it with an essay by

Sakadichi Hartmann that captured the building's streamlined techno-modernist

mystique:

> [As] if guided by a magic hand, [the Flatiron Building] weaves its
> network over rivers and straight into the air with scientific precision,
> developing by its very absence of everything unnecessary new laws of
> beauty which have not yet been explored, which are perhaps not even
> conscious to their originators. (Kiefer 230)

Unfortunately, in spite of the rhetoric that announced the Photo-Secession, in spite of

the "new America" he saw before him, Stieglitz was still avoiding making a clean

break with Pictorialism in order to create the "new laws of beauty" the moment

demanded. The modernism of *The Flatiron Building* was largely in Burnham's

building—which for the next seven years became known as "the most famous

building in the world"—and not in Stieglitz's composition (Koolhaas 88).

Though Stieglitz's first experiments with a truly modernist aesthetics came in

1907 when he produced *The Steerage*, a photograph that many considered to be his

most significant and that had prompted Picasso to remark, "This photographer is

working in the same spirit as I am," it was only three years later that he turned a

similar eye on New York itself (*The Steerage* setting had been an ocean liner en route from New York to France) ("Four Happenings" 133). But in 1910, once again inspired by European modernism and challenged by a younger colleague of his, Alvin Langdon Coburn, who in the spring of that year had, "published a portfolio of twenty studies of New York's towering skyscrapers, cavernous streets, and bustling harbor with a formal boldness unknown in pictorial photography," Stieglitz turned his gaze towards New York with new enthusiasm, focusing on "the icons of New York's modernity," and channeling the city's dynamism into a series of bold experiments in subject and form (Greenough xxiii-xxiv). Between 1910 and 1911 he produced a series of New York photographs focused on its harbor, its industry, and its rapidly evolving landscape that rank among his most significant. Photographs such as *The City of Ambition* (1910), *Lower Manhattan* (1910), *City Across the River* (1910), *Old and New New York* (1910), and *Excavating, New York* (1911), all manage to be both formally challenging and full of life.

> These photographs speak of transits—arrivals and departures to and from New York—and of new buildings; in short, man-made elements forming an architectural stage with backdrops of water and sky. In contrast to the cold geometry of his later photographs of New York City buildings, many of these still contain the suggestion of a human presence and a sense of a developing modern city. (Hoffman 245)

City Across the River (1910), *Lower Manhattan* (1910), and *The City of Ambition* (1910) represent something of a trio, all of which feature the newly constructed Singer Building and its iconic presence from the Brooklyn shore, from the harbor, and from the shore of Lower Manhattan, respectively. Originally constructed as a fourteen-story block in 1899, in 1908 the building's architect, Ernest Flagg, designed and added a massive twenty-seven-story tower that made the building the most

famous building in America for the next five years, and the tallest in the city for the

next eighteen months, until Napoleon LeBrun & Sons added a forty-story tower to

the Metropolitan Life Building's original ten-story block. Flagg had evidently been

inspired by the semiotically rich "culture of the tower" that had been building

momentum since the Latting Observatory of 1853, and had resulted in everything

from Philadelphia's Centennial Tower of 1876 to Coney Island's Beacon Tower of

1905. As Rem Koolhaas put it:

> In 50 years the Tower has accumulated the meanings of: catalyst of
> consciousness, symbol of technological progress, marker of pleasure
> zones, subversive short-circuiter of convention and finally self-
> contained universe. Towers now indicate acute breaks in the
> homogeneous pattern of everyday life, marking the scattered outposts
> of a new culture. (93)

Stieglitz's *City of Ambition* places the city, its ambition, and its "new culture"—as

represented by the majesty of the Singer Building tower and complex assortment of

forms that surround it—into bold relief, while smoke billows into the cloudy sky.

Some have suggested that this photograph creates a sense of harmony between

nature and industry, but more than anything it conveys the Financial District's

skyward thrust, the fact that, "only the Skyscraper offers business the wide-open

spaces of a man-made Wild West, *a frontier in the sky*," and thus by 1910 the

process underway was inexorable: Lower Manhattan was being given over to the

skyscraper (Koolhaas 87, 93; Hoffman 247). "There is no manifesto, no

architectural debate, no doctrine, no law, no planning, no ideology, no theory,"

Koolhaas once wrote, "there is only—Skyscraper" (89).

At first glance, *Old and New New York* looks like a standard photograph in

the "city of contrasts" vein, juxtaposing the horizontal city of yesteryear with the

emerging vertical city, but, on closer inspection, there's something uncanny about Stieglitz's photograph. The skeletal figure of a massive scaffold looms in the background, its base obscured by a row of buildings that recedes along 34th Street, giving the impression that its ghostly presence is floating, somehow unmoored. In the foreground, on the other hand, a curb and a hedge are positioned in such a way as to make the vehicles and the figures behind them appear to be miniature, undermining perspective. Often described as being a depiction of Stieglitz's "ambivalence about the American metropolis," where the "newly emerging skyscraper" is juxtaposed with the elegance, and "human-scale" of nineteenth-century architecture, in actuality the scale here—human or otherwise—has been thrown into question (Bunnell 323-4). Furthermore, at a time when architects were still very much devoted to Beaux Arts and in dressing up steel frames with an "eclectic use of Italian Renaissance, Mexican, and Adam influences" the way the Vanderbilt Hotel (1910-1912)—the building in question—would eventually be, Stieglitz's photograph draws attention to the very modernity of the building's frame (Koolhaas 85). Keeping in mind that the Flatiron Building represented "a new America still in the making," it's hard not to see this apparition as being a vision of an unfinished New York, a "new New York still in the making." As opposed to the bald ambition of Stieglitz's Singer Building series, here we have only instability and uncertainty.[4]

---

[4] In this regard, Stieglitz's photograph embodies T.J. Clark's "approximate definition of modernism," which goes as follows:

> Art seeks out the edges of things, of understanding; therefore its favourite modes are irony, negation, deadpan, the pretence of ignorance or innocence. It prefers the unfinished: the syntactically

Coburn

The youngest of its members at the time of the Photo-Secession's founding, and a member of The Linked Ring, Britain's leading society of pictorial photographers, the following year, at the age of only twenty-one, Alvin Langdon Coburn was already a phenomenon within the realm of international art photography at the turn of the twentieth century, "probably the youngest star in the firmament," in Stieglitz's opinion (Newhall, *Photography* 205). Perhaps reflecting the sphere of influence exerted by Edward Steichen,[5] as well as the importance of portraiture to his early career, Coburn's work remained more strictly pictorialist than that of Stieglitz during the century's first decade, but beginning in 1906-7, his work took a turn. It was at that time that Coburn was commissioned to create the frontispieces for the collected works of Henry James, and, under tutelage of the esteemed expatriate author, who told him to, "Look out *there* for some combination of objects that won't be hackneyed and commonplace and panoramic…," when photographing Paris's Place de la Concorde, he began to develop a new, "straighter" aesthetic (Coburn 54). Working with James was a great honor for the young photographer, and there were many things about him that impressed Coburn, but chief among them was James's familiarity with European cities like London, Paris, and Venice. Coburn described this "knowledge of the streets," which was clearly central to James's working

---

unstable, the semantically malformed. It produces and savours
discrepancy in what it shows and how it shows it, since the highest
wisdom is knowing that things and pictures do not add up. (12)

[5] In 1902, Coburn opened his New York studio on Fifth Avenue, just down the street from Steichen's studio at 291 Fifth Avenue, the future home of The Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession.

method, as being "amazing," and he paid close attention to the instructions such as these:

> The extremely tortuous and complicated walk—taking Piazza San Marco as a starting point—will show you so much, so many bits and odds and ends, such a revel of Venetian picturesqueness, that I advise your doing it on foot as much as possible.… (Coburn 52, 56)

By the time Coburn returned to New York in 1909, around the time of dissolution of The Linked Ring, he was seeing the city with new eyes. Coburn had always enjoyed living in London, whose history and architecture he found inspiring and whose intellectual and artistic milieu he found stimulating, but the pace of life there was altogether different—it seemed of another century. As a member of Linked Ring, Coburn had already been situated at the crossroads of a number of powerful influences: "Symbolism, Pictorialism, Modernism, Avant-Gardism" (Frizot, "Another Kind" 389). Now, wrenched out of the "quiet and seclusion" that had defined his life in suburban London and thrown into the "rush and turmoil of New York," he found himself in what seemed to be the very crossroads of the modern world, and modernism and avant-gardism took on new meanings (Coburn, "The Relation" 52). There, among the skyscrapers that had helped turn the Americans into "the recognized leaders in the world movement of pictorial photography," Coburn's work took on an almost Baudelairean urgency:

> Now to me New York is a vision that rises out of the sea as I come up the harbor on my Atlantic liner, and which glimmers for a while in the sun for the first of my stays amidst its pinnacles; but which vanishes, but for fragmentary glimpses, as I become one of the grey creatures that crawl about like ants, at the bottom of its gloomy caverns. My apparently unseemly hurry has for its object my burning desire to record, translate, create, if you like, these visions of mine before they fade. (Coburn, "The Relation" 53)

The result was Coburn's highly acclaimed portfolio of 1910.

Strangely enough, though, Coburn's greatest breakthrough with regards to his depiction of New York came only in 1911-1912, following a trip to the American West, to Mount Wilson and Grand Canyon. There, perched above one of the acknowledged Wonders of the Natural World, Coburn suddenly found an analogue for Lower Manhattan's breathtaking man-made canyons.

> Even ordinary landscapes are remarkable, but the supreme examples of exceptional magnitude are unforgettable… No words can describe [the Grand Canyon's] grandeur. The camera can give us hints, but only hints, and even with the reality before us it is hardly possible to believe one's eyes. (Coburn 82)

In all likelihood, Coburn's inspiration in this matter was Joseph Pennell, the New York-based lithographer who in 1905 published a series of etchings of the emerging landscape of Lower Manhattan under the title "Skyscraper of New York," including one view of the intersection of William Street and Wall Street that he specifically called *The Cañon, William Street* (Weaver 38). Coburn surely must have been familiar with this series—not only was Pennell famous for having illustrated the works of Henry James, but he also happened to have his studio on the same floor as Steichen and then Stieglitz at 291 Fifth Avenue, and in 1905 Coburn shot his photograph *The Stock Exchange* in the very same milieu as Pennell's William Street image and in a very similar style (Weaver 42).

In any case, having had a vision of the city transformed at the Grand Canyon, Coburn returned to New York and promptly began photographing the city from "its highest vantage points." The result was a 1912 series entitled "New York from Its Pinnacles" taken from "the towers of New York's highest buildings," a series that

capitalized upon the unprecedented nature of these buildings (Coburn 86). The

series included relatively straight-forward arrangements such as his shot of the

tremendous thrust of the Woolworth Building—its tower still under construction—

and his shot of the Park Row Building, City Hall, and the Beaux Arts eclecticism

adorning McKim, Mead, and White's Municipal Building (1914), the "gateway to

Manhattan"—which was also under construction at the time—both taken from the

heights of the neighboring Singer Building, but it's Coburn's high-angle shots that

are truly remarkable. His most famous of these photographs was a tightly cropped

shot of Madison Square as seen from the tower of the recently augmented

Metropolitan Life Building, and it's this shot that most clearly anticipates the

similarly uncanny perspectives we find in the work of Laszlo Moholy-Nagy (i.e.,

Berlin Radio Tower, 1928) and, more recently, Wolfgang Tillman (i.e., *Empire State

Building*, 1985).   In an attempt to naturalize the picture's strange, abstract, and

defamiliarized space, Coburn called the photograph *The Octopus*, and he included

the tower's ominous shadow in order to explain the photographs' revolutionary

perspective—the combination of the two suggested the tentacular character of the

life insurance industry. Also of interest was another poetically titled photograph,

The House of a Thousand Windows. Here, Coburn utilized the observation deck of

the Singer Building once again, this time to take an uncanny high-angle shot of the

Liberty Tower across the street, a 33-story building whose entirely freestanding, neo-

Gothic style anticipated that of the Woolworth Building, and that was also new to the

scene, having just been completed two years earlier. Whereas *The Octopus* used

tight cropping and an extremely high angle to obscure its location, *The House of a*

Thousand Windows used shallow focus and a high-contrast exposure to give the

composition the look of an architectural model, anticipating Olivo Barbieri's peculiar

use of aerial photography for his *Site Specific* project by almost 100 years. Its poetic

name was a reference to Henry James' description of Lower Manhattan's rapidly

changing form as seen from the harbor in "New York Revisited" from *The American*

Scene [1907], and it gave some indication that Coburn viewed the Liberty Tower and

the new face of Lower Manhattan with something more that just wonder:

> Crowned not only with no history, and consecrated by no uses save
> the commercial at any cost, [Lower Manhattan's skyscrapers] are
> simply the most piercing notes in that concert of the expensively
> provisional into which your supreme sense of New York resolves
> itself. They never begin to speak to you, in the manner of the builded
> majesties of the world as we have heretofore known such—towers or
> temples or fortresses or palaces—with the authority of things of
> permanence or even of things of long duration. One story is good
> only till another is told, and sky-scrapers are the last word of
> economic ingenuity only till another word be written. This shall be
> possibly a word of still uglier meaning, but the vocabulary of thrift at
> any price shows boundless resources, and the consciousness of that
> truth, the consciousness of the finite, the menaced, the essentially
> *invented* state, twinkles ever, to my perception, in the thousand glassy
> eyes of these giants of the mere market. (77)

The only one of Coburn's *Pinnacles* photographs that appears to be

anomalous, in that it seems to focus more on the old New York than it does the new,

is his ultra high-angle photograph of Trinity Church [Fig. 1], taken from the top of

the Bankers Trust Company Building and bracketing the churchyard between

Broadway and the Church Street elevated railway. With its 280-foot spire, Trinity

Church was the city's tallest building for fifty years after its completion, when it was

finally bested by R.H. Robertson's "premodern" American Tract Society Building of

1896, and, as such, one of Manhattan's great landmarks. By 1912, however, the

spire had been dwarfed by a number of buildings in Lower Manhattan and its Gothic Revival architecture was often singled out as being an emblem of New York's horizontal past, when it was God who reigned supreme over the skyline and not "the Almighty Dollar" (*WPA* 93, 310). Trinity Church was far from just some helpless relic of the past, however—in actual fact its land holdings, originally granted in 1705 "for the benefit of said Church and other pious uses," were sold and leased to produce the very modernity that hemmed it in on all sides, and beginning in the late nineteenth century and continuing well into the twentieth century the parish's controlling corporation was embroiled in controversy, singled out as "a classic example… of the social evil of land speculation" (*WPA* 312). If Coburn uses his privileged view to place Trinity Church right at the heart of the new order, he also uses it to emphasize the speculative impulse behind this new order: the rooftops in the lower-right corner and the left side of the frame underline the fact that the Beaux Arts façades that surround Trinity Church are just that—façades. Already a year earlier, in an essay in *Camera Work*, Coburn had begun to describe the resonances between the camera and the skyscraper. Now New York's skyscrapers were no longer just emblems of modernity, they were machines for seeing, and Coburn was using them to scrutinize a new New York that was just then coming into being.

Shortly afterwards, Coburn followed up his New York experiments with a number of major changes: he left the United States, never to return, he made a clean break with Pictorialism, whose aesthetic he now openly ridiculed, and by 1914 he had developed ties with the Vorticists, a group of progressive British abstract artists led by the painter Wyndham Lewis and the writer and painter Ezra Pound who'd

been inspired by the Italian Futurists and the Cubists to develop their own modernist/machinist aesthetic. By 1916, when he wrote "The Future of Pictorial Photography" for *Photograms of the Year*, Coburn was singing the praises of the "moderns" and calling for photography to "throw off the shackles" and join their ranks in terms that expanded upon his New York work from earlier that decade:

> [Why] should not the camera…attempt something fresh and untried? Why should not its subtle rapidity be utilized to study movement? Why not repeated successive exposures of an object in motion on the same plate? Why should not perspective be studied from angles hitherto neglected or unobserved? Why, I ask you earnestly, need we go on making commonplace little exposures of subjects that may be sorted into groups of landscapes, portraits, and figure studies? Think of the joy of doing something which it would be impossible to classify…. ("The Future" 205)

Later, in the same essay, Coburn emphasized that he felt the medium was still in its infancy, its potential largely untapped, and he expressed the hope that photography, "with her infinite possibilities, do things stranger and more fascinating than the most fantastic dream" (207). Unfortunately, this turn in Coburn's work led him away from the urban milieu and towards the production of his "vortographs"—photos produced independently of any "natural" subjects, using an optical machine—which anticipated similar non-objective experiments by Man Ray and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy by several years, and "motion studies" and multiple exposures along the lines of the Futurists' early "photodynamic" and "polyphysiognomical" portraits from 1911-1913 (Lista 29-30). The Vorticists apparently had less faith in the photographic image than either Coburn or the Futurists, however, so when Pound was quoted as saying that photography was inferior to painting, "in that it is an art of the eye, not of the eye and hand together," Coburn parted ways with the group (Misselbeck 178).

By the end of 1918, with the war now over, Coburn moved to Wales, and at that point not only did he leave the avant-garde and the urban milieu behind, but he more or less parted ways with photography for the next three decades (Coburn 116). In just over six years, Coburn had retreated from studies of the abstract nature of urban space in New York to studies in pure studio-bound abstraction, before fleeing to the Welsh countryside.

1913

1913, the year before war broke out in Europe, was a pivotal year for New York. It was the year that Cass Gilbert's Woolworth Building, the 60-story, 792-ft technological marvel he designed to advertise Frank W. Woolworth's popular chain of stores, was unveiled to the world, and in April of that year President Woodrow Wilson christened the building when he pressed a remote control in the White House which instantly lit up the building's 80,000 lights (Federal Writers' 97; Koolhaas 99). Though it clearly contributed greatly to the advancement of the American skyscraper style, its Gothic ornamentation underlined the fact that this building, too, was not ready to make a clean break with the past (Federal Writers' 98; Scott and Rutkoff 22). In fact, bathed in light, the building took on spiritual dimensions, and it quickly became known as "The Cathedral of Commerce" (Koolhaas 99). In spite of its hesitation, Woolworth's "sky sign" was roundly acclaimed as a masterpiece, and it remained the world's tallest building until well into the next decade.

1913 was also the year of the American Association of Painters and Sculptors' International Exhibition of Modern Art, the show that was largely credited

with introducing modern art to America, the show that became known as the Armory

Show. Of course, the Armory Show wasn't completely unprecedented—it was

Stieglitz's pioneering curatorial work at 291 that had really introduced European

modernism to an American audience and mounted it side-by-side with the work of

homegrown modernists, but there was no denying that the Armory Show was a

sensation unlike any other up to that point. Consisting of some 1,300 works, roughly

a third of which were European, the show was a veritable cause célèbre—Marcel

Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*, his highly abstracted Jules-Etienne

Marey-by-way-of-the-Futurists[6] study in motion, being the show's most notorious

scandal—attracting an extraordinary 75,000 attendees over the course of its four-

week run, with 10,000 in attendance on its final day alone (Scott and Rutkoff 60).

Just as importantly, the show brought numerous prominent European artists to New

York and strengthened ties between America's metropolis and the Continental art

capitals. For many European artists, their first experience of America was a

revelation. Thus, in spite of America's reputation for relative lack of sophistication,

Francis Picabia proclaimed America's ascent within the art world to *The New York

Times* some 30-40 years before his prediction came true: "France is almost

outplayed, it is in America that I believe that the theories of the New Art will hold

most tenaciously" (Scott and Rutkoff 64). This audacious claim was almost certainly

influenced by the American modernist art that Picabia came into contact with at the

Armory Show, but more than anything it was inspired by the modernity of New York

itself:

---

[6] Jules-Etienne Marey was the Frenchman who developed the proto-cinematic
"chronophotography" process in the 1880s.

Your New York is the cubist, the futurist city. It expresses in its architecture, its life, its spirit, the modern thought. You have passed through all the old schools, and are futurists in word and deed and thought… I see much, much more, perhaps, than you who are used to it see. (Lucic 29)

When war broke out the following year, many of the European artists who had showed at the Armory Show fled to New York—this group included Duchamp and, not surprisingly, Picabia, and both became central to both the Stieglitz circle and the Arensberg circle, as well as the development of New York Dada (Scott and Rutkoff 45). New York's more nativist modernists worried that the arrival of the Europeans might lead to the establishment of a neo-colonial mindset within the New York arts scene, with homegrown talents bowing down before the Continent's established avant-garde masters, but most within the New York scene were inspired by the deadpan and satirical approach their European comrades brought to the Machine Age, and the best combined the two reactions: taking inspiration while remaining fiercely independent (Scott and Rutkoff 45; Lucic 28).

Coady

Outstanding, in this regard, was the work of Robert Coady. An artist, writer, publisher, and gallery owner, Coady was nothing if not an anomaly. His gallery, the Washington Square Gallery, was one of a number of modern art galleries that opened up in Manhattan in the wake of Armory Show, and its bold and irreverent curatorial practices—mounting works of art by Picasso, Braque, Matisse, Rousseau, Léger, Juan Gris, along with exhibitions of African art, carvings from the South Pacific, and children's art—paralleled those of 291 (Bohan, "Looking" 168-9). But whereas 291

made a point of using its broad spectrum of shows to situate American modernism,

Coady rejected modern American art, for the most part, out of "a belief that

contemporary American fine art lacked the cultural authority of either European

modernism or the art of non-Western peoples" (Bohan, "Looking" 169). America's

particular brand of cultural authority, Coady reasoned, had little to do with its elite

culture, but was firmly embedded in its vernacular culture. With this in mind, Coady

launched *The Soil* (1916-7), his short-lived journal, in December 1916—

"iconoclastic and nativist" in its orientation, Coady's journal was also adamantly

urban in spite of its apparently agrarian title (Bohan, "Looking" 171). In its

inaugural issue, Coady claimed, "There is an American Art. Young, robust,

energetic, naïve, immature, daring and big spirited. Active in every conceivable

field," and *The Soil* lived up to this vision, creating an "urban collage" out of

journalism, poetry, editorials, musical fragments, and a wide assortment of visual

materials, and drawing inspiration from everything from cartoons, to boxing, to

motion pictures in an attempt to locate this American Art (Bohan, "Looking" 172-4;

Suarez 58).

In its idiosyncratic nativism and its democratic idealism, *The Soil* was

decidedly Whitmanesque, a prime example of how the Whitman revival that

surrounded the 60th anniversary of the original edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1915) and

the centenary of the bard's birth (1919) energized New York's early twentieth

century modernism. Already in 1907, critic Benjamin De Casseres was predicting

that, "There are multiplying signs that the United States is about to discover its most

significant figure… Whitman is in the air," while others had taken to referring to

Whitman as "the first Modern Man" (Bohan, "Looking" 165-6). In the years that followed the Armory Show, partly due to the influence of visiting Europeans who saw him as being "America's Homer," Whitman began to be acknowledged as an early urban-industrial poet of the highest order, and as the "gateway to the future of the New World," and journal after journal, from *Glebe* (1913-1914), to *Greenwich Village* (1915), to *Seven Arts* (1916-1917), cited him as an inspiration (Bohan, "Whitman's" 36, 38; Bohan, "Looking" 165, 169). While other journals paid homage to Whitman strictly on the level of content, *The Soil* sought a form that would be true to the bard's work and the results could be exhilarating, often eliciting great enthusiasm. Thus, Coady's treatise "American Art" in issue #1 consisted mainly of a list—a self-conscious example of Whitmanesque cataloguing—that was meant to convey *The Soil*'s peculiar aesthetic and it drew heavily from the realms of modern engineering and popular culture:

> The Panama Canal, the Sky-scraper and Colonial Architecture. The East River, the Battery and the "Fish Theatre." The Tug Boat and the Steam-shovel. The Steam Lighter. The Steel Plants, the Washing Plants and the Electrical Shops. The Bridges, the Docks, the Cutouts, the Viaduct, the "Matt M. Shay" and the "3000" [two locomotives]. Gary. The Polarine and the Portland Cement Works. Wright's and Curtiss's Aeroplanes and the Aeronauts… Jack Johnson, Charlie Chaplin, and "Spike" in "The Girl in the Game." Annette Kellerman, "Neptune's Daughter." Bert. Williams, Rag-time, the Buck and Wing and the Clog. Syncopation and the Cake-Walk. The Crazy Quilt and the Rag-mat. The Minstrels. Cigar-store Indians. The Window Dressers… The Motor Boat and the Automobile… Christy Mathewson, Ty Cobb… The Clowns, the Jugglers, the Bareback and the Rough Riders… The Motorcycle. Coney Island, the Shooting Galleries, Steeplechase Park, the Beaches… "Others," "Poetry," "Boxing Record," "The Police Gazette," the Sporting Pages, Krazy Kat, Tom Powers. Old John Brown. Nick Carter, Deadwood Dick, Old King Brady, Tom Teaser, Walt Whitman and Poe. William Dean Howells, Artemus Ward and Gertrude Stein… "Dixie," "Nobody" and the "By Heck Foxtrot." The Toy Soldiers in the Hippodrome…

> The Zoo. Staten Island Warehouses, Parkhurst's Church and the
> Woolworth Building. The Metropolitan Tower. Prospect Park. The
> City Hall… The Pennsylvania Station, The Pullman, the Centipedes
> and the Camelbacks. The Electric Signs and the Railroad Signals.
> Colt's Revolvers, Savage Rifles… Hans Wagner, Home-Run Baker…
> The Roller Coasters. The Gas House. Madison Square Garden on a
> fight night. The Runners, the Jumpers, the Swimmers, the Boxers, the
> Battle Ships and the Gunners… The Movie Posters. The Factories
> and Mills. The Jack Pot. Dialects and Slang. Type… The Gowanus
> Canal and the Bush Terminal. The Batteries… The Carpenters, the
> Masons, the Bricklayers, the Chimney Builders, the Iron Workers.
> The Cement Mixers, the Uneeda Biscuit Building. The Pulleys and
> Hoists… The Cranes, the Plows, the Drills, the Motors, the
> Thrashers, the Derricks, Steam Hammers, Stone Crushers, Steam
> Rollers, Grain Elevators, Trench Excavators, Blast Furnaces—This is
> American Art. (*Soil* 3-4)

If Coady's aesthetic was bewildering, all the better: "It is not a refined granulation

nor a delicate disease—it is not an ism. It is not an illustration to a theory, it is an

expression of life—a complicated life—American life." No, this aesthetic was an

organic expression of the American spirit, an aesthetic that had, "grown out of the

soil" (ibid 4). Elsewhere, Coady referred to this spirit as "Americanism" (*Soil* #2

80).

Ruth Bohan has argued that *The Soil*, "reads like one of Whitman's

journalistic rambles through Manhattan," and that its logic, "like that of *Leaves of

Grass*," is that of an American *flâneur*, with the rambles serving as a means towards

transformation (173). For our purposes, what was particularly fascinating about *The

Soil* was how it situated Coady's notion of an emerging American Art in New York,

and used it to question and challenge the new New York. For instance, in the

inaugural issue of *The Soil* somehow, mysteriously, a Mr. George W. Vos wrote a

letter to the editor to say that, having been confronted by a New York street scene

where a construction site happened to be placed directly opposite a "Fifth Avenue

Studio," this art-world "outsider" had found the image of the steam-shovel "ripping out great handfuls of boulders and earth" endlessly more compelling than the gallery's "still pictures and bronzes"—thus expressing views on modern art and the modern world that bore a remarkable similarity to those expressed by the editor himself in the very same issue (*The Soil* 17-8). Sure enough, Coady introduced his "Moving Sculpture Series," consisting of still photographs of some of heavy industry's more impressive specimens, such as "A Sellers Ten Ton Swinging Jib Crane" and "Locomotive No. 40000 Built by The Baldwin Locomotive Works" in the very next issue, #2. That same issue featured a spread that compared Attilio Piccirilli's recently completed 63-ft-high Beaux Arts *National Maine Monument*, in Columbus Circle, with a similarly shaped "Chambersburg Double Frame Steam Hammer," accompanying them with the caption "Which is the—Monument?" Coady's "moving sculptures" and modern monuments were clearly indebted to the New York Dada sensibility associated with Marcel Duchamp's readymade series and Francis Picabia's *Machine sans nom* (1915), *Portrait d'une jeune fille américaine* (1915), and *Ici, c'est ici Stieglitz/foi et amour* (1915), and like them not only did he anticipate the "Art of the Machine Age" by a number of years, he did so with an ironic sensibility that would be largely absent in virtually all of the later work (Wilson 29).

More interesting still, in terms of an intervention with New York, was another two-page assemblage that appeared in *The Soil* #1. Here, Coady pitted an excerpt from the work of his primary muse, Walt Whitman, side-by-side with an excerpt from the work his modern muse, Arthur Cravan, the notorious poet,

publisher, boxer, lothario, and fellow Whitman scholar, on one page. Thus, he

printed these lines from Whitman's landmark "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry":

> Others will enter the gates of the ferry and cross from shore to shore,
> Others will watch the run of the flood-tide,
> Others will see the shipping of Manhattan north and west, and the
> heights of Brooklyn to the south and east,
> Others will see the islands large and small;
> Fifty years hence, others will see them as they cross, the sun half an
> hour high,
> A hundred years hence, or ever so many hundred years hence, others
> will see them.

And immediately below them, almost in call-and-response form, he placed these

lines from Cravan's "Sifflet," his account of his passage from Le Havre to New York

roughly "fifty years hence":

> New York! New York!
> I should like to inhabit you!
> I see there science married
> To industry,
> In an audacious modernity,
> And in the palaces,
> Globes,
> Dazzling to the retina…. (*The Soil* 36)

On the opposite page, as evidence of New York's "audacious modernity" and of

Whitman's prophecy, he placed an extreme high-angle shot of Lower Manhattan that

called to mind the man-made canyons depicted by Coburn in his *Pinnacles of New*

York series and Whitman's "islands large and small." Unlike the work of Coburn,

the photograph utilized by Coady was not an auteur's modernist vision of New York

and its radical change, it was the product of a large photographic firm and the

accompanying caption was as straight-forward as they get: "New York by Brown

Bros" [Fig. 2]. Not surprisingly, given his avowed hostility toward abstraction and

the theoretical language used to justify it, Coady's photograph had little of the eye

for abstract patterning that one saw in *The Octopus*. Instead, "New York by Brown Bros." presents its viewer with a jarringly multiform city, a riot of styles, taken from the oddly serene Olympian perspective—complete with Stieglitzian artificial clouds—afforded by the Singer Building. The view looks north-northeast across Broadway towards the Park Row Building (1899)—R.H. Robertson's thirty-story proto-skyscraper, and the world's tallest building until the construction of the Singer Building—towards City Hall Park, which sits obscured behind it, and towards the newly constructed Woolworth Building, whose base appears in the upper left corner of the image. In other words, the photograph is focused on the very heart of Lower Manhattan's City Hall District, on the very heart of municipal New York, but its framing and its graininess somehow manage to make the scene almost entirely unfamiliar—if it weren't for the presence of the Park Row Building's distinctive cupolas, one might think the Brown Bros. had managed to replace the real New York with a simulation. Coady's tripartite two-page spread was complicated—it stitched together Walt Whitman at his most prophetic (along with a nod to another of New York's modernist literary magazines of the day, *Others*), the raw power and intensity of emotions characteristic of European modernism at its most free-spirited, and a found image of Lower Manhattan's "culture of congestion" (and accumulation)—an urban readymade, if you will—into a powerful, if open-ended, whole. *The Soil* folded after only five issues, and Coady died just four years later in 1921, but it was features such as these that would continue to resonate within New York's avant-garde for some time.

<u>Sheeler</u>

Like so many other artists of his generation—and like virtually every other artist discussed so far in this chapter—Charles Sheeler was an artist whose conception of art was wholly changed by a trip to Europe. If the Grand Tour in previous days had edified generations of Northern European artists by exposing them to the classical wonders and Renaissance advances of Southern Europe, the new Grand Tour—that of North America's late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century artists—involved a transatlantic journey and exposure to the modernist breakthroughs of the European capitals—and Paris, the undisputed cultural capital of the world, above all—and frequently the experience was shattering. This was certainly the case for Sheeler, who traveled to Paris in 1909 and managed to see the work of a number of the avant-garde's established leaders, including Cézanne, Matisse, Braque, and Picasso, and later reported that he'd experienced rupture: "An indelible line had been drawn between the past and the future" (Lucic 36). 1909 was also the year that the Futurists took the art world by storm, but if their cult of the machine left an impression on Sheeler it remained repressed, for it was only in the 1920s that he developed the machine age aesthetic that would bring him his greatest fame. As Sheeler became more and more immersed in the American modernist movement of the 1910s, machine age imagery and iconography was all around him, in the work of Duchamp, in the work of Picabia, at the Armory Show, which left its mark on Sheeler as it did on so many others, and especially in the work of Morton Schamberg, Sheeler's closest artist-friend, whose paintings were done in a "straight" abstract machine style (Pultz 478). However, Sheeler's embrace of these motifs

came only "gradually and methodically," in part because Sheeler continued to live in

Pennsylvania during this period, at first in Philadelphia and then in his rural home in

Doylestown (Lucic 35). Sheeler was also slow to take up photography, the artistic

medium of the machine age, with any seriousness, concentrating his energies on

painting instead, even though he and Schamberg had both taken up commercial

photography in 1910 as the means towards pursuing their painting studies (Lucic 39).

It was only in 1917 that Sheeler began to shoot artistic, experimental photographs,

and that was primarily in an effort to rid himself of obvious European influences on

his drawing and painting by providing a new source for his art: the photographic

image. Perhaps not surprisingly, this shift corresponds roughly to the point when

Sheeler first met Strand—either Sheeler was looking upon photography with new

eyes because of the influence of Strand, or Sheeler gravitated towards Strand because

of a newfound interest in photography. In any case, the results of this new *modus*

operandi included a series of abstract studies of Sheeler's Doylestown home, as well

as his acclaimed *Bucks County House*. The real change came only the following

year, though, when Schamberg died suddenly, and Sheeler, in a state of bereavement,

decided a move to New York might help him make a clean break with the past

(Lucic 42). This was October 1918—the "war to end all wars" ended in November,

and by the summer of 1919, when Strand got released from the military, Sheeler had

had the time to get acclimatized to his new surroundings and he was all too ready to

make his debut as an "urban iconographer" (Lucic 47).

Strand

        Unlike his colleague, Paul Strand never had any doubts about photography and, aside from a job he had once selling hand-tinted photographs of universities to students and alumni, photography was never the means to an end for him (Hambourg 24-5). Of course, he also had an auspicious debut. From the age of fourteen to the age of nineteen Strand attended the Ethical Culture School, a model school for the disadvantaged that was among the brightest successes produced by New York's Age of Reform, and there under the tutelage of his exceptional gifted and insightful photography teacher, the teenaged Strand found his voice. Strand's mentor was none other than Lewis Hine, the photographer, sociologist, and social reformer, and though, for the most part, Strand shied away from the proto-documentary mode of photographic expression one associates with reformers like Hine and Jacob Riis, and he actually pursued a pictorialist aesthetic immediately upon leaving ECS, Strand never let go of the social conscience imparted to him by Hine (Hambourg 13-14). Beginning in 1911, after leaving school, Strand appears to have given himself a crash course in modern art, one which included repeated visits to 291, one that was capped by Strand's visit to the Armory Show (Hambourg 16, 20). By late 1914 or early 1915, the combined effects of the Armory Show and the mentorship of Stieglitz had rid Strand of any remaining pictorialist tendencies, especially soft focus, and he plunged headlong into the emerging "straight" aesthetic, first taking it on a road trip back and forth across America, and then returning to New York with a new intensity of vision (Hambourg 24-6). Perhaps inspired by the homegrown urban vitalism of painter and Stieglitz circle favorite John Marin, whose watercolors, such as

Movement, Fifth Avenue, created a sense of New York that was, "intensely stimulating, but also disconnected, fragmented and disorienting," Strand began to focus on motion studies of New York, and in order to do so he began to walk the city streets with abandon (Lucic 26-8). As he put it later, "I used to wander around New York City, all over it; Bowery, Wall Street, uptown, the viaduct that leads from Grant's tomb. I could see everything" (Hambourg 27). This period in Strand's work—from 1915 to 1917—produced a number of established masterpieces, but one of the earliest and probably the most highly acclaimed of these photographs was his 1915 photograph *Wall Street*. One of a number of these photographs that captures New York pedestrians on the move, *Wall Street* frames about a dozen people on their morning commute against the five massive, ominous windows that flank a sturdy Financial District building, all of them heading directly into a low, early morning sun, which, in turn, casts long shadows behind them. Many commentators have noted Strand's admitted fascination with, "all these little people walking by these great big sinister almost threatening shapes…these black, repetitive, rectangular shapes," most have noted that the building in question was the Morgan & Company Building, and some have noted that although the windows have the look of a "great maw" (as Strand himself later put), Strand's intentions were more innocent at the time, simply focused on capturing a group of people "rushing to work." Virtually no one, however, has noted that the five-story building designed by the firm of Trowbridge and Livingston had just recently been completed in 1914 (Hambourg 28-9). In other words, the space that made Strand's iconic shot of Wall Street possible had only just come into existence—he might not have realized it at the time, but the

photograph's sense of modernity went much deeper than just the frantic pace of the morning commute.

Encouraged by this modern turn in his work—and the positive reaction he was getting from such luminaries as Stieglitz—Strand spent part of a summer at a retreat in Twin Lakes, Connecticut experimenting with the abstract tendency in modern art (Pultz 478). Anticipating the work Sheeler would produce in Doylestown the following year, Strand took dozens of photographs where he framed the details of his surroundings (kitchen bowls, shadows on the porch) in tightly cropped compositions that flattened space and abstracted the real world into delicately balanced arrangements of light and shadow. Strand was applying lessons he'd learned from his studies of European modernism, and especially Cubism—he later explained that these photographs were his way of coming to terms with, "what I now refer to as the abstract method, which was first revealed in the paintings of Picasso, Braque, Léger, and others…," with the depiction of "things that were… 'anti-photographic,'" of "things in which there is an enormous amount of movement and no recognizable content as a whole" (Frizot, "*Camera Work*" 392; Barnouw 67). His experiments would have an enormous impact on the Stieglitz circle and, from there, the rest of the photographic world.

Later that year, Strand returned to New York and began to produce more Cubist-inspired photographs like his *Untitled* (1917) [Fig. 3]. This low-angle, multi-planar shot captures some interesting shadow-play, a strange reflection from a window on the left side of the frame, and a rich assortment of architectural details. It also included a good portion of Ernest R. Graham's notorious Equitable Building

(1915), a building whose façade shot up like a cliff 542 feet straight up, giving pedestrians on Broadway the vivid sense of, "standing at the bottom of a man-made canyon," a "great box" (the largest office building in the world at the time) that was perhaps, "the ultimate early-twentieth-century expression of the skyscraper as nothing more than a device to cram more floors into the sky," and a structure that single-handedly provoked the Zoning Code of 1916 (Nash 25; Goldberger 15). Because of Strand's daring composition, with its bold diagonals pushing up into the sky, one is only just able to identify the photograph's star attraction, its southern flank adorned by the distinctive pyramidal shadow of the neighboring Bankers Trust Company Building (1912), and the only elements that break up the composition's otherwise rigid geometry are a couple of puffs of smoke (including one in shadow form, emitting from the top of the pyramid), a solitary cloud, and that amorphous reflection. Strand's 1915-1917 New York work also contains a number of high-angle shots that bear some resemblance to Coburn's *Pinnacles* series, although none were taken from the heights of New York's tallest buildings. Thus, instead of gazing down upon the soigné space of Madison Square, Strand's 1917 *Geometric Backyards, New York* finds abstract patterning in the long narrow backyards of Morningside Heights, then disrupts these bold diagonal rectangles with the haphazard lines of laundry hanging out to dry, barren, twisted tree branches, and their shadows—the natural and the everyday. *New York (From the Viaduct)* (1916) is another exercise in defamiliarization, this one capturing the long, lattice-like shadows of a viaduct over Riverside Drive in such a way as to create an abstract, modernist composition out of the urban infrastructure, one that fully encompasses

two dark figures in conversation, one whose only disruption is a cluster of leafy tree branches that cuts across the photograph's upper right-hand corner.

Finally, this period in Strand's career also marked the beginning of the Machine Age aesthetic that he would develop more forcefully in the 1920s in photographs such as *Akeley* (1922), which studied the insides of his newly purchased motion picture camera with an eye for its sinuous curves. Most famously, this was the period when Strand produced his *Wire Wheel* of 1917, a photograph that's often described as being emblematic of the development of the machine aesthetic in America because of its tightly cropped, modernist focus on that ultimate emblem of the Machine Age, the automobile. Strand's photograph is yet another excellent example of his fascination with finding the abstract and the modern in the everyday, but what's often overlooked is the way Strand places this composition firmly (if obliquely) in an urban setting. While Strand's picture is certainly not antithetical to later Machine Age commercial photography such as Margaret Bourke-White's *Detail of a La Salle* (1933), it's a photograph that simply must be understood in the context of his 1915-1917 New York work. Thus, the warped forms of the skyscrapers we see in the headlight at the top of the photograph are quite literally a reflection of the new New York, the New York of the skyscraper and the machine, and once again we're confronted with an example of Strand's experiments in defamiliarizing New York so that we might understand it with new eyes.

For many, Strand's groundbreaking work from the mid- to late-1910s represents a "point of no return" in the history of photography, one that, "marks the arrival of a style that provided the foundation for the essentially international

aesthetic of the 1920s," and one that largely relegated Pictorialism to the dustbin of history (Frizot, "Another" 387). Fittingly, Strand was the figure who brought *Camera Work*'s fourteen-year run to an end. *Camera Work* no. 48, from October 1916, the magazine's penultimate issue, featured six photographs from Strand's 1915 series on movement and traffic in New York. *Camera Work* no. 49-50, a double issue whose release was delayed until June 1917 because of President Wilson's decision to take the United States into war, was dedicated in its entirety to Strand's groundbreaking work. Here, Stieglitz combined examples of Strand at his most modernist and abstract—the Twin Lakes series—and Strand at his most socially engaged—Strand's Lower East Side portraits—and in his introduction to his protégé's work he wrote:

> The work is brutally direct. Devoid of all flim-flam; devoid of trickery and of any 'ism,' devoid of any attempts to mystify an ignorant public, including the photographers themselves. These photographs are the direct expression of today. (Hambourg 41)

The issue also ran Paul Strand's essay "Photography," which had originally run in *Seven Arts*, and in which he provided a stirring account of the particular poignancy of "straight" photography, while simultaneously paying homage to his highly esteemed mentor.

> The photographer must see clearly the limitations and, at the same time, the potential qualities of his medium… This means a real respect for the thing in front of him…
>   In the same way the creators of our skyscrapers had to face the similar circumstance of no precedent, and it was through that very necessity of evolving a new form, both in architecture and photography, that the resulting expression was vitalized. Where in any medium has the tremendous energy and potential power of New York been more fully realized than in the purely direct photographs of Stieglitz? (Strand 137)

However, with the United States now involved in the Great War, Strand found himself unable to continue with the project he'd started in 1915—in fact, he found himself unable to photograph at all. Like many other New York artists at the time, creativity now seemed "mad" and he put down his camera. Later, Strand would look back wistfully upon that moment in history: "with that rupture, one of the most vital and significant experiments, not only in American life, but in the world life of today, came to an end" (Hambourg 41-2).

Return to *Manhatta*

Right from the start, from *Manhatta*'s first frame, it was clear this "little film about New York" was not a standard scenic. Above a sketch of Lower Manhattan's skyline as seen from the New Jersey shore, with the Municipal Building, the Woolworth Building, the Singer Building, the Equitable Building, and the Bankers Trust Building all clearly visible, and signs of New York's bustling harbor in the foreground, the intertitle read:

> "City of the world
> (for all races are here)
> City of tall facades
> of marble and iron
> Proud and passionate city."

The language bore the unmistakable imprint of Walt Whitman, and those familiar with *Leaves of Grass* might have even identified the passage's source: "City of Ships." Picking up on Whitman's imagery, the film's first two shots consisted of an approach of the city by boat, with harbor traffic moving across the foreground and a portion of Lower Manhattan's skyline on prominent display—the Whitehall Building

(1900, 32-story addition 1910), and, once again, the Bankers Trust, Equitable

Building, and the Singer Building all in the background, the South Ferry Terminal

visible on the shore—but taken from an entirely different angle than that of the

sketch. Then, after a panoramic shot of Lower Manhattan from the Brooklyn shore,

with the Brooklyn Bridge's iconic form in the foreground, the film's second intertitle

appears:

> "When million-footed Manhattan
> unpent, descends
> to its pavements."

Once again the passage came from Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, but this time it was

snatched from "A Broadway Pageant." The very next shot was a reverse shot from

inside the South Ferry Terminal that revealed the point of view of the opening shots:

they were taken from the Staten Island Ferry. The ferry approached, moving from

sunlight to shadow, there was a pause as it came to a halt against the pier, and then,

with the opening of the gate, there was a rush of movement as the morning

commuters came surging forward, "unpent." We were only two intertitles and four

shots into the film, and already Sheeler and Strand had presented us with four

quotations—two from Whitman and two from Stieglitz: *City of Ambition* and the

Ferry Boat series, both from 1910.

As Jan-Christopher Horak has pointed out, the view of Manhattan presented

in the intertitle sketch (it appears at the bottom of all twelve) is one that's never

repeated. Not only does Sheeler and Strand's camera never adopt the same point of

view, but it never provides the audience with a view that is as unified and easily

legible.

Nowhere in the film are spatial relationships as clearly established. Nowhere else in the film will a central perspective orient and position the viewer in the concrete and recognizable geographic space of the film's narrative. ("Modernist" 61)

Even the film's first three shots—by far and away the most straightforward and iconic of the entire film—don't position the viewer with the same sense of perspective, opting instead for a shifting, unstable view on the one hand, and a fragmented and obstructed view on the other. And from here on, things only get more difficult—the overwhelming sense of the city that one gets from the rest of the film is one of fragmentation and discontinuity. Anyone hoping to find the panoramic mode of representation that had dominated the scenic genre since the turn of the century, or a standard travelogue depiction of the sights of New York (Grant's Tomb, Washington Square, etc.), would have been disappointed. Not only did the filmmakers not venture north of the City Hall District, but their version of Lower Manhattan was disjointed, composed primarily of views taken from the pinnacles that surround Trinity Church, composed primarily of strange high-angle and extreme high-angle shots. Sheeler and Strand's version of New York was still "magnificent" in its own way, but this was hardly the triumphant vision of New York one expected of the genre.

Even the film's presentation of the Woolworth Building was strangely anti-climactic—it tilted down the building instead of soaring up, and, stranger still, it cropped out the building's majestic Gothic crown, beginning its trajectory just below, thus giving the impression that the filmmakers were more interested in its clean, modern lines than in its historicist flourishes. The pan of the Equitable Building was handled in exactly the opposite way, tilting up from its foundation to

its peak, but, as mentioned earlier, the Equitable Building was hardly renowned for inspiring exultation or even admiration. On the other hand, not only were Trinity Church and its famous 280-foot spire very much a part of tours of New York at the time, but they had been inspiring awe for over seventy years, and *Manhatta* visits and revisits the church and its yard repeatedly, but never in a picture postcard manner where the entire church in all its glory is there neatly packaged for the viewer's consumption. Instead, while the church is clearly central to Sheeler and Strand's understanding of the district, they make a point of only ever providing the audience with partial views from oblique angles, views that emphasize the way the vertical city has shot up around the church, changing the very space it occupies. Thus, even when the film depicts recognized sights—and more often than not it chooses to look elsewhere—the sense of the city that one gets from Sheeler and Strand's film is of an "unseen New York."

Thus, immediately following its treatment of the Equitable Building, the film contains an entire sequence of shots that feature tightly cropped, high-angle views of the architecture, and especially the rooftops, of Lower Manhattan, composed in such a way that the buildings involved are almost completely unrecognizable, any direct sign of humanity has been all but edited out, and the only movement comes from the many smokestacks pumping smoke into the sky. This series of eight shots, sandwiched between the fifth and the sixth intertitle, is more consistent with the work of Sheeler in the period immediately following the making of *Manhatta*, as we shall see, and less so with Strand's work before or after. To be fair, though, Strand's *Untitled* (1917), mentioned earlier, is not entirely inconsistent with this sequence of

shots, except that he tilts his camera up instead of down, and the result is a composition that, with its glimpse of sky (and that single cloud), indicates a natural world outside the urban. In both cases—Strand's *Untitled* and the sequence of eight shots in question—the presence of smoke serves to disrupt the otherwise rigid geometry of the scene. More generally, though, smoke and smokestacks are both omnipresent in *Manhatta*—there's a reason the film was named *La Fumée de New York* when it was screened in Paris in 1923—and what becomes clear as the film progresses is that this focus is a reflection of Sheeler and Strand's very own emerging machine aesthetic. New York is depicted as being a vast and complicated machine in *Manhatta*, just as it was for Stieglitz—the turn towards moving pictures only accentuates this, bringing motion—however ephemeral—to the city's most abstract spaces.

Beyond the daring camerawork, the film's second most noticeable characteristic is its use of intertitles. The snippets of poetry—twelve in all—that are interspersed among *Manhatta*'s collection of images are all uncredited, but Whitman's voice is unmistakable. There continue to be some questions over the intertitles and whether they were part of Strand and Sheeler's original vision or whether they were added by outsiders, all of them stemming from the fact that the film didn't actually carry its Whitmanesque title until 1926, as well as the fact that Strand mentioned that the film's intertitles were "by the Rialto" in his original press release for the film. But as others have argued quite forcefully, there is considerable evidence suggesting that the intertitles were part of the project from the start and not added as part of a cheap ploy to provide the film with artistic credibility or narrative

unity (Bohan, "Whitman's" 45; Horak, "Modernist" 58; Stebbins and Keyes 18). These include the diversity of the sources and the seamlessness of their integration into the film, but one of the strongest indications that this was so, and one that's largely been overlooked, is simply the fact that *Manhatta* as we have come to know it—with intertitles—seems very much in line with the Whitman revival within the New York arts scene documented above. Not only was it produced by two artists who were integral parts of these very artistic circles, but the project was conceived during the very centenary of Whitman's birth, when this revival reached something of a crescendo, including some twenty-five books and over 400 articles on the bard.

Just three years earlier, in "Photography," the polemic in praise of "straight photographic methods" that he'd published in *Seven Arts* and then again in the final issue of *Camera Work*, Strand had described straight photography as being a specifically American movement, a form of modernism built on the work of people like Alfred Stieglitz that was fully independent of "the outside influence of Paris art-schools or their dilute offspring" and fully in step with the dynamism and energy characteristic of early twentieth-century New York (136-7). As he and Sheeler drew upon the straight tradition to channel the particularities of New York Modern into their film, is it any wonder that they should have turned to Whitman for inspiration, given his significance to New York modernism more generally, given that many saw him as embodying the pre-history of New York modernism (Gaughan 136)? While a number of critics have argued that *Manhatta* is a conflicted film, "oscillating between modernism and a Whitmanesque romanticism,"[7] what these critics appear to

_____

[7] See Horak (1990) and Suarez (2007), for instance.

have missed is that there was no contradiction here: American modernism was modernist *and* Whitmanesque, modernist *and* romantic, its sense of modernity was non-synchronous, "Baudelairean" (Horak, "Modernist" 55-6; McDonough, "Fluid" 100). American modernists may have looked to Europe for inspiration and validation the way that Stieglitz did, but Stieglitz himself eventually turned away from Europe, and he and many of his comrades within the New York arts scene fully believed in the cultivation of a homegrown modernist tradition. Time and time again European modernism found itself in conversation with some notion of America—i.e. Italian Futurism, Dada, and New Objectivism—and some European modernists, like F.T. Marinetti and Blaise Cendrars, even drew direct inspiration from Walt Whitman (Marinetti, "We Renounce" 45; Butler 154). Only if one's notion of modernism is steadfastly Eurocentric (to the point of blindness with regards to the impact of American modernity on Europe), or essentially synchronic, can one possibly see "modernism and a Whitmanesque romanticism" as being at odds. Sheeler and Strand were interested in the resonances between Whitman's poems and the present—the ways in which his nineteenth-century visions anticipated the New York they found themselves in, the ways in which they created tensions with the New York they saw before them—and in this regard, their choice of two passages from "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" was particularly a propos. The weakness of *Manhatta's* use of intertitles has to do with the fact that they tend to be used solely in a descriptive manner, and the first of the quotations from "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" is a perfect example of this. Thus, three high-angle shots that all focus on harbor traffic (shots 41-43) are preceded by an intertitle that reads:

> On the river the shadowy group,
> the big steam tug
> closely flank'd on each side
> by barges.

The second passage from "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" is the sole exception to this rule—it's the only time the filmmakers use a portion of Whitman's poetry that's more than merely descriptive:

> Gorgeous clouds of sunset!
> drench with your splendor
> me or the men and women
> generations after me.

Not only is this the first instance of literary metaphor in *Manhatta*, it's the only example of a passage that actually taps into the essence of the source in any kind of a direct manner. Throughout *Leaves of Grass*, New York is heavily striated, composed of a complex history; here, though, the ferry, and the city that it serves, are both time machines that allow communication with the future as well as the past, that allow Whitman to see, "The similitudes of the past and those of the future." Elsewhere Whitman peels away the layers of the city in order to glimpse New York's primordial past and conjure Mannahatta, but here the ferry ride brings to mind, "The glories strung like beads on my smallest sights and hearings," and launches him into an address of future New Yorkers, future readers:

> What is it then between us?
> What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us?
> Whatever it is, it avails not—distance avails not, and place avails not…
> I too walk'd the streets of Manhattan island, and bathed in the waters around it,
> I too felt the curious abrupt questionings stir within me.

Seen in this way, *Manhatta* takes on new meaning. Though the film might only hint at this, the relationship between the film's imagery and that of Whitman is not one of mere reflection—the film in some ways *is* Whitman's vision "fifty years hence."

Manhatta is an odd film, sometimes amateurish, sometimes displaying a clear-eyed connoisseurship. Thus, the cinematographic hand is often unsteady, the camerawork clunky, but, in addition to its keen modernist eye, it is *Manhatta*'s rich intertextuality (given its ten-minute length[8]) that shows off the sophistication of the artists who produced it. So, for instance, *Manhatta*'s particular form of American modernism takes on new meaning if we recall Robert Coady's *The Soil*. Not only does much of Coady's "American Art" read like a shot list for *Manhatta* ("the Sky-scraper… the Tug Boat and the Steam-shovel… Walt Whitman… the Carpenters, the Masons, the Bricklayers, the Cranes… the Drills, the Motors… the Derricks, Steam Hammers, Stone Crushers, Steam Rollers, Grain Elevators, Trench Excavators, Blast Furnaces…"), but his combination of Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," Cravan's "Sifflet," and "New York by Brown Bros." is something of a blueprint for the film overall, one that underlines the peculiarities of American modernism. This is seen most clearly during the Woolworth Building/Park Row Building sequence, especially once the camera has panned just below the tower, paused, then continued into a high-angle shot that defamiliarizes the buildings in question (and the district: that of City Hall), a sequence whose composition is almost exactly that of the Brown

---

[8] Strangely, most accounts of *Manhatta* list the film as running either six and a half minutes or seven minutes, and not infrequently one gets the sense that they viewed the film projected at the wrong speed because they make the pace of the film sound even more frenetic than it actually is. Take these comments from Karen Lucic, for instance: "each shot lasts for only a few seconds, which creates a disconnected and jumbled temporal progression" (51).

Bros. photograph for an instant, but the parallels go much further. As Ruth L. Bohan

has put it,

> The film's fragmented, discontinuous views, unconventional narrative
> structure, emphasis on skyscrapers, construction sites, and tugs, as
> well as its embrace of the motion picture itself, owed much to *The
> Soil*'s earlier evocations of Whitman's twentieth-century presence.
> ("Whitman's" 45)[9]

Later that same year, as if to emphasize this connection between *Manhatta* and *The

Soil*, Sheeler returned to the very same rooftop and the very same high-angle view on

top of the Equitable Building to make a panoramic series—*Towards the Woolworth

Building*, *Park Row Building*, *Buildings in Shadows*, and *Temple Court*—that

featured the Park Row Building as its fulcrum, thereby approximating the Brown

Bros. photograph even more. Similarly, it's difficult not to see a little Joseph Stella

in shot #40, a tightly cropped shot of the Brooklyn Bridge's upper promenade foot

traffic that emphasizes the landmark's massive neo-Gothic arches and its steel

cables. Between 1919 and 1922 Stella painted the Brooklyn Bridge in two major

works—most notably, as part of his epic *New York Interpreted* (1920-1922)—and

not only was he was highly influenced by Whitman's democratic idealism and his

urban-technological visions, but his reading of Whitman was highly informed by that

of Marinetti, who considered the American poet to be one of the "four or five great

---

[9] In an editorial entitled "Censoring the Motion Picture," Coady even called for an
American art cinema:
> It is time it were generally recognized that the aim of the motion
> picture is in the main one with that of the other arts, namely, an
> aesthetic aim. There is a new form of technique gradually revealing
> itself which later on will be seized and formulated. There is a world
> of visual motion yet to be explored, a world the motion picture is
> opening up to us. (*Soil* #1 38)

Manhatta appeared to heed his call.

precursors of Futurism" (Bohan 193). The Brooklyn Bridge became perhaps the most important totem in Stella's work, and he returned to it in four more major works over the next twenty years. Sheeler and Strand's treatment of the Brooklyn Bridge is fleeting, to say the least, but they return to it three times at three different points during the film, and its visionary modernism is clearly a crucial part of their Whitmanesque understanding of the new New York.

Equally as important to Sheeler and Strand's film as Whitman and the Whitman revival of the 1910s, was Stieglitz and the Stieglitz circle of 1902 to 1917. As we have seen, Strand in particular was heavily indebted to Stieglitz, and much of *Manhatta* is an ode to Stieglitz's depiction of New York from the days of the Photo-Secession onwards, one that draws from all three of Stieglitz's productive periods during this range. Thus, the film's railway yard sequence echoes *Snapshot—In the New York Central Yards* (1903) and, to a lesser extent, *The Hand of Man* (1902); its exposition, with its views of Lower Manhattan's skyline from the ferry and its ferry terminal sequence, calls to mind *City of Ambition* (1910) and a group of photographs that all carry the title *The Ferry Boat* (1910); its series of shots of men at work with sledgehammers, two "moving sculptures," a steam shovel and a crane, and silhouetted on top of a construction site are reminiscent of everything from *Excavating—New York* (1911) to *Old and New New York* (1910) (and Coady's *The Soil*);[10] its long section focusing on tugboats escorting the *Aquitania* to dock in the summer of 1920 is an obvious quotation of *Mauretania* (1910); and the film's rooftops sequence that follows the pan of the Equitable Building is suggestive of the

---

[10] Coady had predicted this scenario just a few years earlier: "To-day is the day of moving pictures, it is also the day of moving sculpture…" (*Soil* #2 55).

urban Cubism of the *From the Back Window, 291* series (1915), albeit from an entirely different perspective. Meanwhile, both Sheeler and Strand appear to have been inspired by the avant-gardism of another member of the Stieglitz circle and his New York work: Alvin Langdon Coburn. As many have noted, the extreme high-angle cinematography of *Manhatta*, and the eye for urban abstraction that went along with it, had an important precursor in Coburn's *The Octopus* (see Stebbins and Keyes 19, for instance). What is more rarely pointed out is that the remainder of Coburn's "Pinnacles of New York" photographs, all of which were set in Lower Manhattan (as opposed to *The Octopus*), were perhaps an even more direct influence on *Manhatta*.

But what of it? What do these homages accomplish? For one thing, they help us to get a better sense of the tone of *Manhatta*. Thus, while *Manhatta* has tended to be described as being "celebratory and experimental," "visionary and utopian," "positivistic and elegaic [sic]," examining the film through the lens of its photographic quotations can complicate the picture (Bohan, "Whitman's" 45; Horak 71; Stern 86). Take, for instance, the railway sequence that follows the "This world all spanned / with iron rails" intertitle. The first two shots depict a scene very similar to that of *Snapshot—In the New York Central Yards*—one in a medium to medium-long shot and one in a close-up, both taken from the same angle. The third and final shot of the sequence shows an outcropping of rock in the lower-left corner, rails cutting across the frame diagonally from lower-right to upper-left, and an industrial zone beyond, as a train moves across the plane. While the first two shots are ambiguous, focusing on the patterning of the railway yard and the implicit power of

the still but active engine at the center of the frame, the composition of the third shot

suggests an industrial order at odds with the natural world, or a second nature layered

on top of a fundamental one. Graham Clarke has argued that *The Hand of Man* must

be understood as, "an ironic and ambivalent response to the subject," because

generally, "Stieglitz sought the pure, the clean and the clear" (15). Similarly, what

we find here in *Manhatta* is a vision that is far from a facile celebration of industrial

progress, but a rare glimpse of the primordial Mannahatta poking out from beneath

the new order.

Sheeler and Strand's treatment of Trinity Church might not have carried the

same ironic charge that Coburn's 1912 photograph did, but it was hardly devoid of

irony. Instead of drawing attention to the flimsiness of the new monumentalism that

surrounded Trinity Church, *Manhatta* played on the contrasts provided by the church

and its churchyard cemetery as shot with a motion picture camera: the old and the

new, the living and the dead, the sacred and the profane. The stillness and the

solidity of the church—shot in succession through the balustrade of the Empire

Building and then again in another tightly cropped, high-angle shot that focuses on

the cemetery—accentuates the fluidity of the traffic that travels along Broadway, and

along the path of the Church Street elevated railway in the shot in between. These

extreme views of Manhattan's street traffic—pedestrian and otherwise—are

generally described as reducing New York's citizens to a series of, "antlike

movements, as though they were insects crawling between the skyscrapers," but

somehow this particular sequence suggests a city-as-body metaphor, the streets its

arteries, the traffic its lifeblood, one not at all out of synch with the film's frequent

focus on river and harbor traffic (Horak, "Modernist" 67). Overall, *Manhatta* anticipates the vision of the city that appears in the opening pages of Hugh Ferriss' legendary urbanist treatise, *The Metropolis of Tomorrow* (1929)—first the towers, then the horizontal city below, then,

> on a close scrutiny of the streets, certain minute, moving objects can be unmistakably distinguished. The city apparently contains, away down there—human beings!

But it also draws the same conclusion as Ferriss:

> The drama which, from this balcony, we have been witnessing is, first and foremost, a human drama. Those vast architectural forms are only a stage set. It is those specks of figures down there below who are, in reality, the principals of the play. (15-6)

What's important here, however, is that Sheeler and Strand placed the intersection of Broadway and Wall Street directly facing Trinity Church at the very heart of the five-block radius that forms the core of *Manhatta*, the area that was either physically depicted or provided the vantage point for roughly two-thirds of the shots in the film (Horak, "Modernist" 58).[11] The street traffic throughout *Manhatta* was that of the Financial District, a district whose exponential growth between 1900 and 1920 the Trinity Church Corporation had helped make possible. The ironies associated with Trinity Church were only apparent ones—whether Sheeler or Strand (or Coburn, for that matter) realized it or not, the church's centrality was no accident. Trinity Church was very much a part of the new order captured by these strange high-angle views.

---

[11] One Wall Street (1906-7), directly across from Trinity Church, stood on "probably the most valuable piece of real estate in the world" at the time of its construction. Its basement and first floor were rented for an astronomical $40,000 per year to United Cigar Stores Company immediately after completion (Landau 317).

It might not have looked like much on first viewing, but *Manhatta* was a very early example of what Anke Gleber and others have described as a cinematic variation on the city-as-text, and a remarkably multi-layered one at that. In fact, in only ten minutes, Sheeler and Strand not only transformed the city into a vibrant modernist text, they played with the notion of the text-as-city (Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*) and they depicted Lower Manhattan quite convincingly as a city *of* texts (Stieglitz, Coburn, Coady, etc.). Furthermore, they used this multi-layered approach to create the sense of an "unseen New York," one whose landmarks are depicted in unconventional ways, one willing to show the construction sites, railway yards, port scenes, and rooftops that tend to be omitted from tourist itineraries of the city (and consequently from tourist-oriented representations), but, more importantly, one willing to reconstruct New York out of very particular images of Lower Manhattan—the city's oldest, wealthiest, most powerful, and most dynamic district.

Dissolution

For a short film, *Manhatta* was not without its tensions—between the verticality of New York's modern architecture and the human-scale of its street level views, for instance—but whatever tensions there might have been between Sheeler and Strand remained productive. After all, the project had been an important one for both artists. For Sheeler it represented an opportunity to come to terms with his new hometown and to develop his investigations into the abstract tendency in art into a fully realized urban-industrial aesthetic, one that would be his calling card over the next two decades. For Strand it represented a chance to ease his way back into

artistic production post-World War I with a new medium that he'd yet to experiment

with, not to mention a chance to take up his motion studies of Manhattan again, this

time with motion pictures. Indeed, Strand later described his partnership with

Sheeler as having been one of "very close and fluid experimentation" (Lucic 50).

The truth of the matter, however, was that there was a considerable amount of

tension built into Sheeler and Strand's relationship. The two friends had much in

common and were clearly inspired by each other's work, but Sheeler was

comparatively inexperienced when it came to urban photography, while, on the other

hand, it's impossible to underestimate the stigma that was still associated with

photography within the art world at the time—so much so, in fact, that Strand, in

some regards, was at a great disadvantage in his partnership, something Stieglitz

reminded him of in a September 1921 letter as plans were discussed to exhibit the

film outside of New York:

> All I fear is that Paris will know the film as Sheeler's work, even if
> you are originally mentioned. It will be Sheeler and Strand. And then
> Sheeler…out of that, unless Sheeler requests De Zayas to be very
> particular always to mention the two name together… It's one of
> those ticklish questions when one of two is an "artist" and the other
> only a "photographer." (Horak, "Paul Strand" 268).

Even before 1921, though, fault lines had started to appear. Already in 1920

Sheeler had begun to turn several of the shots seen in *Manhatta* into still

photographs, and, as mentioned earlier, he also returned to the top of the Equitable

Building to make his panoramic study of the Park Row Building. He then translated

some of these images into a series of drawings, such as *New York* (1920), which was

essentially a replica of his earlier *Park Row Building* (1920), as well as paintings,

such as *Church Street El* (1920), which was based on a frame from *Manhatta*

featuring a high-angle view of the elevated railway (taken from the Empire

Building), and *Skyscrapers* (1922), which was yet another interpretation of his *Park

Row Building* photograph. In other words, Sheeler was quick to capitalize upon

Manhatta, quick to use it as a springboard into his new Precisionist machine age

aesthetic. As Lucic explains, Sheeler printed fifteen photographs from film stills and

he was very selective in his choices:

> He did not recreate the film's crowd or harbour scenes, however, and
> his New York photographs are therefore completely denatured and
> depopulated. Now the iconic buildings appear isolated from both
> nature and human use. (53)

The following year, when *Vanity Fair* ran a story on Sheeler and Strand's modernist

deconstruction of New York entitled "Manhattan—'The Proud and Passionate

City,'" both artists were credited but it was Sheeler's *Manhatta* that was being

privileged. Not only did the magazine reprint five photographs taken from Sheeler's

collection of fifteen film stills, but the photographs were compared with Sheeler's

Manhatta-derived works, and it was Sheeler's interpretation of the project that was

represented. Thus, a still of the Church Street elevated railway was given the title

"The Moving Street" and described as, "[a] study in the relation between movement

of the street and the stability of the buildings," drawing no attention to the radical

perspective or to the gaping vacant lot that is central to the image's depiction of

Lower Manhattan's evolving space. Another still, on the other hand, this one

showing a highly abstracted and entirely depopulated vision of the Equitable

Building and some of the structures that surround it—in other words, a perfect

example of Precisionism's "machine-as-parts" or "building-as-parts" aesthetic—was

captioned "Mechanical Monotony" (Wilson 150, 154). It might not have been explicit yet, but the *Vanity Fair* spread already indicated a split.

Sheeler left the Stieglitz circle right around that time, aligning himself with a less rigidly aesthetic photographic circle that had formed around Edward Steichen and Clarence White, would soon include such future luminaries as Ralph Steiner and Margaret Bourke-White, and was a driving force when it came to marrying the straight aesthetic with the demands of commercial photography (Pultz 481). Steichen joined Condé-Nast in the early 1920s, and it was he who apparently facilitated the *Vanity Fair* spread—the following year Sheeler joined him there, striking up a partnership with the publishing house that would last until 1929. Strand, on the other hand, remained very close to Stieglitz, and was therefore hostile to commercial photography and its usurpation of straight photography. In 1922, the very same year as the *Vanity Fair* profile, he published one of his most famous and fiery essays, "Photography and the New God," in the pages of *Broom*. While some have insisted that Strand's essay is, "not so much a tirade against the machine god, its empiricist son, and the scientific holy ghost as it is a call for a synthesis of nature and technology, with the camera acting as a catalytic force," the fact of the matter is that it is not empiricism that Strand critiques, but "*Materialistic* Empiricism," a barbed phrase clearly aimed in part at the world of commercial photography (Horak, "Paul Strand" 281-2 and "Modernist" 68). Furthermore, the essay's main thrust is much more radical than a mere "synthesis of nature and technology"—instead it has to do with utilizing a straight photographic aesthetic that is very much in step with the Machine Age in order to *dismantle* the new Holy Trinity, a position that

anticipates aspects of Walter Benjamin's celebrated "Work of Art" essay by nearly fifteen years and is nearly as urgent:

> Thus the deeper significance of a machine, the camera, has emerged here in America, the supreme altar of the new God. If this be ironical it may also be meaningful. For despite our seeming wellbeing we are, perhaps more than any other people, being ground under the heel of the new God, destroyed by it. We are not, as Natalie Curtis recently pointed out in *The Freeman*, particularly sympathetic to the somewhat hysterical attitude of the Futurists toward the machine. We in America are not fighting, as it may be natural to do in Italy, away from the tentacles of a medieval tradition towards a neurasthenic embrace of the new God. We have it with us and upon us with a vengeance, and we will have to do something about it eventually. Not only the new God but the whole Trinity must be humanized lest it in turn dehumanize us. We are beginning perhaps to perceive that.
>   And so it is again the vision of the artist, of the intuitive seeker after knowledge, which, in this modern world, has seized upon the mechanism and materials of a machine, and is pointing the way. (Strand 143)

Not only does this passage underline the ideological rift between Sheeler and Strand just one year after the making of *Manhatta*, but it indicates that perhaps Strand's interest in the project had been rather different than Sheeler's. Whatever the case, by 1923 the split between the two was definitive, the final blow coming when Sheeler published a stinging critique of the latest work by Stieglitz, his former mentor, one that both Stieglitz and Strand thought was beyond the bounds of acceptability (Horak, "Modernist" 56).

Vortex

With this study of New York Modern between 1900 and 1920, culminating in Sheeler and Strand's *Manhatta*, I've tried to illustrate a few key points. First, that *Manhatta* draws from a body of work—photographic, literary, and otherwise—that

stretches back almost twenty years to the beginnings of the Photo-Secession and the advent of modernism and avant-gardism that ensued. Second, that the emergence of New York Modern was intimately tied to a period of great economic growth emblematized by the rise of the skyscraper. Third, that in many cases, these representations were far from just innocent depictions of the new verticalism, they were highly perceptive studies of the new space that was in the process of coming into being. "Representing the metropolis is never an innocent gesture," as Edward Dimendberg has written, "but one that is always motivated by cultural needs and ambitions" (*Film Noir* 89). In this case the "cultural needs and ambitions" were clearly twofold—they had to do with capturing urban zeitgeist and developing this dynamism into an aesthetic. If skyscrapers were the most powerful expressions of this new space, as Coburn, Coady, Strand, and Sheeler showed, they were also machines for seeing that allowed this new space—its properties, its characteristics, its effects—to be examined. Already by the mid-1920s, as the number of skyscrapers grew exponentially, and their setback forms reached greater and greater heights, New York's skyscrapers had become clichés of modernity, a natural part of Manhattan's peculiar ecosystem. Even those who opposed the "culture of congestion," and therefore the skyscraper, employed metaphors borrowed from the realm of natural history in order to describe this phenomenon. Frank Lloyd Wright, for instance, in *The Disappearing City* (1932), his acerbic critique of modern urban life, described the modern city as being a kind of volcano whose vertical form was the product of unfortunate yet powerful tectonic activity:

> Here is a volcanic crater of blind, confused, human forces pushing
> together and grinding upon each other, moved by greed in common

exploitation, forcing anxiety upon all life. No noble expression of
life, this… Congestion, confusion and the anxious spasmodic to and
fro—stop and go. (21-2)

In the first two decades of the century, however, the emergence of these structures

was shocking, controversial, and far from taken for granted. The skyscraper was far

from just a "curiosity of commercial architecture"—instead, as Goldberger argues,

the skyscraper was, "a bold force, a force as powerful in its ability to transform the

urban environment in its time as the automobile was to be in the decades

succeeding" (3). The artists discussed in this chapter were not only there to

document this spectacle, they recognized its significance, and they helped develop a

new grammar with which to describe the phenomena they saw all around them.

Whitman, as we have seen, was key to this movement, as Baudelaire was key

to the work of many Parisian modernists of the early twentieth century. Whitman's

work seemed prophetic and it provided these artists with ballast, with a foundation

from which to explore the new New York. The historical conditions were altogether

different by the 1900s, of course, but Whitman seemed to have understood the part

that New York would play in America's rise to greatness—the new Manifest

Destiny—but he used the democratic idealism he saw embodied in New York to give

this doctrine a more progressive bent. Many who got caught up in the Whitman

revival of the 1910s may have turned to the poet out of a sense of nostalgia for the

horizontal city of the nineteenth century, but there were plenty of others who

gravitated towards Whitman's urban-technological vision and saw him as forward-

looking, even proto-Futurist, as some kind of, "artistic and intellectual gateway to the

future of the New World," and some may very well have seen in Whitman a

modernity consisting of a "coexistence of temporalities," an interpenetration of past and present (Bohan, "Whitman's" 36, 38; McDonough 100). Whitman was not a distraction from the present moment for these New York modernists, he was yet another lens upon it.

Already between 1900 and 1915, between the construction of the Park Row Building (1899) and the Flatiron Building (1902) not long afterwards and the construction of the Equitable Building (1915) followed by the introduction of the Zoning Code of 1916, New York had asserted itself as a city of international stature, building on a foundation of "economic and institutional integration" laid during the late 1800s, one best exemplified by the "political consolidation of Greater New York in 1898." Already a colossus by 1898, the "great merger movement" that characterized the years 1897 to 1904 further solidified New York's place as the headquarters of modern American capitalism, and transformed the city into an even more impressive economic titan (Burrows and Wallace 1235). America's entrance into World War I—"the first mass global war of the industrialized age"—brought this meteoric rise to power to a climax, as New York made a powerful bid to, "fill the void left in Europe by the physical, economic, and intellectual devastation" of the Great War and enter the upper echelons of global influence (Dickerman 2; Stern 15). The city's "imperial outreach" was vastly expanded during this period as, "the United States was transformed from being a debtor to creditor nation and its leading metropolis began to replace London as the fulcrum of the global economy, emerging as heir presumptive to the title of Capital of the World" (Burrows and Wallace 1236). As one columnist put it in *Munsey's Magazine* in 1917, "Three years ago

New York's light was the brightest in the Western World. The war has made New

York the lighthouse on the whole world" (ibid). The metaphor was apt. New York

was known to be the world's most electrified city and an illuminated spectacle

beyond compare, but the lighthouse analogy also implied the strong center one

would expect of this "culture of congestion." Famously, Fritz Lang modeled the

phantasmagoric city that lies at the center of his *Metropolis* (1927) after his first

visions of New York in 1924, when he was left awestruck by the spectacle of the

city's skyscrapers and its bright lights. Afterwards, his impressions were perhaps

naively enthusiastic but they weren't without insight:

> The view of New York by night is a beacon of beauty strong enough
> to be the centerpiece of a film… There are flashes of red and blue
> and gleaming white, screaming green… streets full of moving,
> turning, spiraling lights, and high above the cars and elevated trains,
> skyscrapers appear in blue and gold, white and purple…. (Neumann
> 34)

Lang might have been blinded by the lights, as it were, but his fascination reflects the

enormous attraction New York held during this period, and his comments display an

implicit understanding of New York as the ultimate example of the modern, densely

concentrated metropolis, the ultimate example of what Lewis Mumford called

"Megalopolis" and what Frank Lloyd Wright would refer to in 1932 as the

"centripetal city." By 1929 Hugh Ferriss captured the magnitude of New York's

startling metamorphosis: "Of the 377 skyscrapers more than twenty stories high,

which stand in the United States in 1929, 188 rise within the narrow limits of New

York City" (50).

Manhatta's representation of New York was a classic example of this

centripetal city. The ferry is drawn to the tip of the island, bringing hundreds and

hundreds of commuters and filling the city streets. The trains emphasize the city's status as a center of territorial influence, while the steamships suggest a center whose influence is global. Construction sites, railway yards, and teeming harbor traffic all confirm tremendous industrial output. But, most of all, the film's fixation on the unprecedented height and monumentality of the skyscrapers that dominate the island, and the fact that the focus of the film's attention is quite specifically Lower Manhattan, the financial and municipal heart of greater New York, generates a vision of "capitalized centralization" with no equal. Sheeler and Strand's film may not have been as outwardly pointed as Mumford's *The Culture of Cities* or Wright's *The Disappearing City*, but the structure and content of the film indicated that the filmmakers too saw New York as being some kind of "whirling vortex" (Wright, *Disappearing* 3). Already in 1909 some commentators had picked up on the particular nature of New York's "swift-expanding" landscape, where, "everything is more or less confused by movement, by casual phenomena, by want of definition. Self-imposed barriers are necessary to keep one from being lost in the vastness of the swirl." A few years later, the Vorticists adopted their name out of the Futurist belief that modern life was a whirlpool, a vortex, but they failed to draw connections between this sense of chaos and the centripetal organization of space then dominant. Thus, Alvin Langdon Coburn's embrace of Vorticism actually pulled him *away* from the probing studies of New York's emerging landscape he'd conducted in the early 1910s and towards an art-for-art's-sake aesthetic detached from the physical form of the new urban order, if not from the fragmentation that was a defining characteristic of its phenomenology. Sheeler and Strand, on the other hand, took a very different

route, not only continuing with their urban-oriented work after World War I, but utilizing the most modern of the arts in order to try to capture some sense of the dynamism of America's metropolis in the immediate aftermath of World War I.

This was a signal moment. As mentioned earlier, *Manhatta* made its debut in July of 1921. Between 1921 and 1922, apparently completely unaware of Sheeler and Strand's film, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy composed "Dynamic of the Metropolis: Sketch of a Manuscript for a Film," which used Constructivist photomontage and typography to outline the script for an avant-garde film about an unspecified modern city, one which would feature shots of construction, smokestacks, trains and railways, of traffic, modern high-rises, and high-angle/aerial views of cities, and one which would feature an "optical arrangement of tempo." If *Manhatta* marked the beginning of the city film and the city symphony, "Dynamic of the Metropolis" was the document that established the parameters of the genre, gave it a decidedly European avant-garde slant, and provided it with exposure within European art and design circles. Meanwhile, in May of 1922, in response to demands for a true city-planning movement— one which would finally favor what Lewis Mumford called "idealty interests" over realty interests—the Regional Plan was announced. Effectively placing Manhattan at the very center of a massive metropolitan region that stretched into New Jersey and Connecticut and covered a massive 5,528 square miles, the plan simultaneously, and, I should add, ironically, began a debate that would span decades and would bring about the decentralization of New York (Stern 42-3). According to Mumford, the very notion of Megalopolis implied decline and demanded renewal (289-295). The days of New York as the ultimate emblem of the

centripetal city were numbered—the new model consisted of, "a vertical core of skyscrapers together with an increasingly centrifugal movement of population" (Dimendberg 100).

After *Manhatta*

The years between 1921 and 1935—the heyday of the city symphony—produced a short line of New York city films. None was as successful, either artistically or commercially, as Ruttmann's *Berlin* or Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera*—the two classics of the genre—but New York inspired more city symphonies and city films during this period than any other city. This section covers three of the most important of these films, and the three films that contribute the most to our discussion of cinematic interpretations of New York between the wars.

The first of these to appear after *Manhatta* was Robert Flaherty's *Twenty-Four Dollar Island* (1927), which he filmed during 1925, and, like *Manhatta*, it is a self-consciously modernist depiction of New York as a tightly organized, highly centripetal city met with ambivalence.[12] *Twenty-Four Dollar Island* was an immensely different project from the one that had made Flaherty famous just four

---

[12] Praised by modernists such as Jacobs and Herman Weinberg, both of whom made city films themselves in the 1930s, *Twenty-Four Dollar Island* suffered tragedy upon release:

> Despite the uniqueness of the film and Flaherty's reputation, *Twenty-Four Dollar Island* had a very restricted release. Its treatment by New York's largest theater, the Roxy, foreshadowed somewhat the later vandalism to be practiced by others upon Eisenstein's *Romance sentimentale* and *Que viva México*. After cutting down *Twenty-Four Dollar Island* from two reels to one, the Roxy directors used the picture as a background projection for one of their lavishly staged dance routines called *The Sidewalks of New York*. (Jacobs 546-7)

The two-reel version was never recovered.

years earlier, *Nanook of the North*, as well as its follow-up, *Moana* (1926). For one

thing, unlike either of its predecessors, *Twenty-Four Dollar Island* had a certain

mystery to it, having been produced for an unnamed private sponsor who Flaherty

later described as a "wealthy socialite" (Rotha 82). In sharp contrast with *Nanook*'s

romantic portrait of a man still very much in touch with the natural world, albeit in

the most severe and desolate of conditions, his new film took Hugh Ferriss's vision

of the depopulated modern metropolis as "human drama" took new extremes. As

Flaherty baldly stated, *Twenty-Four Dollar Island* was, "not a film of human beings,

but of skyscrapers which they had erected, completely dwarfing humanity itself,"

and Flaherty scaled to the top of many of them in order to provide, "a viewpoint of

New York that people in the streets never have" (Jacobs 546; Rotha 83). Overall,

though, *Twenty-Four Dollar Island* has the same basic look as *Manhatta*. It's

slightly longer and quite a bit more sophisticated, but most of the film's motifs

mirror Sheeler and Strand's film closely and there's a similar interest in "new

space": cranes and construction, smoke and "canyons," tugboats and harbor traffic,

and a number of architectural studies, including the Brooklyn Bridge's gothic arches,

the Bankers Trust Building, the Equitable Building, the Municipal Building, the Park

Row Building, the Woolworth Building (which was still the world's tallest building

at the time), the Liberty and Metropolitan Towers, and a number of buildings that

had been erected since the making of *Manhatta*, such as the Bankers Trust-inspired

Standard Oil Building (1922) and the setback, heavily crenellated New York

Telephone Company (Barclay-Vesey) Building (1926). And like *Manhatta*, the film

also focused a great deal of attention on the city's abstract patterning, on the abstract

nature of its new spaces. So much so, in fact, that Herman Weinberg compared

Flaherty's film to Lang's *Metropolis*, praising its depiction of New York as, "a cold,

soulless mound of concrete, steel and glass" (ibid). Two innovations stand out,

however. For one thing, Flaherty had become fascinated by telephoto lenses and the

way he was able to compress space when shooting across the harbor towards Lower

Manhattan and its towering skyline or down into the city's vast "canyons" from atop

its growing number of skyscrapers. The combination of these powerful new views

and this powerful technology created results that Flaherty found "magical." As he

later put it, "It was like drawing a veil from the beyond, revealing life scarcely

visible to the naked eye" (ibid). For another, Flaherty introduced history into his

"camera impression of New York" in a much more direct and convincing way than

his predecessors. Thus, the film begins with two shots of antique maps—one of the

Americas and one of Dutch colonial holdings in North America—before quickly

illustrating New York's foundation myth, the apocryphal tale of Manhattan's

purchase for the bargain price of "24 dollars," the Primal Deal that established the

"Island Manhattes" as a piece of property first and foremost (Burrows and Wallace

xiv-xv). Flaherty then uses a couple more stills (and a couple more intertitles) to

explain the immediate results of this deal: a print of the thirty houses that formed the

original settlement, and a 1661 map showing the outlines of the newly founded

village of New Amsterdam. Then comes the most startling part of the film's

introduction and perhaps the most startling part of the entire film: after an intertitle

which reads, "Three centuries later…," Flaherty cuts back to the map of New

Amsterdam, then fades it out as he fades in an aerial view of Lower Manhattan ca.

1925 which closely matches the shoreline seen in the map, before ending the

sequence with another intertitle: "New Amsterdam grew into New York, with

8,000,000 inhabitants in 1926." In other words, Flaherty essentially takes

Whitman's archaeological search for Mannahatta and turns it on its ear—instead of

peeling back the layers of the city, he begins with a moment of genesis and then uses

an elliptical cut to bury these humble origins under modern New York's immense

concentrations of wealth, population, and influence, emphasizing Manhattan's status

as the apotheosis of speculative capitalism. Only then does he introduce motion into

his film, but simultaneously he turns his back on intertitles, letting the images speak

for themselves for the rest of the film in an attempt to create, "a camera poem, a sort

of architectural lyric" (Jacobs 546).

Flaherty's contemporaries weren't the only ones who failed the understand

Twenty-Four Dollar Island, later critics like Paul Rotha—who otherwise is very

sympathetic to Flaherty's work—were also left unimpressed. Responding to the

enthusiasm expressed by Jacobs and Herman Weinberg, Rotha wrote:

> [We] could not wholly subscribe to the… fulsome praise. Much of it
> seemed ordinary even for the time at which it had been shot and
> certainly most repetitive, but in fairness it must be recorded that
> Weinberg remarks that the best footage is missing from the one-reel
> version.
>   We do not favor the notion, however, that a potential minor
> masterpiece was the victim of vandalism, as implied by Jacobs and
> Weinberg… Flaherty never intended it to be a complete film in itself;
> it was a notebook."

However, in the very next paragraph Rotha goes on to say that there's no question

that *Twenty-Four Dollar Island* was among the earliest of the "city genre of films"

later popularized by Cavalcanti and Ruttmann and "followed by many others," and

he's willing to allow that the film was "ambitious" (84). What Rotha (and others, including the film's champions) failed to see was the extraordinary promise of the film: the promise of turning a penetrating cinematographical eye on the modern metropolis combined with that of the film's opening sequence, with its suggestions of the city-as-palimpsest, the city-as-text, and the "geological" city, the city composed of what Mumford calls "the sedimentary strata of history" (223). That all of this promise went largely unrealized was highly unfortunate— not just for Flaherty and *Twenty-Four Dollar Island*, but for the city film and city symphony genre as a whole, a genre which is notoriously of-the-moment in its outlook, ahistorical.

Over the next several years, city films on New York appeared with increasing frequency, and, inspired by Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a City*, many of these films played up the musicality of the genre, though never with the same degree of determination as their German predecessor. Thus, we have, in quick succession, *Skyscraper Symphony* (1929) by Robert Florey, *A City Symphony* (1930) by Herman Weinberg, and *Manhattan Medley* (1931), which was produced anonymously for Fox's "Magic Carpet of Movietone" series, but which carries all the hallmarks of the work of Bonney Powell. Ruttmann wasn't the only influence on the New York city films of the '30s, though. Its reception was far from unanimously positive at the time,[13] but one of the very finest of these films was *A Bronx Morning* (1931), an

---

[13] Some time after the film's premiere in London, Leyda received the following letter from Miss J.M. Harvey, secretary of The Film Society of London: "Unfortunately, for some reason which I cannot explain, the film was so badly received at its first two performances that the management had to cancel the bookings and substitute something else. This was very disappointing and I can give you no explanation of it,

early attempt at filmmaking by Jay Leyda, the future film historian extraordinaire.

Like many of his avant-garde contemporaries, Leyda was self-taught, having learned

about filmmaking in his native Dayton, Ohio through dedicated movie-going and a

voracious appetite for European and domestic film and arts journals such as *La

Revue du Cinéma*, *Close-Up*, and Lincoln Kirstein's *Hound & Horn* (Mora and Hill

14-5). Then he arrived in New York and inspired by "that paradise" and by a

screening of Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*, and with the support of the

leftist New York Film and Photo League and Alfred Stieglitz, he picked up a camera

and made his own city film.[14] As the title suggests, *A Bronx Morning* is an ode to

Leyda's South Bronx neighborhood, and it is composed of just three simple

intertitles—which together form the sentence, "The Bronx does business and the

Bronx lives on the street."—and an impressive array of street-level and street-

focused shots that show a keen eye for the color and texture of everyday life. Robert

Haller has commented that Leyda's film amounts to, "a city symphony on an

intimate scale," and, sure enough, the film begins with a standard city symphony

motif—the arrival into the city—but instead of a ferryboat (as in *Manhatta*) or a

---

though I have known it happen before in cases where an audience has considered a
film too 'highbrow' for their taste. The manager of the theater himself was most
enthusiastic about your film and was extremely distressed at its reception, which was
as inexplicable to him" (letter dated 19 May, 1933, Leyda Papers, The Elmer Holmes
Bobst Library, New York University, New York).
In spite of this, Leyda wasn't entirely disheartened. As he later wrote: "No public
showing in its 'country of origin,' [but] it was shown by the Film Society of London
and similar clubs on the continent. Most importantly, it brought me access to
Eisenstein's classes at the Film School in Moscow" (undated note, Leyda Papers,
The Elmer Holmes Bobst Library, New York University, New York).
[14] The material here on Leyda's film education, his arrival in New York, and the
support for the film comes from undated notes collected in the Leyda Papers (The
Elmer Holmes Bobst Library, New York University, New York).

speeding locomotive (as in *Berlin*), Leyda ushers us into the Bronx via elevated

railway. Then, instead of the monumentalism typical of the New York city

symphonies, the film provides us with a study of the patterns—both physical and

social—of the Bronx's street life. Leyda's vision of his neighborhood was directly

inspired by the Parisian photographer Eugène Atget, whose work had only recently

been introduced to the world through the admiration of the Surrealists, and the film

contains clear homages to Atget—most notably in the form of its treatment of shop

windows and mannequins. But the film also shows the influence of Walker Evans

and Berenice Abbott—both of whom had just recently returned to New York from

Paris, both of whom were also devotees of Atget, and both of whom were part of the

same New York Film and Photo League set as Leyda—as well as Paul Strand's

1915-1917 New York series, and its exuberant treatment of children's street games

anticipates Helen Levitt's work by a number of years (Pultz 483). Leyda's *A Bronx
Morning* is a very personal and impressionistic depiction of an outlying

neighborhood, and, as such, it's as anti-iconic a city film as we've yet seen. It's not

a film about the new New York, either—it features no skyscrapers, no construction

sites—if anything, its focus has more to do with the persistence of the human-scale,

the horizontal, and the traditional (as emblematized by its fixation on Hebrew

signage) in the face of sweeping change. And herein lies the film's retrospective

poignancy, for this was one of the very same neighborhoods that suffered outright

destruction at the hands of Robert Moses and the "Expressway World" he hacked

through the Bronx between the 1950s and 1970s, a tragedy (both in terms of its

immediate and its lasting effects) that Marshall Berman captured all too eloquently

in *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*:

> [In] the spring and fall of 1953, Moses began to loom over my life in a new way: he proclaimed that he was about to ram an immense expressway, unprecedented in scale, expense and difficulty of construction, through our neighborhood's heart. At first we couldn't believe it; it seemed to come from another world. First of all, hardly any of us owned cars: the neighborhood itself, and the subways leading downtown, defined the flow of our lives. Besides, even if the city needed the road… they surely couldn't mean what the stories seemed to say: that the road would be blasted directly through a dozen solid, settled, densely populated neighborhoods like our own; that something like 60,000 working- and lower-middle-class people, mostly Jews, but with many Italians, Irish and Blacks thrown in, would be thrown out of their homes. The Jews of the Bronx were nonplussed: could a fellow-Jew really want to do this to us?… And even if he did want to do it, we were sure it couldn't happen here, not in America… And yet, before we knew it, steam shovels and bulldozers were there, and people were getting notice that they had better clear out fast. They looked numbly at the wreckers, at the disappearing streets, at each other, and they went. Moses was coming through, and no temporal or spiritual power could block his way. (292)

By the early 1980s, when Berman was preparing his manuscript, the Bronx had

become "an image of modern ruin and devastation… an international code word for

our epoch's accumulated urban nightmares," and he placed much of the blame for

this state of affairs squarely at the feet of Robert Moses, New York's very own

"demolition artist" (290).

By the mid-1930s the craze for New York-focused city films and city

symphonies had all but died out, although the influence of this cycle of films on

other genres would persist for some time. Perhaps the last film that worked through

the conventions of the city film and the city symphony in the years before World

War II was a film commissioned for the New York World's Fair of 1939, Willard

Van Dyke and Ralph Steiner's *The City*. With an original outline by Pare Lorentz,

the godfather and architect of the American documentary movement of the 1930s, a

score by Aaron Copland, the great American composer, and the support of the

American Institute of Planners, not to mention the directorial skills of Ralph Steiner,

the prominent commercial photographer and avant-garde filmmaker (who'd gained

notoriety for cine-poems like *H₂O* [1929]), *The City* had a considerable talent pool

behind it and a much greater budget than any of the other New York city films.

More importantly, from our standpoint, the film's commentary was penned by none

other than Lewis Mumford, and it amounted to, "a scathing indictment of urban

America," "a cinematic excoriation of the polluted and mechanized metropolis," as

well as a highly emotional plea for improved housing and decentralization," echoing

key portions of his 1938 book *The Culture of Cities* clearly (Stern 86; Dimendberg

17). As a result, even though *The City* used music to powerful effect, its overall

structure bore little resemblance to the New York city symphonies—with three

distinct sections roughly corresponding to the past (a close-knit New England town),

the present (polluted industrial cities and Megalopolis), and the future (green cities)

adding up to a very clear argument—"You take your choice," the narrator repeats

more than once—this film was pure propaganda.

Fittingly, the only part of the film that approached the dynamism, creativity,

and verve of the city symphony genre was its Megalopolis section, where, in spite of

numerous blatant attempts to play up the disorder, dereliction, and danger of the city,

the segment had a spirit lacking elsewhere in the film precisely because of its

combination of quick cutting, modernist aesthetics, and dynamic camerawork with

stock New York locations: the crowds, the waterfront, the "canyons" of Lower

Manhattan, Trinity Church. So, for instance, a "lunchtime" sequence that's meant to tease out the connections between automation, the automat, and the automatons who eat in them actually becomes one of the film's wittiest moments because of the way it matches Copland's almost Philip Glass-like flurry with some clever, rapid-fire editing. At other times, however, the film could be just plain ridiculous. Thus, one point of transition features a shot down an empty Wall Street staring directly at Trinity Church, while church bells toll, suggesting very little about the specific location, only a vague sense of faith having been lost. The film then segues into a "weekend warrior" sequence that culminates in a traffic jams and traffic accidents finale (complete with a shot of a car careening over a cliff) worthy of Jean-Luc Godard's apocalyptic *Weekend* (1968).

Overall, the film updated a notion that Mumford had first expressed in the early 1920s, around the time of the release of *Manhatta* and the creation of the Regional Plan: the evolution of America's cities was characterized by a series of "migrations." Thus, the first "migration" had involved the settling of the continent, the second was tied to the industrialization of America, the third had to do with its urbanization, and the fourth migration—the one that Mumford had only predicted in the 1920s, but which had become a distinct reality by the time of *The City*—had to do with electrical power, mobility, telecommunications, and planned, garden cities. Whereas *The Culture of Cities* placed America's urban planning movement at a do-or-die crossroads—enact change or risk descent into Tyrannopolis and maybe even Nekropolis—the picture presented by *The City* was almost that of a fait accompli: "Order has come—order and life together. We've got the skill. We've found a way.

We've built the cities." Either way, the message was clear: the era of the centripetal

city was over, the future would be centrifugal. Robert Moses would have his day.

Chapter 2: Shattered Spaces

<u>Città Nuova</u>

As Filippo Tommaso Marinetti later recalled it, his life was changed utterly early one morning in 1908. Marinetti had been hosting another one in a long line of poetry gatherings in his Milan apartment, and, as usual, the group had worked furiously all night, "debating at the uttermost boundaries of logic and filling up masses of paper with our frenetic writings," when all of a sudden they were awoken from their bohemian fever, "by the terrifying clatter of huge, double-decker trams jolting by" (Marinetti 11-2). In the years that followed Italian unification, Milan quickly asserted itself as the industrial center of the fledgling nation and it simultaneously became Italy's most cosmopolitan city, a city at once Italian and European in character, as foreign capital flooded into the city, "[intensifying] cultural exchanges" (Meyer 14). Already enamored of all that was most modern about the modern city, the shock of these industrial noises enraptured the poets, opening their eyes (and ears) to a vision of a new artistic movement where the notion of the city-as-machine would be radicalized.

> Then the silence became more somber. Yet even while we were
> listening to the tedious, mumbled prayers of an ancient canal and the
> creaking bones of dilapidated palaces on their tiresome stretches of
> soggy lawn, we caught the sudden roar of ravening motorcars, right
> there beneath our windows.
>   "Come on! Let's go!" I said. "Come on, my lads, let's get out of
> here! At long last, all the myths and mystical ideals are behind us.
> We're about to witness the birth of a Centaur and soon we shall
> witness the flight of the very first Angels!… We shall have to shake
> the gates of life itself to test their locks and hinges!… Let's be off!
> See there, the Earth's very first dawn! Nothing can equal the splendor

of the sun's red sword slicing through our millennial darkness, for the
very first time!" (11-12)

In the aftermath of this revelation, Marinetti tossed around a couple of other names
for his nascent movement—*Elettricismo*, *Dinamismo*—but ultimately he settled on
something even more provocative: *Futurismo* (Marinetti 9). And here already in the
Futurist foundation myth, amidst the ironies and bluster of Marinetti's apocalyptic
struggle between the old world and the new, amidst the fetishization of the machine
that instantly became the signature of the Futurist aesthetic, we also see the very
beginnings of what would prove to be an abiding interest on the part of the Futurists
in what Luigi Russolo later described as a "music of noises," one made up of the
sounds and rhythms of the industrialized city, one composed of the polyphony of
modern city life (Kern 99).

Early on, what truly set the Futurists apart from their contemporaries—aside
from their trademark ferocity—was the all-encompassing nature of their vision, the
fact that they were attempting to grapple with modern life in its entirety. This is the
reason the movement developed a multimedia attack right from the start—including
Marinetti's now-famous adoption of modern advertising techniques in order to
disseminate the Futurists' literature as quickly and as widely as possible. Not
satisfied with being just another revolt against yesterday's poetry, Futurism quickly,
"established itself as the most aggressive artistic phenomenon of its age" (Kozloff
46-7). Though initially their focus was strictly literary, they rapidly branched out
into everything from painting to theater, and used their many programmatic releases
to freely discuss scientific and technological concerns, politics, warfare, and a whole
host of other contemporary issues. The one constant to the Futurist vision was its

emphatically urban orientation, the city and its technological appendages being the very definition of modernity for Marinetti and his cohorts (Meyer 138). Avant-garde groups had fed off "the strains and tensions inherent in city life" before, of course, but, "the Futurists were by far the most important of the avant-garde groupings which made life in the modern city central to its concerns" (Butler 137).

By 1914, the Futurists' engagement with the city had expanded to include theoretical writings on architecture and urbanism in an effort to keep up with the times. "The architectural environment of the city is… being radically transformed," it was said. "We live in a spiral of architectural forces" (Meyer 139). A number of treatises on architecture and urbanism resulted, but the Futurist vision of the city was best captured by Antonio Sant'Elia's daring Città Nuova plans. First exhibited as part of the Nuove Tendenze group show in Milan, Sant'Elia's drawings not only amount to the most fully realized Futurist vision of the city, they anticipate many of the key elements of what would become known as the International Style, and, as such, they "[represent] the summa of Sant'Elia's work" in spite of their fanciful nature (Meyer 110). What's more relevant in the present context is that, as Esther da Costa Meyer has shown, Sant'Elia's city of the future—with its "artificial [canyons] flanked by artificial mountains"—was directly inspired by, "America [and], more specifically, [by] New York and its skyscrapers" (117, 133). This sense of America came not from personal experience, but from the popular press [Fig. 4]. It was based on coverage of the emerging cityscape of New York that appeared in illustrated magazines like *L'Illustrazione Italiana* [Fig. 5], including articles on architectural wonders such as the Flatiron Building, the Metropolitan Tower, and the recently

completed Woolworth Building, but it was also based on science fiction depictions

of the New York of the future, such as those of Charles Lamb and Harry M. Petit,

that appeared regularly in Italian periodicals (Meyer 128-9, 133). These visions,

which had originally appeared in American popular magazines and books such as

Moses King's *King's Dream of New York* (1908), not only represent a proto-futurist

New York, one that only needed Sant'Elia's modernizing and dehistoricizing hand

for them to become truly Futurist, but they anticipate the multi-tiered, New York-as-

the-"modernized Venice" renderings of Hugh Ferriss, Harvey Wiley Corbett, and the

rest of the Regional Plan's "culture of congestion" theorists by two decades

(Koolhaas 93-105). Like Marinetti's employment of the advertising blitz,

Sant'Elia's fascination with New York underlines the peculiarities of the Futurists'

brand of avant-gardism. As Meyer has noted, "*L'Illustrazione Italiana* was the

mouthpiece of the dreams and aspirations of Milan's entrepreneurial bourgeoisie"—

the same bourgeoisie, "who looked to the United States for inspiration and saw in the

modern metropolis the locus of their work and profit," the same bourgeoisie whose

industrialization became one of the driving forces behind Italian fascism (133).

New York was much more than just a model for Sant'Elia's Città Nuova,

however. New York—both the physical, early twentieth-century city and the

imaginary one—provided Sant'Elia with a vast urban readymade through which he

could conduct his Futurist fantasies. In this he was far from alone among the

Futurists—America, in many ways, was a crucial part of the Futurist vision.

Boccioni, for instance, spoke of the need on the part of the Futurists to,

"Americanize [themselves] by entering the all-consuming vortex of modernity

through its crowds, automobiles, telegraphs, noises, screeching, violence, cruelty, cynicism, and unrelenting competitiveness; in short, the exaltation of all the savage anti-artistic aspects of our age" (Meyer 133-4). And key to this image of centripetal modernity, of the "culture of congestion"—the very same one captured with such allure in Sant'Elia's Città Nuova—was what Boccioni called, "the powerful upward thrust of American skyscrapers" (ibid 139).

By 1916, having vowed to turn their backs on the journal, the book, and the theatre—those last vestiges of the past they were so desperate to escape—the Futurists had begun to theorize "The Futurist Cinema." They were looking for a medium supple, powerful, and modern enough to capture the "all-consuming vortex of modernity." Three years earlier, they'd taken a step in this direction when they published their passionate nineteen-point encomium in praise of the Variety Theater. Alongside approval of the variety theater's aesthetic of "pure action," and its culture of distraction and amusement, "using comic effects, erotic suggestion, or startling imagination," the Futurists applauded the inclusion of cinema as part of the variety bill:

> The Variety Theater is unique, at present, in making use of film, which enriches it with innumerable, otherwise unattainable visions and displays (battles, riots, races, motorcar and airplane races, journeys, ocean liners, the wonders of the city, the countryside, the oceans, the skies). (Marinetti 186)

It wasn't clear if they realized it at the time, but by the end of "The Variety Theater" they had already made the leap to film. Quite unexpectedly, the piece concluded with a stream-of-consciousness rumination on the city at night that reads like a

precognition of the form and content of Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's "typophoto"

Dynamic of the Metropolis (1921-2), as we shall see:

> fire + fire + light against the moonlight and open warfare against all
> the old firmaments, every night   great
> cities   ablaze   with   neon   signs
>   enormous negro's face (30m. high +
> 150m. the height of the building = 180m.) open shut open shut a
> golden eye 3m. high. **SMOKE SMOKE MANOLI SMOKE
> MANOLI CIGARETTES**…
> …brilliant reawakening of the streets which during the day channel
> the smoky swarming of the workaday world…
> …horror going out going out soon hat cane stairs taxi jostling crowds
> **kee-kee-kee** here we are (Marinetti 191-2) [emphasis in the original]

Originally published as a broadsheet dated September 11, 1916, "The Futurist

Cinema" was a direct response to the Great War, the Futurists announced, a

cataclysm that was serving to "sharpen" the Futurist sensibility, and that apparently

had brought them to the recognition that in spite of the role played by the cinema in

variety theater, "[all] the immense *artistic* possibilities of the cinema remain

absolutely untapped" (Marinetti 261). Anticipating the as of yet unrealized

experimental film, the Futurists argued that the cinema should be used, "to bring

about the evolution of the image," by removing itself, "from reality, from

photography, from whatever is thought of as elegant or solemn," and instead

becoming, "antigraceful, *a means of distortion*, impressionistic, concise, *dynamic,

and a vehicle for Words-in-Freedom*" [my emphasis] (261). In order to do so,

though, in order that the cinema should become *the* medium of modern life, drastic

action was needed:

> **We have to liberate the cinema as a means of expression** so as to
> make it the perfect instrument *of a new art* that is infinitely broader in
> scope and more versatile than all others currently in existence. We
> are convinced that only through adapting the cinema will it be

possible to achieve that *multifaceted expressiveness* which all modern artistic experiments are seeking. *The Futurist Cinema* is today creating that **polyexpressive symphony**… (Marinetti 261) [emphasis in the original]

It wouldn't become apparent for another five years, but the Futurists had visualized the city symphony *avant la lettre*, they had begun to piece together their very own Cinecittà.

Shattered Space

In the opening chapter of his *The Production of Space* (1974), his exhaustive post-'68 study of the space of capitalist production whose translation into English in 1991 was a major driving force behind the "spatial turn" in the English-speaking academic realm, Henri Lefebvre provides his own particular (and by now familiar) account of the sense of rupture that marked the turn of the twentieth century:

> The fact is that around 1910 a certain space was shattered. It was the space of common sense, of knowledge (*savoir*), of social practice, of political power, a space hitherto enshrined in everyday discourse, just as in abstract thought, as the environment of and channel for communications; the space, too, of classical perspective and geometry, developed from the Renaissance onwards on the basis of the Greek tradition (Euclid, logic) and bodied forth in Western art and philosophy, as in the form of the city and the town… Euclidean and perspectivist space have disappeared as the systems of reference, along with other 'commonplaces' such as the town, history, paternity, the tonal system in music, traditional morality, and so forth. This was truly a crucial moment. (25)

That the beginnings of the Italian Futurist movement can be dated to exactly that period "around 1910" was surely not lost on Lefebvre. Already by 1910, just one year after their formation, the Futurists had been inspired by "the triumphant

progress of science" to finally and unequivocally draw the line between, "those docile slaves of tradition and us free moderns, who are confident in the radiant splendour of our future," between the old world and the Futurist one (Kern 98-9). Already by 1910 the Futurists had made great strides in the articulation of their resolutely urban-industrial vision of modernity. As Edward Soja (following Lefebvre) has argued in his *Postmodern Geographies* (1989), this was a period when one art movement after another—Cubism, Futurism, Expressionism, Dada, Surrealism, Constructivism, and so on—claimed to have a privileged outlook on the times, and a particular interpretive lens with which to seize what they saw, producing a body of work that captured this period of radical and wide-ranging transformation, "in poetry and painting, in the writing of novels and literary criticism, in architecture and what then represented progressive urban and regional planning"—and the Futurists were clearly at the forefront of this trend (Soja 34). Furthermore, what's striking about each and every one of these movements is the way they displayed a nascent understanding of the spatial dimensions of this change, the way they expressed that the rupture they were witnessing was inextricably tied to the "changing geography of capitalism" and its instrumentalization of space, and that this emerging space was emphatically urban. In this regard, Soja suggests, they truly were avant-garde, developing a level of insight into capitalist space that it would remain "almost entirely outside the purview of critical interrogation" in the social sciences, whose "persistent historicism tended to obscure this insidious spatialization," for another fifty years (Soja 34). It was only with the coming of social philosophers such as Henri Lefebvre in the 1940s and 1950s that a fuller,

spatial understanding of this early twentieth century moment developed, and

Lefebvre's work on "everyday life" and on the "production of space" in the wake of

this "epoch-making event" continues to be crucial to post-Marxist accounts of the

last century.

The advent of cinema receives no mention in Lefebvre's account of the

epochal change that defined the turn of the twentieth century, but the idea that

cinema played a key part in the process he's describing is central to many other

versions of this moment of rupture, such as Stephen Kern's *The Culture of Time and

Space* (1983). Kern's book is a sweeping history of Western culture from 1880-

1918, from the technological sublime of the late nineteenth century (telephone,

electrical lighting, wireless telegraph, etc.) to the all-out technological warfare of

World War I, but cinema, as one of the most influential of the "new modes of

thinking about time and space that came along with these changes," plays a

particularly important part in his story (1). As Kern makes clear, everyone from

Albert Einstein to James Joyce remarked upon the significance of the emergence of

cinema, and both Einstein *and* Joyce understood the cinema to be an emphatically

urban phenomenon.[15] Few, however, captured cinema's relationship to Kern's

---

[15] Joyce was a great cinephile—in fact, he'd helped bring the first motion picture
theatre to Dublin in 1909—and cinematic montage influenced his approach to
literature profoundly. As Kern explains, *Ulysses* represents the pinnacle of Joyce's
achievements in this regard:

> In *Ulysses* he improvised montage techniques to show the
> simultaneous activity of Dublin as a whole, not a history of the city
> but a slice out of time, spatially extended and embodying its entire
> past in a vast extended present. In this respect he was realizing
> [Henry] Bergson's view that the knowledge we have by intuition is
> analogous to that we gain by walking around a city and living in it.
> (77)

overall argument (and to the sense of rupture that accompanied the advent of the

twentieth century) as succinctly as Blaise Cendrars did in his terse 1917 prose poem

"The ABCs of Cinema." Here, Cendrars utilizes a stream-of-consciousness

meditation to describe the place of the cinematic apparatus in his brief history of the

three "world revolutions" of the history of communications. According to Cendrars,

the "first world revolution" came with the development of the Greek alphabet, while

the "second world revolution" followed the development of the printing press. The

"third world revolution," on the other hand, was a product of the spread of global

capitalism made possible by the previous media revolutions, and photographic

representation played an integral role:

> There is much general progress in commerce. Industry constructs
> boats. Fleets open up faraway markets. The antipodes exist. Nations
> are formed. People emigrate. New governments are founded on new
> principles of liberty and equality. Education becomes democratic and
> culture refined. Newspapers appear. The whole globe is caught in a
> network of tracks, of cables, of lines—overland lines, maritime lines,
> air lines. All the world's people are in contact. The wireless sings.
> Work becomes specialized, above and below. THIRD WORLD
> REVOLUTION. And here's Daguerre, a Frenchman, who invents
> photography. Fifty years later, cinema was born. Renewal! Eternal
> Revolution. The latest advancements of the precise sciences, world
> war, the concept of relativity, political convulsions, everything
> foretells that we are on our way toward a new synthesis of the human
> spirit, toward a new humanity and that a race of new men is going to
> appear. Their language will be cinema… The floodgates of the new
> language are open. The letters of the new primer jostle each other,

---

Einstein, for his part, saw the cinema potential as a pedagogical instrument, and in
1920 he stated:

> By means of the school film, supplemented by a simple apparatus for
> projection, it would be possible firstly to infuse certain subjects, such
> as geography, which is at present wound off organ-like in the form of
> dead descriptions, with the pulsating life of a metropolis. (Michelson
> 47)

innumerable. Everything becomes possible! (28) [emphasis in the original]

Not only was the cinema a primary emblem of the new era and an integral part of its spatial relations, but it also amounted to an entirely new discursive field.

Of course, given the part it played in this "third world revolution," the cinema was nothing if not controversial, so outright hymns of praise like Cendrars' were greatly outnumbered by accounts of the new medium that could be significantly less rapturous, and in many cases utterly hysterical (see Bowser [1994], Gunning [1986], or Singer [2001], for instance). Oftentimes its critics focused on the superficial trappings of the phenomenon—its depictions of violence and depravity, or the notion that exhibition spaces themselves had become "recruiting stations of vice"—but fundamentally much of what upset cinema's early critics was the medium's very status as a crucible of modernity (Bowser 37-52; Charney and Schwartz 2). As Miriam Hansen has explained,

> the cinema was not just one among a number of perceptual technologies, nor even the culmination of a particular logic of the gaze; it was above all (at least until the rise of television) the single most expansive discursive horizon in which the effects of modernity were reflected, rejected or denied, transmuted or negotiated. It was both part and prominent symptom of the crisis as which modernity was perceived… ("America," 365)

Even before 1910, what had begun as simply a "moving-picture craze"—a fad among fads—had developed into a full-blown industry, and a particularly important one at that, and the public reaction to the brash, new medium was frequently "bewildered and confused." Newspapers and magazines were also an important part of the mass communication craze, with its repulsion-attraction complex, but they were of another time; the cinema, on the other hand, represented an entirely different

109

type of sensory experience—kinetic, largely non-verbal, and photo-realistic—and it was very much of the moment (Bowser 1; Gunning, "Modernity" 301-2).

From this standpoint, it's not hard to understand the attraction of the cinema to the artistic avant-garde at around the same time. Here was a new medium that held open the promise of a new language, of a new realm where "Everything becomes possible!" Here, too, was a medium of vast discursive potential that had become a phenomenon in just ten years and whose growth potential still seemed unlimited. And here, finally, was a medium that provoked bewilderment and confusion, a medium whose very form alone had the power to disturb the middle class (Gunning, "Modernity" 301). Attempts to harness the new medium, to lend it respectability, to make it a force of moral uplift and not of moral rot, are among the reasons the cinema shifts from being a "cinema of attractions," in Tom Gunning's now famous turn of phrase, a cinema of exhibitionism and of pure sensationalism, to being more theater- and literature-based, more staid. And this is exactly the reason that the early modernists' writings on cinema tended to follow a set pattern: "enthusiasm for this new medium and its possibilities, and disappointment at the way it has already developed" (Gunning, "Cinema" 64). Still, early cinema's potential remained and avant-gardists like Marinetti and Eisenstein understood that with some "focusing and intensification" they might be, "tapping into a source of energy… [with] revolutionary possibilities" (Gunning 70).

The influence of cinema on the artistic avant-garde went well beyond the sphere of aspiring filmmakers. Early Cubist painters like Picasso and Braque combined early cinema's "multiplicity of spaces" with modern art's rejection of

Renaissance perspective, thereby bringing about "the most important revolution in the rendering of space in painting since the fifteenth century" beginning in 1907 (Kern 142-3). But Cubism remained strangely academic for its first few years, strangely attached to the studio and the depiction of "motionless, frozen" objects considering its otherwise radical vision. It took the "Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting" (April 11, 1910)—which promised to harness "the frenetic life of our great cities"—as well as the outright goading of the hyperkinetic, adamantly urban Italians (who denounced the Cubists as being *passéiste*, of course) to get the Cubists to mobilize their vision and make it more modern (Rotzler 32; Kozloff 47; Butler 152)[16]. "What was needed was a painting more immediately involved in contemporary urban experience" (Butler 152). And this was exactly the way Robert Delaunay responded. Cendrars later claimed that he met Delaunay right at that very moment, right as he was discovering, "a new subject that [permitted] him to make use of all his discoveries and processes: the Great City." Delaunay had never left Paris, so Cendrars informed him of the changes taking place "around 1910"—"I tell him about *New York, Berlin, Moscow,* prodigious centers of industrial activity scattered over the whole surface of the earth, I tell him about the new way of life that is taking shape"—but, according to Cendrars, Delaunay had already divined, "all of it as he contemplated the [Eiffel] Tower, as he deciphered the first colored posters that were beginning to cover the buildings, as he watched the birth of a mechanical life in the streets" (108) [my emphasis]. The result of all this was Delaunay's landmark *Eiffel Tower* (1910-1), which depicted a veritable emblem of modernity

---

[16] Of particular importance to this cross-pollination was the famed Futurist "Parisian campaign" of 1911 described by Kozloff (46-51).

(and a Futurist totem) through a fragmented, multi-perspectival approach that

replicated cinematic montage and its shifting perspectives, thereby capturing the

tower's "ubiquity in Parisian life" (Kern 143).

Along with Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1913), and the "action

art" of Boccioni and the Futurist painters, Delaunay's *Eiffel Tower* was a clear

example of the obsession on the part of avant-gardist painters of the 1910s with

capturing "the sensation of physical movement in their work" and with fragmenting

space. Ultimately, this would lead many of these painters to turn against the static

nature of the canvas and towards "motion pictures"—incorporating "cinematic"

techniques in some cases, moving into cinema itself in others. It is this trend that

eventually brings about the experimental film, and among the first instances of its

conceptualization was Leopold Survage's *Le Rythme Coloré* project (1914), which

appeared in Guillaume Apollinaire's *Les Soirées de Paris* just before the outbreak of

the war. In spite of its name, Survage insisted that, "*Colored Rhythm* is in no way an

illustration or an interpretation of a musical work."

Rather,

> It is an art in itself, even if it is based on the same psychological facts
> as music. On its analogy with music. It is the mode of succession in
> time which establishes the analogy between sound rhythm in music,
> and colored rhythm—the fulfillment of which I advocate by
> cinematographic means. Sound is the element of prime importance in
> music… The fundamental element of my dynamic art is *colored
> visual form*, which plays a part analogous to that of sound in music.
> (Kuenzli 1)

Though Survage's project went unrealized at the time, its "insistence on abstraction

and the importance of visual rhythm" was a clear antecedent to a number of the

earliest experimental films that appeared after World War I, films like Hans

Richter's *Rhythmus 21*, *Rhythmus 23*, and *Rhythmus 25* (1921, 1923, and 1925

respectively), Walter Ruttmann's *Opus 1*, *Opus 2* (both 1921), *Opus 3*, and *Opus 4*

(1924 and 1925 respectively), and Viking Eggeling's *Diagonal Symphony* (1924)

(De L'Ecotais 411). Meanwhile, Duchamp's engagement with optics and movement

began with his *Nude Descending a Staircase*—which had been inspired by both the

paintings of the Futurists and the "chronophotography" of Etienne-Jules Marey—

continued through to the series of experiments on the optical effects associated with

rotating discs that he carried out with the assistance of Man Ray, and these led

directly to his experimental film *Anemic Cinema* (1926) (Rotzler 23). The

"problem" with this line of early avant-garde films was that in spite of their Cubo-

Futurist lineage, these films had managed to become disarticulated from

"contemporary urban experience," from the shattered space that was in many ways

their precondition. Richter would only come to realize this error years later, when he

first glimpsed the way the new Soviet reality of the 1920s was being reorganized

"within the matrix of geometric laws" by Dziga Vertov—most notably in *Man With

a Movie Camera* (1929) (Tupitsyn, *Malevich* 29). Here was a cinema that not only

responded to the shattered space that was early twentieth-century modernity, it took

part in the process, it represented it.

Dada-merika

        The history of photography's manipulation dates back to the medium's very

earliest history, and already within the medium's first twenty years pictorialist

photographers had initiated, "[the] practice of combining photographs or

photographic negatives" (Ades, *Photomontage* 7). The term "photomontage" did

not appear until the 1910s, however, and it is generally accepted that it was the

Dadaists, and specifically the Berlin Dadaists, who coined the term and transformed

a technique whose associations were primarily with kitsch (postcards,

commemorative composite photographs, souvenirs) into a technique capable of

taking part in Dada's "variety show"[17] and making images "*tell* in a new way"

(Ades, *Photomontage* 12, 20; Kuenzli, *Dada: Themes* 16). Though it took some time

for the term to find acceptance, the technique itself quickly became a signature of

international Dadaism in the late 1910s and early 1920s, as well as a cultural

watershed, exerting an influence over everything from literature, to theatre, to

architecture. As such, its invention was hotly debated (Phillips 21, 26). Thus,

George Grosz and John Heartfield claimed that they, "made interesting photo-

pasting-montage experiments," as early as 1915 or 1916 (the dates changed

depending on the account), soon after they met[18], and Grosz quickly began calling

---

[17] An entry from Hugo Ball's diary dated June 16, 1916 describes the projected role
of Zurich Dada in the culture:

> *The ideals of culture and of art as a programme for a variety show—*
> *that is our kind of* Candide *against the times.* People act as if nothing
> had happened. The slaughter increases, and they cling to the prestige
> of European glory. They are trying to make the impossible possible
> and to pass off the betrayal of human beings, the exploitation of the
> body and soul of people, and all this civilized carnage as a triumph of
> European intelligence" [my emphasis]. (Kuenzli, *Dada: Themes* 16-7)

Richard Huelsenbeck returned to his native Berlin from Zurich in 1917 and the
Berlin Dada group began to take shape immediately afterwards. Berlin Dada quickly
expanded upon Zurich Dada's highly charged aesthetics of outrage.

[18] Wieland Herzfelde, John's brother, later described their first encounter with Grosz
and his work in 1915 as being akin to a "a cold shower; shocking, sobering, tingling
and invigorating." Heartfield burned all of his previous work, most of which were
landscapes, soon afterwards. Later that same year, both he and Grosz anglicized
their names (Heartfield from Helmut Herzfelde, George from Georg) to protest the

his friend "monteur" (mechanic, engineer) because of his attachment to wearing old blue overalls as much as because of the nature of the work (Ades, *Photomontage* 19). Haussmann and Höch, for their part, claimed that they came up with the idea in 1918 while on vacation along the Baltic coast when Haussmann became enraged by the repetitive sight of photomontaged kitsch "in almost every house" they entered and suddenly realized, "that he could make pictures composed exclusively of cut-up photographs," that could counter this sea of misplaced sentimentality (Ades, *Photomontage* 19-20). What's significant is not so much who developed the technique first, but that the technique emerged from the Berlin Dada circle at roughly the same time. In both cases, the technique was a direct response to World War I: Grosz and Heartfield's first experiments were in the form of "a politically inflammatory pastime" involving postcards which were made to appear as though they'd been "sent back home from the front," while Haussmann and Höch were responding specifically to military mementos that featured photographs of soldiers who were away at the front sutured into composites that included images of, "Kaiser Wilhelm II surrounded by ancestors, descendants, German oaks, medals and so on" (Doherty 94; Ades, *Photomontage* 19-20). In both cases, the technique was also closely connected to America.

In the case of George Grosz and John Heartfield, Grosz was an acknowledged, even legendary, American culture junky whose studio was said to be littered with clippings from American newspapers, who was obsessed with the sounds of jazz and with American films, and for whom boxing, wrestling, the

war and the nationalistic slogan "Gottt strafe England!" (May God punish England!) in wide currency at the time.

African-American, whiskey, and the figure of the gangster were all totems of American culture that provided a much-needed antidote to the Wilhemine bourgeois values he so loathed (van Rheeden 17). Already, by 1916, Grosz had started making drawings such as *Memory of New York* that layered images (skyscrapers, the American flag, caricatures, and a train, along with his trademark social satire) and text ("PEPPERMINT GUM," "ORIENTAL DANZING," "NEW YORK HERALD") on top of one another in such a way as to create a sense of the city that was at once kaleidoscopic and chaotic, and endlessly more "vertical" than his other drawings from the same period (such as his 1917 *Menschen im Café*). Many years later, in 1932, when he fled to New York to escape the growing political storm in Germany, Grosz picked up where *Memory of New York* had left off. He made a striking series of photographs immediately upon arrival that focused on the restlessness and unsurpassed modernity of his new home, not to mention its "culture of congestion," before establishing himself as an in-demand graphic artist with a keen eye for New York's stark social contrasts (Jentsch 31-55).

Heartfield, too, showed an interest in modern American culture and its iconography beginning in the late-1910s. Soon after he and Wieland Herzefelde, his brother, founded the Malik-Verlag (publishing house) in 1917 so that they could continue publishing the radical journal *Neue Jugend* (New Youth), Heartfield featured a photograph of the Flatiron Building on the cover of *Neue Jugend* no. 2. In true proto-Dada fashion, however, Heartfield subverted the image, placing bold red type overtop that read "REKLAMEBERATUNG" (public relations). *Neue Jugend* anticipated the attitude and design of later Dada publications, not the least because,

as Sherwin Simmons has pointed out, its very design, with its American-style graphics—its mixed typefaces and its attention-grabbing use of color—was a direct challenge to German cultural conservatism, and an update of the Futurists' fetish for American advertising techniques[19] (131). In fact, building on Heartfield's Flatiron collage (and placed directly beside it), *Neue Jugend* featured a short article by Grosz that carried the title "Can You Ride a Bicycle?" that came out in praise of *reklame* on building walls, gleefully comparing the impact of such advertisements when seen from a moving train to, "a ragtime dance melody driving again and again into the brain" (ibid).

Later in his career, in addition to the posters and the covers of *Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung* that were his most lasting contribution to the anti-fascist struggle of the inter-war years, Heartfield was also a rather prolific dust-jacket designer who, as his brother later described it, transformed "his revolutionary technique into an advertising tool for revolutionary literature" (Pachnicke and Honnef 96). Of particular interest here are a number of dust-jackets he produced in the 1920s for Malik-Verlag's German translations of the works of Upton Sinclair[20], including the straight aerial photograph of Midtown Manhattan he used for the cover of *The Metropolis* (1925), a photomontage for *The Moneychangers* (1925) that combines the stock market listings from a newspaper with a high-angle shot of the center of the Chicago Corn Exchange's trading floor, a photomontage for *The Millennium* (1925)

---

[19] Heartfield's early aspirations of becoming a *plein-air* painter in the *Jungendstil* vein were severely disrupted when he moved to Berlin just before the war. He later credited an exhibition of Futurist painting with having been part of this disruption (Roth 19).
[20] When Malik-Verlag moved away from Dada they began publishing "the novels of the great foreign Socialists, first… Sinclair then Gorki" (Willett 74).

which depicts a cataclysmic flood washing over an ultra-high angle shot of New York skyscrapers, and, perhaps most powerfully of all, the "dialectic photomontage" he created for the 1928 reissue of *100%*, which combined a view of Wall Street from Broadway almost identical to Coburn's *The Stock Exchange* with a photograph of a Ku Klux Klan rally complete with makeshift cross and American flag (Pachnicke and Honnef 96)[21]. As is clear from these book cover designs, Heartfield's fascination with America was lasting, but it had rapidly developed into something less than ecstatic over the course of the 1920s. Things were different in 1919, though.

At the time that Grosz and Heartfield began producing their very first photomontages, in the wake of World War I and the failed German revolution, the meaning of America was rather different, and as a result, American imagery and Americanism played a much more ambivalent role in these early experiments. Thus, Grosz and Heartfield's earliest photomontages include their *Life and Times in Universal City at 12.05 Midday* (1919)—which captures the sensationalism and pulp appeal of Hollywood through a combination of photographs and other images lifted from the popular press (a gun moll, a telephone), text ("FOX," "SON OF A GUN," "Gripping!"), found bits of film, and Grosz's pen and ink drawings—as well as their *Dada-merika* (1919)—which creates an anarchic portrait of *Amerika* out of

---

[21] The idea to put artwork on the front and back covers of books originated at Malik-Verlag in the 1920s. At first the front cover photograph was just repeated on the back cover, but later Herzfelde and Heartfield had the idea of using two different images, one on the front and one on the back. Eventually began using images in such a way as to create a powerful tension between the two covers. As Herzefelde noted in 1962, "when Heartfield made deliberate use of it, we called the outcome of this method *dialectic photomontage*" [my emphasis] (Pachnicke and Honnef 96, 98).

photographs of machines, skyscrapers (including the Equitable Building), and a

speedometer, found objects (a measuring tape, loose change), and text

("UNIVERSAL HAIR CO.," "100000," "dada-merika"). Perhaps more importantly,

though, Grosz and Heartfield's fascination with America extended directly into their

shared philosophy of art. The term "photomontage" was derived from the words

montiert and *montieren*, both of which had associations with machines and

engineering, both of which Grosz and Heartfield abbreviated as "mont." on their

collaborations along with print versions of their names, displacing the traditional

signature and giving the impression that they were engineers and not artists (Ades,

Photomontage 23). And this Grosz derived from his sarcastic, if naïve, attachment

to Fordist and Taylorist industrial production,[22] one that was characteristic of Berlin

Dada as a whole. As Bridgid Doherty explains, the Dadaists,

> associated their production of pictures with the operations of the
> assembly line and, more broadly, the expanding modernization of
> Germany's industrial production around 1920, and they did so
> ambivalently, sometimes praising, sometimes criticizing, but always
> insisting on the determinative significance of technologies of
> industrial production and reproduction in contemporary modernity.
> (93)[23]

---

[22] Grosz was said to have an "autographed" portrait of Henry Ford adorning his
studio (the signature and the dedication forged by Grosz himself, of course). Later,
in one of his montages he called for, "the introduction of the Taylor system in
painting" (Doherty 93)
[23] By the late 1920s, Heartfield still identified himself as a *monteur*, but any idealism
he might have attached to American industrial models had disappeared entirely, as
evidenced by his withering 1927 neo-Dadaist critique of Taylorism, "Rationalization
is on the March!"

Dada may have been formed out of "ethical opposition" to Futurism and its

machine cult, but it wasn't always easy to tell (ibid 87).[24]

Hausmann and Höch were less explicit in their Americanism than someone

like Grosz, but some of their earliest experiments with photomontage display a

similar turn towards American culture and away from the conservatism of German

bourgeois culture, or, at the very least, an attachment to similar types of source

materials. Hannah Höch's elaborately titled *Cut With the Kitchen Knife Dada*

Through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch in Germany (1919-1920)—

whose title puns on the German word *schnitt*, creating a tie between her intentionally

crude photomontage and the practice of film editing—intersperses an absolutely

irreverent ode to German popular culture with several icons of machine-age

modernity (wheels, ball bearings, girders, trains, and skyscrapers, including the

Bankers Trust Building)[25]. Hausmann's somewhat less explosive *Dada in Ordinary*

Life, a.k.a. *Dada Cino* (Dada Cinema) (1920) features an obscured logo carrying the

word "America" and images of skyscrapers (including the Metropolitan Life Tower)

alongside pictures of a tank, a model of a baby *in utero*, and men's fashion, with the

words "dada cino" overtop suggesting that these heterogeneous elements stolen from

---

[24] In fact, as Moholy pointed out in his 1928 essay "Photography is Manipulation of
Light," the Dadaists' approach to photomontage formed some kind of parallel with
the Futurist search for "polyexpressive symphonies":

> These "photomontages" were true sisters to Futurist, brutalist music
> which, composed of scraps of noise, in its gathering together of many
> elements sought to convey the exciting experience of the awakening
> of a metropolis and similar things. (Fricke 127-8)

[25] Höch's *Cut With the Kitchen Knife* is perhaps the ultimate example of Moholy's
1928 description of Dadaist photomontage: "These pictures were far from pretending
to be real; they showed brutally the process, the dissection of single photos, the crude
cut made by scissors" (Fricke 127-8)

everyday life and mobilized by Dada would become the stuff of a new cinema, a Dada Cinema. Meanwhile, Grosz, Heartfield, and Hausmann together published a pamphlet in 1920—*Dada no. 3*—that contained an open letter to none other than Charlie Chaplin, addressing him as a spiritual Dada leader: "The International Dada Company of Berlin sends greetings to CHARLIE CHAPLIN, the greatest artist in the world and a good Dada artist. We protest the exclusion of Chaplin's movies from Germany."[26] Its signatories included Huelsenbeck, Picabia, Arp, Tzara, Schwitters, Ernst, Chirico, and Piscator in addition to its authors (van Rheeden 20).

As indicated by the list of signatures above, in spite of the group's penchant for outrage and vitriol, the Dada group's membership was remarkably fluid and open. Not only did the Dadaists have a "proto-globalized identity" (complete with mock corporate stationery designed by Tristan Tzara), but the "Mouvement Dada" was much more than just a name—there was a considerable amount of movement between branches *and* each cell functioned as a sort of node between multiple spheres of artistic influence (both real and imagined) (Dickerman 1). Typical in this regard was the Dutch/German artist Paul Citroën, who became a regular fixture within Berlin's expressionist art circles beginning around 1915, before eventually coming into contact with George Grosz and the rest of the anarchistic strain of artists that eventually developed into Berlin Dada (van Rheeden 16). Citroën's first photomontages were made in Amsterdam in around 1919, but compositions such as

---

[26] Just a year earlier, Grosz also dedicated a particularly lurid depiction of Berlin and Grosz's place within it: *Selbstporträt (für Charlie Chaplin)* (Self-portrait [for Charlie Chaplin]).
The Chaplin shorts were finally admitted into Germany in the early 1920s (Willett 68).

Johnson Training Again, *The American Girl*, and *Groszstadt* (all 1919) betray the

enormous influence of Berlin Dada, and especially George Grosz (ibid 23). *Johnson*

Training Again shares Grosz's fascination with boxing and African-American

culture, as well as the modern metropolis, but it is *The American Girl* and *Groszstadt*

(which includes a fragment of the Bankers Trust Building) where the modern city

comes to the fore, and it does so in a manner that clearly mirrors the pell-mell

assortment of skyscrapers seen in Grosz's *Memory of New York*. Despite these

similarities, like his colleagues before him, Citroën claimed that the idea for these

particular photomontages came to him (somewhat) independently of the Dadaists:

> I joined them [the Dadaists], I also glued. By chance at a friend's I
> saw a sort of collage, two photographs of houses glued next to each
> other, and I was thinking it would be nice to glue a whole sheet of
> paper full of just houses, which probably would give the impression
> of quite a metropolis. (ibid 24)

As promising as these early experiments were, it wasn't until 1923, after he'd

returned to Germany and enrolled in Walter Gropius' Bauhaus, that Citroën made his

true photomontage masterpiece. Now a part of the Dada-Constructivist alliance

whose Dutch-German connection included his fellow countryman Theo van

Doesburg,[27] and getting support from his Bauhaus instructors to return to his

experiments in photomontage, Citroën produced *Metropolis*, which builds a

hallucinatory modern city out of a dizzying assortment of urban and architectural

views, including shots of New York's Flatiron Building, Woolworth Building,

Municipal Building, Park Row Building, and Equitable Building, as well as

---

[27] Van Doesburg was the force behind the Dutch Constructivist journal *De Stijl*.
Simultaneously, and unbeknownst to his Constructivist associates, he also operated
as a Dadaist under the pseudonym I.K. Bonset, participating in Dada events and
publishing the Dada-Constructivist journal *Mécano* (Ades, *Dada* 13).

Washington, D.C.'s Capitol Building, and a wide variety of unorthodox angles, including both extreme high-angle shots and low-angle shots. Again, like his 1919 compositions, Citroën's *Metropolis* lacked the edge characteristic of the work of his Dada associates, but, if anything, this only increased the influence of its modern metropolitanism.

In spite of the underlying Americanism of many of its works, Berlin's First International Dada Fair of 1920 was actually dedicated to the Soviet Productivist artist Vladimir Tatlin, to Tatlin's neo-Futurist *Monument for the Third International* (1919)—which had taken the Futurist spiral and transformed it into a progressive architectural statement[28]—and to the post-Futurist, proto-Constructivist conviction that, in a truly revolutionary society, traditional art was a thing of the past. In fact, Grosz and Heartfield themselves displayed a large placard at the show which further underlined the ambivalent nature of their aesthetic—its slogan, printed in bold type, read: "Die Kunst ist tot / Es lebe die neue Machinenkunst Tatlins" (ART IS DEAD / Long live the new machine art of Tatlin) (Kuenzli, *Dada: Themes* 17).[29] The fair also featured a photomontage work by Hausmann entitled *Tatlin lebt zu Hause* (Tatlin at Home) that didn't actually contain an image of Tatlin, just an image of a man found in an American magazine that had "automatically" reminded Hausmann of the Russian artist (Ades, *Photomontage* 28). The Berlin Dadaists clearly had

---

[28] Around the same time that Futurism began to make waves in Russia, Tatlin made a trip to Paris where he came into contact with Picasso's early constructions. This encounter triggered a new radicalism in his work, one that eventually led to his *Monument* (Michelson, "Introduction" xxx).

[29] Grosz later recanted on this position. In 1922 he was brought to Moscow in an attempt to foster German-Soviet relations and he had the opportunity to meet both Lenin and Tatlin, but apparently the experience left him disenchanted (Willett 71).

some sense of the "impersonal, mechanical" aesthetic that was being cultivated in the

Soviet Union at the time, but Hausmann's interest in Tatlin had more to do with his,

"understanding of him as a revolutionary, rather than from direct knowledge of his

works," and he employed the "machine-head" motif in order to convey the notion of

the "new man" that is the product of a revolutionary society (Kuenzli, *Dada: Themes*

96). That said, Grosz and Heartfield's enthusiasm for both Vladimir Tatlin *and*

Henry Ford was not as antithetical as it might now seem[30]. The receptivity of the

Berlin Dadaists to Russian Constructivism went beyond a shared interest in

revolution, machines, and photomontage, however—it also extended to the modern

metropolis, and especially the modern American metropolis (Kuenzli, *Dada: Themes*

17).

Dynamic City

Though the years 1910 to 1930 in Russia were marked by, "an unprecedented

surge of creative energy that produced experimental masterpieces in painting, poetry,

prose, theater, and cinema," and that resulted in an enormous number of avant-garde

movements and counter-movements within a relatively short period of time, for all

intents and purposes, this history began rather inauspiciously in 1913 (not 1910) in

---

[30] Willett provides a sense of just how strong Dada's dual fascination with America
and the Soviet Union was in 1920 with his description of the Berlin group's
contributions to the Berlin Dada Fair:
> among [their works] were Hausmann's photomontage "Tatlin at
> home," two "Tatlinist plans" and a "Tatlinist mech. construction" by
> Grosz, also a photograph of Charlie Chaplin, one or two boxing
> photographs, "Dadamerika" and a work of 1919 by Grosz and
> Heartfield called "Life and activities in Universal City, 12.05 o'clock
> midday" (from the collection of "Lämmle, California") (53).

Finland (not Russia) (Sheldon ix). It was in July of that year that "The First All-Russian Congress of Poets of the Future" was formed, and attendance at its first event came to a grand total of three, one of whom was the painter Kazimir Malevich. The Russian proto-Futurists were hardly unaware of Italian Futurism—translations of the Futurist Manifesto quickly appeared in Russian (as well as English, German, Spanish, and Czech)—but, nevertheless, there was a "conflict of origins" between Russian and Italian Futurism, one that came to a head in 1914 when Marinetti visited Russia for the first time (Marinetti 16; Crone and Moos 70). Despite a shared enthusiasm for the possibilities associated with the new era, the two strains of Futurism had fundamental ideological differences between them: "while the Italians avidly embraced technology and its mechanically oriented innovation, regarding speed as a mechanism for social advance, the Russians sought profound, convention-shattering change." Marinetti's visit resulted in a veritable explosion of artistic activity in pre-Revolutionary Russia, but, at first, this rupture was sought primarily in the realm of language—if Futurism was to provide a blueprint for the new world, one constructed out of new modes of communication, then one had to begin with the structure of language (Crone and Moos 70). One of the most powerful voices of this new Russian literary scene was Viktor Shklovsky, who made his debut with a talk entitled "The Place of Futurism in the History of Language" while he was still a freshman at the University of Petersburg. Shklovsky, "maintained that futurist poetry emancipated words from their traditional significance and restored them to perceptibility by calling attention to their sounds," creating the opportunity for an aesthetic predicated on, "[forcing] such new perceptions of the word and the world"

(Sheldon x). By 1915, Russian visual artists had begun to respond to the Futurist call for "profound, convention-shattering change" as well. On December 17, Malevich unveiled his neo-Futurist Suprematism movement at the 0.10 Last Futurist Exhibition in St. Petersburg, exhibiting dozens of stark non-objective paintings that utterly rejected figurative and expressionist art, including *Black Square* and *Red Square: Painterly Realism of a Peasant Woman in Two Dimensions* (Crone and Moos 118).

As much as the advent of non-objective art in pre-Revolutionary Russia might have indicated serious rumblings within Russia's intelligentsia, the Russian Revolution quickly unsettled abstract art's vanguard status. As Margarita Tupitsyn has argued, even as early as 1917 Malevich began to display uncertainty over the future of his neo-Futurist art movement. By 1919 Viktor Shklovsky was proclaiming that abstract art's time in Russia had passed, that painting would not and could not, "remain non-objective forever" (Tupitsyn, *Malevich* 6). And that very same year, the Russian Productivist artist Gustav Klutsis staged "the overthrow of non-objectivity" when he transformed a pre-existing Suprematist mixed-media painting of his into his photomontage *Dynamic City* (Ades, *Photomontage* 67). This event, Klutsis later wrote, marked the beginning of political photomontage:

> There are two general tendencies in the development of
> photomontage: one comes from American publicity and is exploited
> by the Dadaists and Expressionists—the so-called photomontage of
> form; the second tendency, that of militant and political
> photomontage, was created on the soil of the Soviet Union.
> Photomontage appeared in the USSR under the banner of "the left
> front of the arts" (LEF) when non-objective art was already
> finished…photomontage in the USSR as a new method of art dates
> from 1919-1920. (Ades, *Photomontage* 63-4)

Revolution required "agit-art," according to Klutsis, and for that, "one needed

realistic representation" (Tupitsyn, "From" 83-4). Though the relationship of

Dynamic City to "agit-art" is somewhat obscure at first glance, its use of photographs

helps to convey a clear message that was only implicit in the original work. Dawn

Ades explains:

> In the photomontage, certain planes have been 'replaced' by
> photographic elements: a whole skyscraper (suggesting volume), and
> a fragment of skyscraper façade (suggesting plane). Photographs of
> workers engaged in construction, whereby other planes become steel
> girders, or a wall, are added, and the overall significance is clear—the
> Communist world of the future is under construction, a new world is
> being built (the circle = the globe). (*Photomontage* 67)

The following year Klutsis produced a much more explicit "agit-art" photomontage

entitled *The Electrification of the Entire Country* that commemorated Lenin's bold

electrification program and his almost Futurist obsession with electricity. Again,

Klutsis employed a Suprematist composition as the work's foundation, placing some

text and a series of cut-out images (construction workers, architectural renderings,

etc.) overtop, including a relatively massive image of Lenin striding forward towards

the center carrying metal scaffolding and architectural segments as he goes

(Tupitsyn, "From" 83-4). In some ways Klutsis's earlier photomontage was the

more radical of the two, though. It was designed so that it had, "no obvious 'right'

way up," so that it defied conventions (and gravity), and allowed its viewer to view it

"from all sides, creating a sense of "spatial instability" (Ades, *Photomontage* 68;

Tupitsyn, "From" 84). It was also notable for the fact that it included images of

skyscrapers, New York skyscrapers—in fact, its planar "fragment of skyscraper

façade" was none other than the Equitable Building. Klutsis may have been averse

to American advertising, but he apparently was friendly to American engineering and his composition had the unfortunate distinction of announcing the arrival of Soviet monumentalism.

By 1920 there was already talk within the Productivist circle (which included Tatlin, Aleksandr Rodchenko, and Rodchenko's wife, Varvara Stepanova) of a type of "rational geometric design" that stood in contrast to Malevich's Suprematism and that was being discussed under the rubric Constructivism, but a fully formed movement had yet to come into existence (Rotzler 55). On March 18, 1921, however, the Constructivist group became official. Two weeks later a Constructivist program was drafted by Aleksei Gan, and, like the Dadaists before them, the Constructivists rejected the idea that the work of art was both a "product of individual genius and a marketable commodity." What was radically different between Berlin Dada and Soviet Constructivism was that one had arisen in the ruins of a failed revolution, while the other emerged within the context of a post-revolutionary society. As such, in stark juxtaposition to Berlin Dada at its most nihilistic,[31] the Soviet Constructivist platform was unabashedly utopian:

> they sought to develop a new form of creative activity, one that would fuse utilitarian, ideological, and formal objectives, and would, therefore, be more appropriate to the needs and collective values of

---

[31] Again, while Dada is often characterized as violent, anarchic, and nihilistic, it should be clear by now that the Dadaist philosophy was quite a bit more mixed than such portrayals let on, and that one way of understanding the Dadaist-Constructivist alliance is through their shared opposition to Italian Futurism's underlying fascism. As Ades has pointed out, there's a strong strain of utopianism to Dada: "Dada's brief life… overlapped with the utopian moment in the 1920s, which gave birth to Constructivism, before the rise of the totalitarian dictatorships in Europe, the grim struggle between Communism and Fascism, which crushed so many avant-garde artists and writers and which led inexorably to the Second World War" (*Dada* 13).

the new postrevolutionary order in which the worker theoretically
reigned supreme. (Lodder, "El" 27)

Photography and photomontage were not originally an important part of the Constructivist aesthetic, but as Russia's avant-garde circles vied with one another for position within the post-revolutionary vanguard, and the Communist party began to place conditions upon their support for the arts, this changed. For photography, which, "[united] the mechanized production of images with a figurative content," thereby reconciling, "Constructivism's commitment to technology with the Party's demands for an art that was comprehensible to the masses," suddenly gained in currency (Lodder, *Constructive* 368).

Thus, in 1922, following a move towards socially committed publishing on the part of the Constructivists, Aleksei Gan published his highly influential book *Constructivism*, the most detailed outline of the group's principles to date, and soon afterwards he began publishing *Kino-fot*, his journal devoted to film and photography (Lodder, *Constructive* 369). *Kino-fot* covered everything from the slapstick comedy of Chaplin to the abstract works of Eggeling, and, despite its name, its focus was primarily on film. Nevertheless, the journal was an important site for early Constructivist experiments in combining photography with design, and it helped create a powerful bond between Constructivist artists and progressive filmmakers (Lodder, *Constructive* 376, 378). Aleksandr Rodchenko was a chief example of this transition. Though his first steps with using photography in his design work were tentative, by 1923, when he took charge of the layout and cover design for *LEF*, Rodchenko was using photomontage in well over half of his designs. Particularly influential was the series of photomontages that he produced to

accompany Mayakovsky's poem "About This" that same year, and which

imaginatively reinterpret the poet's attempts to reconcile individual expression and

revolution (Ades, *Photomontage* 78). Along with Constructivist motifs, such as

modern engineering and communications technology, one of the things that's

striking about Rodchenko's compositions is their affinities with the photomontages

of the Berlin Dadaists (especially Höch) and their almost Groszian Americanism (the

words "Jass-Two-Step / Fox-Trot und / Shimmy" appear alongside a cigar which

protrudes grotesquely from the mouth of a smartly appointed gentleman) (Tupitsyn,

"From" 88). In fact, there, once again, in the thick of an arrangement that includes a

pneumatic tire and a biplane, stands the monumental form of the Equitable Building

with Trinity Church nearby.

By 1924, photomontage was no longer just an experiment, it was the

preferred Constructivist medium, due in large part to the efforts of *Kino-fot* and *LEF*,

the journal of the Left Front of the Arts, whose founders included Mayakovsky,

Rodchenko, and Tretyakov. In fact, the fourth issue of *LEF* contained an articled

entitled "Photomontage" that problematized Pictorialism and explained the new

medium's particular relevance:

> By photomontage we mean the use of the photograph as an illustrative
> means. A combination of photos replaces a composition of graphic
> images. The sense of this substitution is that the photo is not a sketch
> of a visual fact, but an exact fixation of it. This exactness and
> documentariness give the photo a power of influence over the
> observer which a graphic image can never attain…
>   Up to now a qualified photo, i.e. an artistic one, has always tried to
> imitate painting and drawing, which is why its production has been
> weak, and has revealed the possibilities there are in photography.
> Photographers supposed that the more like a picture the photo was,
> the more artistic and better it would be. In reality, however, the result
> has turned out quite the reverse: the more artistic it is, the worse it is.

> Photography has its own possibilities for montage and has nothing in
> common with the composition of pictures. These [possibilities]
> should be made clear.
>   As examples of photomontage in Russia, we can point out the works
> of Rodchenko in his book-covers, posters, advertisements and
> illustrations (Mayakovksy's *About This*).
>   In the West the works of Georges Grosse [sic] and other Dadaists
> are typical. (Ades, *Photomontage* 72)

Illustrating the article was Paul Citroën's *Metropolis*.

During the same period, Rodchenko began to work in film, teaming up with

Vertov by producing bold Constructivist intertitles for his *Kino-Eye* films, and at the

same time Rodchenko began to make the move from being a visionary photomonteur

to being a visionary photographer with an international profile (Tsivian, "Turning

Objects" 98). By the late 1920s, Rodchenko, along with the Berlin-based Moholy-

Nagy and Umbo, had become famous for his unorthodox angles and bold

compositions, including a series of breathtaking high-angle shots that he took in

1927 which aspired to the drama of Moholy-Nagy's *Funkturm* and Coburn's

Pinnacles photographs, but had to settle for somewhat less vertiginous vantage

points. "I prefer to see ordinary things in an extraordinary way," he wrote (Lodder

387). Above all he despised the standard framing of the viewfinder photographs that

were then the norm, favoring novel views instead, views that would perform a

pedagogical function:

> [I]n order to teach man to see from all viewpoints, it is necessary to
> photograph ordinary, well-known objects from completely
> unexpected viewpoints and in unexpected positions, and photograph
> new objects from various viewpoints, thereby giving a full impression
> of the object…
>   We don't see what we are looking at. We don't see marvelous
> perspectives—foreshortening and the positioning of objects.

> We who have been taught to see the inculcated, must discover the
> world of the visible… We must revolutionize our visual thinking.
> (Tsivian, "Turning Objects" 109)

Malevich, for his part, though he never entirely left the non-objectivism of

Suprematist art behind and he remained committed to painting to the end, moved

closer to photography and film during the 1920s, going so far as to claim, "film is an

allegory of modernism," and he also began to tease out the architectural implications

of Suprematism more forcefully. Like others before him, Malevich gradually came

to the conclusion that film and photography were the ideal media for bringing about

the union of the abstract and the real (Tupitsyn, *Malevich* 30). His own experiments

were primarily illustrative at first, resulting in *Analytical Chart No. 16* (1925), which

uses a basic form of photomontage in order to establish Suprematism's unique

position on an artistic evolutionary chart, one which moves from Cubism to Futurism

and then to Suprematism (ibid 40-1). The following year, Malevich augmented his

work on Suprematist architecture with a photomontage that bore the title *Project for

a Suprematist Skyscraper for New York City*. Malevich had already taken pains to

compare the objective sources of Suprematism with those of Futurism and

Academicism in his book *The Non-Objective World* (1927). Thus, while the

Academician was apparently stimulated by rural scenes that included horse-drawn

carriages and hunting dogs, and the Futurist by the urban-industrial complex,

including shipyards, dirigibles, trains, and an almost exact facsimile of the view of

Wall Street pictured in Coburn's *The Stock Exchange* and Heartfield's *100%*, "[the]

environment ('reality') which stimulates the Suprematist," according to Malevich,

was made up of aerial photographs of cities, industrial sites, and airplanes flying in

formation—in other words, the latest views of man's "new environment" (Malevich 22-5). Now, in his photomontage, he was using photography to take one of his "pure, non-utilitarian" Suprematist architectonics and reinsert it into this very same "new environment." Though his model was meant to be displayed horizontally, Malevich turned it on its side and inserted it into the skyline of Lower Manhattan, thereby, "obtaining the highest and most modern of skyscrapers, that symbol of the Icarus myth pursued by this whole generation" (Ades, *Photomontage* 104). Its neighbors? The Bankers Trust Building, the Singer Building, the Woolworth Building, and, yes, once again, though it was partially obscured by Malevich's architectonic, the Equitable Building's unmistakable flank. T.J. Clark claims that for Malevich modernism in architecture was tantamount to "monumentality gone mad"—certainly that was what he found in the "delirious New York" of the early twentieth century ("El Lissitzky" 209).

Despite the fact that he wasn't originally a part of the Moscow Constructivist group, despite the fact that his initiation into the Russian avant-garde had come as part of Malevich's Suprematist circle, "a movement antithetical to [Constructivism] in most respects," where he developed a Suprematist-inspired form of abstract painting that he gave the name *Proun* ("Project for the affirmation of the new"), it was El Lissitzky who became the primary exponent of Russian Constructivism in the West beginning in 1921 (Lodder, "El Lissitzky" 28; Forgács 54). Like Malevich, Lissitzky appears to have had some misgivings about the place of non-objective art in the revolutionary atmosphere of the new Russia, but unlike his mentor, whose concessions to Constructivism were made in the form of adjustments to

Suprematism, Lissitzky actively went about trying to bridge the gap between the movements, bringing Constructivist elements to Suprematism, and Suprematist elements to Constructivism. Lissitzky began this daunting task as soon as he moved to Moscow in late 1920, teaching at the Higher State Artistic and Technical Workshops and joining INKhUK (Institute of Artistic Culture), an organization that also happened to be home to the First Working Group of Constructivists just then taking shape. Though Lissitzky never joined the Moscow Constructivists, in September 1921 he gave an important lecture that began by stressing the debt owed to Malevich, whose *Black Square* was the "zero point of painting," and to Suprematism, which had opened up the possibility of "growth in real space," but then went on to highlight the underlying Constructivism of his *Proun* works, with their emphatic sense of space and their dynamism, in terms that call to mind those of Klutsis:

> We have made the canvas rotate. And as we rotated it, we saw that
> we were putting ourselves in space. Space, until now, has been
> projected onto a surface by a conditional system of planes. We began
> to move on the surface of the plane towards an unconditional
> distance… If Futurism put the spectator inside the canvas, we take
> him via the canvas into real space; we put him in the center of a new
> construction of distance. (Forgacs 56)

These canvases might have appeared to be two-dimensional, but they were actually "architectural," according to Lissitzky, "[a] synthesis of artistic and engineering creativity," "no longer pictorial," but "like a geographical map, like a *design*" (ibid 57).

Later that year, Lissitzky left for Berlin, sent by the Soviet government as an emissary whose task was to forge ties between Soviet and German artists, and,

presumably, as an agitator in the country that Lenin felt was the "weakest link" in

capitalism's chain (Perloff 7; Forgacs 67-8)[32]. There he rapidly became a well-

connected part of Berlin's highly politicized art scene, befriending Moholy-Nagy,

Schwitters, Hausmann, Arp, and Richter, as well as Gropius, and taking part in

Russian cultural exchanges with such notables as Ivan Puni and Viktor Shklovsky

(Forgacs 61). Key to Lissitzky's dissemination of Constructivism was *Veshch*

("Object" or "*Objet*"), a journal he co-founded soon after his arrival in Germany that

was dedicated to, "[acquainting] creative workers in Russia with the latest Western

art" and "[informing] Western Europe about Russian art and literature" (Willett 75).

And there, from his very first editorial, he announced a new internationalist art that

would move beyond Dadaist nihilism:

> We hold that the fundamental feature of the present age is the triumph
> of the constructive method. We find it just as much in the new
> economics and the development of industry as in the psychology of
> our contemporaries in the world of art. *Objet* will take the part of
> constructive art, whose task is not to adorn life but to organize it.
> (Lodder, "El Lissitzky" 28)

At the same time, this was not the Constructivism of the First Working Group of

Constructivists. Lissitzky rejected both the Moscow Constructivists' "Death to Art"

slogan and their "crude emphasis on technology and utility," and instead he

promoted his Suprematist-Constructivist hybrid in the pages of *Objet* and in

influential exhibitions such as his sophisticated *Proun Room* of 1923. In 1924 he

grudgingly took on a position as a graphic designer with the Pelikan corporation in

---

[32] Willett describes how many Soviets were fooled by the "outward similarities"
between the Russian Revolution and the failed German revolution of 1918 (44). The
years that followed were marked by a considerable amount of prodding.

Hannover,[33] but in spite of ideological difficulties, the experience was far from entirely negative, for this marked the beginning of what would become a lifelong passion for photography. The following year, when Lissitzky and Hans Arp teamed up to produce an art historical survey of modern art between 1914 and 1924 called *The Isms of Art* (1925), photography played an important part in the book's highly graphic layout, but barely figured in its history of modern art, appearing only fleetingly in the sections on Dadaism and Futurism. Significantly, though, Lissitzky and Arp's book was organized in reverse evolutionary order, so that modern art's beginnings were placed at the end of the book, while the very beginning of the book was presented as modern art's apotheosis. Thus, Futurism and Expressionism[34] were the last two sections in the book, while Constructivism and Film were the first two. What lay ahead was unclear—the authors placed a simple question mark in the future.

When Lissitzky returned to Moscow later that same year, he was well on his way to making the full transition from abstract painting to photography. He found his homecoming difficult at first, though, because the dominant form of photography in Russia at the time was both documentary in nature and adamantly opposed to any kind of influence from the realm of modernist visual arts. "I should like so much to carry out various photographic projects," he reported in a letter, "but it's almost impossible here" (Tupitsyn, "After" 183). It wasn't until 1926 that he finally

---

[33] Lissitzky came down with tuberculosis. He went to a sanatorium in Davos, Switzerland to seek treatment, and the medical bills he incurred were substantial (Tupitsyn, "After" 177-9).
[34] Though Expressionism was placed at the beginning of the timeline, its earliest works (as represented by Lissitzky and Arp) came from the year 1914, while the Futurism section included works from no later than 1913 and from as early as 1911.

realized his first post-return photographic project, and he did so with the assistance

of the Association of New Architects. The project was *Record (*more commonly

known as *Runner in the City*) and, reflecting his interest in film as well as

photography and a continuing devotion to Futurism passed down from Malevich,

Lissitzky used multiple negatives and bold modernist graphics to produce an

immensely kinetic ode to the dynamism of the modern metropolis (Tupitsyn, "After"

187). As Tupitsyn has noted, "Lissitzky succeeded in infusing his frieze with

cinematic qualities through the rendering of high-speed running, a doubling of the

city landscape, and the spreading of white vertical stripes across the whole image,"

giving the composition an exaggerated sense of motion, fragmentation, and velocity

(ibid 186). But the composition's neo-Futurism went beyond its aesthetics, it also

extended to the precise imagery of Lissitzky's photomontage. This wasn't just any

modern city scene—it was a nighttime shot of New York that captured the

elettricismo of the Great White Way in all its blinding glory, and among the various

advertisements featured ("CANDY," "DANCING / DINING /MUSICAL REVUE"),

three electric signs stood out in particular: "COCA-COLA," "CENTRAL

THEATRE" and "STRAND," placing the photograph specifically at the corner of

Broadway and 47th, at the upper end of Times Square,[35] the district Nik Cohn would

later call *The Heart of the World*. Not only that, but the source photograph for this

---

[35] These were two of New York's most majestic movie palaces. The Strand was built in 1914 and was the largest theater in New York at the time. It was managed by Samuel "Roxy" Rothafel, who later opened an even larger movie palace, the Roxy, where he launched a chorus line that he called the Roxyettes. In 1933, Rothafel brought the Roxyettes to the newly opened Radio City Musical Hall at Rockefeller Center. There he renamed them the Rockettes in honor of the Rockefellers (Wollen 57-8). The Central Theatre was built in 1918. Both stood at the intersection of Broadway and 47th Street.

nighttime scene was Fritz Lang's multiple-exposure photograph entitled *Broadway*, taken on his fateful 1924 visit to New York, thereby giving Lissitzky's composition an added (if secret) cinematic quality (Neumann 34).

Dynamic of the Metropolis

Of the Berlin-based artists who contributed to the formation and dissemination of International Constructivism in the early 1920s, few were as prolific or as influential as the Hungarian émigré Laszlo Moholy-Nagy. Moholy-Nagy arrived in Berlin from Vienna as a correspondent for the avant-garde journal *Ma* (Today) in 1920, and, like Lissitzky and Citroën before him, he worked his way into Berlin's thriving art scene rapidly, befriending everyone from Hausmann and Höch, to Richter, van Doesburg, and Lissitzky within a year of arrival (Hight, *Picturing* 14). Between the Futurist leanings of *Ma* and the impact of Berlin's urban-industrial sprawl, Moholy-Nagy's aesthetic underwent enormous change in a relatively short period of time, and during his first years in Berlin he began to work out a machine aesthetic that rejected any sense of documentary truth and was heavily indebted to that of Picabia. As Moholy-Nagy himself explained,

> Many of my paintings of that period show the influence of the
> industrial "landscape" of Berlin. They were not projections of reality
> rendered with photographic eyes, but rather new structures, built up as
> my own version of machine technology, reassembled from the
> dismantled parts. (ibid 15)

By October 1921, however, inspired by the principles of Vladimir Tatlin and others, Moholy-Nagy had begun to work out a new aesthetic that was both Constructivist and Internationalist in its orientation, and he joined Hausmann, Arp and Puni in

drafting the "Manifesto of Elemental Art," which sought to create links between Swiss, German, Dutch, and Russian art circles through the discovery of, "a universal language of art suitable to the era of the machine" (ibid 15, 20). As with other Constructivists, like Klutsis, Rodchenko, and Lissitzky, photography was deemed an ideal medium for such a program, and Moholy-Nagy's newfound interest in both photography and film was heralded by his "typophoto"/film sketch *Dynamic of the Metropolis* (1921-2), whose title was a clear reference to Klutsis' *Dynamic City*.

Moholy-Nagy's "sketch of a manuscript for a film" had been inspired by the non-objective film experiments of Richter, Ruttmann, and Eggeling, all three of whom, "worked at an animation bench, passing before the stationary lens of the camera contrived sequences of line drawings or geometric figures," all three of whom, "gave their works musical titles" (Kaliski Miller 123). But as he would write years later in his 1947 book *Vision in Motion*, Moholy-Nagy believed that, "[all] types of film—but especially the abstract ones—need an *avant-garde*," and he apparently decided that the truly avant-garde film would be one that combined the objective world with the non-objective one, the dynamism of Elemental Art—which drew from everything from Futurist typography to the Neo-Plasticism of Piet Mondrian—with that of the modern metropolis (273). Anticipating Lissitzky and Arp's *The Isms of Art*, Moholy-Nagy's sketch begins with the transition from the non-objective to the objective, from abstract animation to the realm of Constructivist photography, from pure typography to "typophoto": "First, animated cartoon of moving dots, lines, which, seen as a whole, changed into the building of a zeppelin (photograph from life)." The photograph of the zeppelin being built came with the

caption, "A metal construction in the making," and this was followed with a short

sequence of a "crane in motion during the building of a house" that combined

"oblique" camera positions ("from below / from above") with "circular motion"—in

other words, a sequence directly reminiscent of the construction sequence in

Manhatta, and of Robert Coady's "moving sculptures" before that (*Painting* 124).

Moholy-Nagy's outline didn't feature any skyscrapers, any scenes of New York, or

any other direct references to America, but it too participated in the discourse of

Americanism through its focus on a number of leitmotifs of early-twentieth century

American modern: boxing (a photomontaged image of a young boxer plus "Close up.

ONLY the HAnds with the boxing gloves."), jazz ("Jazz-BAND with the /

TALKING FILM / FortiSSimO / Wild dancing caricature. Street- / girls."), chorus

girls ("Girls. Legs." accompanying a photograph of an all-female chorus line),

variety theater (a photograph of an exotic dance troupe followed by the phrase,

"VaRIETé, / feverish activity. / Women wrestling. / Kitsch."), and electric signs (a

photograph of the electrified city of night alongside the caption, "Electric signs with

luminous writing which vanishes and reappears. YMOHOLYMOH…")[36]. The film

was never realized, of course—Moholy-Nagy suggested later that the film was too

avant-garde, and thus "appeared bizarre" to people at the time, scaring off potential

investors.[37] No matter—the printed "typophoto" managed to find an audience

---

[36] Moholy hadn't yet visited New York at the time, but when he finally made his way
to the "neon mecca" he came face-to-face with the apotheosis of the nocturnal
modernity he first sketched in *Dynamic of the Metropolis* (Kaplan 82).
[37] Kaliski Miller is tough on Moholy when it comes to this point:
> Moholy's excuse rings false. In the years 1921-1922 when Moholy
> was supposedly pushing the script with collaborator Carl Koch,
> Eggeling and Richter found financing from UFA, the largest

nonetheless. Within the next few years one could find clear parallels to Moholy-Nagy's script in everything from Sergei Eisenstein's *Strike* (1925), to Ruttmann's *Berlin* and Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera*.

If Moholy-Nagy's ideas already exerted a certain degree of influence in the early 1920s because of his connections within the Berlin art world and his ongoing ties with Budapest and Vienna, his five-year stint with Walter Gropius' Bauhaus put him at the center of one of Europe's most important design centers. Moholy-Nagy's appointment was a direct result of his involvement in the Dada-Constructivist Congress of 1922, where Gropius was pressured by van Doesburg to expand his curriculum and embrace Constructivism. Along with van Doesburg and Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy was perhaps the most prominent advocate of Constructivism, so, not long afterwards, Gropius invited Moholy-Nagy to join his faculty, which he did in early 1923 in spite of opposition from Paul Klee and others, who dismissed the new appointee as "nothing but optics, mechanics…" (Haus 15; Hight, *Picturing* 34). As if to validate the words of his critics, Moholy-Nagy turned away from painting after his arrival in Weimar, and towards Tatlin-inspired sculpture and a series of bold

---

> commercial film concern, for their far more esoteric enterprises. By the time of publication of *Malerei, Photographie, Film*, film clubs and festivals promoting the works of the international avant-garde were commonplace and many artists were to try their hand at the type of radical documentary to which the script seems to point. (127)

The fact remains that the film Moholy was proposing was much more radical (at the time) than either Richter's or Eggeling's projects precisely because his film was not an abstract work of art produced by an established abstract painter, because it directed its eye at the outside world, and because it utilized a jarring montage aesthetic. In all likelihood, it also would have cost more to make, and the cine-club scene that Kaliski Miller describes only came into existence because of the impact of films like *Manhatta*, *Rien que les heures*, and *Entr'acte*. That said, why Moholy never again returned to the radical vision of *Dynamic of the Metropolis* in film (as opposed to in other media) is unclear, as we shall see.

experiments in photographic processes of all sorts. By 1924-5, photography and film

represented the progressive wing of the New Vision philosophy that Moholy-Nagy

was developing, a philosophy that he began to lay out in his 1925 book *Painting,*

Photography, Film:

> In this book I seek to identify the ambiguities of present-day optical
> creation. The means afforded by photography play an important part
> therein, though it is one which most people today still fail to
> recognize: extending the limits of the depiction of nature and the use
> of light as a creative agent…
>   The camera has offered us amazing possibilities, which we are only
> just beginning to exploit. The visual image has been expanded…
> [No] manual means of representation (pencil, brush, etc.) is capable of
> arresting fragments of the world seen like this; it is equally impossible
> for manual means of creation to fix the quintessence of a
> movement…. (7)

Photography and film were not just new media, they were powerful examples of

what Marshall McLuhan would later call "extensions of man," and Moholy-Nagy

credited them with the as of yet unrealized potential to visualize the world anew:

> [If] people had been aware of these potentialities they would have
> been able with the aid of the photographic camera to *make visible*
> existences which cannot be perceived or taken in by our optical
> instrument, the eye; *i.e., the photographic camera can either complete*
> *or supplement our optical instrument, the eye*….(28)

And key to the New Vision afforded by photography and film were those shots that

Moholy-Nagy called "so-called 'faulty' photographs": "the view from above, from

below, the oblique view, which today often disconcert people who take them to be

accidental shots" (ibid). These photographic visions were intended to defamiliarize

the outside world in a way that parallels the ideas of the Russian formalist Viktor

Shklovsky. As Eleanor Hight explains,

> Shklovsky urged that art should provoke and challenge the viewer, for
> only in its very difficulty could art promote growth and reverse an

individual's propensity to repetitious actions and thus stagnation. Shklovsky's method involved a process he called *ostranenie*, defamiliarization or "making strange," in which the viewer is forced to see a known object, institution, or what have you, in a new way, from a new perspective. (*Picturing* 198)

The idea here was that, "through the provocations of artistic form and the resulting growth of individual awareness, people would first be liberated and then mobilized by a heightening of their collective consciousness," that defamiliarization could function as an initial step towards revolutionary struggle, and Moholy-Nagy, who, like Lissitzky, remained committed to internationalist social change, shared this view (ibid). Paradoxically, however, it was these views that simultaneously revealed the inherent objectivity of the photographic apparatus:

> The secret of their effect is that the photographic camera reproduces the purely optical image and therefore shows the optically true distortions, deformations, foreshortenings, etc., whereas the eye together with our intellectual experience, supplements perceived optical phenomena by means of association and formally and spatially creates a **conceptual image.** Thus in the photographic camera we have the most reliable aid to a beginning of objective vision. (Moholy-Nagy, *Painting* 28)

Above all, Moholy-Nagy believed that a century of photographic vision and "two decades" of cinematic vision had had an enormous impact on human consciousness ("We may say that we see the world with entirely different eyes."), but that the work of creating "new relationships"—revolutionary ones—had just begun (29).

In addition to photograms and photomontages, in the mid- to late-1920s, Moholy-Nagy dedicated himself to objective camera work that sought to "expand visual perception" and create a "[heightened] understanding of contemporary culture" (Hight, *Picturing* 3). This work was radical in its outlook and emphatically urban in its orientation, concerned as it was with examining man's relationship to the

built environment, and it became synonymous with the Bauhaus photographic

aesthetic (Fiedler 16). Typical of this period was an essay Moholy-Nagy published

in the journal *Bauhaus* in 1926 entitled "Geradlinigkeit des Geistes—Umwege der

Technik" (Directness of the Mind—Detours of Technology). Here, he expanded

upon the significance of the camera's eye to his New Vision:

> [Man] always desires to see more than the eyes are able to
> comprehend… Working feverishly, mind and eye achieve new
> dimensions of seeing for which today photography and film already
> offer the foundation and the reality. The details for tomorrow. Today
> the training of vision. (Hight, *Picturing* 118, 121)

The article was accompanied by a number of images, all of which expressed

Moholy-Nagy's fascination with the New Visions afforded by aerial photographs: a

pigeon who'd been outfitted with a camera to take aerial photographs in 1908 along

with some of the pigeon's photographs, a photograph of a plane flying, and a

topographic photographic taken by the firm of Junkers & Co. (ibid 121). Soon

afterwards, Moholy-Nagy followed up on this spread when he began to take a series

of extreme high-angle photographs from vertiginous perspectives atop modern

structures. The most famous of these were the photographs he produced from the top

of Berlin's Funkturm around 1928 [Fig. 6]. This massive tower was the closest thing

that Berlin had to an American-style skyscraper, and, as Hight explains, this setting

had great symbolic value for Moholy-Nagy:

> [The] *Funkturm* was in one sense Berlin's Eiffel Tower: a modern
> steel construction from which the energetic photographer could obtain
> views of the city below. Because of Moholy's interest in
> communication and the mass media, he undoubtedly saw the radio
> tower as a symbol of twentieth-century communication and a
> harbinger of the new collective society. (ibid)

More importantly, properly viewed, Berlin's Funkturm was a reincarnation of

Tatlin's *Monument for the Third International*, especially if one recalls Tatlin's

grandiose original plans:

> An iron spiral framework was to support a body consisting of a glass
> cylinder, a glass cone and a glass cube. This body was to be
> suspended on a dynamic asymmetrical axis, like a leaning Eiffel
> Tower, which would thus continue its spiral rhythm into space
> beyond. Such 'movement' was not to be confined to the static design.
> The body of the Monument itself was literally going to move. The
> cylinder was to revolve on its axis once a year: the activities allocated
> to this portion of the building were lectures, conferences and congress
> meetings. The cone was to complete a revolution once a month and
> to house executive activities. The topmost cube was to complete a
> full turn on its axis once a day and to be an information centre. It was
> constantly to issue news bulletins, proclamations and manifestos—by
> means of telegraph, telephone, radio and loud-speaker. A special
> feature was to be an open-air screen, lit up at night, which would
> constantly relay the latest news; a special projection was to be
> installed which in cloudy weather would throw words on the sky,
> announcing the motto for the day. (Constantine and Fern 6)

In other words, the Funkturm wasn't just a dynamic modern vantage point, it wasn't

just a symbol of twentieth-century modernity, it was a gigantic urban readymade, a

reminder of Berlin's untapped revolutionary energy.

Not coincidentally, this period also marked Moholy-Nagy's return to working

on film. In 1926 Moholy-Nagy saw his first film to completion: *Berliner Stilleben* .

Apparently, the frustration of seeing *Dynamic of the Metropolis* go unproduced still

haunted Moholy-Nagy, for his new film had little of the ambition of its

predecessor—it didn't require a large budget and there was little chance that a

potential backer might find it too "bizarre." As Andrea Kaliski Miller explains,

"[the] film as produced… simply makes use of the city outside Moholy-Nagy's door.

Composed of short takes, some with still camera, others panning, the film seems

almost undirected" (127). One year later, as Moholy-Nagy was preparing the second edition of *Painting, Photography, Film* for publication, he heard of a film that, "[sought] to realize the same aspiration as those proposed" in his "typophoto" for *Dynamic of the Metropolis*: Walther Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, which, "shows the rhythm of the movement of a town and dispenses with normal 'action'" (Moholy-Nagy, *Painting* 123). One would have thought that this might have prompted him to up the ante and make a rigorously composed city film himself, but it appears to have had the opposite effect. When he returned to filmmaking to make *Marseille vieux port* in 1929, once again the results were subdued. In this case, the film dares to comment on class, but it does so through hackneyed images of the, "city's poor juxtaposed with sewage ditches." Like *Berliner Stilleben*, the film lacks self-referentiality and, "any possible political impact" is lost due to the randomness of its structure. "Unlike his writing where brilliant insights compensate for occasional lapses in logic and unlike his photographic oeuvre where clear aesthetic purpose supersedes murky personal content, Moholy's films are truly amateur efforts" (Kaliski Miller 122). Despite the promise of *Dynamic of the City*, despite the fact that his New Vision eventually developed into the cinematic sounding Vision in Motion, Moholy-Nagy appears to have never had the capacity to make films that lived up to his bold aesthetic vision. That he left to others.

Vortex

Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) may have been inspired by his visit to New York City in 1924, but the models he used for his vision of the metropolis of the

future, appropriately enough, were the turn-of-the-century sci-fi visions of New York coveted by Sant'Elia and the Italian Futurists. However, when the Russian-born, Paris-based artist Boris Bilinsky was hired by l'Alliance Cinématographique Européenne to produce publicity for Lang's film, he made a few interesting decisions. First, he produced a photomontage to publicize the new film, evidently out of the belief that this would be the best way to capture Lang's grotesquely hierarchical vision of the city of the future. Secondly, in choosing his images, he used a number of fantastical elements snatched directly from *Metropolis*, but overall the composition was grounded in early twentieth-century modernity, and the approach utilized was essentially an elaborate homage to the film's namesake: Citroën's *Metropolis*. Like Citroën's original, Bilinsky's photomontage featured New York prominently, placing its skyscrapers in juxtaposition with *Metropolis*'s visions of dystopia—thus, Lang's sets dominated the composition's "underworld," but its upper crust was dominated by such landmarks as the Metropolitan Life Tower and the Equitable Building. In other words, Bilinsky's photomontage brought Lang's vision—which had moved from the actual, physical New York of the 1920s, back through the Futurist and proto-Futurist cities of the 1910s and 1900s, into the powerful tensions of the metropolis of the future, and back to the photorealistic New York of the 1920s—full circle. Bilinsky's more famous piece of *Metropolis* publicity was a striking lithograph that was apparently based on his photomontage. Here, Bilinsky kept the original's sense of a futuristic Babylon, but aside from the suggestion of *Metropolis*'s sophisticated traffic management, he eliminated any

references to Lang's set design entirely, opting instead for a composite built up out of towering American skyscrapers. The question is why?

Stranger still was the publicity material that Walther Ruttmann produced for *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* the very next year. In spite of his background in abstract, non-objective, and modernist art, Ruttmann also turned to photomontage to capture the dynamism of his modern metropolitan vision, paralleling his shift from non-objective to documentary-based filmmaking. That was to be expected. So were the modern motifs that littered his photomontages: a watch, a perfume bottle, a variety theater act. What was strange was that a composition designed to advertise a film about Berlin was dominated by skyscrapers—New York skyscrapers. And there, once again, amidst the cluster of buildings that made up Ruttmann's fantasy skyline, together with a rendition of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's 1921 plan for a futuristic glass and steel Friedrichstrasse skyscraper,[38] were two buildings that we've seen over and over again: the Woolworth Building and the Equitable Building. The choice of media made sense. As Moholy-Nagy would argue somewhat anachronistically one year later,

> the cinema posters of the future will be produced by photographic and
> photosculptural means which, unquestionably, correspond better to
> the nature of film than do today's posters which are done by drawing
> and are colored poetically to illustrate scenes in the film. (Fricke 128)

---

[38] Mies van der Rohe's design was yet another famous early avant-garde photomontage from this period. Perhaps more importantly, the design's prism-like shape and its powerful sense of thrust were dictated by the triangular plot of land in question. The photomontage gives the sense of a "transparent, futuristic" prow driving its way through the center of Berlin. The parallels with the Flatiron Building are unmistakable.

Mies van der Rohe had ties to the radical Arbeitsrat für Kunst architectural group that was formed in the wake of World War I. He later joined the Bauhaus, before becoming its director in 1930 (Metzger 134, 351).

What was harder to fathom was the insistence on New York.

We see a similar phenomenon if we look at cinema poster production in the Soviet Union at the same time, where a veritable explosion of activity occurred because film and the poster were the two art forms that the Soviet government truly threw its weight behind. The two media fed on one another—posters generated interest in films, and as the film industry took off (the Soviet Union had 2,700 movie theatres in 1924; 7,500 by 1927), the production of posters followed suit. And just as Soviet filmmakers developed a new cinematic grammar that was in step with the revolutionary fervor of the new nation, Soviet poster artists drew from the artistic vanguard in order to create a visual language of a similar intensity. As Vladimir Stenberg, of the prolific Stenberg Brothers production team, later put it: "When we made posters for the movies, everything was in motion because in films, everything moves" (Pack 17).

In its heyday, between 1924 and 1932, Soviet poster art became something of a crucible for the peculiar form of Americanism that was such an important part of the Soviet avant-garde. The most obvious reason for this fascination with America had to do quite simply with U.S. domination of the Soviet film market. In spite of obvious ideological tensions, Hollywood films were prevalent in the Soviet Union just as they were in other parts of Europe during the inter-war years. But whereas other European nations saw their long-standing national cinemas get swamped, the situation in the Soviet Union was rather different. There, because Russia's film industry was largely nonexistent, American films became the engine of the Soviet film industry. In a clear parallel to the free market concessions of Lenin's New

Economic Policy, American comedies, adventure films, Westerns, and serials that might otherwise have been considered ideologically unsound were tolerated by the government purely for pragmatic reasons: they were popular and therefore lucrative.[39] Thus, *Battleship Potemkin* might have been a triumph of Soviet filmmaking, but its ability to fill a movie theater was found wanting—and therefore it was the huge profits from Hollywood films and Hollywood-style Soviet knockoffs that really contributed to financing Soviet film production (Pack 16-7). Americanism in Soviet cinema posters advertising Hollywood films is one thing; Americanism elsewhere is another. Even taking into account the Russian Futurist-Constructivist fascination with American industry, one might have expected the highly centralized Soviet film industry to have repressed the American Other in its poster designs—after all, as Trotsky himself lamented, "Futurism proclaims the revolution in Moscow cafes, but not at all in the factories"—but, in fact, in the designs of many posters of the period, we see the opposite (Pack 15; Constantine and Fern 5).

Take the Stenbergs' poster for *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, for instance. While one could cite numerous examples of early twentieth-century

---

[39] Willett elaborates:

> There were two issues [when it came to rebuilding the Russian cinema], the need to re-equip the film and photographic section (which by mid-1921 had a mere 5000 metres of negative film left) and the problem of what to show in the reviving free-enterprise cinemas all over the country. Lenin's view… was that within certain (censorable) limits it did not much matter what the feature films were like so long as enough good propagandist documentaries and newsreels were shown. Accordingly that year, while the NEP cinemas of Moscow showed imported works like *Daughter of Tarzan* and *A Night Horror in the Menagerie*, Dziga Vertov's first *Kino-Pravda* magazine films started to appear. (70)

American Modern in Soviet films set in the United States—films such as Yuri

Zhelyabuzhsky's *Who Are You?* (1927), which was based on Jack London's *People

of the Abyss*, or Georgi Tasin's *Jimmie Higgins*, which was based on the Upton

Sinclair novel of the same name[40]—it's the Americanism of the designs for films

such as *Berlin*, films *not* set in the United States, that's even more striking.

Following in the footsteps of Ruttmann's photomontage, the Stenbergs' design

begins with an abstract American-style skyscraper shooting up from left to right at a

dynamic diagonal, but then, instead of replicating Ruttmann's photomontage any

further, they quote Umbo's 1926 neo-Dadaist portrait of the modern journalist, *The

Roving Reporter*. Thus, in place of Ruttmann's emblems of modernity, we have

Umbo's—camera, phonograph, wristwatch, typewriter, fountain pen, airplane.

Overall, though, the Stenbergs' design is strangely incomplete—whereas in Umbo's

photomontage most of its modern motifs serve as body parts for its cyborg-reporter,

in the *Berlin* poster the reporter's body disappears below his typewriter/chest—but

like Ruttmann's poster, it insists on representing Berlin through the lens of America.

Endlessly more successful is one of the two designs the Stenbergs produced

for Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929). The more famous of the two poster

designs picks up on elements of their earlier *Berlin* poster, creating the suggestion of

a man-machine composed of one half of woman's face, a movie camera that includes

the film's single most famous image, its camera-eye, a tripod, and a woman's

gamely high-stepping, mini-skirted legs, and combines these with a militant

Vertovian analogy between the camera operator and the machine-gun operator.

---

[40] *Jimmie Higgins* was yet another of the Upton Sinclair published by Malik-Verlag
and designed by John Heartfield.

Aside from some semblance of a flapper aesthetic, the poster has little to do with Americanism, but much to do with Vertov's film. The Stenbergs' alternate poster is something altogether different, though. Once again, like their other poster for *Man With a Movie Camera*, the Stenbergs' design features a dismembered woman, and, once again, like their *Berlin* poster, the Stenbergs' design plays on the cold abstraction of the New York-style skyscraper, but here a powerful Constructivist spiral throws the whole image into flux. The multiple skyscrapers that shoot up around the extreme low-angle point of view do so at oblique angles and in a "powerful upward thrust," and the vortex seems to draw the buildings together and makes it unclear whether the woman's body parts (bare legs, bare arms, a decapitated head with a fetching flapperish bob) are floating up into the sky or falling down—the overall impression is one of vertigo. Futurism, Dada, and Constructivism, montage, the New Vision, and film, New York and America, and all of it combined in a poster advertising a Constructivist film, a Constructivist city symphony, a Constructivist city symphony about Moscow. The Stenbergs' haunting image was apt. As we have seen, in many ways, the vortex, "the spiral of architectural forces," the cause of all this vertigo, *was* New York.

Chapter 3: Kino-Eyes 1: Vertov and Ruttmann

Vertov I: Kinoks Revolution

Denis Arkadyevitch Kaufman arrived in Moscow with his parents and his two brothers—Mikhail and Boris—when his family was forced to flee from invading German troops in 1914. He had studied music at the Bialystok Conservatory in his native town, and he would later study medicine in St. Petersburg during 1916-1917, but upon arrival in Moscow he quickly entered a "period of youthful literary activity" inspired by the Futurist craze that followed Marinetti's 1914 visit and by the Futurist fascination with Whitman, and it was then that he took on the Futurist-inspired pseudonym that he's been known by ever since: Dizga Vertov, or "spinning top" (Michelson, "From" 73; Tsivian, "*Man*" 88).[41] One of Vertov's poems from 1920, entitled quite simply "Dziga Vertov," indicates both Vertov's interest in Futurist form and the vortical and revolutionary associations his adopted name was meant to call to mind (not to mention a certain degree of narcissism): "spin the top / wehee! wheels whiz / jigging vortex / dizzy vertex / Dziga Vertov" (Tsivian, "*Man*" 88).

---

[41] In *Evolution of Style in the Early Work of Dziga Vertov*, Seth Feldman argues that the translation is somewhat more complicated:

> "Dziga" is not only a child's toy top, but is also related to a Ukrainian word describing gypsies. "Vertov" is the adjectival form of the Russian word "vertet" meaning to spin or twirl. Thus, "Dziga Vertov" is often translated as "Spinning Top" or "Spinning Gypsy." "Vertet," however, is also used to describe the action of rewinding film. According to Jay Leyda, Vertov himself thought of "Dziga" as the sound made by film being rewound on an editing table, while "Vertov" described the rewinding itself. (1)

Erik Barnouw adds that the names also suggested perpetual motion (52).

By 1918, building upon an interest in assemblage and montage that he'd developed during his medical studies, and inspired by the Bolsheviks' embrace of the cinematic apparatus as an ideological weapon, Vertov had joined the Moscow Film Committee as a clerk, but his aptitude for film soon got him promoted, first to being a title-writer and then to being the editor of the *Kino-Nedelia* (*Film Weekly*) newsreel program (Tsivian, "Dziga Vertov" 23; Barnouw, *Documentary* 52). With *Kino-Nedelia* folded by July 1919, Vertov worked as a war correspondent before joining a propaganda train that had been created to keep the lines of communication flowing between Moscow and the fronts and that featured Vertov's first full-length editing project: a film called *The October Revolution* (Leyda 138). Later that year however, locked in an ongoing crisis, the Soviet Union ran out of raw stock and its newsreel schedules came to a grinding halt. By 1921, with "famine and epidemics" rampant, Lenin was forced to introduce the New Economic Policy, "a temporary return to forms of economic enterprise," one effect of which was the reappearance of fictional feature films in the Soviet Union's battered cinemas, most of them foreign films from the United States, Germany, France and Italy (Barnouw, *Documentary* 54). In 1922 Vertov started his own newsreel operation, *Kino-Pravda*, whereby cameramen would be sent out into the field to document the development of the Soviet Union, footage would be sent back to *Kino-Pravda*'s dank, rat-infested central headquarters, and there the raw material would be edited according to Vertov's emerging sensibility. 1922 also marked the beginnings of the Council of Three, the talented filmmaking team that featured Vertov as director, his brother Mikhail as cameraman, and his wife Elizaveta Svilova as editor, and of Vertov's career as a polemicist. For

it was that very year that he published his first manifesto—or "variant of a

manifesto," as it were—in Aleksei Gan's initial issue of *Kino-Fot*. "WE" dismissed

the "absurdity" of the "psychological Russo-German film drama" outright.

Hollywood's action films, on the other hand, fared quite a bit better:

> To the American adventure film with its showy dynamism and to the
> dramatizations of the American Pinkertons the kinoks say thanks for
> the rapid shot changes and the close-ups. Good… but disorderly, not
> based on a precise study of movement. A cut above the psychological
> drama, but still lacking in foundation. A cliché. A copy of a copy.
> (Vertov 5-6)[42]

Simultaneously, Vertov's filmmaking became noticeably more experimental, and it

was during this period (1922-4) that Vertov's ties to Constructivism were at their

strongest, as evidenced by his participation in *Kino-Fot*, his collaboration with

Aleksandr Rodchenko on *Kino-Pravda*'s boldly graphic titles, and his publication of

another manifesto, *Kinoks: A Revolution*, in the pages of Mayakovsky's *LEF*

(Tsivian, "Man" 86-7; Michelson, "From" 73). While recent criticism has gone out

of its way to "correct [the] time-honored misnomer" that Vertov was a

"Constructivist filmmaker,"[43] citing the insistence of Vertov and others that the

Constructivists and the Kinoks were absolutely and fundamentally different, Yuri

Tsivian quite rightly points out that behind their "austere and isolationist"

appearances, the practices of these two movements were actually "flexible and

open," and "techniques, ideas, and objects easily changed hands" (Tsivian,

---

[42] Elsewhere, Vertov was less kind, referring to the influx of foreign films as so
many "living corpses… garbed in splendid technological dressing" sent to sow
confusion (Barnouw, *Documentary* 54).
[43] Typical in this regard is Vlada Petric's *Constructivism in Film: The Man with the
Movie Camera, a Cinematic Analysis* (1987).

"Turning" 94-5). Besides, in spite of Vertov's protestations, it's hard not to see just

a hint of Constructivism in his 1923 manifesto on "kinoculism":

> I am kino-eye. I am a builder. I have placed you, whom I've created
> today, in an extraordinary room which did not exist until just now
> when I also created it. In this room there are twelve walls shot by me
> in various parts of the world. In bringing together shots of walls and
> details, I've managed to arrange them in an order that is pleasing and
> to construct with intervals, correctly, a film-phrase which is the room.
> (Vertov 17)

In 1924, Vertov showcased his fledgling Kinoks movement and its "sensory

exploration of the world through film" with his *Kino-Eye* film, and there he began to

develop the penchant for visual experimentation and tricks that would become his

calling card. Previously, Vertov had limited his avant-gardism to the political

content of his vignettes and the graphics he and Rodchenko used to introduce them.

Thus, in one particularly notable instance in the *Kino-Pravda* series, Vertov

transformed one of Rodchenko's non-objective "spatial constructions" from the early

1920s (before this "nonutilitarian, nonmimetic" period in the history of

Constructivism was declared over and done with in 1922), into an animated, three-

dimensional, thoroughly Constructivist intertitle, a "moving sculpture" that spelled

out the word "America" and that introduced a sequence of, "found footage of the

New York docks and skyscrapers, street crowds, underground trains, and scenes of

nightlife in expensive restaurants" that he then juxtaposed with life in Moscow

(Tsivian, "Turning" 97, 102). Now, however, Vertov began to take liberties with the

documentary image as well. Instead of the standard "objective" framings of the

actualités and the newsreels, *Kino-Eye* developed a much more arresting visual style,

one replete with what would soon come to be known as "Rodchenko angles"—

unorthodox camera angles that were meant to force people, "to see ordinary things in an extraordinary way" (Tsivian, "Turning" 109; Lodder 387). *Kino-Eye* may have been a "tapestry of life," and, "the first non-fiction film thing / without a script / without actors / outside the studio," but Vertov was now actively drawing attention to his film's constructedness and to his role as the film's "builder." Most striking of all was a sequence that began with an intertitle that read "On Tverskoy Street" and was followed by a high-angle, symmetrical shot of a Moscow avenue, with streetcars running down the middle, pedestrians, a couple of cars, some horse-drawn carriages, and some cyclists moving this way and that, and a late-afternoon sun casting long horizontal shadows across the scene. The next intertitle read, "the same place seen from a different camera angle," but instead of what one might expect—some degree of orthodoxy—Vertov's next shot turned almost the exact same camera position clockwise by 90º, making the shadows stand almost upright, anticipating similarly striking photographs by both Rodchenko (*Pedestrian [Street]*, 1928) and Umbo (*Uncanny Street* and *Mystery of the Street*, both 1928) by a number of years. As Tsivian has pointed out, this gesture was a clear parallel to Shklovsky's notion of defamilarization, a clear attempt contribute an important visual lesson to *Kino-Eye*'s assortment of political lessons (Tsivian, "Turning" 110).[44]

On the 12th of April, 1926, while visiting Brussels, Vertov experienced something momentous. Vertov's diaries rarely devoted any attention to any films

---

[44] Comparing Vertov and Rodchenko's shots with Umbo's, Tsivian writes, "There was nothing uncanny or unreal about Kaufman's or Rodchenko's walking shadows, however: for a true Kinok, as for a Constructivist, to see a street in a strange—defamiliarized—way was tantamount to making it more real." He appears to have overlooked that Vertov's shots (the sequence includes three brief shots linked by jump cuts) run backwards.

other than his own, but on this occasion a screening of a two-year-old French film

left him totally shaken.

> Saw *Paris qui dort* at the Ars movie theatre. It pained me.
>   Two years ago I drew up a plan whose technical design coincides
> exactly with this picture. I tried continually to find a chance to
> implement it. I was never given the opportunity. And now—they've
> done it abroad.
>   Kino-Eye has lost one of its attack positions. Too long a time
> between idea, conception, and realization. If we are not allowed to
> implement our innovations promptly, we may be in danger of
> continually inventing and never realizing our inventions in practice…
>   Soviet cinema is currently experiencing an unforgettable turning
> point.
>   The work of kino-eye, which generated so many trends, movements,
> and groups in Soviet and, to a lesser extent, in foreign cinema, has
> managed to conquer all obstacles, crawl out of its prison cellar and
> through the barbed-wire entanglements of high-level or ordinary
> administration and distribution; it has burst through the ranks of
> theater management onto the screen.
>   Everything was against its success. (Vertov, *Kino-Eye* 163-5)

At first glance, it's perhaps difficult to imagine that René Clair's "slight comedy," a

feature film that, "appears more obviously indebted to the style and pace of Mack

Sennett than to the efforts of the nascent European and Soviet avant-gardes," could

have troubled Vertov so (Michelson, "Dr. Crase" 32). But as Annette Michelson

explains in her seminal 1979 article "Dr. Crase and Mr. Clair," what, from a

superficial standpoint, might have seemed like simply a frivolous science-fiction

satire and "trick film," actually had much to offer someone a Kinok like Vertov:

> In this succinct, ingenious comedy, Clair proposes, with a cascade of
> subtle gags, the topography of a great city; he explores its scale and
> pace, that which sustains its life. Temporality, apprehended as
> *movement in space*, is the vital current of the metropolis, the medium
> of "the course of affairs," of "the business of life." Their powerful
> and intricate implication is the film's generative core. Adopting the
> genre of science fiction—which is, as we know, one of cinema's
> oldest forms—Clair offers a fresh series of critical variations upon the

thematic cluster—the city, the crowd, capital—which the art and the cinema of his day had begun to explore. (35)

For one thing, Clair's apprenticeship under Louis Feuillade, the master of both serial adventure films (*Fantomas*, *Les Vampires*, etc.) and location shooting, had taught the young filmmaker how to transform Paris "into a vast film set," into a "landscape of the imagination" (ibid 36). Of central importance to Clair's reimagined Paris was the Eiffel Tower, the same structure that Delaunay, Cendrars, Apollinaire and others had claimed as a modernist totem in the 1910s. But whereas Delaunay's paintings of the tower had warped time and space in order to represent its omnipresence within the modern cityscape of Paris, Clair took another tack altogether. Much of *Paris qui dort*'s action takes place not merely in the presence of the Eiffel Tower but *on* it, so in true Feuillade fashion, Clair actually shot much of the film from the tower's heights. According to Michelson, this vantage point, "provides... not merely a general, panoramic view of the landscape but, in a manner grasped and fully exploited by Clair, a machine for the generation of infinite compositional variations." In other words, Clair had seized upon the Eiffel Tower's very modernity and, "[transformed] it into a complex optical instrument, a filmic apparatus,... a camera" with which to capture Paris (ibid 38-9). Vertov may have been frustrated by the experience of seeing *Paris qui dort*, but, as we shall see, he was also inspired by its bag of tricks, its daring use of "Rodchenko angles," and its depiction of the modern city.

That same year, 1926, Mikhail Kaufman, Vertov's brother and cameraman, his fellow Kinok and partner in The Council of Three, shot and directed his first solo project: *Moscow*. If Kaufman had begun to take a more experimental approach

towards the documentary image with *Kino-Eye*, his new project marked the

beginning of a whole new set of visual experiments. Late in his life, Kaufman had

this to say about this development:

> You could say that all of my work consisted in learning to film life in
> such a way that it could impress and influence one emotionally
> without the mediation of the artist or actor. To simply film,
> photograph life is to produce a chronicle. We actually went beyond
> the limits of the chronicle and began to create works of art—using the
> image, working on the image through every possible means: through
> camera angles, through photography. If you take someone's picture,
> you should make it an image, not simply a photograph. This doesn't
> mean that I have to compose the person into an image. Rather I catch
> the moment when reality becomes an image. (Macdonald and
> Cousins, 65-6)

 One of Kaufman's greatest advancements in this regard, was the "tiers of space"

approach to cinematography that he first tested out during the filming of *Moscow*.

According to this method, Kaufman would shoot urban space in such a way as to

create the impression, "of tiers, or levels, with people and vehicles moving in

different directions," thereby transforming post-revolutionary Moscow into

something analogous to the Futurist/futuristic visions of Charles Lamb, Antonio

Sant'Elia, and Fritz Lang (Tsivian, *Lines* 312). Perhaps the film's most immediate

influence, however, was its dawn-to-dusk structure, which was used the very next

year by Walter Ruttmann in *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (Michelson, "From"

73).

Ruttmann's Berlin

If *Manhatta* was the film that launched the city symphony subgenre,

Dynamic of the Metropolis was the script/typophoto that introduced the idea of the

modernist city film to a European audience, disseminated it, and codified both its

iconography and its musical structure, and Alberto Cavalcanti's *Rien que les heures*

(1926) and Kaufman's *Moscow* (1926) were the films that showed that the European

city film could actually be realized, Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*

was the film that transformed it into a full-blown international phenomenon. In

many ways, Ruttmann's trajectory during the 1920s paralleled that of Richter—he

too had started as a non-objective visual artist, he too had made the transition from

painting to abstract experimental films and he too had had something of an epiphany

when he witnessed how Vertov had combined avant-garde aesthetics with

documentary form. Unlike Richter, though, Ruttmann's sudden interest in filming

the built environment and "cineplastics" had brought him full circle: Ruttmann had

begun his career as an architect (Vidler 102; MacDonald and Cousins 73). In any

case, Ruttmann later denied any artistic inheritance, claiming that he'd first

conceived of, "the idea of making something out of life, of creating a symphonic

film out of the millions of energies that comprise the life of a big city," not because

of the influence of Vertov, Kaufman, or Moholy, but quite on his own (ibid 74). The

project eluded him, however, until he met Karl Freund—the famed cinematographer

of *The Last Laugh* and *Metropolis*—who apparently had had a similar project in

mind (ibid 74). The third important link in the chain was Carl Mayer, the veteran

scenarist who provided the screenplay and whose credits included *The Cabinet of Dr.*

Caligari, *The Last Laugh*, and *Sunrise*. Mayer, too, had had a similar vision. In

1925, having lost interest in "fictional invention" and wanting his stories to "grow

from reality" instead, Mayer was standing amid the whirling traffic in front of the

Palace theater in Berlin's west end, when he suddenly conceived the idea for the city symphony. Gazing upon the "melody of pictures" before him—he quickly began to put his thoughts on paper and the result was the treatment for *Berlin: Symphony of a City* (Kracauer, *From Caligari* 182). That said, Mayer later distanced himself from *Berlin* because of the way Ruttmann had supposedly undermined the script's political content (Elsaesser 232).

By the mid-1920s, in the aftermath of Dadaism and Expressionism, and, to a certain extent, in conjunction with International Constructivism, a new aesthetic had taken hold in Germany, one that had its debut in Mannheim in 1925 under the name *Neue Sachlichkeit*, or New Objectivity.[45] At first, this aesthetic was only applied to the field of painting (the Mannheim show dealt with paintings exclusively), where the phrase acted as a kind of catchall for a turn away from non-objective work and towards representational, one that included both left-leaning Verists and right-leaning classicists. And as Gustav Friedrich Hartlaub, the director of Mannheim Kunsthalle, explained, this work was a product of,

> the widespread mood in Germany at that time, which was one of resignation and cynicism after a period of exuberant hopes… Cynicism and resignation are the negative side of the New Objectivity; the positive side expresses itself in the enthusiasm for the immediate reality, as a result of a desire to take things entirely objectively on a material basis, without immediately investing them with immaterial meanings. (Metzger 179)

It wasn't long before the term New Objectivity was being applied to the other arts in Germany, so that one could speak of New Objectivity with regards to architecture

---

[45] *Neue Sachlichkeit*'s translation is disputed. Others, such as Willett, translate the phrase as New Sobriety (hence the title of his definitive account of the Weimar period). I've stuck with the more common translation because it seems to be a better fit with this particular project.

just as one could speak of New Objectivity in relation to journalism and

feuilletonisme. Chief among these, though, was photography, whose indexical

nature seemed to lend itself to the New Objectivity. And of the various

manifestations of New Objectivity in Weimar photography—for, again, New

Objectivity was nothing if not multiplicitous—two are of particular relevance here:

a tendency towards unusual angles and unorthodox perspectives combined with an

interest in finding the abstract in the real, and an interest in the documentation of

everyday life (Metzger 185).

Ironically, given Hartlaub's characterization, the period that saw the New

Objectivity at its height—roughly 1925-1929—was a period of rapid growth that

resulted directly from the stabilization of the German mark after the institution of the

Dawes Plan, which enabled Germany to pay war reparations while at the same time

making the country attractive to foreign investment. Not surprisingly, given the

period and the plan's authorship, the country that was in the best position to take

advantage of these attractive new conditions was the United States, and this helps to

explain a second wave of Americanism—one quite different from that of Berlin

Dada—that came to the fore in Germany in the late 1920s (Willett 72; Hansen,

"America" 367). This new *Amerikanismus* dovetailed with what Thomas Elsaesser

has called a "second machine age" in Weimar Germany, and, again, unlike that of

the Dadaists, this machine aesthetic was overwhelmingly affirmative:

> We find it as a celebratory metaphor of energy and vitality in revue
> girls and bio-mechanics, in the New Photography and representations
> of Fordism, in the passion for "time and motion studies" and the jazz
> idiom. In short, it became Weimar's code for "Americamania." (308)

Both of these discourses—that of *Amerika* and that of the machine—were closely tied to the cinema, in no small measure because of the part Hollywood played in the institution of the Dawes Plan, most notably through the Paramount-UFA-MGM (Parufamet) deal of 1926. *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, produced by another Dawes Plan amalgamation, Fox-Europa, was in many ways a primary example of this entire complex of cultural forces.

Despite its origins in Mannheim, and in juxtaposition with Dadaism and Constructivism, which were both highly international in character, the New Objectivity was quite emphatically a Berlin phenomenon. Mannheim may have been the place where New Objectivity's cool sensitivity was first given a name, but the artists whose works were shown there were overwhelmingly Berlin-based and Berlin-focused and consequently their visions were very much grounded in the peculiar metropolitan culture of 1920s Berlin (Metzger 160). But in a strange doubling, Berlin was viewed at the time as being, "an apostle of Americanism," a city whose energy and sympathies placed it at the frontier of early-twentieth-century American modernity (Willett 99; Hansen 385). Emblematic in this regard was Brecht's *Mahagonny*, the imaginary "sucker-catching city" that he located somewhere on the North American continent "between Florida and Alaska," but which, "was really only a topical disguise for his judgments about Berlin" (Willett 99). The reasons for this dual nature were multi-layered. In addition to the profound influence of the Dawes Plan on German culture more generally and on Berlin quite specifically, Berlin was a "new city," a city whose population had grown more than fivefold in half a century, reaching 4.3 million in 1929. By the 1920s it was a city of

hustle and bustle, of rapid redevelopment and hard-nosed businessmen, a city whose "tempo, diversity, and moral laxity" had gotten it named "the most American city in Europe" (Metzger 23, 28; Kaes 186). But another reason that *Amerikanismus* took hold in Berlin the way that it did was because, as Peter Wollen has pointed out, while Americanism was pervasive across much of Europe during the 1920s, this second wave was felt much more powerfully in Germany and the Soviet Union than elsewhere. The reason for this, Wollen argues (following Gramsci), was quite simple, and it had everything to do with World War I and its aftermath: "the further east you went in Europe, the more completely the traditional ruling class had been swept away" (35). This was precisely the reason Americanism was such an important part of the early history of the Bauhaus, whose aesthetic at the time was said to be guided by, "the American spirit [*Amerikanismus*], progress, the marvels of technology and invention, the urban environment" (Willett 81). With its Constructivist aesthetic and its strong ties to both Berlin and Moscow, the Bauhaus's Weimar campus was something of a breeding ground for Americanism, one typified by Citroën's *Metropolis*. And as we have seen, Citroën's ode to modern iconography became something of an icon itself.

      Amerikanismus in Weimar Germany meant many things to many people, and, as a result, the word found itself right in the thick of the *kulturkampf* of the 1920s. As Miriam Hansen explains:

> This term encompassed everything from Fordist-Taylorist principles
> of production—mechanization, standardization, rationalization,
> efficiency, the assembly line—and attendant standards of mass
> consumption; through new forms of social organization, freedom
> from tradition, social mobility, mass democracy, and a "new
> matriarchy"; to the cultural symbols of the new era—skyscrapers, jazz

("*Negermusik*"), boxing, revues, radio, and cinema. Whatever its
particular articulation (not to mention its actual relation to the United
States), the discourse of Americanism became a catalyst for the
debate on modernity and modernization, polarized into cultural
conservative battle cries or jeremiads on the one hand and euphoric
hymns to technological progress or resigned acceptance on the other.
(367)

Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a City* was a prime expression of many of the

major elements of this Americanism discourse. Its iconography included everything

from mass transportation (trains, cars, trams, elevators), mass communication

(telephones, billboards, newspapers), mass production (factories and factory-like

environments), and mass consumption (shopping, film, dining, boxing matches,

amusement parks), its overall impression was one of speed, of hustle and bustle, and

of a complex, machine-like organism, one that, like *Manhatta*, used smoke and

steam to punctuate this sense of the city-as-machine.

In spite of Ruttmann's claims to the contrary, many of these motifs appear to

have been lifted directly from Moholy's *Dynamic of the Metropolis*: trains and train

signals; the city by night and allure of electrical illumination; Luna Park and

fireworks; variety theatre and kitsch; sporting events and boxing; factories,

machines, and stockyards; and jazz. But whereas *Dynamic* was made up of shock

effects and jarring juxtapositions, all of which were carried along by the film's

musicality—"TEMP-O TEMP-O / TEM TEM TEM / PO-O-PO-O-O / TEM PO" the

script reads at one point—*Berlin* was given a much more conventional linear form,

one consisting of a one-day-in-the-life-of-a-city, dawn-to-dusk structure, to which

Ruttmann added a theatrical/operatic/symphonic conceit: five thematically

consistent acts.

The only real structural parallel between *Dynamic of the Metropolis* and *Berlin* comes during the film's limited use of dialectical montage. Thus, whereas Moholy inserts a "furious" tiger, an "angry lynx," and the "head of a lion showing its teeth" into his script in order to introduce intellectual collisions into his portrait of the modern city, Ruttmann's depiction of the modern workplace in Act II builds into an outright maelstrom of sights and sounds, both diegetic and non-diegetic. These include the furious activity of a typewriter pool, an optical-effects-created spiral of typewriter keys, a Duchamp-like spiral, shots of factory machinery juxtaposed with a shot of switchboard machinery, a switchboard operator in a frenzy, a shot of some monkeys screeching, and a couple shots of a vicious dogfight, before a two-shot of some telephones being hung up finally brings about a reprieve: "End of Act II" (Kaes 188).[46] Whereas Moholy's montage is made up of images that "have not… an absolute logical connection with one another," as he later explained, Ruttmann's message is clear: modern life is a whirlpool of activity, the modern workplace is a jungle, the modern world is dog-eat-dog (122).

Berlin may have been, "[a] film without a real plot," a film that, "attempts to allow the metropolis to arise out of a sequence of microscopic individual traits," as Kracauer wrote in 1928, it may have been a film without intertitles and (virtually) no actors, but its messages were straightforward and its form and its structure were designed to carry its audience along a rather conventional narrative arc (*Mass Ornament* 318). *Berlin*'s publicity material indicated otherwise, but the film itself

---

[46] Kracauer refers to such elements as Ruttmann's use of "symbols of chaos" and he compares their deployment to Karl Grune's early "street film" *The Street* (*From Caligari to Hitler* 186).

was representative of a profound shift in the discourse of America since the days of Grosz and Heartfield's *Dada-merika*. Its new form was more of a "way of looking, acting and doing things," than a way of upsetting the elite classes and challenging the social order; it was a reflection of a capital that was "urban, smart and metropolitan, "a capital that was the very embodiment of the New Objectivity and its culture of distraction (Willett 98-9; Metzger 160; Kracauer, *Mass* 324).

From our perspective, it may be hard to see Ruttmann's vision of the city and his approach to his material as having been conceived completely independently of the work of Moholy, but it's almost impossible to see it as having been conceived independently of the Kinoks. Because of Berlin's strong ties to Moscow during this period, Vertov's *Kino-Pravda* and *Kino-Eye* were certainly being discussed in Berlin during the 1920s even if their distribution was poor and they didn't create nearly the sensation that Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* did when it stormed Berlin in 1926.[47] Vertov's writings could travel with greater facility, and, according to Willett, their influence was widespread—he cites both Franz Roh and Jan Tschichold's *Foto-Auge – Oeil et Photo – Photo-Eye* (1929)[48] and John Dos Passos' *U.S.A. Trilogy* (1930),

---

[47] As Willett explains, it was the German reaction to *Potemkin* that established the film as a modern masterpiece. Eisenstein himself came for the Berlin premiere and he oversaw the film's scoring by Edmund Meisel, an associate of Erwin Piscator, the godfather of German agit-prop theatre. The score wasn't recorded, but it was published and disseminated throughout Germany, and it helped turn the film into a sensation. By contrast, the film had received a lukewarm reception when it was originally released in the Soviet Union. By 1929, however, the official party line had changed, as evidenced by the following remarks by Comrade Lunacharsky: "The full revolutionary force of this brilliant piece of film and its new technique were not immediately understood in Russia. It was only the German reaction to it that made us realize how far our cinema had progressed" (143).

[48] Roh and Tschichold's book also featured Lissitzky's self-portrait *The Constructor* on its cover.

with its famous cinematic conceits—its "Newsreel" and its "Camera Eye"—as being

clear offspring of the Kinoks revolution (141).[49] Likewise, when one is presented

with *Berlin*'s elaborate factory sequences, it's hard not to think of Vertov's "WE":

> The geometrical extract of movement through an exciting succession
> of images is what's required of montage…
>   Hurrah for *dynamic geometry*, the race of points, lines, planes,
> volumes.
> Hurrah for the poetry of machines, propelled and driving; the poetry
> of levers, wheels, and wings of steel; the iron cry of movements; the
> blinding grimaces of red-hot streams. (Vertov, *Kino-Eye* 8-9)

And when Ruttmann's camera mounts a train, a U-bahn car, or a bus, or during the

veritable *symphonie mécanique* that brings Act I to a close, Vertov's famous lines

from "Kinoks: A Revolution" echo in one's mind:

> I am kino-eye, I am a mechanical eye. I, a machine, show you the
> world as only I can see it. (Vertov, *Kino-Eye* 17)

When he arrived in Berlin in 1929 to present *Man with a Movie Camera*,

Vertov was shocked to find that the Kino-Eye movement was being grossly

misrepresented by Berlin's press corps. So appalled, in fact, that he sent a letter to

the editor of the *Frankfurter Zeitung*:

> After eleven years of work on the documentary film I arrived in
> Germany for the first time. I immediately encountered something
> strange. A portion of the Berlin press, while noting the cinematic
> merits of kino-eye, is, at the same time, stressing that in fact kino-eye
> is, as it were, a more "fanatical" extension of the theory and practice
> of Ruttmann (*Symphony of a Great City*).

---

[49] Of his influence on Dos Passos, Vertov himself was unequivocal:
> I am accused of corrupting Dos Passos, of infecting him with Kino-
> Eye. Otherwise he might have been a good writer, some say. Others
> disagree and say that if not for Kino-Eye, Dos Passos would not even
> have been heard of.
>   Dos Passos translates from film vision into literary language. The
> Terminology and the construction are that of Kino-Eye. (Vertov,
> "From" 78)

This quasi supposition, quasi assertion is absurd…. (Tsivian, *Lines* 379; Vertov, *Kino-Eye* 101)

As he explained, there were numerous precedents for both Ruttmann's symphonic form and his dusk-to-dawn structure in earlier Kinok productions (such as *Kino-Eye*), and that if one truly understood the history of post-war film, one would recognize that Ruttmann's "recent experiment" was derivative of Kino-Eye and not the other way around (Vertov, *Kino-Eye* 102).

What Vertov didn't understand was that the views of Berlin's press corps—about the evolution of the city symphony, or anything else—were not equatable with those of Berlin's intelligentsia. Perhaps if he had, he would have felt that his reputation was more secure, because in spite of *Berlin*'s New Objectivity and its enormous influence both at home and abroad, *Berlin* was not without its detractors.[50] On the one hand, there were those within the "absolute film" movement who accused Ruttmann of having turned his back on the art world and sold out to market interests, and, even more damningly (from their elitist perspective), having adopted a "*feuilletoniste*" aesthetic (Eisner 266).[51] On the other, some of the city's left-leaning cultural critics—many of whom wrote for the *feuilleton* sections of Berlin's astronomical number of publications—attacked *Berlin* for very different reasons. Thus, Béla Balázs, the Hungarian émigré who was Béla Bartók's librettist, whose screenwriting credits included *The Threepenny Opera* (1930), and whose Weimar-

---

[50] With regards to *Berlin*'s impact on German cinema, Eisner mentions that Ruttmann's film changed the way German social dramas of the late-1920s and early-1930s portrayed the city, with documentary passages and rapid montage sequences becoming commonplace (309).
[51] Richter was not part of this camp. Eisner reports that Richter, "stressed that Ruttmann merely sought 'improvisations of forms' and that any interconnecting rhythms between them were purely fortuitous and gratuitous" (266).

era books on film theory include *Visible Man, or the Culture of Film* (1924) and *The Spirit of Film* (1930), first wrote about *Berlin* in the 1920s, but his most famous comments on the film appeared some two decades later in his internationally famous *Theory of the Film* (1948), where he focused on Ruttmann's rapid editing as part of a larger critique of montage and musicality:

> [Shots] in themselves lose their primary significance when they serve
> as material for rhythmic effects.
>   What have subtle changes and forms of rhythm in Walter
> Ruttmann's *Berlin* in common with the trams shown in the film?
> What have the shots of Montmartre streets in Cavalcanti's *Rien que
> les heures* in common with the *legato-staccato* of his cutting? From
> the viewpoint of rhythm these features are merely carriers of light and
> shadow, of form and movement. They are no longer objects at all.
> The visual music of the montage is played in a separate sphere that is
> parallel to the content. (133)

Even more damning was the criticism of Siegfried Kracauer, the very editor of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* who Vertov inadvertently addressed his letter to in 1929. In a review of the state of German film published one year earlier, Kracauer lambasted the German film industry for being "stupid, false, and often mean" (*Mass Ornament* 307). What made his observations about *Berlin* sting all the more was his obvious frustration with a film that he found "interesting" and that he called the German film industry's "only significant attempt to break away from the common production fare." At issue, was not so much the film's rhythmic editing, as its depiction of Berlin and its politics:

> [Does] it convey the reality of Berlin? No: it is just as blind to reality
> as any other feature film, and this is due to its lack of a political
> stance. Instead of penetrating its enormous object in a way that would
> betray a true understanding of its social, economic, and political
> structure, and instead of observing it with human concern or even
> tackling it from a particular vantage point in order to resolutely take it
> apart, Ruttmann leaves the thousands of details unconnected, one next

to the other, inserting at most some arbitrarily conceived transitions that are meaningless. At best, the film is based on the idea that Berlin is the city of speed and of work—a formal idea that in no way leads to any content and that perhaps for this reason intoxicates the German petit bourgeois when it appears in society and literature. There is nothing to see in this symphony, because it has not exposed a single meaningful relationship. (ibid 318)

Thirty years later, when he revised his critique of *Berlin* for his own *Theory of Film*, Kracauer was less willing to argue that he found the film entirely "unconnected." Instead, he now pointed out the film's organization according to affinities in shape and movement and "social contrasts," but he labeled these as "crude." You could still sense his sense of frustration, however:

This "Symphony of a Great City" is particularly intriguing because it has the makings of a truly cinematic documentary: its candid shots of streets and their extensions are selected and arranged with an admirable sense of photographic values and transient impressions. And yet the film does not fulfill its promise. (207)

One common denominator between Ruttmann's *Berlin*, Vertov and his work, and the discourse of Americanism is the image of the vortex. This motif was persistent throughout Weimar cinema—one could see in Karl Grüne's *Die Strasse* (1923), as Kracauer did when he described its portrayal of modern anomie as being akin to, "the whirl of atoms," and one would also see it brought to the fore in the spiral motifs of Fritz Lang's *M* (1931) almost a decade later. Its appearance wasn't merely a theatrical gesture—this image of the city-as-whirlpool was closely tied to the way, "the urban landscape had radically reshaped the relationship of subjects to their surroundings" under the reign of "all-pervasive instrumental rationality" (Kaes 187). In some ways, however, this vision of the modern city reached its apotheosis

in *Berlin*, where both Ruttmann's technique and his imagery combined to create this particular form of kineticism:

> Ruttmann's editing style uses repetition and parallelism to suggest similarity and exchangeability among the most disparate objects: everything is swept up and whirled around in frenzied, machine-like circulation. (ibid)

But the film's carefully chosen imagery—its traffic congestion, its rollercoaster rides, its races, and its multiple rotating spirals—accentuates this sense of modern life, so much so that it led Anton Kaes to argue that, "[the] primary image of the city alluded to again and again is that of the vortex, the frantically downward spiraling movement that visualizes the existential crisis of a life without foundation and finitude" (ibid 191). Furthermore, this vision reflects Berlin's status as a city of migrants, a city whose Weimar era was in many ways defined by the widespread dislocation that brought millions to its doorstep, a city whose massive number of immigrants and relatively short history as a metropolis (as opposed to London or Paris) underscored its Americanism (184-5). Thus, following a sequence that moves from the abstract patterning found on the *surface* of water, to a short abstract film in the tradition of *Opus I* that appears to draw its inspiration from the rising of the sun and the rapid, rhythmic, and highly fragmented views one gets from onboard a moving train, Ruttmann begins his film with a tour-de-force sequence of just those very rapid, rhythmic, and highly fragmented views seen from an actual passenger train hurtling its way from Berlin's hinterland, through the exurban and suburban areas that form concentric rings around the city, and, finally, into the "great maw" at its center: Anhalter Bahnhof. This grand entrance calls to mind the approach of the city that begins *Manhatta*, and ferry terminal photographs by Stieglitz that inspired it

173

(not to mention Edward Hopper's uncanny *Approaching a City* [1946][52]), and its

virtuosity and its efficacy turned opening sequences such as this into a major trope of

the city symphony phenomenon that followed in *Berlin*'s wake (Dimendberg, *Film*

Noir 15). But, as Kaes has argued, this scene also captures the contradictions of the

migrant's arrival to the city: namely, exhilaration mixed with trepidation (184).

For our purposes, though, what's striking about *Berlin*'s opening sequence in

relation to the rest of the film is the way it creates the sense of a highly centripetal

city. The metropolis pulls us into its densely populated, highly capitalized, and

dynamic center. Life in the vortex may not necessarily lead to madness and

depression the way it appears to during the climax of Act II mentioned above, or

during the highly theatrical suicide sequence in Act IV, which is also capped by

spiraling optical effects, because overall Ruttmann's portrait of *Berlin* is affirmative,

but in many ways the figure that typifies the film's vision of modern life is the traffic

cop who appears in Acts III and IV, standing at the center of the fray, directing the

mayhem that revolves around him, keeping the seemingly boundless energy of the

city in check.[53] As Dimendberg explains, the film's progression from outskirts to

center and from dawn to dusk is tightly organized:

---

[52] Hopper's comments on the inspiration behind his painting are highly relevant here:
> I've always been interested in approaching a big city by train; and I
> can't exactly describe the sensations. But they're entirely human and
> perhaps have nothing to do with aesthetics. There is a certain fear and
> anxiety, and a great visual interest in the things one sees coming into
> the city. (Dimendberg, "From Berlin" 67-8)

[53] There's a fascination with this type of modern hero in the city films of the 1920s
and 1930s, in characters who are able to make sense of the chaos and tame it (e.g. the
telephone operator), but none is as central to *Berlin* as the traffic cop. In this regard,
it share something with Joe May's *Asphalt* (1929).

> Ruttmann's Berlin is entered from the surrounding countryside at dawn by a speeding locomotive with a camera mounted on it. First seen are the outlying industrial districts, as if to reinforce the subsequent images of assembly lines, machine parts, laboring masses, and Tiller Girl-style revue dancers as the foundation of its urban identity as a site of industrial production. Frequent shots of crowded sidewalks, sidewalk cafés, and residential courtyards convey the impression of a frenetic metropolis of irrepressible kineticism but one still possessing urban centers and the possibility of centralized control, an idea expressed by repeated shots of police conducting automobile traffic. (*Film Noir* 59-60)

In other words, Ruttmann's vision of Berlin as a highly centripetal metropolis was closely related to its status as a product of the "second machine age" and of second-wave Americanism.

Vertov II: *Man with a Movie Camera*

By the time Vertov got around to making *Man with a Movie Camera*, his own city symphony, he had experienced the "shock of recognition" associated with seeing one's as-of-yet unrealized project made real by another on two occasions: once with a film he was sympathetic to, René Clair's *Paris qui dort*, and once with a film whose aesthetics he found entirely derivative of Kino-Eye and whose politics were largely non-existent, Walther Ruttmann's *Berlin*. As a result, it's not hard to understand the resolve and determination with which Vertov applied himself to the task. Facing an assortment of production difficulties and other "shortcomings, injustices, crimes, [and] obstacles" at home, and competition and misrecognition from abroad, Vertov described the Kinoks' "revolutionary struggle" in almost Nietzschean terms in a letter addressed to Aleksandr Rodchenko:

> Our invariable victories over so-called tragic situations, over every difficulty lead you to think that we apparently exaggerate our difficulties.
>   No. We do not exaggerate. Herein lies our strength. (*Kino-Eye* 166)

Five days later, on March 20, 1927, Vertov made an entry in his notebook that captured the Kinoks' approach to filming modern life, the approach best exemplified by *Man with a Movie Camera*:

> We leave the studio for life, for that whirlpool of colliding visible phenomena, where everything is real, where people, tramways, motorcycles, and trains meet and part, where each bus follows its route, where cars scurry about their business, where smiles, tears, deaths, and taxes do not obey the director's megaphone.
>   With your camera you enter the whirlpool of life, and life goes on. The race does not stop…
>   The cameraman has to be very inventive in his work.
>   He must abandon the camera's immobility and develop maximum mobility and resourcefulness. (*Kino-Eye* 167-8)

The film that resulted from this cinematic encounter with this maelstrom was Vertov's widely acknowledged masterpiece, a film that marks the fullest realization of the revolutionary project first articulated by the Kinoks in 1919. Far from having merely been frustrated by the "shock of recognition," *Berlin* ignited Vertov's competitive juices while *Paris qui dort*, "was catalytic, sharpening and confirming Vertov's epistemological orientation, stimulating the more systematic deployment of the [Kinoks'] filmic techniques and strategies" (Michelson, "The Man" 68).

Whereas the connection between the Americanism of Ruttmann's photomontaged publicity materials for *Berlin* and the Americanism of the film they advertised was straightforward, the connection between the New York-style skyscrapers in the Stenbergs' vertiginous alternate poster for *Man with a Movie Camera* and the film that it advertised was much less apparent. The young Vertov

was hugely inspired by Walt Whitman, and as late as the mid-1920s, when he made

One Sixth of the World, his "symphony of the whole Soviet land," Vertov's aesthetic

featured flourishes that were both Americanist and Whitmanesque,[54] but *Man with a*

Movie Camera's Americanism is implicit not explicit. For the most part it is tied to

issues of industrialization, productivity, and modernization. One would hardly want

to accuse Vertov of being a Stalinist, but, as Willett has suggested, in the Soviet

Union Americanism was tied to Stalin's call, "for a combination of American matter-

of-factness and Russian revolutionary spirit in order to get industry moving" in 1924,

as well as to the fascination with Taylorism that accompanied this push for rapid

industrialization, and it's hard not to see *Man with a Movie Camera*'s factory

sequences in this spirit, even if Vertov goes out of his way to humanize many of his

featured factory workers in a way that's antithetical to Taylorist conceptions of labor

(not to mention those of Ruttmann in *Berlin*) (98). On the other hand, Vertov's

admiration for Lenin is well known, and is best exemplified by the film he made to

commemorate the tenth anniversary of Lenin's passing, *Three Songs of Lenin* (1934),

but as Tsivian has argued rather persuasively, Vertov's fixation on electrification in

Man with a Movie Camera (electric trams, dams, hydroelectric plants) is a clear, if

somewhat inconspicuous, tribute to Lenin's sweeping electrification program of the

---

[54] Tsivian has shown that if you isolate the film's titles, the result looks, "more or less like a coherent poem with a pantheist touch reminiscent of Whitman":
> In the land of capital / I see / the golden chain of capital / the foxtrot / the machines / and you / […] I see / the colonies / the capital / the colonies / the slaves / […] from the negroes / for the fun of it / it makes "The Chocolate Kiddies"…

As Tsivian explains, The Chocolate Kiddies were a 35-piece, all-African-American troupe of dancers, singers, and jazz musicians who toured the USSR for three months in 1926 and appeared in *A Sixth Part of the World* (89, 109).

early 1920s, as well as his dictum, "Communism equals Soviet power plus the electrification of the entire country" ("*Man*" 98-9). What Tsivian doesn't mention is that Lenin's electrification drive (as well as the Futurist-derived cult of electricity that became widespread across Europe immediately after World War I) was inspired in large part by the dynamism of the United States, which had been the world's supreme electrical powerhouse since at least the time of the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 and its astounding Electricity Building and which had made electricity a central trope of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century modernity (Banham 124).[55] More generally, though, the Soviet Union was a new society, and Moscow—which, along with Odessa and Kiev, is one of the three cities featured in *Man with a Movie Camera*—was the new capital of this new society, not to mention a city teeming with recent arrivals in a way that resembled Berlin (Michelson, Introduction xxxvii). From this perspective, the Stenbergs' skyscrapers in their "vertigo" poster for *Man with a Movie Camera* were a projection of *Amerika* that went well beyond the influence of Hollywood.

Man with a Movie Camera was not only an attempt to enter modern life's "whirlpool of colliding visible phenomena" and document it, like *Berlin* it represented an attempt to replicate this vortex. True to his name, Vertov made spinning machines a central motif of *Man with a Movie Camera*, paralleling the *monteuse* in the factory operating complex machinery and the *monteuse* in the editing studio operating her own complex machinery, for instance, and augmenting

---

[55] Banham claims the cult of the power station and of electricity appears in Marinetti's writings in 1914, well before we find it elsewhere (124). It certainly is an important part of Sant'Elia's Città Nuova plans of the same year (Meyer 71).

this vision with a whole array of shorts involving revolving doors, races, and carousels, and a fixation on the circulation of traffic. As in Ruttmann's film, Vertov's interest in traffic signal and traffic cops is much more than just a visual nod to a modern urban type—these shots are emblems of the centripetal organization of the modern city. These shots are also closely tied to the centripetal model for filmmaking that Vertov had been using since the days of *Kino-Pravda* and that *Man with a Movie Camera* went to great lengths to represent. Thus, the cameraman (Kaufman) makes his way out into the world, stopping at nothing to capture the dynamism of the new society wherever it becomes apparent—factories, hydroelectric plants, the city streets, the world of athletics—and frequently clambering up the Soviet Union's tallest, newest structures to do so,[56] the editor (Svilova) cuts this raw footage down into strips which can then be organized, grouped, stitched together, and set into motion again, and the director (Vertov) is the magician who conjures a film—perhaps even the film we are watching—out of this material. This figure—the magician—was crucial: as he had in *Kino-Eye*, Vertov identified the crowd-pleasing charms of the itinerant Chinese magician with that of the director, but here he did so in a film that was designed to unmask every trick in the Kino-Eye repertoire (Michelson 70, 72).[57] As Leyda noted, the collaboration was virtuoso: "In *The Man*

---

[56] Finally, in one famous sequence near the end of the film, we see the cameraman, his camera, and his tripod superimposed in such a way within a shot of a busy Soviet square that he looks like a giant looming over the crowd. Significantly, Barnouw describes the tripod as, "seemingly the size of an Eiffel Tower" (63).
[57] Michelson, in particular, makes a great deal of this connection in her essay "*The Man with the Movie Camera*: From Magician to Epistemologist." However, it's important to stress that he's linking his avant-garde techniques with the *populism* of the magician. At a time when issues of artistic elitism and legibility were of the

with the Movie Camera all the stunts that can be performed by a cameraman armed with Debrie or hand-camera, and by a film-cutter with the boldness of Vertov and Svilova—all can be found in this full-to-bursting film." (251-2).

But whereas *Berlin*'s centripetalism, as we have seen, is tightly focused, *Man with a Movie Camera*'s pulsates. The film's carousel sequence is instructive here, for it consists of two shots: one looking straight in at the rotating carousel, and a second, longer shot which looks straight out as the world that surrounds the carousel is transformed into a kaleidoscope of sorts. Similarly, the man with a movie camera heads out from the nerve center to film the necessary images, the raw footage is sent back to the nerve center to be broken down and reassembled, but then the film that results is disseminated: it's there in the cinema for the audience to see and it's there right before the viewer's eyes, wherever he or she may be situated. Of course, virtually every film, aside from home movies and the most obscure experimental films, is made along these lines, but *Man with a Movie Camera* brings this pattern of production, post-production, and exhibition to the fore, stops it, starts it, and utterly demystifies it (in a way that builds upon Clair's *Paris qui dort*), and transforms it into radical epistemology, "a manifesto written in celluloid" (Michelson, "*The Man*" 72; Tsivian, "*Man*" 100-1). Ultimately, Vertov is less interested in creating a tightly organized portrait of a modern metropolis than in using a tightly organized portrait of the heroic attempt to capture and unleash urbanized modernity as a way of bringing about a materialist understanding of the modern world.

---

utmost importance, Vertov's point is that this may look difficult, but it's nothing you haven't seen before in another context.

Which brings us to another one of *Man with a Movie Camera*'s central

motifs: awakening. *Berlin*, of course, also deals with awakening—with the

awakening of a great city—and there this theme has a rather explicit biologism to it

because not only does the film begin with the raw power of the locomotive driving

its way through the city's concentric layers and then entering the "great maw" of the

Hauptbahnhof, but it is this sequence of events that brings life to the city, that sets

the metropolis back into motion.[58] *Man with a Movie Camera*'s opening sequence is

quite a bit less graphic, but it's also a clever bit of one-upmanship. Here, the

awakening of the city is preceded by the first of Vertov's many metacinematic

sequences: the cameraman (we're led to believe there's only one throughout the

film) sets up his camera on top a giant movie camera; he shoots some film; he enters

an empty cinema and steps behind a curtain; his film is loaded; this gesture

apparently brings the cinema to life, as the cinema's seats suddenly lower

automatically; the audience fills the auditorium; the orchestra readies itself; the

projector's arc light is lit; the band plays; the film rolls; and the number "1" appears

onscreen announcing the first scene of *Man with a Movie Camera*. The sequence

that follows depicts a city at sleep in a manner reminiscent of the opening act of

Berlin—the camera shows us many different urban motifs, from streets, to factories

and offices, to a hospital nursery and the neoclassical façade of the Bolshoi Theatre,

but all of them are just as still as the wax museum statue and the window

mannequins that Vertov also includes in the montage (perhaps as an homage to *Paris*

---

[58] Actually, *Manhatta* also begins with the reanimation of a city at sleep—but
Berlin's opening sequence is endlessly more powerful and it was Ruttmann's
sequence that Vertov would have been measuring himself against.

qui dort)—the only disruptions come courtesy of a blowing breeze and the use of

several "Rodchenko angles." What's different is what follows. *Berlin*'s awakening

is organic—the city is a complex organism, the film suggests—but *Man with a*

Movie Camera's awakening is typically metacinematic, or, more accurately,

*meta*kino*matic*, for the film explicitly links the awakening of a woman, followed by

her washing and her getting dressed, with the awakening of the city, including its

cleaning and its maintenance, *and* with the awakening of the camera-eye, including

the changing of its lens and the pulling of its focus. This complex set of connections

is made explicit through the inclusion of repeated glimpses of a Constructivist poster

announcing a film in front of a movie theatre. At first, Vertov's use of the image

appears to be merely a clever visual play on the stillness and silence of a city at

dawn—a man and a woman gaze out from the poster intently, the man holds his

index finger to his mouth, shushing. Later, however, we learn that the title of the

film in question is *The Awakening of Woman* and suddenly Vertov's fixation on the

poster—it appears at least four times during the film—becomes obvious.[59] For in the

final analysis, Vertov's film is much more than a film about the awakening of a city,

a woman, a cinema, and a film, it's also a film about the awakening of a society.[60]

---

[59] The fact that the poster was a Constructivist interpretation of a German film—one that in some ways mirrors Vertov's *détournement* of *Berlin*'s awakening sequence—makes the gesture all the more piquant (Tsivian, "*Man*" 102).

[60] Many of these elements are captured in one particularly brilliant shot towards the end of the film's "awakening" section. Here, the filmmakers carry out a pan with a stationary camera by shooting directly into the reflective surface of a window which is in the process of swiveling. The shot begins with the *Awakening of Woman* poster (which is backwards, of course), and as the window moves the reflection captures a sweeping 180º pan, including the "man with a movie camera" himself, and the entire city intersection that faces the theatre (the one that's playing the film).

Ever since the days of *Kino-Eye*, Vertov had made use of a number of

cinematic illusions, including "reversal of order and of action" (a form of hysteron

proteron) in order to impart lessons in Bolshevism, in order to provide, "a communist

decoding of the world as social text, inseparable from the identification of class

structure and class interests" (Michelson, "*The Man*" 70; Michelson, Introduction

xlv). What was different about *Man with a Movie Camera* was not only its

unprecedented degree of experimentation, but the way it functioned as a Kino-

Eye/Constructivist primer on cinema. As Michelson explains,

> Thirty years after the invention of the medium, four years after
> Eisenstein's inaugural masterwork of the Revolutionary period,
> Vertov had produced a film which, taking cinematic consciousness as
> its theme, defined in a stroke the outermost limits of his art, that art
> par excellence of this century and its revolution. (ibid 69)

More than just an aesthetic appropriate to a new society, Vertov was attempting to

create an aesthetic of perpetual revolution, an aesthetic that would continue to push

this new society and its revolution forward. Like Tatlin's *Monument for the Third*

International before it, Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* literalized revolution

(Michelson, "*The Man With*" 64-5).

Among the surprises that Vertov pulled out of his extensive bag of tricks in

the making of *Man with a Movie Camera*—including a variety of distancing

techniques and other forms of demystification—one of the most effective was his use

of defamiliarization. Shklovsky once wrote,

> In order to transform an object into a fact of art it is necessary to
> detach it from the domain of life, to wrest it out from the web of
> familiar associations, to turn over the object as one would turn a log
> in the fire. (Tsivian, "Turning" 107)

Vertov didn't provide "the same place seen from a different camera angle" as he had

in *Kino-Eye*, but he did use a split screen at numerous points during *Man with a*

Movie Camera, sometimes horizontally as he had in the film's opening shot, but,

more commonly, on a vertical, allowing him to create strange mirroring effects and

clashing angles. For the most part, though, these sequences were mere trifles

compared with the film's other forms of illusionism. There is, however, one such

sequence towards the end of the film that stands out from the rest. In this particular

scene the split screen is used to capture the Bolshoi Theatre—the same theatre whose

stately grandeur played such an important part in Vertov's montage of city-at-sleep

shots earlier in the film—and this time the technique is used to make the theatre cave

in on itself. Now, many writers have mentioned the fact that the building in question

is the legendary Bolshoi Theatre, but Tsivian is one of the few who have mentioned

that Vertov's act of symbolic destruction came at the end of a ten-year debate over

the fate of the Bolshoi, one that pitted radicals who wanted to raze the cultural field,

like Malevich, Rodchenko, and Vertov, against cultural conservatives who favored

giving the Imperial new clothes, as it were. As Tsivian points out,

> Hardly any former Imperial institution had grown into an issue as
> polarizing as the Bolshoi. It even caused a heated exchange between
> Lenin and his otherwise loyal Commissar for Education Anatoly
> Luncharsky, who later characterized Lenin's attitude toward this
> theatre as "very nervous." ("*Man*" 106)

"Representing the metropolis is never an innocent gesture," Edward Dimendberg

reminds us, but in this case Vertov was treading on particularly dangerous ground

(*Film Noir* 89). Tsivian has argued that, "Vertov's tricks may look odd, but they are

never inconsequential"—the iconoclastic death wish that he addressed to the Bolshoi in *Man with a Movie Camera* was perhaps the supreme example of this ("*Man*" 108).

Of course, Vertov and *Man with a Movie Camera* were nothing if not controversial—there were many who found Vertov's tricks both odd and inconsequential, there were others who found Vertov's tricks odd and (dangerously) consequential. As early as *One Sixth of the World*, the experiments (and the fanatical views that stood behind them) that brought him acclaim in some circles, also caused his status within the Soviet film world to slip. "Stalin was as interested as Lenin in cinema, but more intent on control," Erik Barnouw has noted, and Vertov was viewed as "troublesome" even before *Man with a Movie Camera* (61). Elsewhere, even within the pages of the same film journal, opinions on Vertov's foray into the city symphony subgenre, his bold attempt to construct a film free of text, script, sets, and actors, never failed to impress its viewers, but it either exhilarated them or alienated them. Thus, at the time of *Man with a Movie Camera*'s release in the United Kingdom in 1929, a reviewer for the British film journal *Close-Up* stated quite plainly that Kino-Eye's latest film had completely reinvented the city symphony with a simple Debrie: "*Berlin* and *Rien que les heures*! Forget all that… Forget the other documents, for Vertov has the idea of making you conscious of the camera" (Blakeston 361-2). Two years later, however, in the pages of the very same journal, another reviewer argued that Vertov had gotten carried away with his own virtuosity and that ultimately the entire project had suffered. Vertov, he wrote,

> has failed… by showing hundreds of examples of most cunning
> artistry in turning: acrobatic masterpieces of optic jigsaw, brilliant
> conjuring of filmic association—but never a rounded work, never a
> clear, proceeding line. His great efforts of strength in relation to

detail did not leave him breath for the whole. His arabesques totally covered the ground plan, his fugues destroyed every melody. (Leyda 251)

Meanwhile, the reaction from U.S. trade journals was predictably hostile. One review with the blunt title "*Man with the Camera*: No Appeal for American Fans" described the film as being essentially irrelevant, relegating the film forthwith to the dustbin of history:

This Soviet importation doesn't mean a thing for American theatres. It is really a camera solo, there being no story, titles, settings, or actors—a difficult fare for the average American audience to down. Surnamed "Living Russia," the picture will appeal only to those of Slavic extraction, to those who support the "arty" film theatre. (Ganly 363)

What's even more interesting, and a lot less predictable, is the reaction that *Man with a Movie Camera* garnered from those one would expect to be sympathetic to the film: documentary filmmakers and fans of avant-garde film. Thus, John Grierson, the godfather of both British and Canadian documentary film and the man reputed to have initially coined the term "documentary" in the mid-1920s, someone whose commitment to documentary filmmaking, whose politics, and whose opposition to the hegemony of Hollywood one would expect would make him receptive to the groundbreaking work of the Kino-Eye team, provides a fascinating case because his reaction to *Man with a Movie Camera*, as expressed in *The Clarion* in 1931, was one of barely contained contempt. At first, Grierson minces his words, arguing somewhat condescendingly that Vertov's basic approach is one shared by most other documentary filmmakers, and he appears to have an appreciation for *Man with a Movie Camera*'s aesthetics:

[Vertov] has observed that there are things of the every-day which achieve a new value, leap to a more vigorous life, the moment they get into a movie camera or an intimately cut sequence. It is at that point we all begin… The secret may be in the angle, or an arrangement of light, or an arrangement of movement, but there is hardly one of us but gets more out of the camera than we ever thought of putting into it. In that sense there is a Kino Eye. In that sense, too, the Kino Eye is more likely to discover things in the wide-world-of-all-possible-arrangements which exists outside the studios. (375)

But then the tone shifts and Grierson really begins to sound off, dismissing Vertov outright as a slave to technology and gimmickry, a mere fad:

Vertov, however, has pushed the argument to a point at which it becomes ridiculous. The camera observes in its own bright way, and he is prepared to give it his head. The man is with the camera, not the camera with the man. Organization of things observed, brain control, imagination, or fancy control of things observed: these other rather necessary activities in the making of art are forgotten. *Man with a Movie Camera* is in consequence not a film at all: it is a snapshot album. There is no story, no dramatic structure, and no special revelation of the Moscow it has chosen for a subject. It just dithers on the surface of life picking up shots here, there, and everywhere, slinging them together as the Dadaists used to sling their verses, with an emphasis on the particular which is out of all relation to a rational existence… [Virtuosity] in a craftsman does not qualify him as a creator.

   [Say] what you like, according to your sense of ultimate importances, the necessity is that you say something. The Kino Eye in that sense is only the waiter who serves the hash. No especial virtue in the waiting compensates for a lunatic cook. (ibid)

Few documents from Grierson's early years reveal as much about his doctrinaire attitude towards the documentary film than this ostensibly non-programmatic film review, and it's worth pointing out that Vertov and the rest of the Russian Formalists were encountering very similar flak at home as the Stalinist clampdown on culture moved into high gear in the early 1930s in the lead-up to the institution of Socialist Realism as the official Soviet aesthetic.

Perhaps even more intriguing, though, was Jay Leyda's reaction to *Man with a Movie Camera*, because here we get some indication that the film might have been working at cross-purposes, so that even those who were fascinated by its materialist epistemology and dazzled by its radical aesthetics found themselves overwhelmed, even confused by Vertov's attempts to spur on revolutionary awakening. Leyda saw the film in New York in 1930 and Vertov's masterpiece was the very first Soviet film that the young cinephile had ever seen. The experience was something of an epiphany, inspiring him to make his own city symphony, *A Bronx Morning*, and instilling a passion for Soviet cinema in him that would lead him to the Moscow State Film Institute by 1933[61] and would culminate in *Kino*, his authoritative history of Russian and Soviet film. Writing about the experience over twenty-five years later, Leyda still seemed dazed:

> My memory of *The Man with the Movie Camera* is not reliable; I have not seen it since it happened to be, in New York in 1930, the first Soviet film I saw [!]. It was such a dazzling experience that it took two or three other Soviet films with normal "stories" to convince me that all Soviet films were not compounded of such intricate camera pyrotechnics. But I hope to be forgiven for not bringing away any very clear critical ideas as I reeled out of the Eighth Street Playhouse—I was even too stunned to sit through it again. (251)

But, again, whereas Grierson's reaction was something bordering on outrage, Leyda's reaction was something other. He may have been mesmerized by Vertov's bag of tricks, but he seemed to agree with Kracauer when, in a review for the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in 1929, he wrote: "*Man with a Movie Camera* wishes to represent nothing less than life itself. The collective life of a city" (356-8). After all,

---

[61] Leyda's invitation to the Moscow State Film Institute came on the back of the merits of *A Bronx Morning* combined with "the persistence of a friend" (Leyda 301).

Man with a Movie Camera was the film that encouraged him to pick up a camera and make *A Bronx Morning*, *Man with a Movie Camera* was the film that started Leyda on his way to becoming one of the twentieth century's preeminent film scholars—not *Nanook*, not *The Drifters*, and certainly not *Berlin*.

Still, there's something telling about Leyda's remarks, something that indicates *Man with a Movie Camera*'s shortcomings, and in some ways Leyda's later career path is instructive here. Take the issue of specificity. Contrary to what Grierson had to say, *Man with a Movie Camera* is not a film about Moscow, it's a film about a composite city, a film that combines images of three cities into an imaginary one, one that certainly captures the dynamism of a new society in the making, but one that in doing so sacrifices geographic and historical specificity, as Grierson quite rightly notes. The film's Bolshoi Theatre sequence is of crucial importance here, as it underscores the potential of making a specific portrait of a specific city with a specific history and a specific set of politics. For the most part, however, it appears as though Vertov somehow missed Paris and its particular urban space when he watched *Paris qui dort* and only noticed its metacinematic elements; for the most part, *Man with a Movie Camera*'s blurring of city spaces and its focus on the present and the future at the expense of the past led to ahistoricism.[62] Second, while the film's experiment in extra-literary, extra-textual representation was nothing if not daring, it was very much a product of its time (i.e. at a time when film theory was still very much concerned with the specificity of the medium, at the cusp of the

---

[62] Leyda describes Vertov's temporal focus this way: "Vertov's films dared to treat the present and, through the present, the future, with an approach as revolutionary as the material he treated." Conspicuously, he makes no mention of a revolutionary approach to the past.

sound era) and its rejection of all that was theatrical and/or literary about the medium

failed to see the potential in text suggested by a film as comparatively rudimentary as

Manhatta. In the early- to mid-1920s Vertov had used intertitles in a daring manner,

but mainly on the level of graphics and not content. Years later, Vertov

experimented with sound on his later film *Enthusiasm: Symphony of the Don Basin*

(1931), his symphony of industry,[63] but here as elsewhere he again overlooked the

potential of text. In other words, despite his background in avant-garde poetry,

despite the revolution in literature that was taking place in the Soviet Union parallel

with the revolution in cinema led by Vertov, Eisenstein, Kuleshov, Pudovkin and

others, and despite the powerful intersections between these two avant-gardes in

journals like *Kino*-Fot, LEF, and *New LEF*, Vertov failed to see the potential for a

fully Constructivist cinema, one that might have combined the image, montage, text,

and graphics into a unified whole. Among other missed opportunities, one might cite

the following: In 1923, when he returned to the Soviet Union from Berlin, Viktor

Shklovsky joined the *LEF* group that had formed around Mayakovsky and became

part of its battle against, "the resurgence of conservative literary tendencies" through

the development of a new documentary literature (Sheldon xii). That same year was

the year he composed *A Sentimental Journey*, his memoir of the revolution, using a

rough verbal surface, a literary montage of, "parenthetical comments, impudent

---

[63] By this time Vertov also referred to himself as a "composer" (Leyda 176-7). That
was certainly the way Charlie Chaplin saw him after he caught a screening of
Enthusiasm:

> Never had I known that these mechanical sounds could be arranged to
> sound so beautiful. Regard it as one of the most exhilarating
> symphonies I have heard. Mr. Dziga Vertov is a musician. (Vertov,
> "From" 76)

asides to the reader, interjections, puns, rhetorical questions, colloquialisms, and typographical divisions," that was meant to put his theories of "defamiliarization" and "impeded form" to work (ibid xvi, xviii). It instantly became one of the most controversial texts of the post-revolutionary period. By the late 1920s, Shklovsky had embraced "factography" and had become a leader in, "the exploration and the refinement of such genres as the newspaper articles, the feuilleton, and the sketch," and he'd also become one of the most important figures in the Russian Formalists' theoretical engagement with cinema (ibid xxiii-xxiv). Vertov and Shklovsky moved in some of the same intellectual circles, including the *LEF* group, but they never collaborated on a film together. However, as we have seen, the resonances between the theories of Shklovsky and the visual aesthetics of Vertov were profound. One can only imagine what a collaboration between Vertov and Shklovsky on a project as daring and as highly charged as *A Sentimental Journey* might have produced.

Chapter 4: Kino-Eyes 2: Benjamin and Kracauer

<u>Walter Benjamin: "And what else does the flâneur do?"</u>

"Filling Station," the opening salvo in Walter Benjamin's 1928 *One-Way Street*, provides a brief but illuminating snapshot of the collection of "aphorisms, jokes, dreams" that follows:

> The construction of life is at present in the power far more of facts
> than of convictions, and of such facts as have scarcely become the
> basis of convictions. Under these circumstances, true literary activity
> cannot aspire to take place within a literary framework; this is, rather,
> the habitual expression of its sterility. Significant literary
> effectiveness can come into being only in a strict alternation between
> action and writing; it must nurture the inconspicuous forms that fit its
> influence in active communities better than does the pretentious,
> universal gesture of the book—in leaflets, brochures, articles, and
> placards. Only this prompt language shows itself actively equal to the
> moment. Opinions are to the vast apparatus of social existence what
> oil is to machines: one does not go up to a turbine and pour machine
> oil over it; one applies a little to hidden spindles and joints that one
> has to know.

The imagery invoked by Benjamin is striking—construction, oil, machines, turbines, spindles, joints—and, along with the image of the filling station, it helps prepare the reader for the book's form and the playful subheadings that announce its many different sections (e.g.,"Construction Site"). The ideas conveyed here are equally provocative: this is a new era, one of facts "far more… than of convictions," of "inconspicuous forms," of "leaflets, brochures, articles, and placards" and not of the "universal gesture of the book." And as Susan Buck-Morss argues in *The Dialectics of Seeing*, *One-Way Street* emerged from a period that was marked by a number of personal epiphanies that changed the course of Benjamin's life irreversibly and brought about an abrupt shift in Benjamin's thought and praxis. Key to this

transformation was Asja Lacis, the "Russian revolutionary" who Benjamin fell

deeply in love with in Italy in 1924, who ignited his Marxist awakening, and who

even led him to Moscow in the winter of 1926-7 (Buck-Morss 12). At the time of

their meeting, however, Benjamin was still struggling with *The Origin of German*

Tragic Drama, the *Habilitationsschrift* which he still hoped would help him secure a

proper academic career, and his encounter with Lacis, with her radical approach to

art and theatre and her commitment to the "revolutionary transformation of society,"

shook him to the core (Buck-Morss 14).[64] Benjamin had always thought of his study

as having a great deal of relevance to the field of contemporary literature and its

understanding, but suddenly his *Habilitationsschrift* felt like so much bourgeois

posturing. As a result, even as he continued to work on his dissertation, he began

envisioning a new project, one that responded to Lacis's prodding, one that would

resist the urge to shroud his "contemporary and political" ideas in the "outmoded,"

but instead would, "develop them, and… do this experimentally, in extreme form"

(Buck-Morss 15). That project, which Benjamin assembled over the next two years,

was *One-Way Street*, of course, and it was perhaps the supreme achievement of a

period in his life dominated by his infatuation with Lacis, the rejection of his

dissertation, "his parents' subsequent withdrawal of financial support," and his

reinvention as, "a practitioner of culture who has a job to do, and needs to support

---

[64] As Lacis later recalled,

> He was deep in work on *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. When
> I learned from him that it had to do with an analysis of German
> Baroque tragedy of the seventeenth century, and that only a few
> specialists know this literature—these tragedies were never played—I
> made a face. Why busy oneself with dead literature? (Buck-Morss
> 15)

himself by it as well" (Schwartz 402). As Buck-Morss explains, "[between] the *Trauerspiel* study and *One-Way Street*, the author's understanding of his trade had changed from esoteric treatise writer to mechanical engineer," and the manuscript that resulted reflected this Constructivist turn: Benjamin's "avant-garde, modernist" text was, "assembled without regard for disparities of size and discontinuities in kind, like so many discrete pieces in a photomontage or a Cubist collage" (17-8).

In fact, this turn was not quite as unexpected as it may have first appeared. Benjamin had been moving at the periphery of Germany's Dadaist-Constructivist alliance since 1923, his contacts within this circle included El Lissitzky, Theo van Doesburg, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, and Hans Richter, and he was a contributor to at least two of this scene's avant-garde journals: the German journal *G—Material zur Gestaltung*, for which he provided a translation of Tristan Tzara's "Man Ray and the Photography of the Converse" in the very first issue, and the Dutch journal *i10*, whose film and photography editor was Moholy-Nagy (Schwartz 403; Cadava xix). It had just taken Lacis to give him a decisive push in this direction. That Benjamin felt liberated by the opportunity to experiment with literary form in *One-Way Street* was obvious from the finished product. In stark contrast with *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*,

> The atmosphere of *One-Way Street* has all the light, air, and
> permeability of the new architecture of Gropius or Corbusier. The
> outside world of gas stations, metros, traffic noises, and neon lights,
> which threatens to disrupt intellectual concentration, is incorporated
> into the text. These material substances rub against thought with a
> friction that generates cognitive sparks, illuminating the reader's own
> life-world. (Buck-Morss 17).

It was also obvious from the book's arresting cover, which, unlike the ultra-

conservative cover designed for the *Trauerspiel* book, featured a photomontage by

another member of Berlin's Constructivist avant-garde, Benjamin's close friend

Sasha Stone (Schwartz 403).[65] And this cover was no mere window dressing. Not

only did Benjamin describe Stone's composition as "one of the most effective covers

ever,"[66] but as a section of *One-Way Street* entitled "Attested Auditor of Books"

makes clear, the cover, with its defamiliarized, slightly absurdist vision of a Berlin

shopping street littered with "*Einbahnstrasse*" signs, intersected directly with the

book's analysis of the place of literary production within the dynamics of modern

culture:

> Script—having found, in the book, a refuge in which it can lead an
> autonomous existence—is pitilessly dragged out into the street by
> advertisements and subjected to the brutal heteronomies of economic
> chaos. This is the hard schooling of its new form. If centuries ago it
> began gradually to lie down, passing from the upright inscription to
> the manuscript resting on sloping desks before finally taking itself to
> bed in the printed book, it now begins just as slowly to rise again from
> the ground. The newspaper is read more in the vertical than in the
> horizontal plane, while film and advertisement force the printed word
> entirely into the dictatorial perpendicular. And before a contemporary
> finds his way clear to opening a book, his eyes have been exposed to
> such a blizzard of changing, colorful, conflicting letters that the
> chances of his penetrating the archaic stillness of the book are slight.
> Locust swarms of print, which already eclipse the sun of what city
> dwellers take for intellect, will grow thicker with each succeeding
> year. (456-7)

---

[65] Interestingly, Schwartz points out that when Benjamin drafted a diagram in the late 1920s to map out, "the path of his personal and intellectual life," the names of two visual artists stood out: Stone and Moholy-Nagy (403).
What makes the contrast between *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* and *One-Way Street* even more intriguing is that both books were published by the same publisher: Berlin's Ernst Rowohlt Verlag.
[66] As Benjamin was surely familiar with Heartfield's covers for Malik-Verlag, this was high praise indeed.

In these changed conditions, Benjamin saw the beginning of a new literary aesthetic taking form, one which would be more graphic in its orientation, and would eventually be characterized by a poetics of "picture-writing" and "international moving script," one which would build upon the early experiments of both Mallarmé and the Dadaists, and one whose form was announced by that of *One-Way Street* itself (ibid). As Frederic J. Schwartz has pointed out, this fascination with Constructivism, photomontage, and the New Typography was very directly inspired by Benjamin's two artist-*monteur* colleagues, Sasha Stone and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy—by Stone's literal embodiment of the artist-as-engineer, and by Moholy-Nagy's *Painting, Photography, Film* and his "manifesto of the New Typography," *Dynamic of the Metropolis* (403-4).

It is well known that Walter Benjamin was deeply impressed by photography, film, and montage theory more generally. So much so, in fact, that when he described his unorthodox approach to organizing and presenting the reams of material he had compiled for the *Passagen-Werk*, the extensive prehistory of twentieth century modernity that was to be his magnum opus, he put it in photo-filmic terms: "This work has to develop to the highest degree the art of citing without quotation marks. Its theory is intimately related to that of montage" (*Arcades* 458 [N1,10]). And later in the same convolute: "Method of this project: literary montage. I needn't *say* anything. Merely show" (*Arcades* 460 [N1a,8]). Benjamin's interest in the principles of montage was no mere flirtation with style. As with others before him, Benjamin's turn towards the language of cinema, his development of a "literary montage" aesthetic, was a direct reflection of the highly

disjointed, highly fragmented, and shock-laden experience of the modern metropolis,

the very "culture of time and space" that had created the cinema.[67] In fact, along

with the kaleidoscope and the Chinese Puzzle, whose "juxtaposed elements… [built]

around a central idea" anticipated Cubism and Constructivism, Benjamin cited the

Eiffel Tower as an example of the principle of montage given architectural form

because of the way this "colossal span of spiritual energy… [channeled] inorganic

material energy" into its 12,000 metal fittings and its 2.5 million rivets (Buck-Morss

74; *Arcades* 164 [F6,2] and 160-1 [F4a,2]). But Benjamin's infatuation with

montage theory was also an expression of the dialectical nature of his "historical

materialist" outlook. Benjamin explained this affinity this way: "The first stage in

this undertaking will be to carry over the principle of montage into history. That is,

to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut

components" (*Arcades* 461 [N2,6]). And, as Buck-Morss explains, the project he

had in mind was vast, daring, and, frankly, daunting:

> Could montage as the formal principle of the new technology be used
> to reconstruct an experiential world so that it provided a coherence of
> vision necessary for philosophical reflection? And more, could the
> metropolis of consumption, the high ground of bourgeois-capitalist
> culture, be transformed from a world of mystifying enchantment into
> one of both metaphysical and political illumination? To answer these
> questions was the point of the Arcades project. (Buck-Morss 23)

Moreover, Benjamin's turn to montage amounted to a blunt rejection of prevailing

historiographical norms. This was not a seamlessly narrativized form of history, the

kind of "harmonized" perspective characteristic of idealist historiography. Here,

---

[67] In "The Author as Producer," Benjamin traced his interest in montage back to the
"revolutionary" work of the Dadaists: "You need only think of the work of John
Heartfield, whose technique made the book cover into a political instrument"
(*Reflections* 229).

instead, was a progressive form of history replete with interruptions designed to counteract the illusions of mainstream histories and trigger the dialectical awakening that was the ultimate goal of historical materialism (Buck-Morss 67). In this regard, Benjamin's methodology clearly parallels Soviet montage theory and its interest in early cinema, for as Gunning has written, what Eisenstein, René Clair, and others found in the earliest chapter of film history was an aesthetic of "exhibitionist confrontation rather than diegetic absorption" ("Cinema of Attraction" 66). It also calls to mind Shklovsky's notions of "impeded form" and "defamiliarization," this time applied to the historiographical arena.

What the above paragraph only hints at, though, is that already by the time that Benjamin had published *One-Way Street* another shift had occurred. If Benjamin's mid-1920s work had come under the sway of Asja Lacis and Moscow, by 1927 his work was under the sway of Paris and its arcades, where, for all intents and purposes, it would remain until his death in 1940 (Buck-Morss 5). The year 1927 for Benjamin began in Moscow, the "improvised metropolis" where he was impressed by the "thorough-going politicization of life," but already the city was beginning to show the signs of the Stalinization of Soviet culture, and this together with his continuing difficulties with Lacis led to the ambivalence of his essay "Moscow" (1927). Nonetheless, Benjamin wrote of having discovered a "new optics" in Moscow, one that had helped him to "see Berlin through Moscow," as well as one that revealed to him the strange affinities between the United States and the Soviet Union: "Probably the only cultural conditions in the West for which Russia has a lively enough understanding for disagreement with it to be profitable

are those of America" (38). By April, however, Benjamin had traveled to Paris, for

what he initially thought would only be a two- to three-month stay to acquaint

himself with the latest developments in French literature. The trip would last until

November, though, and by the summer of 1927 Benjamin together with Franz

Hessel, his friend and editor-in-chief at Rowohlt Verlag (which published both

Origin of the German Tragic Drama and *One-Way Street*), had begun work on the

earliest version of the arcades project (Jennings et al. 823-6). The impetus for his

Paris stint may have been motivated by the same urge to reject the dusty halls of

academia and embrace the modernism of the 1920s, but instead Benjamin found

himself inescapably drawn to the "outmoded" once again.

As Buck-Morss and others have argued, by the late 1920s Benjamin's work

may have taken on an entirely new focus—"Paris, the capital of the nineteenth

century," in his famous phrase—but there was a considerable amount of continuity in

his work from at least the time of his *Origin of the German Tragic Drama*. In fact,

one can see the *Arcades Project* as being an attempt to fuse *Origin*'s combination of

the "contemporary and political" and the "outmoded" with the montage-based

experimental form of *One-Way Street*. Key to this new approach, as has often been

noted, was the influence of the Surrealists, the group of Paris-based artists and

intellectuals who had emerged out of the ashes of Paris Dada and were led to a large

extent by André Breton, and two works stand out among the Surrealist oeuvre as

having had a particular effect on Benjamin: Louis Aragon's *Le Paysan de Paris*

(1926) and, later, André Breton's *Nadja* (1928).[68] Famously, it was Aragon's ode to

the Passage de l'Opéra, a nineteenth-century "ruin" that was slated for demolition,

that provided the initial inspiration for Benjamin's own *Passagen-Werk*:

"[Evenings] in bed I could not read more than a few words of it before my heartbeat

got so strong I had to put the book down […]. And in fact the first notes of the

Passagen come from this time" (Buck-Morss 33). While in the pages of *Nadja*,

Benjamin recognized an "an extraordinary discovery" that carried Aragon's study of

the arcades even further. As he put it in his 1929 essay "Surrealism: The Last

Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia,"

> [Breton] was the first to perceive the revolutionary energies that
> appear in the "outmoded"—in the first iron constructions, the first
> factory buildings, the earliest photos, objects that have begun to be
> extinct, grand pianos, the dresses of five years ago, fashionable
> restaurants when the vogue has begun to ebb from them. The relation
> of these things to revolution—no one can have a more exact concept
> of it than these authors. (210)

Here, in these pivotal works of 1920s Surrealism, Benjamin found a version of the

avant-garde that broke in a fundamental way with the radical art currents that he had

been aligned with both in Berlin and Moscow, one that challenged the early

twentieth century's prevalent "cult of the New" (Hansen, "Benjamin, Cinema and

Experience" 192). Simultaneously, Benjamin's Surrealist turn amounted to a

rejection of orthodox Marxism and its belief, as expressed by the early Marx in *The

Eighteenth Brumaire*, that, "[the] social revolution… cannot draw its poetry from the

past, but only from the future" (Cohen 190). "The trick by which this world of

things is mastered," Benjamin explained, "consists in the substitution of a political

---

[68] Sources here include: Buck-Morss (1989), Cohen (1993), Gilloch (1996), Hansen
(1999).

for a historical view of the past," and, "[at] the center of this world of things stands the most dreamed-about of [the Surrealists'] objects: the city of Paris itself" (210-1). Benjamin envisioned a project that would transcend the Surrealists' fixation with dreams, though—as he put it in a note:

> [Whereas] Aragon persists within the realm of dream, here the concern is to find the constellation of awakening. While in Aragon there remains an impressionistic element, namely the "mythology"…, here it is a question of the dissolution of "mythology" into the space of history. That, of course, can happen only through the awakening of a not-yet-conscious knowledge of what has been. (*Arcades* 458; N1,9)

The location—the Surrealists' "most dreamed-about" object—remained of crucial importance: Paris was perhaps *the* crucible of modernity, "the capital of the nineteenth century," the city where Baudelaire had first coined the term, and it was still the cultural capital of Europe and the undisputed hub of early-twentieth-century European modernism. But it was also not a "new city," in the sense of a Berlin, a Moscow, or a New York, and Benjamin certainly didn't claim that Paris was the "capital of the twentieth century."[69] Those other cities might have been on the ascendant, but Paris was still the brightest star in the European cultural universe, and, more importantly, it provided both a prehistory of twentieth-century modernity and a powerful counter-image to its dominant form (Hansen, "America" 385).

While the form of *Paysan de Paris* was inventive, creating a sense of literary collage out of its combination of text with various and sundry artifacts—newspaper clippings, advertisements, menus, and so on—and using a whole variety of other literary devices to break up the narrative, *Nadja*'s form appears to have left a greater

---

[69] Convolute J: Baudelaire of the *Arcades Project* contains the following note: "A criterion for deciding whether or not a city is modern: the absence of monuments. 'New York is a city without monuments' (Döblin)" (J91a, 1; 385).

impression on Benjamin. It was Breton's incorporation of photographs by Jacques-

André Boiffard in particular that drew his attention. One might have expected

Breton to reject photography because of his tendency to prefer inner states over

external ones, but as Rosalind Krauss has indicated, "in fact Breton has a curious

tolerance for photography" (97). Not only was photography placed at the heart of

many of the Surrealists' publications and their pursuit of an "advantage over the

real," but Breton's infatuation with photography led him to this famous

proclamation: "[When] will all the books that are worth anything stop being

illustrated with drawings and appear only with photographs?" (Breton, *What is* 10;

Krauss 98). Significantly, while the photography of the most famous of the

Surrealist photographers, Man Ray, amounted to an all-out assault on "straight"

photography, Breton turned to Boiffard, Ray's assistant, in order to pursue a very

different aesthetic, one that was "scientific" and intentionally banal, one that

communicated with the city in a way that the Man Ray school of Surrealist

photography avoided (Jay 253; Finkelstein 81). Breton appears to have been elated

with the results of this collaboration; he inscribed Boiffard's copy of *Nadja* with the

following inscription: "To Jacques-André Boiffard, to whom I owe the most

beautiful photographs in this book and through whose eyes I have seen the true sites

known by mine." (Walker 57) Though many were left mystified by Boiffard's

peculiar, seemingly anti-Surreal approach to photographing Paris, Benjamin was not

one of them. Instead, he saw an analogue for the Surrealist notion of *dépaysement* in

Boiffard's photographs[70]:

---

[70] Marja Warehime describes Surrealist *dépaysement* as, "the separation or

In such passages in Breton, photography intervenes in a very strange way. It makes the streets, gates, squares of the city into illustrations of a trashy novel, draws off the banal obviousness of this ancient architecture to inject it with the most pristine intensity toward the events described, to which, as in old chambermaids' books, word-for-word quotations with page numbers refer. And all the parts of Paris that appear here are places where what is between these people turns like a revolving door. ("Surrealism" 211)

"Nothing proves the truth of surrealism so much as photography," Dali had once remarked, and here in *Nadja* Benjamin had found a powerful example of what he meant (Walker 21).

Beyond the way they augmented *Nadja*'s "trash" aesthetics, a great deal of the appeal of Boiffard's photographs for Benjamin had to do with how these "flat," apparently banal photographs intersected with Breton's attempts to re-imagine Paris, to *rewrite* it, how they helped Breton's prose access what Dali referred to as the "delicate osmoses which exist between reality and surreality" (Cohen 108; Walker 21). Thus, as Margaret Cohen has explained, much of the reason behind Breton's obscure paths across Paris has to do with his fondness for sites with an insurrectional

---

displacement of objects from the referential context that ordinarily defines them in order to allow the viewers to discover their irrational, surreal qualities" (41). Her definition comes in a discussion of the flea market as the "operative model for *dépaysement*," but, as Ian Walker has explained, the very nature of photography lends itself to this act of "separation or displacement":

By removing fragments from the flow of experience, photographs create new meanings, which may be powerful in their very isolation but bear little relation to their original context. Photographs cut the world up, they silence it, flatten it and rob it of colour, in a transposition that is both violent and exhilarating. And indeed, so extreme that one must wonder how it is that we can still take photographs to be true documents of the exterior world. Yet, even though we may know better than to trust a photograph altogether, still we cannot escape the pull of its indexical adhesion to the real; in the very physical nature of the medium, there is a tension that is powerful in its ambiguity. The process of recording is inseparable from the process of transformation. (14)

and bohemian past,[71] sites which might allow him to tap into a hidden wellspring of

revolutionary energy, and some of Boiffard's blank, strangely emptied-out

photographs—such as that of the Porte St-Denis [Fig. 7]—contributed to such

interventions (94). Cohen notes:

> The political and often explicitly revolutionary resonance of this
> monument had, interestingly, long been encoded in the history of its
> visual representation, for it served as backdrop either for a challenge
> to official power or occasionally for this power's display throughout
> the nineteenth century. (ibid 90)

Quite rightly, Benjamin traced this aesthetic back to the work of Eugène Atget, the

Parisian producer of photographic *documents* that the Surrealists had "discovered"

and brought into the *Révolution Surréaliste* fold in the late-1920s, and whose body of

work acts as both an extensive catalogue of the topography of Paris and a subtle, yet

insightful investigation of its social space ("A Small History" 518-9; Nesbitt 1-101)

[Fig. 8].

In all four of these characters—Aragon, Breton, Boiffard, and Atget—

Benjamin also found models for a twentieth-century variation on a nineteenth-

century type that not only helped him to better understand "Paris, the capital of the

nineteenth century," but also took on great methodological importance: the

flâneur.[72] Benjamin's blanket use of the term, covering both bourgeois and

---

[71] Regarding Breton's infatuation with bohemia, a social group that received nothing
but derision from Marx, Cohen argues that part of the attraction has to do with the
continuity of the Parisian bohemian tradition, so that one can trace an unbroken
chain back into past, whereas the Parisian revolutionary tradition has been
intermittent (108).

[72] Margaret Cohen argues that Benjamin's notion of flânerie is more Bretonian than
Baudelairean (201). In some ways, I think she's right, but as I'm indicating here, I
also think the picture is more complicated than just a simple Baudelaire vs. Breton
dichotomy, and that a number of photographers form a part of the story.

bohemian versions over a period of a few decades, has led to much confusion in the literature on Benjamin and flânerie, but suffice it to say that the flâneurs in question here—those of "methodological importance"—were not those outlandish bourgeois flâneurs of "around 1840" that we encounter so often, the ones who took turtles along for their strolls in the arcades of Paris so that their pets could set the pace for them (*Illuminations* 197). While there's no doubt that Benjamin took great pleasure in the foppish rejection of the workaday world captured by this curious anecdote of his, it's clear that there was one particular version of the nineteenth-century flâneur who Benjamin most identified with. This flâneur was both a "literary man [who] ventures into the marketplace to sell himself," just as Benjamin had done following the collapse of his academic career, and a prose poet along the lines of Baudelaire, one capable of wresting poetry out of the city streets:

> Which of us, in his moments of ambition, has not dreamed of the miracle of a poetic prose, musical, without rhythm and without rhyme, supple enough and rugged enough to adapt itself to the lyrical impulses of the soul, the undulations of reverie, the jibes of conscience? / It was, above all, out of my exploration of huge cities, out of the medley of their innumerable interrelations, that this haunting ideal was born. (Benjamin, *Arcades* 437)

But the more direct influence on Benjamin's notion of flânerie came from neo-flâneurs like Aragon, Breton, Boiffard, and Atget, flâneurs who had appeared decades after the death of the type, flâneurs who used the highly charged streets of Paris as a kind of dialectical time machine, a "mnemotechnic device," that connected the present with "a vanished time" through the gateway provided by "the outmoded" (ibid 416; Hansen, "Benjamin, Cinema and Experience" 194). "Beyond the Paris that was visible and anonymous there existed a latent city," Gérard Durozoi has

written," a city waiting "to be decoded by the poet-seer" (173). Here, Benjamin found an inspiration for the *Passagen-Werk* and its meandering attempt to construct a prehistory of modernity out of the outmoded, one capable of communicating with the "contemporary and the political."[73] Here, too, Benjamin found something of a counter-image to early-twentieth-century modernity's cult of speed and efficiency. Frederick Winslow Taylor may have "carried the day" with his "war on flânerie" ("Down with dawdling!"), but the dialectical materialist could adopt the ways of the flâneur and transform the "innumerable interrelations" of the city into a penetrating study of modern capitalism and the commodity fetish that lay at its heart, as well as a sweeping critique of progress (*Arcades* 436; *Reflections* 197).

When Benjamin wrote his essay "A Small History of Photography" in 1931, both of these concerns—the development of nineteenth-century capitalism and his critique of progress—were key to his account of photography's centennial. In addition, it was here that Benjamin produced some of the earliest incarnations of two of his most lasting concepts: the "optical unconscious" and "aura." Benjamin's essay was prompted in large measure by the publication of an "exceptionally beautiful" monograph on Atget that was published that very same year and he placed the actor-turned-photographer, who had, "wiped off the mask and then set about removing the make-up from reality," at the center of his thoughts on the medium. As unlikely as it might have seemed, it was in the work of this elderly, neglected

---

[73] At times, this inspiration could take on a bizarre appearance. At one point in Convolute M, "The Flâneur," Benjamin cites an example of "Flânerie through the bill of fare," one that resembles the actual shape and form of the *Passagen-Werk*:
> The menu at Les Trois Frères Provençaux: "Thirty-six pages for food, four pages for drink—but very long pages, in small folio, with closely packed text and numerous annotations in fine print." (423)

photographer, this producer of photographic *documents* completely removed from the sphere of the artistic avant-garde, that the Surrealists found their photographic godfather. Atget's work quickly became a conspicuous part of the layout of *La Revolution Surréaliste* beginning in 1926 with their famous "Les Dernières Conversions" cover, which appropriated (and placed a surrealist twist on) Atget's 1912 photograph of a group of Parisians gazing up into the sky towards an eclipse, but Benjamin went so far as to argue that Atget's work anticipated the Surrealists' most important experiments in any realm, photographic or otherwise: "Atget's Paris photos are the forerunners of the surrealist photography; an advance party of the only really broad column surrealism managed to set in motion" (249). And it was in his discussion of Atget's work that one gets the fullest sense of Benjamin's thoughts on aura and the optical unconscious. Thus, it was here that Benjamin saw among the earliest instances of, "the emancipation of the object from aura which is the most signal achievement of the latest school of photography," typified by journals like *Bifur* and *Variéte*, by which he meant the schools of "straight" photography and of "New Objectivity" (ibid 250). "[Atget] looked for what was unremarked, forgotten, cast adrift," Benjamin argued, and it was these locales that Atget used to pump the aura (that "strange weave of space and time") "out of reality like water from a sinking ship" (ibid). According to Benjamin, this quality was the sign of an advanced, modern, and decidedly photographic visual literacy:

> The stripping bare of the object, the destruction of the aura, is the
> mark of a perception whose sense of the sameness of things has
> grown to the point where even the singular, the unique, is divested of
> its uniqueness—by means of its reproduction. Atget almost always
> passed by the "great sights and the so-called landmarks"; what he did
> not pass by was a long row of boot lasts; or the Paris courtyards,

where from night to morning the hand-carts stand in serried ranks;…
or the brothel at Rue… No 5, whose street number appears, gigantic,
at four different places on the building's façade. Remarkably,
however, almost all these pictures are empty. Empty the Porte
d'Arceuil by the Fortifications, empty the triumphal steps, empty the
courtyards, empty, as it should be, the Place du Tertre. They are not
lonely, merely without mood; the city in the pictures looks cleared
out, like a lodging that has not yet found a new tenant. (250-251)

Elsewhere in the same essay, he described these emptied out locations as having the look of a "scene of a crime," before posing a question that must be understood (I think) in relation to Benjamin's ongoing examination of the city as the focus of late capitalism and its particular (and peculiar) social relations: "But is not every square inch of our cities the scene of a crime?" Simultaneously, Atget's anti-auratic photographs provide an example of Benjamin's "optical unconscious." Just as chronophotography and the close-up expose their own secrets, Atget's photographs expose an uncanny Paris in spite of their deceptive deadpan appearance (243, 250-1). For Benjamin, this Atgetian aesthetic was both redemptive *and* critical, and he saw the possibility for a truly political aesthetic (worthy of Brecht) in this type of photographic work, as well as in those works that mobilized such image*s*:

It is in these achievements that surrealist photography sets the scene
for a salutary estrangement between man and his surroundings. It
gives free play to the politically educated eye, under whose gaze all
intimacies are sacrificed to the illumination of detail. (251)

"Photography as art is a very dangerous field," Benjamin cited Sasha Stone as having said ("A Small History," 254). The stakes surrounding photography were high, Benjamin understood, and in the work of Atget and his successors he believed he'd found a counter-aesthetic capable of resisting the prevailing current.

By mid-decade, Benjamin's focus on photography had developed into a more generalized interest in mechanical reproduction (or "technical reproducibility"), one that placed a great deal of importance on cinema, and one that was summed up in the three drafts of Benjamin's seminal (even canonical) "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." As Hansen has noted, Benjamin's discussion of cinema has a profound ambivalence to it, one that, "resumes a perspective articulated among Western European avant-garde artists and intellectuals during the 1920s which was marked by an enthusiasm for the possibilities of the new medium and a simultaneous critique of its actual development" (181). By the mid-1930s, with fascism dominant in Italy and Germany, the Stalinist counterrevolution well under way, and the illusions of the culture industry firmly in place elsewhere, this tension had become acute, and the resultant tone of Benjamin's essay, particularly in its closing section, is desperate (Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics" 3). Hansen describes the moment in the following terms:

> when Benjamin wrote his Artwork Essay, the "all-out gamble of the historical process" (Kracauer) in which film and photography were to play a decisive role seemed all but lost; instead of advancing a revolutionary culture, the media of "technical reproduction" were lending themselves to oppressive social and political forces—first and foremost in the fascist restoration of myth through mass spectacles and newsreels, but also in the liberal-capitalist marketplace and in Stalinist cultural politics. Nonetheless, Benjamin's concern with the photographic media still participates in the avant-garde perspective of the 1920s… The belated moment of the Artwork Essay only enhances the utopian modality of its statements, shifting the emphasis from a definition of what film *is* to its failed opportunities and unrealized promises. Thus, the cinema becomes an object—as well as a medium—of "redemptive criticism," the same effort of critical preservation that inspired Benjamin's work on Baudelaire and the Paris Arcades, the *Passagen-Werk*. ("Benjamin, Cinema and Experience" 181-2)

For our purposes, what's most significant about Benjamin's Work of Art essay is the way it carries forward certain key aspects of his photography essay and quite literally mobilizes them. This takes place in two ways: first, in the form of Benjamin's most elaborate and eloquent study of *motion* pictures, and secondly, through a study of photographic reproduction that is concerned primarily with patterns of exchange and visual economies. Photography was of crucial importance to Benjamin's conception of modernity because its emergence came right in the thick of the French industrial revolution, and largely as a product of it. Roughly half a century later came the cinematic apparatus, and it bookended Benjamin's understanding of modern visual media much as it had Cendrars' "third world revolution."

Even though Benjamin was heavily indebted to Surrealism, after his initial enthusiasm, he was very conscious of distancing himself and "lifting" *The Arcades Project* out of what he called, "an all too ostentatious proximity to the *mouvement surréaliste* that could become fatal to me" (Cohen 7). Much as he had with photography, Benjamin saw film's potential as being both *surréaliste* and *hyper-surréaliste*, capable of portraying "a world in which the true surrealist face of existence breaks through," but so much more too: "Film is the first art form capable of showing how matter interferes with people's lives. Hence, film can be an excellent means of materialist representation." (Benjamin, *Illuminations* 247). Perhaps the greatest example of Benjamin's belief in the materialist power of the cinematic medium comes in another passage from the Work of Art essay, one that doubles as an outstanding example of his notion of the optical unconscious and its relevance to cinema. After a brief reference to Freud's *Psychopathology of Everyday*

Life and its impact on how the human world was viewed, Benjamin discusses how

certain cinematic techniques—the close-up, time-lapse and slow-motion

photography, reverse, etc.—have also functioned as so much "epistemological TNT"

(to borrow Anne Friedberg's memorable phrase):

> By close-ups of the things around us, by focusing on hidden details of
> familiar objects, by exploring commonplace milieus under the
> ingenious guidance of the camera, the film, on the one hand, extends
> our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the
> other hand, it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected
> field of action. Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices
> and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared
> to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this
> prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that
> now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and
> adventurously go traveling… Evidently a different nature opens itself
> to the camera than opens to the naked eye—if only because an
> unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously
> explored by man. (Friedberg 47; *Illuminations* 236)

While this oft-cited passage has been interpreted in many different ways over the

years, I'd like to suggest that Benjamin's thoughts here tie in to our discussion of the

city film in several important ways. First of all, they serve as a commentary on the

history of film and its relationship to Lefebvre's moment of "shattered space."

When would one periodize the arrival of the "dynamite of the tenth of a second"?

"Around 1910"? There's no question that it is sometime between 1910 and 1915

that the "dynamite of the tenth of a second" began to be experimented with in more

and more daring ways. Second, it suggests the idea of the city film being the ideal

medium for the exploration of this splintered landscape, this "field of action." Thus,

cinema is the explosive that helped create Lefebvre's shattered space, clearing the

way for twentieth century modernity but simultaneously littering it with "splinters of

messianic time"—meanwhile, cinema is also the device that allows this new,

decidedly urban space to be "consciously explored." Third, his language is striking. In addition to its clear parallels with the language of Lefebvre's discussion of that "crucial moment," its urban imagery calls to mind many of Vertov's locales in *Man with a Movie Camera* quite specifically. What film or films did Benjamin have in mind here? Was Vertov's explosive portrait of the new cities of the Soviet Union one of them? Finally, if Benjamin's essay does indeed deal with "failed opportunities and unrealized promises," then could one not argue that Benjamin's primary interest here is in the failed promise of the city film in particular? Often taken as a commentary that deals primarily with reception and spectatorship, what if we were to place the emphasis instead on its call for the production of "a space consciously explored"? According to Hansen, Benjamin's central thrust here has to do with,

> the fragmenting, destructive, allegorizing effect of cinematic devices, their tendency to cut through the tissue of reality like a surgical instrument."
> Revealing the "natural" appearance of the capitalist everyday as an allegorical landscape, the camera's exploration of an "unconsciously permeated space" thus overlaps with the area of investigation pursued, in different ways, by the flâneur, the Surrealist, the dialectical historian. ("Benjamin, Cinema and Experience" 209)

More than just a simple ode to Soviet montage, in some ways Benjamin was envisioning an entirely new cinematic aesthetic, one that would avoid the pitfalls of futurist/constructivist technological fetishism, one "that might yet counter the catastrophic effects of humanity's... 'miscarried reception of technology' that had come to a head with World War I" (Hansen, "Benjamin and Cinema" 312).

That said, it is perhaps not surprising that at one point during his work on *The Arcades Project* Benjamin contemplated making a city film about Paris, one that was

surrealistic, flâneuristic, and historical. For one thing, as Vidler has argued, "almost

every characteristic Benjamin associates with the flâneur might be associated with

the film director with little or no distortion":

> An eye for detail, for the neglected and the chance; a penchant for
> joining reality and reverie; a distanced vision, apart from that
> distracted and unselfconscious existence of the crowd; a fondness for
> the marginal and the forgotten… Both share affinities with the
> detective and the peddler, the ragpicker and the vagabond; both
> aestheticize the roles and materials with which they work. Equally,
> the typical habitats of the flâneur lend themselves to filmic
> representation: the banlieu, the margins, the zones, and outskirts of
> the city; the deserted streets and squares at night; the crowded
> boulevards, the phantasmagoric passages, arcades, and department
> stores; the spatial apparatus… of the consumer metropolis. (117)

Benjamin's vision was fleeting but nonetheless provocative:

> Could one not shoot a passionate film of the city plan of Paris? Of the
> development of its different forms in temporal succession? Of the
> condensation of a century-long movement of streets, boulevards,
> passages, square, in the space of half an hour? And what else does
> the flâneur do? (C1,9)

The idea apparently went no further, but as Anthony Vidler has pointed out, the

actual form of the *Passagen-Werk*, with its, "endless quotations and aphoristic

observations… carefully written out on hundreds of single index cards, each one

letter-, number-, and color-coded to cross-reference them to all the rest," calls to

mind the shots of a compilation film just waiting for an editor to montage them

together into an epic film. Vidler suggests the title "Paris, the Capital of the

Nineteenth Century" for this "prehistory of modernity, finally realized by

modernity's own special form of mechanical reproduction" (115). Towards the very

end of "A Small History of Photography" Benjamin cited Moholy-Nagy's *Painting,*

Photography, Film, purposely obscuring his colleague's identity: "'The illiteracy of

the future,' someone has said, 'will be ignorance not of reading or writing, but of photography.'" In the same breath, Benjamin wrote of the caption's ability to help "photography turn all life's relationships into literature," before posing the following question: "Will not the caption become the most important part of the photograph?" (256). Text combined with photography had the potential to give the photograph a Constructivist edge, to politicize it. In his "Small History of Photography," Benjamin quoted Brecht:

> [Less] than ever does the mere reflection of reality reveal anything about reality. A photograph of the Krupp works or the A.E.G. tells us next to nothing about these institutions. Actual reality has slipped into the functional. The reification of human relations—the factory, say—means that they are no longer explicit. So something must in fact be *built up*, something artificial posed. (255)

Three years later, in "The Author as Producer," the address he drafted for the Parisian Institute for the Study of Fascism, Benjamin followed up on his earlier essay by arguing that the photographer must learn how to use captions to give his or her works a revolutionary charge, and that simultaneously writers needed to break through the "barrier between writing and image" and "start taking photographs" (Cadava 21). Later, as we have seen, Benjamin indicated that he felt writers (historical materialist writers, at least) needed to break through the "barrier between writing and image" even further and perhaps start making films. As his work on the *Passagen-Werk* took on increased urgency in the waning years of the decade, Benjamin continued to model his magnum opus on the montage aesthetics of photography and film, but clearly "the caption" had taken on even greater significance.

Siegfried Kracauer: rag-picker, flâneur

Beginning in April 1929 in Berlin, Siegfried Kracauer began conducting the research for a proposed series on "the newest Germany" and the "salaried masses" which were such a crucial part of its complexion. His intention was to publish the series in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, the elite newspaper with which he'd been associated since 1921. When his vignettes finally appeared in the paper in December, after some initial resistance from the editorial board, they caused a sensation among the paper's readership and Kracauer's study was quickly readied for publication as a book (Mülder-Bach, Introduction 4). *Die Angestellten* (*The Salaried Masses*) appeared in January 1930 and was unanimously praised by such cultural luminaries as Ernst Bloch, the economist Hans Speier, and Walter Benjamin, who highlighted its "spirit of irony" and its "[lively] satire" (ibid 17).

Already one could see Kracauer's ironic wit in the book's subtitle, which claimed to have emerged "from the newest Germany," for the phrase was meant to capture the "sensationalism of contemporary reportage," while simultaneously suggesting the hollowness of "the most advanced state of economic and socio-cultural modernization" (ibid 5). As Kracauer argued, a study of "the newest Germany" inevitably leads "to the heart of the modern big city," as "our big German cities today are not industrial cities, but cities of salaried employees and civil servants," and Berlin was particularly emblematic of this shift:

> Here, the economic process engendering salaried employees en masse
> has advanced the furthest; here, the decisive practical and ideological
> clashes take place; here, the form of public life determined by the
> needs of employees—and by people who for their part would like to
> determine those needs—is particularly striking. Berlin today is a city
> with a pronounced employee culture: i.e. a culture made by

employees for employees and seen by most employees as a culture. Only in Berlin, where links to roots and the soil are so reduced that weekend outings can become the height of fashion, may the reality of salaried employees be grasped. It also comprises a good part of Berlin's reality. (32)

Capturing this vast reality, however, was no simple matter. One of the defining characteristics of Weimar Germany's New Objectivity was its embrace of reportage, of what the legendary Berlin journalist Egon Erwin Kisch called the "photography of the present" (Mülder-Bach, Introduction 14). But mere photography wasn't enough to capture the "artificial, constructed quality" of reality—this "constructedness" required a method that went beyond any "fortuitous empirical coherences [within] the raw material" and instead rearranged and reorganized this material in such a way as to plumb its depths. Kracauer explained:

> Reality is a construction. Certainly life must be observed for it to appear. Yet it is by no means contained in the more or less random observational results of reportage; rather, it is to be found solely in the mosaic that is assembled from single observations on the basis of comprehension of their meaning. Reportage photographs life; such a mosaic would be an image. (32)

In practice, this "mosaic" consists of a complex assortment of literary material, a "rough verbal surface" that includes "quotation, conversation, report, narrative, scene, [and] image," and that is notable for its use of arresting "close-ups." Together these elements put the reader in the position of taking part in the "construction of reality," while simultaneously they leave "room for one's own position" (Frisby 166). And as Inka Mülder-Bach has noted, "behind this image ['mosaic'] it is not hard to recognize the technique of another optical medium, namely the montage technique of film" (Introduction 14, 16). With this in mind, while Kracauer's interest in "group-sociological diagnosis" could be dated at least as far back as his 1922

essay "Those Who Wait," it isn't entirely clear what prompted his 1929 study, but one might cite two possibilities. First of all, the book's subject matter, its locale, and its timing certainly suggest that the project was at least in part a direct response to Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a City*, which had been released two years earlier, and which Kracauer had chastised the year before for its "blindness" (Mülder-Bach, Introduction 6-7; *Mass Ornament* 318). And secondly, the book's clever, penetrating literary montage, its insistence on the "constructedness" of modernity, and its often playful chapter headings—"Short Break for Ventilation," "Alas, so soon!," "Repair Shop," "Dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen!"—suggest the influence of Benjamin's *One-Way Street*, which had just been published just one year earlier.

Whether or not *The Salaried Masses* was prompted by *Berlin: Symphony of a City*, its counter-image to Ruttmann's portrait of Berlin was devastating. Earlier, Kracauer had quite pointedly attacked "Ruttmann's lack of attention to the *visual* reality of Berlin" by listing all the aspects of Berlin life that Ruttmann's film had failed to capture. Here, he focused on what he considered to be one of the film's major oversights: its white-collar workers—a group whose explosion in the early twentieth century was one of the most significant aspects of Berlin's rapid modernization—as well as the city spaces they occupied (Kracauer, *Salaried Masses* 29). Ruttmann's film made feeble attempts to capture the tumult of Berlin's workplaces, but his approach was superficial and vacuous, utilizing rhythmic montage, cross-cutting, and special effects to create the impression of the hectic pace of these locations, but never going any further. The city was a place of (contained)

chaos, frayed nerves, and even the occasional (highly theatrical) suicide, but overall

Ruttmann's vision was triumphant and its daily patterns (commute, work, lunch,

play) were naturalized by its dusk-to-dawn structure and its "symphonic" form

(complete with five acts).[74] Kracauer, on the other hand, saw the salaried masses (a

class that appears so prominently in *Berlin: Symphony of a City*) as inherently

problematic, victims of the very social order that had brought them to prominence:

> [In] the very process in which the salaried employees grew to mass
> proportions, they massively forfeited what had been used to justify
> their privileged position: higher earnings, relative autonomy, chances
> of social advancement and security of employment. Their material
> conditions of life came to resemble those of the working class.
> (Mülder-Bach, Introduction 6)

In fact, Kracauer saw these salaried masses as worse off than the working class in

some ways, "spiritually homeless:" "they are living at present without a doctrine to

look up at or a goal they might ascertain" (*The Salaried Masses* 88). From this

perspective, their search for "shelter" within the cult of distraction takes on an

ominous appearance. Kracauer couldn't have entirely foreseen the catastrophe that

loomed ahead, but it was precisely this, "tension between proletarianized existence

and bourgeois self-definition [that drove] them towards the National Socialists"

(Mülder-Bach, Introduction 6).

Furthermore, while Ruttmann's film was a representation of the triumph of

New Objectivity in Berlin, Kracauer's book amounted to a punishing critique of New

Objectivity's hold over the city. In a configuration that calls to mind Benjamin's

work on collective dreams and awakening, Kracauer made the following claim in

---

[74] According to Dagmar Barnouw, Kracauer claimed that Ruttmann, "had set out to
compose a 'symphony' of Berlin before he had really *looked* at it" (121).

"On Employment Exchanges," also published in 1930: "Spatial images are the dreams of society. Wherever the hieroglyphics of any spatial image is deciphered, there the basis of social reality presents itself" (Frisby 145). Over and over again, whereas Ruttmann's *Berlin* glossed over such spaces, *The Salaried Masses* understood them to be "ideologically permeated" social constructions and probed them for their historico-political meaning (ibid 144-5). Thus, in the Haus Vaterland, Kracauer found a supreme example of what he called the "pleasure barracks," a location, "which embodies most completely the type roughly adhered to also in picture palaces and the establishments of the lower intermediate strata."

> The mystery of *die neue Sachlichkeit* could not be more conclusively exposed than here. From behind the pseudo-austerity of the lobby architecture, Grinzing grins out.[75] Just one step down and your are lapped in the most luxuriant sentimentality. But this is what characterizes *die neue Sachlichkeit* in general, that it is a façade concealing nothing; that it does not derive from profundity, but simulates it. Like denial of old age, it arises from dread of confronting death. (91, 92)

Later that same year, Kracauer produced another fascinating critique of the New Objectivity, one that also spoke directly to Ruttmann's *Berlin*. It appeared in an essay entitled "*Lokomotive über der Friedrichstrasse*," where, in a scene straight out of *Berlin*'s fifth act, Kracauer concocts a "visual impression" from a train traveling through Berlin's animated nocturnal landscape. Only, unlike *Berlin*, Kracauer then stops the action momentarily, as the train's driver is suddenly overwhelmed by the dazzling scene before him. Its "brilliance and tumult" having burned itself onto his retina, the action then resumes, the blinding image staying with him as the train

---

[75] Grinzing is a Viennese suburb that was associated with "schmaltzy music and romantic nights out" at the time (Kracauer, *Salaried Masses* 92).

continues on its way through the cityscape (Reeh 108-9). Already by 1928, at the

time of the *Berlin im Licht* exposition, Berlin, along with New York and the Great

White Way, Coney Island, and the occasional world's exhibition (e.g. Chicago 1893,

St. Louis 1904, and San Francisco 1915), had become one of the most electrified

places on earth in under a decade. The cultural conservatives decried this startling

transformation, the New Objectivists (including Ruttmann) celebrated it, and

Kracauer understood that one had to truly reflect upon it in order to arrive at its

meaning. Along with the Tiller Girls, Taylorism, and aerial photographs, the

spectacle of modern electrification was a manifestation of "America," of a

"disenchanted modernism" marked by "*abstractness*," and Kracauer stressed that

"America will only disappear when it completely discovers itself" (Mülder-Bach,

"History" 150; Kracauer, *Mass Ornament* 75-77, 81). For our purposes, what's even

more interesting in this particular instance, is that Kracauer dealt with this new

landscape in an experimental manner complete with stops and starts and alienation

effects reminiscent of Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*, or perhaps more

accurately, Shklovsky's *A Sentimental Journey*.

As for the influence of Benjamin, while there's no denying Benjamin was an

important part of Kracauer's gravitational field, the picture is complicated and the

issue of attribution becomes difficult. Both were part of a development that Adorno

referred to as the "emergence of a new type of intellectual," one who, as Gertrud

Koch has put it, "could not and did not want to fall into line with academia," and

who "cut a path between empiricism and idealism," a path that fully realized the

significance of mass culture (96). This "school" of cultural critics included Joseph

Roth and Ernst Bloch, and all of these writers, but perhaps most especially Kracauer, were closely tied to the institution of the feuilleton. In a graphic representation of Weimar Germany's prevailing notions of "high" and "low," the *Frankfurter Zeitung*'s feuilleton section, or cultural page, appeared quite literally "below the line." This division suited the work of these "new type of intellectuals" fine.

Early on, due in no small measure to the devastation of World War I, Kracauer had come to the conclusion that, "The world as a coherent totality has been shattered. Only its individual fragments remain." At that point, however, Kracauer had yet to find his intellectual footing, and he still held out the possibility that religion might fill this "empty intellectual void" (Frisby 115). By 1921, when Kracauer joined the editorial staff of the *Frankfurter Zeitung*'s feuilleton, his stance had changed. He'd purged himself of any naïve idealism and he'd decided to become more *engagé*. He'd come to the conclusion that it was the duty of the journalist to "attack current conditions in a manner that will change them," and he committed himself to bringing about change through a materialist analysis of everyday life—he'd returned to the material world (Levin 9; Frisby 117). "We must rid ourselves of the delusion that it is the major events which have the most decisive influence on us," he wrote. "We are much more deeply and continuously influenced by the tiny catastrophes that make up daily life" (Levin 5). The space of the feuilleton, caught in a dialectical tension with the "hard" news, was an ideal place for Kracauer's cultural criticism.

> Here Kracauer found the forum that suited his interest in the quotidian
> and his plans for public activity. Here were literary traditions that
> could be used to pursue the 'big' questions not in the form of
> philosophical systems but in reference to the phenomena themselves.

> Here, finally, he was offered a field for experimentation, where the concreteness of thought he strove for could be converted into styles and genres that crossed the established boundaries between scientific disciplines as well as between journalism, literature and philosophy. (Mülder-Bach, Introduction 9)

Behind the leadership of Benno Reifenberg, the section's editor, Roth, Bloch, and Benjamin, along with Kracauer, became regular contributors to the feuilleton, turning it into something "it had never been before and would never be again: the production site of a fragmentary theory of modernity" (Mülder-Bach, Introduction 9-10). Kracauer was particularly prolific: he published some 2,000 articles and reviews between 1921 and 1933 (when he was forced into exile) (Hansen, Introduction x).

Thus, if *The Salaried Masses* has an experimental side to it, like *One-Way Street* before it, not only does this have something to do with a shared set of influences (Constructivism in the case of Benjamin, Tretiakoff in the case of Kracauer), but it has much to do with the Weimar Germany's feuilleton literature. And if its form displays an interest in montage aesthetics and film aesthetics more generally, well, this should hardly be surprising because Kracauer was the chief film critic for the *Frankfurter Zeitung* from the early 1920s into the 1930s, during which time he produced roughly 700 reviews (Frisby 163; Hansen, Introduction x). Kracauer's interest in the cinema was in part, "a practical critique of the remnants of bourgeois culture" and its "attempts to conceal the actual state of disintegration and upheaval" of the early Weimar period, one he shared with other German intellectuals and avant-garde artists, and one which has much in common with the anti-bourgeois tendencies of what I referred to earlier as first-wave Americanism (Hansen,

"Decentric" 57). But it also has much to do with what Thomas Levin has called

Kracauer's "phenomenology of the surface." Again, more than mere reportage,

Kracauer's studies of hotel lobbies, arcades, and beer halls amount to a "serious

exploration of superficies of cultural ephemera and marginal domains."

> The focus on scorned quotidian realms, artifacts, and practices, the interpretive attentiveness to the castoffs from the storm of progress (which motivated Benjamin's description of Kracauer as a "rag-picker"), and the voyage of discovery to the "new world" of modernity…: these are all part of a strategy—Kracauer calls it a "trick"—whose goal is to move beyond that surface realm. (Levin 20)

And as "quotidian superficiality" became a central concern for Kracauer, so did

photography and film, the two "representational practices that display an elective

affinity with the surface" (ibid). What was different about both photography and

film was their innate ability "to discover and articulate materiality," and in the case

of film specifically, its ability "to enact 'the process of materialization'" (Hansen,

Introduction xvii). Thus, as with other manifestations of "surface culture," the study

of film—its representations, its role in our society, and so on—held political

potential, but so did film itself, and much of Kracauer's work on film from the mid-

1920s until *Theory of Film* (including the so-called Marseille Notebooks and *From

Caligari to Hitler*) amounts to an attempt to determine just where this potential

resided. In this regard, Kracauer's concerns run parallel to the work of a number of

second wave film theorists—writers and writer/practitioners such as Epstein, Balázs,

Richter, Moholy-Nagy, and Benjamin—who were concerned with the issue of film's

"specificity," the attributes unique to it as a medium, as well as with the medium's

potential as an instrument of "critical inquiry with unprecedented immediacy and

power" (Hansen, Introduction viii; Michelson, Introduction xli). Like Benjamin, with his "angel of history," Kracauer's politics were tied directly to a concept of history that was "tinged with apocalyptic urgency," but that nevertheless held open the possibility that an "innervation of contemporary reality" that might yet avert total disaster (Hansen, Introduction xii). This was where new journalism and the feuilleton section came in, this was where photography and film came in—all were part of Kracauer's "redemptive project of exploring, recording, and archiving the scattered fragments of contemporary life" towards the goal of overcoming modernity, of bringing about catharsis in place of catastrophe (ibid xii).

Unexpectedly, perhaps, given his frequent characterization as a "naïve realist," Kracauer's Weimar-era essays frequently carry a "surrealist streak," one that he shared with number of his colleagues (Benjamin, Bloch, Hessel, etc.), and we can see this streak perhaps most clearly in Kracauer's thoughts on film and photography (Hansen, "Decentric" 70). Thus, in his landmark 1927 essay "Photography," Kracauer writes:

> The capacity to stir up the elements of nature is one of the possibilities of film. This possibility is realized whenever film combines parts and segments to create strange constructs. If the disarray of the illustrated newspaper is simply confusion, the game that film plays with the pieces of disjointed nature is reminiscent of *dreams* in which the fragments of daily life become jumbled. This game shows that the valid organization of things remain unknown. (*Mass Ornament* 63)

One is reminded of the Surrealists' practice of "improvising a film" by skipping from one cinema to another in rapid succession in an attempt to locate the surreal that lay beneath everyday banality—here, however, the "game" and its "strange constructs" are located within the film (Durozoi 176). The "relationless jumble" that Kracauer

225

finds in the cinema's "creative geography" is a signature element of the fragmentation of modernity, but instead of rejecting it, Kracauer sees something radical: the potential for such moments to reveal the metaphysical condition and point towards its transformation (Levin 22). Even more promising was film's surrealist capacity to defamiliarize, to transform the outside world into something uncanny, and to thereby create "chances of alienation" (see Frizot 449-455; Frisby 136-7; Hansen, "With Skin" 457). As Hansen puts it:

> the same indexicality that allows photographic film to record and figure the world also inscribes the image with moments of temporality and contingency that *disfigure* the representation. If Kracauer seeks to ground his film aesthetics in the medium of photography it is because photographic representation has the perplexing ability not only to resemble the world it depicts but also to render it strange… It is in this sense that the slippery term 'affinity' (of the medium with material reality) includes both film's ability to *record* and its potential to *reveal* something in relation to that world. (ibid xxv)

Herein lay the danger of film and photography, as capitalized upon by an already long line of authoritarian regimes, from the restoration that followed the Paris Commune, to the campaigns of the National Socialists (Hansen, "With Skin" 453). But here, too, lay an opportunity to "turn photography's radical potential into an aesthetic and political practice," one that would confront what both Kracauer and Benjamin referred to as "second nature" head-on, helping to spark an awakening with regards to the "provisionality of all given, presumably natural, arrangements" (ibid xxvii). Hence Kracauer's oft-repeated claim that, "the turn to photography is the *go-for-broke game* of history" (*Mass Ornament* 61). Hence, too, his profound disappointment with Ruttmann's *Berlin*.

Late in life, as he was working on *History: The Last Things Before the Last*, his final, posthumously published work, Kracauer found himself struck by the "shock of recognition":

> I suddenly realized that my interest in history—which began to assert itself about a year ago and which I had hitherto believed to be kindled by the impact of our contemporary situation on my mind—actually grew out of the ideas I tried to implement in my *Theory of Film*… I realized in a flash the many existing parallels between history and the photographic media, historical reality and camera-reality. Lately I came across my piece on "Photography" and was completely amazed at noticing that I had compared historism with photography already in this article of the 'twenties. Had I been struck with blindness up to this moment? Strange power of the subconscious which keeps hidden from you what is so obvious and crystal-clear when it eventually reveals itself… So at long last all my main efforts, so incoherent on the surface, fall into line—they all have served, and continue to serve, a single purpose: the rehabilitation of objectives and modes of being which still lack a name and hence are overlooked or misjudged. Perhaps this is less true of history than of photography; yet history too marks a bent of the mind and defines a region of reality which despite all that has been written about them are still largely *terra incognita*. (3-4)

Strange, indeed, for Kracauer's first attempts to write a definitive book on film, one that would build upon the theory of film that he had developed in the pages of the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, came in November 1940, at the tail end of a chapter in his life which began with his "rediscovery" of the past in Paris in the late 1920s and culminated with his "social biography" of Jacques Offenbach, Kracauer's very own attempt to stage an intervention into the dangerous political situation of 1930s Europe through a historical study of nineteenth-century Paris, his very own Arcades Project.[76] As in the case of Benjamin, one can safely say that Kracauer adopted Paris

---

[76] While the arcades didn't play quite as central a part in Kracauer's account of "Paris, the capital of the nineteenth century" as they did in Benjamin's, they were

during this period: first as a counterimage to the modernity of Berlin, the "new" city, the "city without memory," and then from February 1933 (around the time of the Reichstag fire) as a home in exile (Mülder-Bach, "History" 146; Frisby 134; Reeh 168).

Among the many parallels Kracauer found between the photographer and the historian at the time that he wrote *History*, the most important were linked to mobility, spatiality, and temporality (Kracauer, *History* 80-103). Both practices involved exploration, sightseeing, and perambulation, and for the majority of Kracauer's career the privileged locus for both was the metropolis and especially the city street, the site of the specific tensions, struggles, and shocks that defined modernity (Hansen, "With Skin and Hair" 459). If the city represented the greatest concentration of the "spatial images" that captured social reality under modernity, for Kracauer the figure best suited to traverse this landscape, study it, and come to terms with it was that archetype of the nineteenth century modernity, the flâneur (Vidler 66; Kracauer, *Theory* 72). In a manner similar to Benjamin and the surrealists, Kracauer understood the flâneur to have been a product of the advent of Parisian modernity, but he also saw the revival of this figure as key to plumbing the

---

nevertheless very much present, and at times his descriptions overlapped considerably with those of his colleague:

> Anyone who lost his way in these passages might well have been
> pardoned for supposing that he had entered a fairy grotto. The gilt
> decorations, the artificially illuminated flowers, pistols, bottles, and
> delicacies gleaned [sic] behind the plate glass like so many treasures.
> The city's magic seemed concentrated here. Remote from earth and
> sky, it seemed a realm exempt from natural laws, preserving
> marvelous illusions, like the stage. (24)

Benjamin appears to have been very familiar with Kracauer's Offenbach book—he cites it on several occasions during *The Arcades Project*.

depths of early-twentieth century modernity, while simultaneously developing an understanding and a critique of the current crisis which might yet help to avert the impending cataclysm. The flâneur was not only a historical figure, the flâneur was a contemporary reality, a figure with whom Kracauer directly identified as he walked the city streets incessantly himself, a figure whose interest in the street had to do with its status as "the historical arena of shock and chance" and some kind of "picturesque icon of modern life" (Hansen, "With Skin" 459). Kracauer's early-twentieth century flânerie was an appropriation, a *détournement*, of a nineteenth-century practice, just as his *feuilletonisme* was, and together they served to, "[render] the city strange to its inhabitants," as Benjamin once noted (*Arcades* 803). And as was the case with Benjamin, it was Paris that "taught" Kracauer that the streets could be sites of revelation: "Filled with the desire to finally reach the place where what was hidden would once more be revealed to me, I could not brush past the smallest of side streets without entering it and then turning around the corner. My utmost wish was to search through every house, room by room" (Reeh 114). Paris also provided Kracauer with a "new optics" with which to see Berlin. In his 1926 essay "Analysis of a City Map," which moved from the abstract space of a city map of Paris to the "filled life" that characterizes its faubourgs on the outskirts of town, Kracauer found that even in Paris the city center had succumbed to what Mülder-Bach has called "the centripetal maelstrom" of early twentieth-century modernity, creating a dialectical tension between periphery and center that Kracauer transposed onto Paris and Berlin. "All the cosmopolitan centers that are also sites of splendor are becoming more and more alike," Kracauer observed, and while one could still

find traces of revolution in the "impoverished and humane" confines of the faubourgs, he concluded, in a passage that foreshadows "The Mass Ornament," "the streets that lead to the center must be traveled, for its emptiness today is real" (*The Mass Ornament* 43-4). Paris was a labyrinth, yes, but crucially it was a temporal labyrinth as well as a spatial one. In "Memory of a Paris Street" (1930), Kracauer wrote of having found "a secret smuggler's path" that took him back in time first hours and then decades. Unlike Proust, whose goal was "merely" the remembrance of things past, Kracauer's urban investigations were an "attempt at a remembrance of a history lost" (Frisby 139). Thus, as was the case with Benjamin, flânerie also became a methodological model for Kracauer's political and philosophical outlook.

Kracauer came back to the subject of film and flânerie over and over again in *Theory of Film*, but for the most part his comments have an overly general tone to them, falling back on facile notions of how the mobilized gaze of the flâneur anticipates that of the cinematographer's kaleidoscopic depiction of the modern city and how the space and freedom of the screen encourage virtual flânerie on the part of the spectator (Kracauer, *Theory of Film* 72, 170). Not surprisingly perhaps, it is this primarily metaphorical sense of a flâneur aesthetic that has been promoted by scholars such as Friedberg (1993) and Gleber (1999) in their respective studies of film and flânerie. Read between the lines of *Theory of Film*, however, and take into account Kracauer's thoughts as contained in the Marseille Notebooks and one gets a rather different sense of what a cinematic flâneur aesthetic might amount to. For one thing, like most other aspects of *Theory of Film*, Kracauer's privileged version of this flâneur aesthetic is rooted in the realm of photography and especially in the work of

people like Charles Marville, who produced a record of the rapidly changing landscape of Paris in the late nineteenth century whose scale, axial composition, lack of sentimentality, and seriality mirrored Haussmann's reconstruction of the imperial city, with its utilitarian advanced capitalist logic (Kracauer, *Theory* 19; Jacobs 24). Even more central to Kracauer's flâneur aesthetic, however, was the work of Eugène Atget (Kracauer, *Theory* 19). To a much greater extent than he's generally given credit for, Kracauer was interested in a film aesthetic marked not by rigidity and propriety but hybridity, an aesthetic that might exist between fixed genres and categories of filmmaking just as he had looked to create a new journalistic language out of his passions for philosophy, sociology, film, and fiction during his years at the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, just as he later laid out a historical approach that was similarly unconventional at the time that he wrote *History*. Atget in many ways served as a perfect model for Kracauer's photographer-as-flâneur: his massive catalogue of photographs/artists' documents mapped Paris exhaustively, from its central palaces and *hotels* to its *zones* at the periphery of the metropolis, creating a contemporary portrait of Paris that plumbed its social history and the meaning of its most recent convulsions through a penetrating and subtle study of the built environment, a vision of the city that was truly modern in the sense established by Molly Nesbitt, T.J. Clark, and others: at once slippery, unsettling, and difficult to fathom (see Nesbitt 1992). Furthermore, as Anthony Vidler has pointed out, the photographs of Marville and Atget, "fostered a kind of self-estrangement allowing for a closer identification with the objects being observed" (113). Kracauer sought similar qualities in the realm of cinema and while he listed numerous moments where film approached

231

something of what he saw in the work of someone like Atget—Vigo's brilliant *A Propos de Nice*, for instance, with "its revolutionary ardor and [its] constant awareness of death"—but for the most part he found only immaturity and unfulfilled promise, with Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* being the primary example of this failure (Kracauer, *Theory* 181, 207). Film offered excellent opportunities for analyzing the urban environment, traversing and mapping its landscape, collapsing its history, and, most importantly, utilizing what Epstein had called *photogénie* to render the city strange, to defamiliarize the city, locating new possibilities in the process so that "well-springs of life [might] gush out of corners that one believed sterile and explored" (Charney 152-3).[77] Unfortunately, these opportunities had yet to be fully capitalized upon.

Interestingly, soon after his arrival in New York in 1941, Kracauer appears to have investigated the possibility of making a feature film that might unite aspects of *Orpheus in Paris* with the city film. He went so far as to devise a synopsis and to discuss with Max Horkheimer the possibility of its realization with the help of the Institute for Social Research. He also apparently held discussions with a potential director of photography. His choice: Eugen Schüfftan, the legendary cinematographer of Marcel Carné's *Quai des brumes* and, even more relevantly, Robert Siodmak's *Menschen am Sonntag*, the famous cross-section film about leisure time among Berlin's white-collar workers (Reeh 188).

---

[77] In this regard, Kracauer resembles Shklovsky, whose sense of defamiliarization (a term he coined), "never simply involved distortion, but rather offered an artistic means of rediscovering the nature of the object," in this case, the city of late capitalism (Gunning, "Modernity" 300).

Benjamin's writings on film and photography are roughly concurrent with the classical era of the city film, the final two decades of early twentieth-century modernity. Kracauer's cover both early twentieth-century modernity and the period between 1939 and 1959 that Edward Dimendberg and others have labeled "late modernity." As such, Kracauer's final book on film, 1960's *Theory of Film*, parallels the film noir cycle that is the focus of Dimendberg's *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity* (2004) in that it, too, is, "finely attuned to both the realities of earlier modernisms and the post-1939 built environment and media culture" (17-8). Both writers conceived of a modernity (and an accompanying modernist aesthetics) that was a powerful counter-image to a vision of modernity that had reigned since "around 1910," one that was inextricably tied to the avant-garde (both European and American), to the cinema, and to the relationship of both to the modern metropolis— and especially New York as the quintessential early twentieth-century metropolis— and therefore one that was inextricably tied to the cycle of films known as the city symphonies. That Benjamin died en route to New York and that one of his final essays was entitled "Central Park" (anticipating his new home), and that Kracauer lived in exile in America during the war and the anti-communist frenzy that followed (along with Adorno, Horkheimer, Brecht, and a whole host of other German-Jewish critics of the culture industry) is an irony that hasn't been lost on some (see Hansen [1995], for instance). Be that as it may, Kracauer was able to carry his work on film forward into the late twentieth century, and the numerous bridges linking his *Theory of Film* with his prolific Weimar-era output together with his sharp eye for socio-historical detail make for a particularly rich text, "not a theory of film in general," as

Hansen has argued, "but a theory of a particular type of film experience, and of cinema as the aesthetic matrix of a particular historical experience" (Introduction x). Thus, according to Heide Schlüpmann, "[the] subject of the theory is film—not film simply as a phenomenon of late capitalism, nor film before Hitler, but rather film after Auschwitz" (112). For Dimendberg, on the other hand, Kracauer's book *is* an account of film "as a phenomenon of late capitalism," but a rather precise one—one that demarcates "the historical apex of late modernity from the ascendance of postmodernism," but one that also acts as "a key articulation" of late modernity, the "crisis of centripetal space," and the centrifugal spread of what Henri Lefebvre called "abstract space" (*Film Noir* 131). Though abstract space is closely associated with the built environment that emerged after World War II, with its housing projects, shopping centers, airports, and suburban tract housing, the concept is not strictly "postmodern"—one could see it in New York's adoption of the gridiron at the dawn of the nineteenth century, one could see it in the economic adventurism of the Equitable Building, and one could also see it in Kracauer's "Analysis of a City Map" (Dimendberg, *Film Noir* 106). Already in 1930 Kracauer witnessed an "emptiness" at the center of the modern metropolis, one that corresponds with a pattern that would become commonplace first in North America and then elsewhere: "the city center gutted by urban renewal and surrounded by highways and tract homes on its periphery" (ibid 18). Whereas centripetal space is defined by urban density and the reign of the visible (typified by the skyline of New York), its centrifugal other is characterized by the immaterial and the nonarchitectural, by the invisible and by speed (ibid 177-8). Between 1940 and 1960 Kracauer envisioned an urban cinematic

aesthetic that might make sense of the transition from early twentieth-century

modernity to late modernity. Lefebvre's *Production of Space* had always held open

the possibility of resistance to abstract space through appropriation, or the purposive

use of space, but it came with a warning:

> "Change life!" "Change society!" These precepts mean nothing
> without the production of an appropriate space. A lesson to be
> learned from the Soviet constructivists of 1920-30, and from their
> failure, is that new social relationships call for a new space, and vice
> versa. (Lefebvre 59)

By the late twentieth century, film hardly carried the revolutionary charge that the

avant-garde had found there roughly a half century earlier (no one more so than

Vertov),[78] it might not have had the capacity to create "new social relationships" and

"new spaces" single-handedly, but it still had the potential to "stir up the elements of

nature" and "create strange constructs," to traverse the spaces of postmodernity,

subject them to a "new optics," and "think *through*" them (Kracauer, *History* 192).

---

[78] Although there was a period in the mid- to late1960s and into the 1970s when
Jean-Luc Godard (together with his Dziga Vertov Group) and others sought to find
that revolutionary charge again.

Interlude: The Department of Inversion Presents…

Trained as an architect, like Kracauer and Ruttmann before him, Patrick Keiller joined the London Film-Makers' Co-op (LFMC) and began to make a series of offbeat short films in the early 1980s that would eventually lead him to his 1990s diptych, *London* (1994) and *Robinson in Space* (1997). Characterized by an economical and hybrid approach to filmmaking, somewhere between narrative, documentary, and experimental modes, an interest in the built environment, and a dry, mordant, and at times absurdist sense of humor that one could also find in other LFMC productions of the period, such as John Smith's *The Black Tower* (1987),[79] this series of films initiated a number of recurring patterns: an interest in travel stories and the travelogue as a form, an interest in the built environment and especially the urban environment, an interest in intertextuality within Keiller's own *oeuvre*, and an interest in making sequels.[80]

From the very beginning, Keiller established an economical, minimalist style that would remain a constant in his later work: silent, strictly visual production plus post-production sound. Thus, in *Stonebridge Park* (1981) a series of long, handheld

---

[79] Of *The Black Tower*'s method, John Smith once said, "If you look hard enough, all meanings can be found or produced close to home." This philosophy would become of vital importance to Keiller's Robinson films.

[80] Thus, in the first ten years of Keiller's filmmaking career, he made three sets of sequels (*The Tourists' Return* [1980] and *The Iron Grip of History* [1982], *Stonebridge Park* [1981] and *Norwood* [1983], and *The End* [1986] and *Valtos, or The Veil* [1987]), five tales of travel, every single one of his films showed an uncharacteristic fascination with the built environment and its cinematic manipulation, and already within his first five films there were two references to Wormwood Scrubs Prison, two references to Trotsky's "the iron grip of history," and four references to the South of France.

camera shots taken from a "subjective" perspective were coupled with a long, rambling, anomic monologue by the film's Narrator that transformed the mostly banal urban landscape into "a world of menacing potential," a kind of strange, low-budget neo-noir (Danino 105). *Stonebridge Park* also incorporated what would prove to be an abiding interest in history, although the sense of history the audience gets from the Narrator here is vague and existential, reminiscent of Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, which is appropriate given the film's convoluted tale of crime, guilt, and flight: "That was the difference between me and the Napoleons of the world: that what I did, what I wanted to do, and what I thought I should do were always worlds apart." But, aside from a monologue that was at times brilliant, *Stonebridge Park* was still a crude early experiment and its overall of effect was limited. Two years later, Keiller and "The Department of Inversion" returned with a sequel, *Norwood* (1983), a film that, as the closing credits emphasized, "was filmed entirely on location in Norwood." The overall approach was the same, the narrative voice was identical, but the camera work combined openly "subjective" views with more quieter, more "objective" ones, and Keiller began to display an interest in unearthing the specific histories of London buried beneath its contemporary surface. Thus, in addition to featuring an epigraph attributed to Camille Pisarro in 1883 (i.e. exactly 100 years prior to *Norwood*), one that spoke directly to the Narrator's misadventures in both London and Nice,

> England, like France, is rotten to the core. She knows only one art,
> the art of throwing sand in your eyes.

the Narrator explains that his reason for settling in Norwood was an attempt to follow the example of Pisarro, who'd done the very same thing 111 years before. He

also began to play more seriously with the motivation behind his films' insistence on urban imagery. Thus, in language that calls to mind such prominent nineteenth-century modernists as Edgar Allan Poe and Charles Baudelaire, the Narrator speaks with fondness of, "the promiscuity of the pavement, the irresistible possibility of a chance encounter with a desirable stranger," views that he realizes are very much out of step with the "dark thoughts and political atavisms" that run rampant in a suburb like Norwood in an age when "the petty bourgeoisie are in command" and, "collectivity lies in ruins—children will tell you that the idea is unnatural." Interestingly, though hopelessly out of his league and doomed to certain failure (à la *Sunset Boulevard*, the Narrator's neo-noir monologue comes to us from beyond the grave), the Narrator's *oeuvre* amounts to something of a compromise between his Romantic tendencies and the dominant entrepreneurial spirit. Unlike Pisarro, the Narrator did not come "to paint the streets of Norwood, but to buy them": his new racket was real estate. Keiller's next two films, *The End* (1986) and *Valtos* (1987), used a very similar approach to *Stonebridge Park* and *Norwood*, they also amounted to a diptych, and they were also produced with the help of the Department of Inversion (albeit its Italian division, *l'Ufficio d'Inversione*), but only *Valtos* dealt with England, and its most pointed and poignant moments came during a section that moved from the seaside resort at Blackpool (including a melancholy shot of a couple dancing in a ballroom that brings to mind the Blackpool ballroom sequence from Humphrey Jennings' *Listen to Britain*) to the shipyard at Barrow across the Irish Sea where the Narrator tells us Trident submarines are being built behind closed doors. While Keiller's final film of the decade, *The Clouds* (1989), focused intently on the

landscape of the North of England and introduced a materialist philosophy based on the work of Lucretius that would become an important part of Keiller's "Robinson films," *London* and *Robinson in Space*.

Aside from Keiller's use of color film, his turn to 35mm format, and his step up to feature length, there was one other characteristic common to the Robinson films that distinguished them from their predecessors: in some ways they marked Keiller's return to a project that predated his filmmaking career, the pursuit of urban readymades. Keiller explains:

> Before I ever thought of making a film, I had developed a habit of identifying examples of what might be described as "found" architecture, and documenting them with colour slides. Many were industrial structures of various kinds, including some of the types photographed by Bernd and Hilla Becher, whose work I knew a little. I had also come across the Surrealists' adoption of particular sites in Paris—the Tour Saint-Jacques, the Porte Saint-Denis, the abattoirs of La Villette, the Parc des Buttes-Chaumont and so on…
>
> What began as a search for individual buildings gradually widened to include all sorts of details of everyday surroundings—odd ruined shop fronts, roofscapes, scaffolding, the space of the London Underground and so on. The subjectivity involved was very like that described by Aragon [in "On Décor"], or the state of mind that Walter Benjamin describes in his essays about Marseilles. In the long run, the aim was to gradually refine the practice and to transform even the most familiar spaces of the city centre—Piccadilly Circus, say, or Regent Street—but it was difficult to progress beyond a certain point without some technique in making images. ("Architectural Cinematography" 38-9)

Though aspects of this project had never entirely disappeared from Keiller's aesthetics, he later claimed to have largely forgotten about this earlier work until he began making *London* over ten years later, "by which time the process of defamiliarisation had become second nature" (ibid 39). Aside from the return to the pursuit of "found" architecture, not to mention the return to color, *London* also

displayed a much more controlled camera than one generally found in his early films, as well as a more "photographic" use of the motion picture camera. Consequently, *London* and *Robinson in Space* share a very unified, composed, and minimalist film aesthetic, one notable for its fixed positions and careful compositions. But these two films are also rather different projects. Though *London* has a strong interest in the suburban and exurban regions that form the periphery of the metropolis, such as the Brent River Valley and the bleak area that surrounds Heathrow Airport, it is emphatically a film about urbanism and the urban environment, and The City, London's historic and financial core is literally the film's alpha and omega. The film addresses what Robinson, one of the film's two central characters, somewhat vaguely refers to as "the problem of London," and while its investigation of this problem, not to mention its attempts to counteract it, are carried out spatially, through a series of walks that address primarily what Keiller calls "townscape," there is an emphasis on political, cultural, and historical space, on finding fissures within the geography of the city and locating ghosts, and the sense of space conveyed is overwhelmingly centripetal. *Robinson in Space*, on the other hand, broadens the investigations of its central characters, this time examining what Robinson (again) somewhat vaguely refers to as "the problem of England." Our protagonists tackle this problem through a series of journeys that cut across the length and breadth of England, and while they visit a number of large towns and cities (including Birmingham, Liverpool, and Manchester), much of the film's action takes place in the areas outside England's congested urban centers, in its exurban and semi-rural areas. As a result, while political, cultural, and historical manifestations

of space are also of great importance to *Robinson in Space*, there is a greater emphasis on England's economic space and on landscape, and here the sense of space is overwhelmingly centrifugal. The chapters that follow reflect these differences of approach. Together they provide a thorough and well-rounded account of Keiller's unique and captivating methodology.

Chapter 5: *London*

London is a strange unmatched combination of the mercantile and the surreal…
—Chris Petit, "The Tattered Labyrinth"

Patrick Keiller's *London* (1994) was one of a number of films—along with Mike Leigh's *High Hopes* (1988) and *Naked* (1993), Derek Jarman's *The Last of England* (1987), *The Garden* (1990), and *Blue* (1993), Peter Greenaway's *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover* (1989), Stephen Frears' *My Beautiful Laudrette* (1986) and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1987), and others—that emerged in Britain in the late 1980s and early 1990s, shaped by the turmoil, divisions, and crises that were so much a part of the Thatcher and Major years. These were times marked by, among other things, a greatly exacerbated division of wealth,[81] the sudden proliferation of "cardboard cities" and of a full-blown homelessness crisis,[82] a prolonged and cruel attack on the labour movement (the lynchpin of which was the suppression of the miners' strike of 1985) that left it thoroughly debilitated,[83] the dismantlement of the Greater London Council along with six other Metropolitan

---

[81]Hugo Young describes this shift as follows:

> The share of total income earned by the top 1 per cent of earners grew by around a quarter, and in 1988 the best-off tenth of the population enjoyed nearly nine times more income than the worst tenth: in 1979 they were only six and a half times better off. This was the result of escalating earnings, but, to a much greater extent, of income tax cuts. These were massively weighted towards the already prosperous. No less that half went to the richest 10 per cent, and one-third to the richest 5 per cent. (535)

[82]According to D.T. Herbert, homelessness in Britain rose from "53,110 in 1978 to 102,980 in 1986" (266).

[83]Colin Leys writes that "by 1985 total union membership had fallen to 10.7 million from 13.2 million in 1979," and that according to a Gallup poll conducted in 1987, only one percent of the population "considered union power the chief issue facing the country, compared with 73 percent in May 1979" (120).

County Councils, the institution of the notorious flat-rate "Poll Tax," the strange

marriage of urban decay (resulting from the shifting of public funds away from the

cities[84]) and massive urban redevelopment projects,[85] and not infrequent rioting

(most notably the Brixton riots of 1981 and the Poll Tax riots of 1990). Not

surprisingly, these films represent responses to these conditions and the malaise they

sowed. One can specifically see these films responding to the "Crisis of London"[86]

and the "Crisis of the Left" (under a seemingly endless Conservative Party reign)

---

[84]See Herbert's "The Changing Face of the City" in Johnston and Gardner's *The Changing Geography of the United Kingdom* (1991).

[85]Brownill and Sharp indicate some of the negative effects associated with the major development projects that swept across London during the 1980s:

> Responding to changes in the London economy the speculative property sector has proposed a number of large-scale major developments on the fringe of the City. Called 'mixed-use,' they are largely commercial developments with some retail, leisure and residential elements. Docklands, Broadgate, Spitalfields, and King's Cross are all examples of existing or proposed developments. These developments threaten the working-class housing in these areas through direct demolition, gentrification and increased incentive for tenants to buy; land values increase, thereby making the provision of affordable rented housing under present subsidy regimes impossible. (20)

[86]London, of course, is the principal home of the British film industry, the seat of Britain's media culture, and was/is the home to many of these filmmakers.

In 1991, Michael Hebbert described the situation in London this way:

> Back in 1985 many thought, and some even hoped, that the decapitation of metropolitan government would cause urban chaos. There was a hint of disappointment in County Hall when a GLC-funded forecasting project found that the most likely scenario was not a breakdown of services but a gentler process of 'policy drift' in which standards slipped and new problems were left unsolved. Six years later it might seem that the pessimists were right and the forecasters wrong. The message of this book [*The Crisis of London*, ed. Thornley] is not slippage but *crisis*. (134)

from within a film industry which had been forced to undergo serious structural changes during the very same period.

While other filmmakers responded to these years with decidedly anti-realist narratives and non-narrative collages (such as those of Greenaway and Jarman), or with narratives working with (or through) the realist tradition (such as those of Terence Davies, Mike Leigh, and Ken Loach), Patrick Keiller's *London* is a rather different type of film, an experimental documentary, a city film, that blurs the lines between fiction and reality, a cinematic intervention into the reality of London under Major and after Thatcher. The film is the story of a man (the Narrator) who returns to London after a seven-year absence when he gets word from his friend (and former lover) Robinson, "that he is on the verge of a breakthrough in his investigations and that I should come as soon as possible, before it is too late." What ensues, ominously enough, is an eleven-month "journey to the end of the world," whereby the Narrator and Robinson traverse back and forth across the city and its environs on a series of expeditions, unearthing its secret histories[87] and studying (and trying to come to terms with) the "problem of London" in the early 1990s. This narrative is embedded in a film firmly rooted in the documentary mode by its camerawork, which consists strictly of static, "un-choreographed" (in the pro-filmic realm, at least) shots of modern-day London in 1992, and its environs—its sites, events, and

---

[87] Chris Petit writes the following about the difference between filming Paris and filming London:

> I would argue that Parisian cinema is inclusive. You get a real sense of Paris through what you see and what's shown. London is the opposite. It's exclusive both in the sense of its class structure and what we're not shown (which is often more interesting). London is essentially a secret and secretive city… (230)

details—which are then closely synchronized (as far as we can tell) with the film's narration. This camerawork, with its studied lack of motion, clearly fits into a tradition of minimalist film practice and accentuates the photographic basis of the cinematic apparatus,[88] but, as is often the case with minimalist films, the look is deceiving—here, the camera's stillness masks the "fanatical attention" that had to be paid to "people, traffic, clouds, leaves, the flow of water—anything that moved" (Sider 169).

This combination of elements makes the viewer's ability to distinguish between how much of the film is truth and how much is fiction difficult, especially since the film's protagonists, its only two characters, never appear before the camera, and their dialogue is itself narrated by the distinctive voice of Paul Scofield (of whom Iain Sinclair writes: "it is so clear that he is *not* the narrator. It's a performance—tired, slightly camp, detached") (13). This play with fictional (?) narrative and documentary forms provides the film with a considerable amount of depth and complexity, not the least because Keiller's protagonists are such ideal vehicles for his dissection of London: the Narrator is a "ship's photographer" and former Londoner who, upon returning, is not only seeing his former home with new eyes, he is also seeing the effects of Thatcherism on London; Robinson is an eccentric university lecturer in art history who has an immensely broad and idiosyncratic grasp of British political and cultural history, especially that of London,

---

[88] At the same time, Keiller's method has been described in Vertovian/Kaufmanesque terms. Clair Barwell notes that although Keiller's filmmaking is, "founded in the unconventional approaches of the London Film-makers' Co-op," "at moments watching him run down a hill with the camera and tripod over his shoulder… I am reminded of images from *The Man with a Movie Camera*" (159).

and, as a long-time resident of the metropolis, is making a desperate and impassioned attempt to find a solution to "the problem of London." Together they spend several months touring the city and probing Britain's political climate, the crisis of London, and the crisis of the Left.

In many ways, this narrative form is typical of the Left-leaning cinema that emerged from the later years of the Thatcher era and the early years of John Major's rule. If not for the absence of any actors, the basic premise could very well be that of a Mike Leigh film from that same period. The difference comes through Keiller's method: through the film's use of documentary imagery, through its itinerary, through its minimalist and anti-dramatic approach, through its historical imagination, and through the predilections and tendencies of his characters. Thus, early during Robinson and the Narrator's second expedition, there is a series of scenes that deals with the general election in a variety of ways and that provides a useful snapshot of how Keiller's film functions. Having saved up the necessary funds (£630) to spend a night at the Savoy Hotel in the very room that Monet painted his views of the Thames, our protagonists do just that.[89] Keiller has said that part of his aim in shooting *London* was to, "recover the river as a subject, and a space, rather as artists of this earlier period—Turner, Whistler and Monet—had depicted it" (House 1). The elegant shot that Keiller produces from "Monet's window" does just that, transforming London's bridges and its riverside architecture into one of a number artful "tiers of space" shots we see in *London*. Adding to the shot's depth, however,

---

[89] One of the Narrator's earliest descriptions of his partner describes him as living, "the way that people were said to live in the cities of the Soviet Union: his income is small, but he saves most of it."

is the Narrator's commentary, which disrupts the view's lyricism by linking it to London's bind in the wake of the abolishment of the GLC and the legacy of Thatcherism:

> On one side Westminster, on the other County Hall, the former seat of London's city government, soon to be sold to a Japanese hotel consortium, and St. Thomas's Hospital, under threat of closure or amalgamation.
>   On the South Bank the whole district was threatened with commercial reconstruction.

Afterwards, the two anxiously await the coming general election, noting that the crisis of London had become a national issue in the last year, and hoping for the sake of London, and for the sake of the nation, that the Tories are finally defeated, as it appears they will. As the election draws near public opinion polls continue to give Labour the lead, but this lead diminishes considerably over the weeks. Robinson, having lived through the heartbreak of the 1987 general election (when Thatcher won a stunning third term in office) first hand, is far from convinced by these polls, and therefore tense; the Narrator, on the other hand, still expects a narrow Labour victory. When the results come through, our protagonists are devastated. They stay up almost all night wandering the streets in disbelief, before making their way to Downing Street to watch the Tory victory celebration. As the camera fixes its gaze on the podium where John Major and his wife greet their enthusiastic supporters, the Narrator delivers a jeremiad that catches the crisis of the Left in all its anguish (and that surely ranks as one of the film's highlights). Two things make the scene truly remarkable: the way Keiller captures the victory celebration in eerie silence, underlining what the Narrator describes as, "the shock with which we realized our alienation from the events which were taking place in front of us," and making the

audience a part of it; and the fact that, "Robinson's first reaction was one of *spleen*." Finally, the IRA responds to the results of the election by setting off two bombs, one at Staples Corner, and one targeting the City's insurance market that was "positioned to spectacular effect." Our protagonists visit these sites in the aftermath and this sequence is distinguished by two shots in particular: one featuring a man in a bowler haranguing passersby near the insurance market with conspiracy theories, who Robinson immediately recognizes as a man after his own heart: "he was a *man* of the *crowd*;" the other featuring a portion of the cordoned-off Staples Corner site, where a fragment of a leftover Tory election billboard reads "The Best Future…"

As Iain Sinclair put it (bluntly) in the opening sentence of an article for *Sight and Sound*: "Patrick Keiller's *London* is not your London…" Sinclair then went on to describe just what he meant, and few people have captured *London*'s overall form as eloquently:

> *London* has the meandering form of an epistolary novel, a fabulation backed by congeries of fact. The narrator, returning from a seven-year exile, takes a leisurely inventory of the city's consciousness, makes expeditions, bears witness to public events, the aftermath of violent political acts, fantasies of escape. . . He is describing an absence, a necropolis of fretful ghosts, a labyrinth of quotations: not so much the ruin of a great city as the surgical removal of its soul. . .
>
> The truth of a city, divided against itself, can only be revealed, so Keiller believes, through a series of obscure pilgrimages, days spent crawling out on to the rim of things. (13-14)

Sinclair captures much of *London*'s essence here: the jauntiness of its peripatetic adventures; the way the protagonists' expeditions, their "pilgrimages," set free the city's "fretful ghosts" and "labyrinth of quotations;" the film's blurring of fact and fiction, its combination of "fabulation" and "congeries of fact." Elsewhere Sinclair mentions the film's engagement with the politics of the period in passing, but his

article is principally interested in the image of London, and much of the article attempts to situate *London* within a history of cinematic depictions of this city. What is not commented on is the way in which the characteristics that Sinclair isolates in the quotations above, in many ways, *are* Keiller's engagement with politics.

There is a point in *London* when the Narrator claims to come to an understanding with regard to Robinson's investigations, his project:

> I was beginning to understand Robinson's method which seemed to be based on a belief that English culture had been irretrievably diverted by the English reaction to the French Revolution. His interest in Sterne and other English writers of the eighteenth century and in the French poets who followed Baudelaire was an attempt to rebuild the city he found himself in as if the nineteenth century had never happened.

The Narrator's assessment is misleading, though. Two nineteenth-century figures— one being a poet "who followed Baudelaire," Rimbaud, the other being Baudelaire himself—are absolutely central to the film's narrative and to Robinson's project. Neither Baudelaire nor Rimbaud were English, of course, but Robinson reclaimed them both because he had discovered that Baudelaire's mother had been born in England, and because Rimbaud had lived in London (as well as elsewhere in England) in the years following the Commune, as is well known. There are a number of other nineteenth-century figures that haunt the film, too, most of them foreign, but even here there are exceptions (Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, a Victorian character if ever there was one, being a primary candidate). We should be careful with what the Narrator and Robinson convey to the audience. Although there's a certain degree of autobiography in these characters, and although the film itself is shot in documentary style, there is a distinction to be made between Keiller's project and that of his protagonists, who are not without their foibles. In actuality, at least part of Robinson's project is in fact an attempt to re-vision London not as if the

nineteenth century had never happened, but as if this history had been rather different, as if Baudelaire and Rimbaud *had* been central figures there, as if London had not been so removed from the social unrest that was so much a part of the nineteenth century on the Continent, as if London had been swept up by the revolutions that shook Paris in 1830, 1848 (in which Baudelaire took part), and 1871 (in which Rimbaud took part). Furthermore, Robinson's interest in "the French poets who followed Baudelaire" is really more of an interest in those poets and artists (mostly French, but even here there are exceptions) who drew inspiration from the revolutionary artistic currents of the nineteenth century and channeled it into such twentieth-century avant-garde uprisings as the *Revolution Surréaliste*. If Walter Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk* constitutes an "ur-history," as Susan Buck-Morss argues, "a history of the *origins* of that present historical moment" from which the *Passagen-Werk* emerged, Keiller's project, in some sense, is an attempt to engage with London's "present historical moment" through a radically re-imagined version of its past, a past that might have been (47).

Baudelaire

The first time the Narrator attempts to explain Robinson's project, he begins with a quote from Montaigne selected by Robinson which is clearly meant to reflect upon the times and present us with a glimpse of our guide's self-image: "It is good to be born in depraved times, for by comparison with others you are reckoned virtuous at little cost." He then continues by revealing that Robinson is studying the work of a number of French writers who found themselves exiled in London, Montaigne being the first. The remainder of this group includes Mallarmé, Rimbaud and Verlaine, Marcel Schwob, "the translator of Defoe, de Quincey, and Robert

Louis Stevenson," and one anomaly, Baudelaire, who never set foot in England, but whose mother was born in London, the Narrator tells us, and who translated Poe.[90] Meanwhile, Keiller's camera focuses on a trace of Montaigne's stay in Soho,[91] one whose name could be that of Robinson's "school" of French exiles: the Montaigne School of English.[92] Not long afterwards, we're told that Robinson rarely goes out much anymore, but that he used to be utterly transformed by the experience of going to the Continent, during which time he would become "an enthusiastic flâneur, astonishing his hosts with his stamina and generosity," but that for several years he hasn't been able to leave England because of his ongoing attempts to confront "the problem of London." The clear implication is that, while Robinson is a native-born Englishman, he identifies with the loose school of writers he's studying—he feels like an exile in his own land. He is also something of an "armchair flâneur," someone whose situation has reduced him to practicing flânerie primarily vicariously, through the work of Baudelaire, Poe, de Quincey, and others.

While Poe also proves to be of great importance to Robinson's constellation of literary heroes—chiefly because of the images of the crowd and of the convalescent[93] in "The Man of the Crowd," and because of "The Narrative of Arthur

---

[90] Baudelaire, like Schwob, also translated De Quincey, but for some reason this detail is left out.

[91] The Narrator claims that Montaigne lived on Wardour Street.

[92] The school's entrance is adorned with a mural, and although we can only see a fragment of it, Rimbaud's distinctive profile is plainly visible.

[93] The second expedition ends with Robinson trying to locate traces of Poe's time in Stoke Newington, but instead finding the house where Daniel Defoe had written *Robinson Crusoe*. This time chance is not on his side. The third expedition begins with the Narrator explaining that, "Robinson was devastated by this discovery. He had gone looking for the man of the crowd, and had found instead shipwreck and the

Gordon Pym," his tale of "shipwreck and deprivation"—strangely it is Baudelaire, the only one of these writers who doesn't have a direct connection to London, who immediately asserts himself as being among Keiller and Robinson's most important muses. The film begins with a lovely sequence showing an enormous cruise ship lumbering into London through the Tower Bridge, a clever, somewhat eerie updating of the city film's arrival into the city, the date is established as January 11, 1992, and then the title of the first chapter appears—"The Great Malady—Horror of Home"— as the Narrator delivers Robinson's opening diatribe on London:

> Dirty Old Blighty: undereducated, economically backward, *bizarre*, a
> catalogue of modern miseries. With its fake traditions, its Irish War,
> its militarism and secrecy, its silly old judges, its hatred of
> intellectuals, its ill health and bad food, its sexual repression, its
> hypocrisy and racism, and its indolence—it's so exotic, so *home*made.

Deceptively quickly and economically, given the very deliberate, measured pace of the sequence, Keiller introduces us to the topic at hand (*London*), firmly establishes the film's distinctive tone, and links Robinson's proposed investigation into "the problem of London" to Baudelaire's "Mon Coeur mis à nu," where he once proposed, "Research into that serious disease, hatred of the home."

Minutes later, Baudelaire's role in Robinson's project is made explicit following another chapter heading—"The Romantic"—and the moment is among the film's most memorable. As Keiller's camera fixes on the patently absurd image of a massive, inflatable "Ronald McDonald" bobbing atop a roadside McDonald's restaurant, the Narrator states:

---

vision of Protestant isolation." Weeks later he reemerges, "with the fresh eyes of the convalescent," much like the narrator of Poe's story.

"Romanticism," wrote Baudelaire, "is precisely situated neither in choice of subjects nor in exact truth but in a mode of feeling." For Robinson the essence of a Romantic life is in the ability to get outside oneself, to see oneself as if from outside oneself, to see oneself, as it were, in a romance.

The quote comes from Baudelaire's "Qu'est-ce que le Romantisme?" from the *Salon of 1846*, an essay he produced the very same year that he developed his notion of "correspondence*s*"[94] and discovered Poe, but what's more immediately important to Robinson here is this "mode of feeling," this embodied form of late Romanticism (Benjamin, *Arcades* 243 [J9,2], 248 [J11,8]). Robinson's interest in "[getting] outside" himself has to do with escaping from the present moment, from the London he sees before him (presumably the same one captured by Keiller's camera), but it also reflects a desire to study London more thoroughly (even if "exact truth" is not the goal), and it's clearly a reflection of the way Keiller himself uses filmmaking as a vehicle for stepping outside of himself, seeing himself from outside, seeing himself in a romance of his own creation. But it is the figure of Baudelaire as a flâneur and poet which is especially key to Robinson (and Keiller), for it is through the practice of strolling the city that Robinson is able to both inhabit this "mode of feeling" *and* "get outside himself," putting London under scrutiny all the while. In his "Notes nouvelles sur Edgar Poe," Baudelaire wrote,

> Imagination is not fantasy… Imagination is an almost divine faculty which perceives… the intimate and secret relations of things, the correspondences and the analogies. (Benjamin, *Arcades* 285 [J31a,5])

---

[94] Baudelaire's "Correspondences" reads: "Nature is a temple where living pillars / At times allow confused words to come forth; / There man passes through forests of symbols / Which observe him with familiar eyes" (*Flowers* 27).

For Robinson and Keiller, as it was for Baudelaire, flânerie acts as the instrument, the vehicle, for this form of imagination. Robinson's first outings with the Narrator as "witness and chronicler" already indicate an incipient method, but not long after their visit to McDonald's, the Narrator informs the audience that Robinson has made things official: "Robinson has decided that we should get out more—he had thought that he might learn to drive, but now he says it would be better if we walk." And he suggests a series of expeditions, "each one prompted by an aspect of his project."

Taking his cue from Baudelaire, Robinson decides that they should stage their own inquiry into "Qu'est-ce que le Romantisme?" by carrying out a "pilgrimage to the sources of English Romanticism." The pair promptly set out for Strawberry Hill, "the house of Horace Walpole," but their progress is disrupted by an IRA bomb, the first of several that take place during the course of the film. When they finally do make it to Twickenham, the site of Strawberry Hill, Robinson informs the Narrator that it was here that Walpole wrote *The Castle of Otranto* in the 1760s, "the novel that established the genre of English Gothic fiction." Like the Surrealists before him, Robinson appears to be a fan of the Gothic novel and its sense of the "marvelous," and given the outlines of Robinson's project, it's likely that he too believes that this genre was somehow, "symptomatic of the great social upheaval that shook Europe at the end of the eighteenth century" (Finkelstein 73). Meanwhile, Keiller's affection for *The Castle of Otranto* could very well have something to do with the fact that the novel's provenance was intentionally obscured by Walpole at

the time of publication.[95] What is clear is that it is Strawberry Hill itself—its neo-Gothic whimsy and its extraordinary views—that is of crucial importance to both Robinson and Keiller. "Twickenham," said Robinson, "is the site of the first attempts to transform the world by looking at the landscape," and while he never fully explains himself, he's clearly referring to an entire lineage of British artists (from Pope to Turner) who found inspiration here, not far from the limit of the London Port Authority, and his declaration anticipates Robinson and the Narrator's attempts later in the film to redeem the landscape along the River Brent and around Wembley and Heathrow. For the most part, though, our protagonists are drawn back towards the centre of London, towards the urban landscape that is the true habitat of the Baudelairean flâneur.[96]

Anne Friedberg has astutely described the way in which the (window) shopper as a type is directly linked to (and in some ways descended from) the "mobilized gaze" of the flâneur. She writes:

> [T]he speculative gaze of the shopper was an instrumentalization of the *mobilized. . .* gaze to a consumer end. The modes of distracted observation of the flâneur and flâneuse became the prototype for the shopper, a social character who was not afraid of the marketplace (agoraphobia), and who became agora*philic* instead. (58)

In Baudelaire, however, we are faced with a rather different type of flâneur. Baudelaire's gaze was both distracted and focused, both consumerist and productive,

---

[95] It was published under a pseudonym and passed itself off as a translation from an Italian work.

[96] Baudelaire apparently felt much stronger about this issue than Robinson. "I detest the countryside… I am perhaps affronting your convictions as a landscape painter, but I must tell you further that an open body of water is a monstrous thing to me; I want it incarcerated, contained within the geometric walls of a quay. My favorite walking place is the embankment along the Canal de l'Ourcq" (Benjamin, *Arcades* 284 [J31,2]).

for it was "during his flânerie that Baudelarie composed his poems," his "wanderings through the city streets [becoming] itself a method of productive labor" (Buck-Morss 185). "For my part, I saw him composing verses on the run while he was out in the streets; I never saw him seated before a ream of paper," a colleague once noted (Benjamin, *Arcades* 273 [J25,6]). Furthermore, while Baudelaire certainly sought the marketplace as an artist peddling his wares, he was also someone who actively rejected the emerging marketplace, frequenting the haunts of the city typical of *la bohème* and gravitating towards the city's detritus and debris. It was this dual nature of his character that so fascinated Benjamin, and that captured all that was modern about Baudelaire for him. Thus, in a passage that had great significance for *feuilletonistes* like Kracauer and himself, Benjamin wrote: "Baudelaire knew how things really stood for the literary man: As flâneur, he goes to the marketplace, supposedly to take a look at it, but already in reality to find a buyer" (ibid 185). But Benjamin's Baudelaire was also an allegorical poet, one for whom "[the] primary interest of allegory is not linguistic but optical," who was obsessed with "images" and who used them to transform the city he found himself in (Benjamin, *Arcades* 334 [J59,4]; Buck-Morss 179). And if Baudelaire's flânerie represents an attempt to cultivate a particular form of idleness, this form of idleness, this ethic, was both productive and critical. Here, as Benjamin put it, "The *vita contemplative* is replaced by something that could be called the *vita contemptiva*" (*Arcades* 801 [m1a,2]).

The Paris of Baudelaire's time was that of the reaction to the barricades of 1830 and 1848, captured most forcefully in the urban redevelopments planned, orchestrated and executed by Baron Haussmann, Prefect of Paris, during the Second Empire. Thus, in his essay "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century," Benjamin named his section on Haussmann's renovations "Haussmann, or the Barricades," and he noted that, "the true purpose of Haussmann's work was to secure the city against civil war. He wanted to make the erection of barricades in Paris impossible for all

time" (*Reflections* 160). But Haussmann's redevelopment program had other goals as well, as indicated by Benjamin's essay title. Haussmann's renovations were also intended to facilitate circulation (of people, traffic, and commerce), guarantee Paris's dominance as a center of trade, and establish Paris as: "the capital not only of France but of the world. . . Cosmopolitan Paris will be the result" (133). Ironically, Haussmann had initially discovered "the problem of Paris," and had begun to consider what "improvements" might be made to remedy the situation, while strolling through the streets of Paris as a student:

> I took walks. . . through all parts of the city, and I was often absorbed,
> during my youth, in protracted contemplation of a map of this many-
> sided Paris, a map which revealed to me weaknesses in the network of
> public streets. (ibid 126)

Of course, when he finally came around to addressing the city's "weaknesses," these sweeping changes were achieved through that combination of construction and destruction that is so symptomatic of modernity (see Berman [1982], for instance), earning him the moniker of "artist-demolitionist" (ibid 128). In *The Dialectics of Seeing*, Susan Buck-Morss describes the devastating effects of these public works as follows:

> The demolition of Paris occurred on a massive scale, as destructive to
> the old Paris as any invading army might have been. The urban
> "perspectives" which Haussmann created from wide boulevards, lined
> with uniform building facades that seemed to stretch to infinity and
> punctuated by national monuments, were intended to give the
> fragmented city an appearance of coherence. In fact the plan, based
> on a politics of imperial centralization, was a totalitarian aesthetics, in
> that it caused "the repression of every individualistic part, every
> autonomous development" of the city, creating an artificial city where
> the Parisian [. . .] no longer feels at home. (89-90)[97]

---

[97] Haussmannization produced a considerable amount of hyperbole and hysteria, which, as T.J. Clark has argued, only served to obscure its very real effects. Thus, in a passage that calls to mind Robinson's jeremiad following the Conservative Party

Studying these effects in the 1930s, Benjamin saw a precedent for the all-out

destruction of the Spanish Civil War in Haussmann's improvements, while, half a

century later, Marshall Berman saw a precedent for New York's great artist-

demolitionist, Robert Moses (*Arcades*, 147; Berman 292).

Baudelaire's own politics were ambivalent, to say the least—though he was

on the barricades in 1848, having responded to what Breton called, "the hour when

the street beneath [his] window [began]… to tremble," Benjamin notes that he, "soon

forgot the February Revolution," and *The Arcades Project* charts his wavering

between an *engagé* aesthetic "inseparable from morality and utility" and one of "art

for art's sake" (Benjamin 230 [J1a,1, J1a,2], 745 [d2,1]). Insofar as the Paris of *Les*

Fleurs du mal and *Paris Spleen* is the Paris of the Second Empire, though,

Baudelaire's vision of the city in these works opens up an important window onto

Haussmannization and its consequences. And one of the things that is most unique

about Baudelaire's reaction to this new Paris is the way that Baudelaire replaces this

emerging version of the city with another, intentionally bleaker, version from time to

time, one which nevertheless points towards a true utopia:

> The *ruin*, created intentionally in Baudelaire's allegorical poetry, is
> the form in which the wish images of the past century appear, as

---

victory in the general election in 1992 (minus the critique that brackets it), Benjamin
cites a typically apocalyptic diatribe against Haussmann:
> You will live to see the city grown desolate and bleak. / Your glory
> will be great in the eyes of future archaeologists, but your days will be
> sad and bitter. / . . . / And the heart of the city will slowly freeze. / . . .
> / Lizards, stray dogs, and rats will rule over this magnificence. The
> injuries inflicted by time will accumulate on the gold of the balconies,
> and on the painted murals. / . . . / And loneliness, the tedious goddess
> of deserts, will come and settle upon this new empire you will have
> made for her by so formidable a labor. (*Arcades* 129)

rubble, in the present. But it refers also to the loosened building
blocks (both semantic and material) out of which a new order can be
constructed. . . Haussmann builds the new phantasmagoria. . .
Baudelaire's images are ruins, failed material expressed as allegorical
objects. (Buck-Morss 212)

Paradoxically, this new city-as-phantasmagoria was characterized by sweeping

change coupled with a strange stasis, both social and political. The new city was one

that was utterly transformed yet the social order had apparently been made more

secure. Buck-Morss describes this process as being a "classic example of

reification": "urban 'renewal' projects attempted to create social utopia by changing

the arrangement of buildings and streets—objects in space—while leaving social

relationships intact. Under Haussmann, schools and hospitals were built, and air and

light were brought into the city, but class antagonisms were thereby covered up, not

eliminated" (89). In this new Paris, under these reified conditions, Baudelaire found

melancholy, the source of his "allegorical genius" (Benjamin, "Paris" 156). Thus, in

"Le Cygne," he writes:

> Paris changes! Only in my gloom
> nothing stirs! New palaces, blocks, scaffolds,
> old suburbs, they have come to be my symbols,
> and my memories are heavier than stones. (*Les Fleurs du mal*, 187)

And herein lies Baudelaire's odd, dialectical modernity, for he was both the most

modern of poets—the poet most willing to look the world directly in the eyes, the

poet most willing to dispense with its conventions—and the poet most determined,

"[to] interrupt the course of the world" (Benjamin, *Arcades* 318 [J50,2]). Benjamin

saw this aspect of his *oeuvre* as being key to its understanding.

> Baudelaire's opposition to progress was the indispensable condition
> for his success at capturing Paris in his poetry. Compared with this
> poetry, all later big-city lyric must be accounted feeble. What it lacks
> is precisely that reserve toward its subject matter which Baudelaire
> owed to his frenetic hatred of progress. (*Arcades* 346 [J66a,1])

And flânerie, as a trace of the archaic, was integral to this critique: "The spontaneity common… to the flâneur is perhaps that of the hunter—which is to say, that of the oldest type of work, which may be intertwined closest of all with idleness" (Benjamin, *Arcades* 806).

It is precisely this "odd, dialectical modernity" founded on flânerie's interpenetration of past, present, and townscape[98] and its potential as a means toward "getting outside oneself" that is the source of Baudelaire's attraction for Robinson. Baudelaire's literary reaction to the Haussmannization of Paris serves as something of a precedent for Robinson's attempt to come to terms with "the problem of London" under Conservative rule, and especially in the wake of massive redevelopment since the dismantlement of the GLC. Time and time again, Keiller's film turns towards the upheavals being created by Thatcherite "urban renewal" programs, underlining the destructive edge of these programs, underlining the notion that these programs constitute a provincial attack on the basic necessities of London's residents (hospitals, housing, transportation, etc.) in favor of business and commercial interests. And time and time again Robinson's Baudelairean methods lead to the discovery of minor utopias, like Boundary Estate, the first of the London County Council's celebrated public housing projects, which was based on the "socialist and visionary writings" of John Ruskin, William Morris, Karl Marx and others, and where Robinson found a "fragment of a golden age" among its weathered bandstand and its "handsome Arts & Crafts" buildings (Glancey 96). Ultimately,

---

[98] Benjamin's *Arcades Project* includes the following assessment: "We know that, in the course of flânerie, far-off times and places interpenetrate the landscape and the present moment" (419 [M2,4]).

though, Robinson (if not Keiller) succumbs to melancholy. After yet another failed

opportunity on the part of the opposition to defeat the government (this time on the

first Maastricht vote), the Narrator tells the audience that, "Robinson began to talk,

as he often did, about leaving the country, but, as always, he had no idea where to

go." Immediately afterwards, the intertitle "Anywhere out of the World—

Baudelaire" appears, and overtop a meticulously composed shot of traffic flowing

back and forth across an overpass, set against a postmodern office tower bearing

strange hieroglyphs—HROW, GATW, mira, ce, fly[99]—the Narrator reads the

following lines from Baudelaire's prose poem:

> Life is a hospital where every patient is obsessed by the idea of
> changing beds. One would like to suffer opposite the stove, another is
> sure he'd get well beside the window.
>   It always seems to me that I should be happy anywhere but where I
> am, and this question of moving is one that I'm eternally discussing
> with my soul.

The Narrator never reaches the poem's climactic finale ("Finally my soul explodes,

and cries out to me in great wisdom: 'Anywhere at all! Provided it is outside this

world!'") on behalf of Robinson, but by this point in the film, we've already divined

as much. What makes the scene truly devastating, however, is the way the traffic,

the ceaseless movement, and the (partial) airline advertisement all underscore

Baudelaire's assessment of the human condition.

---

[99] The font and the text indicate the remnants of an Emirates Airlines sign
advertising flights from Heathrow and Gatwick.

Rimbaud

Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891) serves as an even more central figure to *London* than

Baudelaire, due in no small measure to the fact that Rimbaud actually lived in

London following the fall of the Paris Commune, and that his tempestuous

relationship with Paul Verlaine, part of which took place in London, provides a

parallel for the "bickering" relationship between the Narrator and Robinson.[100] In

fact, in one sequence, the Narrator informs the audience, that an apartment shared by

Rimbaud and Verlaine was torn down to build the British Telecom Tower, and that

Robinson sees the (absurdly phallic) tower as being a monument to the two poets.

But in addition to this, Keiller is clearly attracted to the nature of Rimbaud's

experience of London and the manner in which he responded to his new

surroundings. Rimbaud's experience in exile was difficult, having been witness to

the brutal repression of the Commune of which he was an active part, and then

coming to live in the city that was at the very heart of the new global order that he

saw taking shape, and it marked him deeply. Fredric Jameson describes Rimbaud's

reaction to London as having been one of "very real personal shock" as he came into

contact "with London itself, supreme metropolis of capitalism and also the very

center of the shipping networks which will increasingly unite a world drawn together

by colonization" (71). It is London, the epitome of the "industrial and commercial

metropolis" which would become the city of Rimbaud's later prose poems, cruelly

replacing Paris's "space of politics and revolution" (ibid 85).

---

[100] Robinson and the Narrator were apparently former lovers.

Baudelaire had witnessed Haussmann's attempts to guarantee that Paris would never again be filled with barricades through his implementation of "strategic beautification." Rimbaud, on the other hand, participated[101] in the Commune's (fleeting) triumph over Haussmannization, seemingly attesting to the fact that phantasmagoria could be overturned.

> The barricade is resurrected in the Commune. It is stronger and better secured than ever. It stretches across the great boulevards, often reaching the height of the first floor, and covers the trenches behind it. Just as the *Communist Manifesto* ends the epoch of the professional conspirator, the Commune puts an end to the phantasmagoria that dominates the freedom of the proletariat. It dispels the illusion that the task of the proletarian revolution is to complete the work of 1789 hand in hand with the bourgeoisie. (Benjamin, "Paris" 160)

This reaction to Haussmann's renovations is not only key to understanding the Commune, it is key to understanding what distinguishes the Commune from other revolutionary moments. As Terry Eagleton has written,

> [the Commune's] base lay not in heavy industry and an organized large-scale proletariat, but in the seizing, defense, and transformation of a *place*, a city, a sector of "civil society" where men and women lived and congregated, traveled and talked. It was a revolt not so much within the means of production, rooted in factory soviets and a revolutionary working-class, as one within the means of lives themselves. It was a revolution out on the streets from the start, an uprising for which the bone of revolutionary contention was the streets themselves, rather than the streets as a front line defense of a proletarian seizure of capital. . .What the various subordinate groups had in common was precisely the besieged bastion of Paris, of a space that belonged to them all; and there could consequently be a constant traffic across the class lines between worker and artisan, revolutionary women and disaffected literati. (ix)

But it is also important to remember that the Commune was not simply a reaction to Haussmanization; on some level, it was also a product of Haussmanization.

---

[101] Breton writes that Rimbaud, "[placed] all his confidence and *élan vital* in the Commune" (Benjamin, *Arcades* 745 [d2,1]).

Haussmann's renovations were such a massive undertaking that they required the importation of a workforce from the provinces and beyond; in the *Passagen-Werk*, Benjamin cites Du Camp's claim that, "the population of Paris during the Commune was 75.5 percent foreigners and provincials" (143). Meanwhile Haussmann's *travaux* divided the city dramatically along class lines, creating a sense of, "active and passive zones," of "privileged places where decisions are made in secret, and places where these decisions are executed afterward," thereby inscribing the rise of the bourgeoisie in the years following 1789 on the city of Paris (Ross 41). Hence, the formation of the "red belt" in the city's northeastern peripheries; hence, Benjamin's claim that the "illusions" of 1789 were dispelled. The results of this social reorganization were summed up in the *Passagen-Werk* with the following passage from Granveau's *L'Ouvrier devant la société* (1868):

> Hundreds of thousands of families, who work in the center of the
> capital, sleep in the outskirts. This movement resembles the tide: in
> the morning the workers stream into Paris, and in the evening the
> same wave of people flows out. It is a melancholy image. . .I would
> add. . .that it is the first time that humanity has assisted in a spectacle
> so dispiriting for the people. (137)

Thus, the workers' "redescent into the center of Paris" during the Commune was not only due to the "political significance of the city center within a tradition of popular insurgency," it was also a show of "their desire to reclaim the public space from which they had been expelled, to reoccupy streets that were once theirs." This dismantlement of the spatial hierarchy, which reintroduced the *quartiers*, created new, transparent sites for political debate and decision-making, also affected temporality, for with the heightened freedom of communication characterized by "the immediate publication of all the Commune's decisions and proclamations, largely in the form of *affiches*," came a sense of history as something that was immediate, something that was lived. Thus, the reappropriation of the city and its

streets by the Communards also amounted to a "reinvention of urban rhythms" on a mass scale: "we can describe the sensation as being a simultaneous perception of events passing by quickly, too quickly, and of each hour and minute being entirely lived or made use of: saturated time" (Ross 41-2).

It was as a part of the Commune, immersed in this sense of "saturated time," that Rimbaud found his notion of *paresse* expressed most fully. Rimbaud wrote about this concept frequently in his letters and in poems like "Mauvais Sang," where, Rimbaud's narrator announces, "I have a horror of all trades [*métiers*]," then goes on to, "[refuse] the very structure of work, the social division of labor itself that in the nineteenth century is beginning to be pushed to the limits of overspecialization" (Ross 50). In its place, Rimbaud valorized a very different type of experience, one consisting of, "infinite walks, rests, trips, adventures, wanderings [bohèmienneries]" (ibid 55). But, as with Baudelaire, Rimbaud's refusal to work, his *paresse*, is a particular form of idleness, one that amounts to a refusal of the social order, and one whose brief moment of triumph was during the days of the Commune. It therefore comes as no surprise that after the fall of the Commune, "the moment in the history of Western society that comes closest to a dismantling of the state apparatus," that the nineteenth century "is figured in Rimbaud's poetry as the epoch of the triumph of the work model, the moment when all activities are translated into possible or virtual work" (ibid 70). As Jameson has argued, Rimbaud saw this situation in apocalyptic terms—"only destruction and Apocalypse, then, the end of the world, remains as an imaginative possibility"—and, for him, London, "the very center of the colonial world network," was the capital of this new world order, its Babylon (81, 85).

Rimbaud was apparently the subject of discussions between Benjamin and Brecht, for in his journals Benjamin recounts some of Brecht's thoughts on Rimbaud, the poet with whom he felt the greatest affinity:

He thinks that Marx and Engels, had they read "Le Bateau Ivre," would have sensed in it the great historical movement of which it is the expression. They would have clearly recognized that what it describes is not an eccentric poet going for a walk, but the flight, the escape of a man who cannot live any longer inside the barriers of a class which—with the Crimean War, with the Mexican adventure—was beginning to open up even the most exotic lands to mercantile interests. (Ross, *Emergence* 75)

Here, Brecht's description of Rimbaud as "an eccentric poet going for a walk" effectively sums up and dismisses the myth of the *poète maudit* or *enfant terrible*, characterizing Rimbaud's work as a "historical narrative" instead. But Brecht had difficulty with the way historical development becomes portrayed "in terms of a massive, synchronic expansion or spatial movement: the late nineteenth-century European construction of space *as* colonial space." Ross, on the other hand, sees this as being the very strength of much of Rimbaud's later work, noting that this work,

is marked by a distinct proliferation of geographic terms and proper names: poles and climates, countries, continents and cities—a kind of charting of social movement in geographic terms. (ibid 75-6)

This attempt at a form of poetic social geography constituted an open rejection of Parnassian poetry, with its idealized, ahistorical landscapes, *and* French academic geography, with its "science of landscape" based on a fantasy of a natural world that was also totally removed from the realm of the socio-historical. Instead, as Ross has quite convincingly argued, there is something of the geography of Elisée Reclus in Rimbaud's poetry—both shared a political imagination that had been shaped by the Paris Commune, both lived through the experience of defeat followed by exile, and both seemed to view the world in terms that were emphatically socio-historical. As Reclus put it, "Geography is nothing but history in space." Thus, much in the same way that Rimbaud opposed the Parnassian school's depoliticized approach to poetry

by infusing his later work with a sense of landscape (whether urban or global/colonial) that was specifically and provocatively socio-historical, Reclus responded to the reactionary nature of academic geography and the way it defined the discipline in the years that followed the Commune (helping to fuel French colonial policy, among other things) by redefining the field as socio-historical first and foremost. For both, having been active participants in the Commune, having seen the Commune crushed, there was simply no other way to approach the world around them. Rimbaud's friend Delahaye once described a walk the two had taken together through the streets of Paris in November of 1871, and his account indicates just how deeply the fall of the Commune scarred Rimbaud (and the city):

> We took quite a long walk on the boulevard and around the Panthéon. He showed me the white holes in the columns: "From the bullets," he said. Everywhere, in fact, we saw the traces left on the houses by machine gun fire. I asked him where Paris was from the point of view of "ideas." In a weary voice he spoke a few brief words that revealed he had lost hope:
> "Annihilation, chaos. . .all the possible, and even probable *reactions*."
> In this case could a new insurrection be foreseen? Did any Communards remain?
> "Yes, a few."
> He knew some determined ones. . .he would be with them. . .his ideal would be that result, he didn't see any other. (qtd. in Ross, *Emergence* 117-118)

In spite of his struggle with "the problem of London," Robinson takes solace in the fact that Rimbaud, "found the strangeness of the Victorian metropolis conducive to work," and that his work consisted of, "[spending] longs days wandering." In addition to the BT Tower, Robinson is reminded of Rimbaud with frequency over the course of his expeditions. In fact, at one point, as he's contemplating London's former status as a preeminent port, he gets particularly

effusive and suddenly declares, "Sometimes I see the whole city as a monument to Rimbaud." Immediately afterwards an intertitle announces "Rimbaud—The Bridges" and the Narrator reads the first of *London*'s two Rimbaud poems (this one in its entirety) as Keiller complements the text with one of his most lyrical visual passages, a brief, self-contained cine-poem on the Thames, its bridges, its currents, and its banks.

While Rimbaud's relationship with Verlaine provides an important parallel with Robinson and the Narrator, it's this relationship between Rimbaud and London as a port that's of greater importance to *London* overall. Thus, the Narrator informs the audience that while in exile, Rimbaud frequently visited the docks—the same docks that put London at the center of the global order of the period—and there he sought drugs, the exotic, the state of debauchery he had first described in a letter written on May 13, 1871, in the waning days of the Commune:

> Now I am going in for debauch. Why? I want to be a poet, and I am working to make myself a *visionary*: you won't possibly understand, and I don't know how to explain it to you. To arrive at the unknown through the disordering of *all the senses*, that's the point. The sufferings will be tremendous, but one must be strong, be born a poet: it is in no way my fault. (*Illuminations* xxvii)

Just over 120 years later, Robinson and the Narrator visit London's Docklands and find only the largely vacant results of the Docklands development project, the shipping trade having disappeared long ago (and relocated elsewhere), the area's traditional working class communities having been evacuated. They visit on the day that the failure of the Docklands project is officially announced to the media, and they promptly declare the site a(nother) monument to Rimbaud. But *London*'s most poignant Rimbaldian moment comes later in the film, as our two investigators are once again touring the City. Here, soon after the Narrator quips, "London is a

colonial city—there was nothing here before the Romans came," the intertitle "City-Rimbaud" comes up and the Narrator gives another dramatic reading:

> I am an ephemeral and not too discontented citizen of a metropolis considered modern because all known taste has been evaded in the furnishings the exterior of the houses as well as in the layout of the city. Here you would fail to detect the least trace of any monument of superstition. . .The way these millions of people, who do not even need to know each other, manage their education, business, and old age is so identical that the course of their lives must be several times less long than that which a mad statistics calculates for the people of the continent.

Instead of a montage, this time the poem is set against a long take of the City's rush-hour throngs in a commuter train station, a telephoto lens compressing the space in order to heighten the sense of the crowd. Afterwards, the Narrator tells the audience that the City's residential population is a mere 6,000, while every workday some 300,000 commute there, and then Robinson leads the way to the headquarters of the Oversea Chinese Banking Corporation. Aside from its obvious play on both Robinson's invisibility and his urbanism, this sequence quite subtly builds upon the image of London as a colonial city, connecting London's colonial past, with its present-day global (even neo-colonial) reach, and its daily colonization by the armies of banking and finance. More than just a muse, Rimbaud provides Keiller with another important gateway. Through Rimbaud, Keiller introduces notions of *paresse* and "saturated time," of revolution and utopia, social geography and visionary poetics, political reaction and London as some sort of capitalist Babylon.

Apollinaire & Co.

He goes unmentioned when the Narrator first introduces us to the Montaigne School

of English, but during the film's second expedition, in a subsection entitled

"Apollinaire Enamoured," Robinson pursues the traces of yet another "exile,"

Wilhelm Kostrowitzky, who came to London in 1901, and who would go on to

become the hugely influential French poet, playwright, and critic Guillaume

Apollinaire. The Narrator explains that Apollinaire had moved to London in the

hopes of wooing one Annie Playden, an English governess he'd met in Germany and

who he'd followed to London when she returned to her family home in Clapham

North, but his love was not reciprocated and his beloved fled to the United States

leaving explicit directions that her whereabouts should not be shared with anyone.

Robinson leads the Narrator to a number of sites connected (if sometimes indirectly)

to Apollinaire's stay in London—including Landor Road, a name the Narrator claims

was familiar to him from Edgar Allan Poe's "Landor's Cottage,"[102] and Brixton

Market—but overall the significance of Apollinaire has more to do with cultural

constellations. Thus, along with the link between the Russian Formalists, Laurence

Sterne, and Apollinaire mentioned earlier, there's also an unmentioned link between

Apollinaire and the Surrealists that's important to point out. Aragon, Breton, and the

rest of the Surrealists are never mentioned during the course of the film, but in

interviews and articles connected to *London*, the French Surrealists are listed as a

primary influence and many have pointed out the film's prominent surrealist

---

[102] Cruelly, the Narrator notes that the story, "conjured up an image of idyllic domesticity."

elements.[103] Thus, in an interview with Tony Rayns of *Time Out*, Keiller described

the film as having a "sceptical Euro-surrealist sensibility," before putting things even

more bluntly: "Obviously, the whole thing picks up on surrealist writing about

cities. I'm afraid I was always destined to be a surrealist groupie" (61). Elsewhere,

Keiller described Robinson as an aspiring "Surrealist *flâneur*" and stated that the

project's original conception was tied to a collection of odd remarks about London

that he'd amassed over the years by Apollinaire, Verlaine, and others:

> …I was interested in the perception of London by people who came
> from elsewhere and had some sort of connection with the evolution of
> Surrealism. I regarded myself in the context of the traditions of
> Surrealism because of the work that originally led me into film-
> making which was to do with the Surrealist perception of Paris, of
> architecture. (Barwell, "Interview" 162)

Keiller's most detailed account of his fascination with the surrealist "desire to

transform the world" appears in his 1981 *Undercut* essay "The Poetic Experience of

Townscape and Landscape, and Some Ways of Depicting It." Here he traces a

concern with depicting "the poetic experience of townscape" through the work of a

number of nineteenth- and twentieth-century artists, ranging from Poe and

Baudelaire to Apollinaire, Aragon, Breton, and Atget (75). Apollinaire's role in all

of this is double. On the one hand, here was the man who, with his *Le Flâneur des

deux rives* and *Stories and Adventures of the Baron d'Ormesan* "produced the most

demonstrative of flâneur writings," helping to reinvent a lost nineteenth-century

---

[103] Strangely, Steve Pile seems to suggest that Keiller's film is actually anti-
surrealist, but it's not clear how he's defining the term:
> I am interested in how Keiller's film seeks to stitch together the time-
> spaces—the bits and pieces—of the city. In part, this is because he
> seems to slow the city down, rather than attempt to follow its
> intensities and (faster) speed, its tensions, its surrealism. (204)

figure that would soon become an absolutely vital part of the *Révolution Surréaliste*.

On the other, this was the very man who'd coined the term "surrealism" in his 1917

play *Mamelles de Tirésias* (Jay 237).

As Keiller explains in "The Poetic Experience of Townscape and Landscape,

and Some Ways of Depicting It," it was one of the Baron d'Ormesan stories, "The

False Amphion," that he found the "most prophetic" of Apollinaire's stories because

of its description of a new art form invented by the Baron called "amphionism." The

Baron describes it thusly:

> The instrument of this art, and its subject matter, is a town of which
> one explores a part in such a way as to excite in the soul of the
> amphion, or neophyte, sentiments that inspire in them a sense of the
> sublime and the beautiful, in the same way as music, poetry and so
> on. (qtd. in Keiller, "The Poetic" 77)

Just a few years later, André Breton led the Paris Dada group through an exercise

that Keiller calls "the first surrealist event," in spite of the fact that the "Surrealist

Manifesto" was still three years from being penned, because, following in the

footsteps of "amphionism," "it was to consist solely of direct experience of the city."

Originally, the idea behind the infamous St. Julien-le-Pauvre "happening" was that it

was to be a public exhibition of the Dadaists' experiments with urban space, the kind

they'd been carrying out in the city's forgotten zones, including its flea market and

its "cretinous suburbs," for some time. Breton envisioned a series of these events in

such locations as the Buttes Chaumont and the Canal de l'Ourcq, but although it was

advertised widely, driving rain turned the first expedition into a complete failure and

the remaining tours were cancelled (Peterson 22; Keiller, "The Poetic" 77). Just a

few years later, however, after the release of the "Surrealist Manifesto" and the

launch of the *Révolution Surréaliste*, Aragon succeeded where the St. Julien-le-Pauvre event had failed when he began to publish the peripatetic adventures that would eventually be released as *Le Paysan de Paris* in 1926. Here, Aragon used his "direct experience of the city"—namely, of two Surrealist haunts: the Passage de l'Opera and the Parc des Buttes-Chaumont—as an instrument towards the exploration of what he called "modern mythology." In the closing section on the Buttes-Chaumont, Aragon discussed the epiphany he experienced with regards to his "chance existence, in pursuit of chance," and the birth of his surrealist reinvention of flânerie:

> [What] was this need that moved me, this bent I felt like following, this detour that was more than a diversion and that so aroused my enthusiasm? I felt the great power that certain places, certain sights exercised over me, without discovering the principle of this enchantment. Some everyday objects unquestionably contained for me a part of that mystery, plunged me into that mystery. I loved this intoxication which I knew how to put into effect, although ignorant of its causes. I sought for it in empiricism, but my hopes of finding it there were usually deceived. Slowly, a desire sprang up in me to find out what was the link between all these anonymous pleasures. I felt sure that the essence of such pleasures was entirely metaphysical and involved a sort of passion for revelation with regard to them. The way I saw it, an object became transfigured: it took on neither the allegorical aspect nor the character of the symbol, it did not so much manifest an idea as constitute that very idea. Thus it extended deeply into the world's mass. I was filled with the keen hope of coming within reach of one of the locks guarding the universe: if only the bolt should suddenly slip. It also seemed to me that time played a part in my bewitchment. While time lengthened in the same direction that I advanced each day, each day enlarged the influence that these still disparate elements exercised over my imagination. I began to understand that their kingdom derived its nature from their newness, and that a mortal star shone over the future of this kingdom… Lucidity came to me when I at last succumbed to the vertigo of the modern…
>   Then, without feeling reluctant any longer, I set about discovering the face of the infinite beneath the concrete forms which were escorting me, walking the length of the earth's avenues. (113-115)

"Men pass their lives in the midst of magic precipices without even opening their eyes," Aragon claimed. The goal of the Surrealists' experiments with urban space was to locate these "magic precipices," these "sacred places," and study their effects, and they chose to do so in a manner that ran counter to the dominant form of early twentieth-century modernity, with its machine cult, and its "inconceivable effects of speed,"[104] but still managed to vanquish boredom (118). But there was also another element at work here, for as these sites transformed consciousness, they enabled consciousness to transform the environment. In this regard, a site like the Parc des Buttes-Chaumont was both a pilgrimage point and a "laboratory" that allowed Aragon to transform "whole districts of the city" (Aragon 135; Keiller, "The Poetic" 78). This vision of the city was emphatically palimpsestic, and Paris, with its richly layered history coupled with its undeniable modernity, provided the ultimate palimpsest. Years later, Breton described Aragon's ecstatic relationship to the city as follows:

> I still recall the extraordinary role that Aragon played in our daily
> strolls through Paris. The localities that we passed through in his
> company, even the most colourless ones, were positively transformed
> by a spellbinding romantic inventiveness that never faltered and that
> needed only a street-turning or a shop-window to inspire a fresh
> outpouring… No one could have been a more astute detector of the
> unwonted in all its forms; no one else could have been carried away
> by such intoxicating reveries about a sort of secret life of the city…
>   Even at this stage, he seemed to have read absolutely everything.
> An infallible memory enabled him to recapitulate the entire plots of
> countless novels. His mental agility was unparalleled… (Taylor viii)

---

[104] Aragon adds that this vision of modernity has a "tragic symbol: it is a sort of large wheel which is spinning and which is no longer being steered by hand" (118).

Clearly, there is a precedent here for Robinson and the Narrator's engagement with the city, for their attempts to transform the problematic London they find themselves in into something other. There is also a precedent here for Keiller's film, especially if we take into account (as Keiller does) that in 1918, in one of his first pieces of criticism, Aragon wrote an essay called "On Décor" where he noted film's ability, "to focus attention and reformulate the real into the imaginary, the ability to fuse the physical and the mental" (Vidler 109). As Aragon himself put it, film held an enormous amount of poetic potential which remained largely untapped:

> To endow with a poetic value that which does not possess it, to willfully restrict the field of vision so as to intensify expression: these are two properties that help make cinematic décor the adequate setting of modern beauty. (qtd. in Vidler 109)

A good part of *London*'s particular genius is derived from the fact that Keiller (like Vidler) understands the connection between Aragon's "On Décor" and *Le Paysan de Paris*[105] and that he used his film to explore the surrealist notion that, "the city…need not necessarily be what its seems" (Cardinal 146). But what makes Keiller's surrealism even more interesting is the way that he uses it in a manner that is both historically astute and keenly critical.

Thus, aside from the faint shadow of Apollinaire, the only concrete trace of Continental Surrealism in *London* comes roughly midway during Robinson and the Narrator's second expedition. "It seemed that every day we were faced with some new reminder of the absurdity of our circumstances," the Narrator announces in his characteristic deadpan, and as he does, Keiller's camera focuses on a Royal

---

[105] In fact, Keiller writes, "[one] wonders… if it was partly Aragon's experience of the cinema" that gave him the idea of applying his "surrealist subjectivity to actual everyday surroundings" ("Architectural" 38).

Automobile Club road sign that points to the right and that reads: "Margritte [sic] / Hayward Gallery." This shot would be nothing but a clever visual/art historical joke if it wasn't for the way it was deployed. The sequence that follows begins with eerie images of an unidentified curtained form and a Union Jack draped over what appears to be a statue, like a flag adorning a coffin, while a color guard stands at attention. Meanwhile, apparently anachronistically, the Narrator tells us that, "Sunday, May the 31st was the fiftieth anniversary of the Allied bombing raid on Cologne in 1942." He then adds a layer of cruel irony: "It was also the birthday of the late Sir Arthur 'Bomber" Harris, leader of Bomber Command in World War II, the instigator of the saturation bombing of civilian populations in Germany." And it is only then that the occasion in question becomes apparent: in order to "celebrate" the occasion, against the wishes of the mayor of Cologne and numerous anti-war protestors, a statue of Harris commissioned by the Bomber Command Association and the Ministry of Defense is being dedicated, complete with the blessing of the Queen Mother. It is clear where the Narrator's sympathies lie, for he insists on mentioning that a group of protestors that interrupted the Queen Mother's speech to yell "Murderer! Mass Muderer!," was "suppressed" by police while the Queen Mother paused patiently before continuing. As the statue is finally unveiled, in a segment that ties personal history together with collective history (and adds to the absurdity of the entire occasion), the Narrator tells us that, "Robinson found it impossible to stop thinking about his father" during the ceremony, while Keiller simultaneously provides us with a shot of the massive statue looming on its pedestal but cropped from the waist down. It's not clear what Robinson means by this—the Narrator certainly doesn't

know—but immediately afterwards Keiller cuts to a shot of the statue's top half staring back into the camera calmly so that we might get a better sense of "Bomber" Harris.

<u>Benjamin</u>

As we've seen, Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) is already something of a presence in *London* with regards to Keiller's interest in Baudelaire, and quite likely his interest in Rimbaud, as well.[106] However, there is a fleeting moment in the film when Benjamin himself actually "appears." The day after the Tory victory in the general election of 1992, bombs go off simultaneously in the City's insurance market, as well as in a shopping district in Staples Corner. Keiller's scene progression in this section of the film thus moves from John Major's eerie and disconcerting victory celebration, to the bomb site in the heart of the City and its "spectacular effect," to the wreckage of the bomb site at Staples Corner, the final shot of which includes a telling fragment of a Tory election billboard that reads "The Best Future. . ." next to a police cordon. Keiller then moves the action to Brent Cross shopping center, where Robinson and the Narrator have repaired for lunch. This scene features the film's only tracking shot as the otherwise immobile camera is suddenly carried up to the second floor of the mall, panning past stores and a courtyard fountain, and as it does so the Narrator states: "'If I were a poet,' said Robinson, 'this is the place I would come to write. I feel instantly at home here.'" The camera then fixes itself on

---

[106] Rimbaud is a fairly important character in *The Arcades Project* and his poem "City" appears in the convolute on Baudelaire [J82,3], edited in the same manner as in *London*, and bearing the caption "Disenchantment of 'modernity'!"

the fountain from its second-floor vantage point and the Narrator recounts the following:

> We caught sight of a small, intense man sitting near a fountain reading through a book by Walter Benjamin. Robinson embraced this man and they talked for a long time, but when he tried to call him later he found that the number was a public telephone in a street in Cricklewood and we never saw the man again.

Not only does the spectre of Benjamin "appear" in the scene, but Benjamin's fascination with the arcades, department stores, and other proto-shopping malls of Paris is clearly the filter through which Robinson is attempting to reappropriate Brent Cross mall's semi-public spaces. Keiller, on the other hand, seems to point toward the futility of such an enterprise—or at least ironize it—by underlining the banality of these surroundings (it's not clear he feels "instantly at home" in these surroundings). The Narrator notes that, "in his enthusiasm for crowds and public places, Robinson is a modernist"—something that is most apparent in the Notting Hill Carnival sequence later in the film—but the disappearance of the "small, intense man" apparently has the effect of making Robinson reconsider his surroundings and instead seek an environment that is a little more photogenic, a little more conducive to his studies of correspondences, for a little later in the film the camera trains its sight on Brixton market. The Narrator explains: "Since our meeting with the writer at Brent Cross, whenever he is occupied by his literary researches, [Robinson] takes the bus to Brixton market where he works in a café in one of the arcades." There Robinson sits and spends the day reading and writing, attempting to forge a link between "the Russian formalists of the revolutionary period, with their interest in Sterne" and Guillaume Apollinaire, "who visited Brixton in 1901." Whereas Benjamin holed himself up in the Bibliothèque National de Paris, whose iron and glass architecture was reminiscent of the architecture of the arcades, pavillions, markets, and department stores—and therefore also important as a *space*—in order

to work on his *Passagen-Werk*, Robinson turns to the architecture and *space* of the arcades themselves in order to inspire and activate his studies. The Narrator comments: "He loves the modernity of Brixton: Electric Avenue, the Bon Marché, the railways crossing over Atlantic Road." But Robinson also understands the historical conditions that brought about Brixton's modernity, and he promptly reminds the Narrator of the ties that bind the neighbourhood's demographics to the British history of shipping and colonialism, while Keiller uses a pub sign to illustrate the point.[107]

Benjamin may have done much to promote the notion of Baudelaire as a poet-flâneur, but like so many *feuilletonistes* of his day, his was not a distanced relationship to this type of spatial practice; he, too, was a seasoned city stroller. As a result, "Benjamin's flâneur was a palimpsestic construction," a "textual flâneur" drawn primarily from the work of Baudelaire and Surrealists such as Aragon and Breton, as well as an "actual flâneur" who took great pleasure in roaming the streets of Paris in the 1920s and 1930s, and found some kind of key to "the problem of modernity" there (Friedberg 34). Gershom Scholem noted that Benjamin had been greatly inspired by the literature of the Surrealists, "in which Aragon and Breton proclaimed things that coincided somewhere with his own deepest experiences." Although, according to Scholem, Benjamin was not an ecstatic himself, "the ecstasies of revolutionary utopias and the surrealistic immersion in the unconscious were to him. . .keys for [the] opening of his own world," and he turned to the city as a vehicle toward accessing these territories as the Surrealists had—he learned the art, and potential, of losing oneself in the city (qtd. in Friedberg 72-3). In "A Berlin Chronicle" he wrote on his discovery of the stroll as a practice in Paris:

---

[107] Pub signs recur over and over again in Keiller's Robinson films because of the frequency with which they carry traces of the past that are connected to place.

Not to find one's way in a city may well be uninteresting and banal. It requires ignorance—nothing more. But to lose oneself in a city—as one loses oneself in a forest—that calls for quite a different schooling. Then, signboards and street names, passers-by, roofs, kiosks, or bars must speak to the wanderer like a crackling twig under his feet in the forest, like the startling call of a bittern in the distance, like the sudden stillness of a clearing with a lily standing erect at its center. Paris taught me this art of straying. . . (*Reflections* 8)

Thus, for Benjamin—as for the Surrealists and as for Baudelaire—"the city streets served as a mnemonic system," ushering images of the past into the present moment, "telescoping the past into the present" (Friedberg 73-4). Benjamin utilized this "mnemonic system" to look into his own past, and specifically his childhood in Berlin, but he also used it to move from one century into another, into the "ur-history" he was attempting to construct. According to Hannah Arendt, Benjamin's relocation to Paris from Berlin was "tantamount to a trip in time—not only from one country to another, but from the twentieth century back to the nineteenth" (qtd. in Friedberg 73). Furthermore, Benjamin believed that only through the mobilized gaze of the stroll through the city could one truly understand the depth of meanings and experiences that characterize a city. Buck-Morss cites Benjamin's essay "Naples" as being a notable (and early) example of Benjamin's use of the stroll to reach such a higher understanding:

There is no lack of humor or entertainment. There is no explicit political message. Rather, hardly noticeable to the reader, an experiment is underway, how images, gathered by a person walking the streets of a city, can be interpreted against the grain of idealist literary style. The images are not subjective impressions, but objective impressions. The phenomena—buildings, human gestures, spatial arrangements—are "read" as a language in which a historically transient truth (and the truth of historical transiency) is expressed concretely, and the city's social formation becomes legible within perceived experience. This experiment would have central methodological import for the *Passagen-Werk*. (27)

In many ways it is this *application* of the stroll toward true spatial and historical understanding—as opposed to some vague sense of the outmoded—that really distinguishes Benjamin's flânerie from that of the Surrealists. Scholem noted that in contrast with Breton and Aragon, Benjamin "was seeking altogether different, strict, and disciplined forms of expression" (qtd. in Friedberg 73). And, in fact, Benjamin himself was at times critical of the "nihilistic-anarchism of the Surrealists," and their "lack of a constructive, dictatorial, and disciplined side to [their] thinking that could 'bind revolt to revolution'" (Buck-Morss 34). If "the Surrealists recognized reality as a dream" and sought to promote and expand upon this sense of a dream world, Benjamin's goal with the *Passagen-Werk* was to "evoke history in order to awaken its readers from [this dream-state]" (ibid).

In *The Dialectics of Seeing*, Susan Buck-Morss notes that the idea of including images in a historical work such as the developing *Passagen-Werk*, as Benjamin had intended, was considered to be extremely daring in the 1930s (71). In the case of *London*, its daring has little to do with the use of images, strictly speaking—which had become a largely uncontroversial, even banal, element of historiography, just as they'd become a part of virtually every other realm—but it does have a lot to do with the *kinds* of images composed and used by Keiller and the manner in which these (still) images are mobilized by the film's narration (as Sinclair puts it, "Movement becomes a function of voice, and voice an instrument.") in a way that resonates with Benjamin's literary montage and its unorthodox historical materialism (*Lights Out* 305). Thus, on the one hand, Keiller, like Benjamin (and Kracauer and Atget), seeks out "the small, discarded objects, the outdated buildings and fashions. . .the 'trash' of history," and he too finds illumination in these elements, he too engages in an act of redemption, but he does so through a cinematographic investigation of the physical city. As Patrick Wright has

282

argued in *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain*, there is much more than mere nostalgia in such a method:

> As so few guide-books ever recognize, this is not merely a matter of noticing old objects situated in a self-evident reality: the present meaning of historical traces such as these is only to be grasped if one takes account of the doubletake or second glance in which they are recognized. The ordinary and habitual perspectives are jarred as the old declares itself in the midst of all this dross. There is active distantiation and even what some philosophers have called "astonishment" to be found in their recognition. (229-230)

Filming such traces inscribes them onto the face of London; making them the substance of a film with a title as audacious as *London* literally rewrites the city. On the other hand, many of the film's shots consist of meticulously composed set pieces, whose aesthetics may not be Atgetian, strictly speaking, but which nevertheless display a similar interest in mapping out the city through an extensive series of still shots, moving from the center to the periphery (what we might call the *zones* of London), and creating a subtle and nuanced portrait of the city (one filled with, "a hidden political significance"[108]) that is overwhelmingly one of *surfaces* (Keiller, "Poetic" 78). On a narrative level, many of these shots highlight the estrangement felt by Robinson and the Narrator towards their surroundings, but Keiller's cinema of surfaces also captures what Benjamin called "a salutary estrangement between man and his surroundings" just as Atget's photographs had earlier. Insight (beyond the surfaces) here comes in three forms: from the details of Keiller's studied compositions, which, "[give] free play to the politically educated eye;" from the syntax of Keiller's film, the way it utilizes its montage to create striking combinations of images; and through its use of text, both in the form of intertitles

---

[108] Keiller is describing Atget here.

and, more importantly, in the form of its voice-over narration. In the end, Keiller's *London* shows a particularly knowing appreciation of Benjamin, his work, and his unorthodox methodology, but what truly distinguishes it is its understanding of how these elements might get translated into a cinematic aesthetic, into "a passionate [if melancholic] film" of London.

Jennings

Humphrey Jennings, the great British documentarian, is only ushered into London once during the course of the film, but his impact is lasting. The moment comes during the scene where the statue commemorating Arthur Harris is being dedicated, precisely when the Queen Mother arrives. "Robinson remembered her in Humphrey Jennings' film," the Narrator announces, "sitting next to Kenneth Clarke, the art historian, at a concert by Dame Myra Hess at the National Gallery in 1941." The film in question is Jennings' *Listen to Britain*, his symphonic, "twenty-four hour" portrait of everyday life in Britain during war, and, in addition to referencing this film, whose understanding of Britain and its particular poetry was clearly something of an inspiration to Keiller, the moment seems to have something to do with Robinson's disappointment with the Queen Mother and with England. It's as if Jennings' film, which had framed the Queen Mother next to Clarke and in the remarkable presence of Dame Myra Hess, had left an indelible impression on Robinson, and suddenly, at the unveiling of the Harris memorial, he'd seen her and the nation she represents also laid bare, as a patriotism that had once been briefly married to art and to the popular was now clearly aligned with mass murder and the

sin of total war. Jennings' 1945 film *A Diary for Timothy*, which deals with the final

days of the war in Britain and the risks of a post-consensus world, sums up the

precariousness of the situation with a question directed directly at Timothy (and the

film's audience): "[Are] you going to make the world a different place…?"

Keiller's film seems to suggest that the nation was let down. More importantly,

though, along with Jean-Luc Godard's *2 ou 3 choses je sais d'elle* and Chris

Marker's *Le Joli Mai*, *A Diary for Timothy* is one of a number of calendrical films

that served as a direct inspiration for London's eleven-month narrative.

The influence of Jennings on *London* goes well beyond this fleeting moment,

though. Jennings' true significance has to do with the central role he played in the

history of British Surrealism, which began from the time he returned from Paris in

the early 1930s, his head now swimming in Baudelaire and Rimbaud, his preferred

artistic medium now photocollage, and culminated in London's International

Surrealist Exhibition in 1936, where he was put in charge of the exhibition's film

program (Remy 50-53, 74). Of particular interest here is a scathing critique of

Herbert Read's accompanying collection of essays entitled *Surrealism* (1936)—"so

expensive, so well produced, so conformistly printed," so lacking in "passion, terror

and excitement"—where Jennings had the following to say about the Surrealist

perception of architecture and the possibility of applying surrealism to the

architecture of England:

> To the real poet the front of the Bank of England may be as excellent
> a site for the appearance of poetry as the depths of the sea. Note the
> careful distinction made by Breton in his article [in *Surrealism*]:
> 'Human psychism in its most universal aspect has found in the Gothic
> castle and its accessories a point of fixation so precise that it becomes
> *essential to discover what would be the equivalent for our own*

> *period*. He continues to say that Surrealism has replaced the
> 'coincidence' for the 'apparition' and that we must 'allow ourselves
> to be guided towards the unknown by this newest *promise*.' Now that
> is talking; and to settle Surrealism down as Romanticism only is to
> deny this promise. It is to cling to apparition with its special 'haunt.'
> It is to look for ghosts only on the battlements, and on battlements
> only for ghosts… 'Coincidences' have the infinite freedom of
> appearing anywhere, anytime, to anyone: in broad daylight to those
> whom we most despise in places we have most loathed… (Remy 97;
> Jennings 14)

During the second expedition, Keiller sets out to be such a "real poet" in the City,
just as Jennings had suggested, only not with the face of the Bank of England, but
with the side of the Oversea Chinese Banking Corporation (the same one that was
mentioned earlier). There, Robinson and the Narrator pay a visit to the "last
remaining fragment of the London Stone," the stone that has marked the heart of the
City since Roman times, the stone that Jack Cade, the legendary Kentish rebel, made
a point of striking with his sword when he took possession of the city in the fifteenth
century, and that now lies half-buried underneath a bank. If ever the City held an
example of one of Aragon's "sacred places" this is it, and Robinson seizes upon the
opportunity to try to take possession of the City himself:

> Robinson could not strike the stone [as Jack Cade had], but he was
> inspired by it and declared Cannon Street to be a sacred site and the
> number 15 bus route a sacred bus route.

If the City is made up of a "labyrinth of streets" that has been "dedicated first and
foremost to Mammon" for some 2,000 years, as Jonathan Glancey has suggested,
then Robinson is interested in re-dedicating this labyrinth, making it his own.

Finally, following up on his thoughts on "the front of the Bank of England,"
Jennings turned against the type of surrealism that privileged the unconscious and
towards "a repertoire of public images that were accessible to almost every English

person," a decisive turn that Mary-Lou Jennings, his daughter, accredits to the fact

that, "England was a more serious place at the end of the decade: unemployment

and the real threat of war affected everyone physically and intellectually"

(Hodgkinson and Sheratsky 25; "Humphrey Jennings" x). This process began

already in 1936 with his ambitious Mass Observation project (together with Stuart

Legg, David Gascoyne, and Charles Madge), which sought to respond to the

abdication crisis with a sweeping study of everyday life across the nation,[109] and

continued with his turn to documentary filmmaking and his distinctive brand of

poetic-realism. But aside from landmark films like *Listen to Britain* and *A Diary for*

---

[109] According to a letter to the *New Statesman and Nation* co-signed by Jennings, this study was to cover such topics as:

> Behaviour of people at war memorials; Shouts and gestures of motorists; The aspidistra cult; Anthropology of football pools; Bathroom behaviour; Beards, armpits, eyebrows; Anti-semitism; Distribution, diffusion and significance of the dirty joke; Funerals and undertakers; Female taboos about eating; The private lives of midwives.

Furthermore, the letter concluded:

> …[This study] does not set out in quest of truth or facts for their own sake, or for the sake of an intellectual minority, but aims at exposing them in simple terms to all observers, so that their environment may be understood and thus constantly transformed. Whatever the political methods called upon to effect the transformation, the knowledge of what has to be transformed is indispensable. The foisting of mass ideals or ideas developed by men apart from it, irrespective of its capacities, causes mass misery, intellectual despair and an international shambles. (Jennings, *Humphrey* 16-17)

Remy describes the investigation as, "running halfway between the ghosts of Marx and Freud," but the British Surrealists in the group—like Jennings—soon became frustrated. Remy explains:

> Mass Observation could have provided surrealism with concrete anchorage in British society's everyday life. But Tom Harrisson's purely ethnological viewpoint and his unwillingness to take sides politically distanced his undertaking from the main surrealist propositions. (102-3)

Timothy, and a shared interest in Apollinaire[110] and "the spectacle of Trooping the

Colour,"[111] the biggest influence on Keiller came from Jennings' masterpiece of

"surrealist history," *Pandaemonium: The Coming of the Machine as Seen by

Contemporary Observers, 1660-1886* (Saler 124).

In 1938, Jennings gave a radio lecture entitled "The Disappearance of

Ghosts" where he had the following to say:

> Now the obvious question is, "What is the future of ghosts in poetry?"
> But I suggest that the proper question to ask is, "What is the future of
> poetry without ghosts?" We have spent three hundred years or more
> in the position of Hamlet—increasingly terrified of the possible
> impact of ghosts on existence. What our poets have to do is to find
> the modern equivalent of the sword, wine, water, flour and blood that
> Ulysses used to ask the *past* about the future.[112] (Jackson 255)

This concern with the "visionary links between the past and present" was not new, it

was something he'd addressed repeatedly since returning from France, but that very

same year, Jennings seemed to respond to his own question when he began to work

on what proved to be the "germ of *Pandaemonium*": a "collection of texts on the

---

[110] Mary-Lou Jennings writes: "In 1938 he did a series of talks on the radio on
poetry and national life… He spoke of Apollinaire who said that the poet must stand
with his back to the future because he was unable to see it: it was in the past that he
would discover who he was and how he had come to be" (x-xi).
[111] In the case of Jennings, the context was a digression on "the English love of
pattern" that calls to mind Kracauer's "Mass Ornament":
> This is the English love of pattern, of order, one of their fundamental
> qualities. It is responsible for their delight in ships, the supreme
> example of a patterned life, for their fame abroad as troupe dancers
> (Les Girls), for the spectacle of Trooping the Colour. (Jennings,
> *Humphrey* 43)
In the case of Keiller, there's a famous scene in *London* that focuses on this custom.
Afterwards, the Narrator comments with characteristic irony, "I was amazed by the
precision and splendour of the display and the squalor of the surrounding city and its
suburbs."
[112] The reference here is to Ulysses' performance of a "thrilling ritual to summon up
the dead," pouring the ingredients listed above into a "kind of grave" (Jackson 255).

Impact of the Machine" (Remy 51; Jennings, "Humphrey" xi). The book that

resulted, a sprawling collection of hundreds of "images"—quotations chosen for

their "imaginative impact," for their "revolutionary and symbolic and illuminatory

quality"—together with pithy commentary by Jennings, that attempts to reconstruct

the imaginative history of the Industrial Revolution, has drawn comparison with

Walter Benjamin's own "surrealist history," *The Arcades Project*, and with good

reason, not the least of which being that Jennings' book, too, remained unfinished at

the time of his (premature) death (Madge xviii; Jennings, *Pandaemonium* xxxv).[113]

Among the most striking points of convergence between the work of Jennings and

Benjamin had to do with a shared skepticism towards orthodox Marxism. As

Michael Saler points out:

> [Jennings] was familiar with Marx's *Capital*, and the trajectory of
> *Pandaemonium*'s images traced the conflict between the "peasants"
> and the "bourgeoisie." But Jennings, like Benjamin and Breton, was
> uncomfortable with the orthodox Marxist view that subordinated art
> to praxis. He insisted that art would always remain more profound
> than either politics or economics. When he joined the GPO Film Unit
> in 1934, he spurned the social-realist approach of its head, John
> Grierson, and the two never got along. Historical materialism made
> up one half of the history represented in *Pandaemonium*, but the force
> of the imagination was its equal complement. (132)

Furthermore, Jennings' montage, like Benjamin's, was explicitly meant to, "awaken

the public from the imposed dreams, or ideologies, of a particular class in order to

realize their own utopian dreams retained within the collective unconscious." As

Jennings put it: "The English at present are sleeping… But in their dreams they

know very well that they will have to rise and go forth" (Saler 131).

---

[113] For a more detailed enumeration of the similarities between Jennings'
Pandaemonium and Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*, see Saler (2000).

Aside from a shared methodology, including a shared interest in conjuring ghosts (including the film's invisible protagonists) and in making "the function of 'imagination'…an essential part of the modern world," the strongest correspondence between *London* and *Pandaemonium* comes through a passage that shows up late in both texts. While exploring Trafalgar Square one day, Robinson tells the Narrator, "of another exile, Alexander Herzen, the Russian socialist, who arrived in London at the end of August 1852 and lived initially" on the square. That evening Robinson reads a passage from Herzen's memoirs, but the passage he selects is almost exactly the one that appears in *Pandaemonium* under the title "Herzen in London," one of many "images" devoted to the great metropolis. In the original, London's bleakness, its oppressiveness is actually a positive, helping to galvanize Herzen and renewing his commitment to writing: "I set to work upon *My Past and Thoughts* [i.e. the very volume we're reading], and upon founding a Russian printing press" (143). In both the Jennings and the Keiller version, however, the portrait is unremittingly melancholy:

> There is no town in the world which is more adapted for training one away from people and training one into solitude than London. The manner of life, the distances, the climate, the very multitude of the population in which the individual is lost, all this together with the absence of Continental diversion conduces to the same effect. One who knows how to live alone has nothing to fear from the dullness of London. The life here, like the atmosphere here, is bad for the weak, for the frail, for one who seeks a prop outside himself, for one who seeks cordiality, sympathy, attention; the moral lungs here must be as strong as the physical lungs, whose task it is to get rid of the sulphuric acid in the smoky fog. The masses are saved by the struggle for daily bread, the commercial classes by their absorption in heaping up wealth, and all by the fuss and hurry of business; but nervous and romantic temperaments, fond of living among their fellows, of intellectual sloth and emotional idleness, are bored to death and fall into despair.

Wandering lonely about London, through its stony lanes and
through its stifling passages, sometimes not seeing a step before me
for the thick, opaline fog, and running against flying shadows—I
lived through a great deal.

In the evening when my son had gone to bed, I usually went out for
a walk; I scarcely ever went to see any one; I read the newspapers and
stared in taverns at the alien race, and stood on the bridges across the
Thames.

I used to sit and look, and my soul would grow quieter and more
peaceful. And so through all this I came to love this dreadful antheap,
where every night a hundred thousand men know not where they will
lay their heads, and the police often find women and children dead of
hunger beside hotels where one cannot dine for less than two pounds.
(Herzen 140-2)[114]

Opening this sequence with a stunning, Kaufmanesque "tiers of space" shot that

compresses a number of London's bridges into a meditation on metropolitan motion

and traffic (birds, water, vehicles, pedestrians), on fitfulness and tedium, Keiller uses

the ghost of Herzen to question the past about the future.

The SI

Beginning in the 1950s, Paris went through a process of renovation and

modernization unprecedented since Haussmann had carried out his great projects.

[Between] the years of 1954 and 1974 Paris underwent the demolition
and reconstruction of a full 24 percent of its buildable surface.
Modernity and hygiene served as a pretext for the demolition of entire
quartiers: Montparnasse, Italie, Belleville, Bercy. The Haussmanian
projects of the mid-nineteenth century were the occasion for the first
great emptying out of the city's poor. Under the second wave of
expulsions, between 1954 and 1974, Paris proper lost 19 percent of its
population—about 550,000 people, or approximately the population
of Lyon. But that statistic masks what was in fact a profound
reworking of the social boundaries of the city as a result of the

---

[114] One might compare Herzen's version of London with Engels' in his *Condition of
the Working Class in England*. Despite a certain admiration for London's immense
productivity, nowhere does Engels come close to stating, "I came to love this
dreadful antheap."

renovation projects: in those years the number of workers living in
Paris declined by 44 percent. They were dispersed to the outlying
suburbs, while the number of *cadres supérieurs* increased by 51
percent. As in the nineteenth century the reasons justifying the
reappropriation of space were the same: hygiene and security. And
as in the nineteenth century, when recently arrived provincial day
labourers—the future Communards of 1871—labored on the urban
renewal projects (thus constituting both the instruments and the main
victims of the transformation), the twentieth century modernization
employed a large number of recently arrived foreign immigrants
toward the reconquest of the central areas by the middle classes.
(Ross, *Fast Cars* 151)

Here, again, was an example of how renovation, "is always aggressive, requiring

active state intervention into the urban structure with a view toward changing the

function and social contexts of an already existing space" (ibid 153-4). And as the

"violence" of the Haussmanization of Paris had in many ways led to a radical

response in the form of the Commune, the "violence" of the Parisian renovations of

the 1950s received a (much more limited) radical response from the Lettrist

International, as well as the small but influential group that would eventually emerge

out of the LI, the Situationist International. Founded in the early 1950s and led, for

all intents and purposes, by Guy Debord, the SI[115] is primarily associated with their

critique of "the society of the spectacle," but the SI is also notable for the critique of

urbanism which they levelled at the reconstruction of Paris during the 1950s, and

which was very closely tied to their critique of the "spectacle."[116]

Perhaps the two most important terms and concepts developed by the SI as

part of their "critique of urbanism" were "psychogeography" and the "dérive." In his

"Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography," Debord noted that the term

---

[115]For the sake of convenience I will simply use the term SI from this point on. I, as
well as many others, see the SI as being a logical outgrowth of the LI. This is
especially true with regards to their work on the urban environment.
[116]And thus calls to mind Benjamin's discussion of the Commune as a response to
the "phantasmagoria" of Haussmannization.

"psychogeography" had been coined by "an illiterate Kabyle"[117] in order to describe

"the phenomena a few of us were investigating around the summer of 1953" (5). If

geography "deals with the determinant action of general natural forces. . .on the

economic structures of society, and thus on the corresponding conception that such a

society can have of the world," then "*psychogeography* could set for itself the study

of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously

organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals" (ibid). Debord then

gave a more specific set of examples for what he meant by this term:

> The sudden change of ambiance in a street within the space of a few
> meters; the evident division of a city into zones of distinct psychic
> atmospheres; the path of least resistance which is automatically
> followed in aimless strolls (and which has no relation to the physical
> contour of the ground); the appealing or repelling character of certain
> places--all this seems to be neglected. In any case it is never
> envisaged as depending on causes that can be uncovered by careful
> analysis and turned to account. . . The research that we are thus led to
> undertake on the arrangement of the elements of the urban setting, in
> close relation with the sensations they provoke, entails bold
> hypotheses that must constantly be corrected in light of experience, by
> critique and self-critique. (ibid 6-7)

Much of this research was to be carried out through the practice of the dérive (or

"drift"). "The dérive entails playful-constructive behavior and awareness of

psychogeograpical effects," characteristics which, according to Debord, completely

distinguishes this activity "from the classical notions of the journey and the stroll"

("Theory" 50). Debord continued:

> In a dérive one or more persons during a certain period drop their
> usual motives for movement and action, their relations, their work and
> leisure activities, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the
> terrain and the encounters they find there. The element of chance is
> less determinant than one might think: from the dérive point of view

---

[117] The Kabyle, as Pile explains, "inhabited part of Algeria and were the subject of
anthropological research by people like Pierre Bourdieu." The reference revealed
the Lettrists allegiances with regards to the Algerian conflict.

> cities have a psychogeographical relief, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes which strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones. (ibid)

Whereas the term psychogeography could be applied to any type of environment one came into contact with, the dérive, as conceptualized by the SI, was a more specifically urban practice, "in its element in the great industrially transformed cities--those centers of possibilities and meanings," and he noted that the dérive could be expressed by Marx's phrase: "Men can see nothing around them that is not their own image; everything speaks to them of themselves. Their very landscape is alive" (ibid 51). Eventually, these forms of research would be applied towards the establishment of "unitary urbanism," whereby "present city-planning (that geology of lies) will be replaced by a technique for defending the permanently threatened conditions of freedom, and individuals--who do not exist as such--will begin freely constructing their own history" (Kotanyi 67). In short, unitary urbanism was an attempt to envisage "a terrain of experience for the *social space* of the cities of the future," indicating the affinities the SI's critique of urbanism shared with the work of Reclus ("Unitary Urbanism" 143).

If psychogeography was the study of the effects of the geographical environment on the individual, in practice psychogeography amounted to singling out locations in Paris that still held the power to trigger intense, at times disorienting, psychological effects. Asger Jorn described psychogeography as "the science fiction of urban planning," meaning, in part, that it involved discovering and studying psychogeographical phenomena in the built environment as it stood, as it had come together, "making a nonsense of the Corbusian fantasy of the city as something abstract, rational, or ideal" (Sadler 77). In a 1955 edition of *Potlatch*—the LI's journal--Michèle Bernstein, writing about one of the psychogeographical locations the group was studying, described the "unities of ambiance" that characterized the

Square des Missions Étrangères. For Bernstein, this site, although thoroughly

bourgeois and decidedly unfashionable by the opinion of the day, still possessed

something to "haunt the visitor" (Sadler). These haunting qualities somehow arose

from the fact that this square was a terminal point in the city, presided over by "a

bust of Chateaubriand in the form of the god Terminus," and that the space had an

odd, intriguing form, forking in an altogether unusual manner (ibid). To intensify

the confusion and fascination created by this arrangement, Bernstein recommended

that the site be "besieged at night" (ibid). Another of the SI's favorite

psychogeographical locations was the Beaubourg district, with its decrepit Les

Halles market, an ideal, if decaying, example of the nineteenth-century iron and glass

construction that so fascinated Benjamin. Somehow, at the time, despite its central

location, "the spectacle of modernization had bypassed this part of Paris" (ibid 63).

> [Beaubourg] was a recognizably working-class area, where
> pedestrians rather than motorized traffic had priority on the streets,
> and where commercial exchange still took place over transitory
> market stalls, or in small shops, rather than in the chic boutiques or
> monumental department stores a little further north and west. Here in
> the center of late-fifties Paris, Debord and Jorn correctly identified a
> gap in the Parisian spectacle. (ibid)

Potlatch frequently recommended other sources of the psychogeographical sublime

as well, including two of the "best-surviving examples of picturesque gardening

around Paris, the Désert de Retz and the Parc Monceau," and it advised its readers to

embark in comparisons of two great masters of the sublime, Claude Lorrain and

Giovanni Battista Piranesi, whose *Vedute* (views of ancient and modern Rome) and

Carceri d'Invenzione (imaginary prisons) had fascinated Charles Baudelaire and

Thomas de Quincey, as well as the architect Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, among others.

Potlatch also gave the honor of "psychogeography in architecture" to Ferdinand

Cheval, the French postman who had built a personal exotic palace in his spare time,

and they praised Edgar Allan Poe, who had fascinated Baudelaire and Benjamin, for his "psychogeography in landscape" (ibid 75). With its concept of psychogeography, the SI turned to the city and discovered "obscure places. . .elusive ambient effects and partial artistic and literary precedents for the sublime"--this was a conscious attempt to reconsider and re-experience the city against the grain (ibid 76).

In their "Report on the Construction of Situations" the SI explained what was meant by their term "situation" and how this term related to their notion of (and critique of) the "spectacle":

> The construction of situations begins on the ruins of the modern spectacle. It is easy to see the extent to which the very principle of the spectacle—nonintervention—is linked to the alienation of the old world. Conversely, the most pertinent revolutionary experiments in culture have sought to break the spectator's psychological identification with the hero so as to draw him into activity. . .The situation is thus made to be lived by its constructor. ("Preliminary" 43)

Whereas Henri Lefebvre, in discussions with the SI, had argued that the development of "individual love had created situations" and had led to "a creation of situations," the SI held that they had a better example of this process, stating that "in the city one could create new situations by, for example, linking up parts of the city, neighborhoods that were separated spatially" (Ross, "Lefebvre" 73). According to Lefebvre, "that was the first meaning of the dérive" (ibid). The term dérive was of nautical origin and had been largely inspired by the wanderings of Thomas de Quincey through the streets of nineteenth-century London and the manner in which de Quincey had approached and described the city using nautical terms and references to Western narratives of discovery. For instance, in one memorable section of his *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1821), de Quincey wrote:

Some of these rambles led me to great distances: for an opium-eater is too happy to observe the motion of time. And sometimes in my attempts to steer homewards, upon nautical principles, by fixing my eye on the pole-star, and seeking ambitiously for a north-west passage, instead of circumnavigating all the capes and headlands I had doubled in my outward voyage, I came suddenly upon such knotty problems of alleys, such enigmatical entries, and such sphinx's riddles of streets without thoroughfares, as must, I conceive, baffle the audacity of porters, and confound the intellects of hackney-coachmen. I could almost have believed, at times, that I must be the first discoverer of some of these *terrae incognitae*, and doubted, whether they had yet been laid down in the modern charts of London. (81)

If the study of psychogeography was interested primarily in locating and studying areas of the city that were riddled with "unities of ambiance," the dérive was meant to identify the *correspondances* between these areas, and to study the pathways and flows that linked them together. One important concept that was developed as a result of these investigations was the "*plaque tournante*," or psychogeographic hub. The term *plaque tournante* was a typical example of the SI's use of complex, multi-layered wordplay, for it could mean everything from "the center of something," to a "railway turntable," to "a place of exchange" (i.e. drugs), but for the SI it meant primarily an area with particularly strong "unities of ambiance" that acted as a hub connecting and pointing towards a number of psychogeographic zones. Thus, Les Halles provides a perfect example of the concept because not only was it a central (*the* central?) *plaque tournante*, but as a site famed for its "markets, drinking, prostitution, and drugs," Les Halles was a *plaque tournante* in all of its senses (Sadler 88). Another excellent example of a *plaque tournante*, and one of Debord's favorite discoveries, was Ledoux's tollhouse (1786), near the Place de Stalingrad. In "Two Accounts of the Dérive," Debord provided an account (in the third person) of how he and Gil J. Wolman had come across this near-ruin, as well as his thoughts on its psychogeographic qualities and its merits as a *plaque tournante*:

Shortly thereafter they suddenly came upon the far end of the canal [Saint-] Martin and unexpectedly find themselves facing the impressive rotunda by Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, a virtual ruin left in an incredible state of abandonment, whose charm is singularly enhanced by the curve of the elevated subway line that passes by at close distance. . .

  Upon studying the terrain the Lettrists feel able to discern the existence of an important *plaque tournante*--its center occupied by the Ledoux rotunda--that could be defined as a Jaurès-Stalingrad unity, opening out onto at least four significant psychogeographical bearings. . .and probably more. . .One should no doubt liken this to the clearly psychogeographic appeal of the illustrations found in books for very young schoolchildren; here, for didactic reasons, one finds collected in a single image a harbor, a mountain, an isthmus, a forest, a river, a dike, a cape, a bridge, a ship, and an archipelago. Claude Lorrain's images of harbors are not unrelated to this procedure. (139)

The dérive functioned as a "transgression of the alienated world," for by "cutting freely across urban space, drifters would gain a revolutionary perception of the city, a 'radical disordering of the senses' of the sort demanded by Rimbaud, encountering both the city's embarrassing contrasts of material wealth and its clandestine glories of popular culture and history" such as Les Halles and the Ledoux rotunda (Sadler 94). And if, as Debord argued, "the new beauty can only be a beauty of situation," the dérive was a vehicle towards transforming the modern city into just such "*a sum of possibilities*" ("Introduction" 7).

If the dérive took its inspiration from literary sources, it also sutured literary material into the fabric of the city in ways reminiscent of the Surrealists' urbanism, transforming the city into a text quite other than the one the modernizers intended. Years after they had engaged in dérives together, the former SI member and novelist Alexander Trocchi had the following recollection:

There was a magical quality to Guy [Debord]. . .Distances didn't seem to matter to the man. Walking in London, in the daytime, at night, he'd bring me to a spot he'd found, and the place would begin to live. Some old, forgotten part of London. Then he'd reach back for a story, for a piece of history, as if he'd been born there. He'd

quote from Marx, or *Treasure Island*, or de Quincey—do you know
de Quincey? (Marcus 388).

Thus, one who takes part in the dérive takes "psychogeographic bearings" and

becomes a "theorist of space as others are of text," but there is a sense here in which

the dérive is also an essay "written" in space (60). In an interview with Kristin Ross,

Lefebvre once commented on his understanding of Situationist spatial practices and

the part he played in developing them:

> HL: As I perceived it, the *dérive* was more of a practice than a
> theory. It revealed the growing fragmentation of the city. In the
> course of its history the city was once a powerful organic unity; for
> some time, however, that unity was becoming undone, was
> fragmenting, and [the Situationists] were recording examples of what
> we had all been talking about. . .We had a vision of a city that was
> more and more fragmented without its organic unity being completely
> shattered. . .We thought that the practice of the *dérive* revealed the
> idea of the fragmented city.
> KR: . . .The *dérive* took the form of a narrative.
> HL: That's it; one goes along. . .and recounts what one sees. . .a
> synchronic history. That was the meaning of unitary urbanism: unify
> what has a certain unity, but a lost unity, a disappearing unity.

Among the richest and most intriguing texts to have emerged from the SI's

work in the 1950s were a couple of psychogeographic maps of Paris: the *Guide*

Psychogeographique de Paris (1956) and *The Naked City* (1957); both of which

were made at the point of transition from the LI and the SI. In his "Introduction to a

Critique of Urban Geography," written for the Belgian Surrealist journal *Les Lèvres*

Nues in 1955, Debord had stated that "the production of psychogeographic maps. . .

can contribute to clarify certain wanderings that express not subordination to

randomness but complete *insubordination* to habitual influences,"[118] thus

---

[118]In "Theory of the Dérive," Debord had mentioned Chombart de Lauwe's *Paris et
l'agglomération parisienne* (1952), in which "in order to illustrate 'the narrowness of
the real Paris in which each individual lives. . .within a geographical area whose
radius in extremely small,' he diagrams all the movements made in the space of one
year by a student living in the 16th arrondisement." Debord commented that the
results of particular study of movement was an example "of a modern poetry capable

condemning the embrace of irrationality of the Surrealists and positing a much more pointed practice (7). The Situationist maps were collaborations between Debord and Asger Jorn created out of fragments from maps—a popular "bird's eye view" map of Paris in the case of the *Guide Psychogéographique*, the definitive *Plan de Paris* in the case of *The Naked City*—that were then placed on a white background (often at oblique angles) and connected with bright red arrows placed between the map fragments. As Greil Marcus has noted, these maps resemble the imaginary maps created by geographers to explain continental drift, but the original source of inspiration for these creations was the *Carte du Pays du Tendre* of 1656 (Marcus 389; McDonough, "Situationist" 60-1). Created by Madeleine de Scudéry and the members of her salon, the *Carte* "uses the metaphor of spatial journey to trace possible histories of a love affair," and it anticipates the psychogeographic maps in that all three maps "are figured as narratives rather than as tools of 'universal knowledge'. . .[and] the users of these maps were asked to choose a directionality and to overcome obstacles, although there was no 'proper' reading" (McDonough, "Situationist" 60-1). That said, the push and pull of certain districts was plainly evident. Thus, as McDonough explains, "the nationalist monument of the Panthéon exerted a repellent force, while the 'haunted' Place Dauphine, so dear to André Breton, had an attractive power" ("Fluid Spaces" 96). The two psychogeographic maps also provide a perfect example of the SI's use of *détournement*, or the "theft of aesthetic artifacts from their contexts and their diversion into contexts of one's own device," and "into a superior construction of a milieu" (Marcus 168; "Definitions" 45). For the SI, the dérive was also a form of *détournement*, for it took the existing elements of the city, reappropriated them, and put these elements to entirely new, at times transcendent, uses ("Unitary" 144). Thus, a psychogeographic map such a *The*

---

of provoking sharp emotional reactions (in this case, indignation at the fact that there are people who live like that)" (50).

Naked City included a détourned title (the title was borrowed from the Jules Dassin *film noir* of 1947) and nineteen détourned fragments of the *Plan de Paris*, but it was also based on the *détournement* of the city through the SI's psychogeographic explorations, and it was meant to encourage others to engage in similar acts of *détournement*. The fragmentation of the *Plan de Paris* was quite clearly meant to graphically represent the fragmentation of Paris mentioned by Lefebvre earlier, but it served other purposes as well. For one thing, the fragments "cover a rather compact portion of the center of Paris" and the precision with which they were selected and cut suggests "that every street integral to each unity, and every street bordering it, was walked and considered," indicating to what extent the SI's *dérives* and their mapping of their findings amounted to a reclamation of the center of Paris (and a call for an even more radical reclamation) in a manner analogous to the reclamation of the *centre-ville* carried out by the Communards.[119] Buth these heavily fragmented maps also call to mind Michel de Certeau's use of the terms *synecdoche* and *asyndeton* with regards to space (101). "*The Naked City* names parts of the city. . . instead of the whole ('Paris') that includes them," and in this synecdochic manner, the SI's fragmented version of Paris comes to replace the totalizing vision of the *Plan de Paris* (McDonough, "Situationist" 64). Furthermore, *The Naked City*'s "suppression of linkages, between various 'unities of atmosphere,' except for schematic directional arrows," corresponds to the process of *asyndeton*, whereby "in walking it selects and fragments the space traversed. . .[skipping] over links and whole parts that it omits" (ibid 65; de Certeau 101). These various qualities shared

---

[119]The Situationists (and Henri Lefebvre) were fascinated by the Commune, and especially the Communards' destruction of the Vendôme Column, which, as Kristin Ross has written, represented "violence and destruction as complete reappropriation: the creation, through destruction, of a positive social void, the refusal of the dominant organization of social space and the supposed neutrality of monuments" (*Emergence* 39).

by the psychogeographic maps encouraged new ways of approaching and using the city but they also called into question abstractions of space and a whole history of fundamentally anti-democratic forms of urbanism. Thus, as Thomas McDonough argues in "Situationist Space":

> This discourse [that of the *Plan de Paris*] is predicated on the appearance of optical coherence, on what Henri Lefebvre called the reduction of the city to "the undifferentiated state of the visible-readable realm." This abstract space homogenizes the conflicts that produce capitalist space; the terrain of the *Plan de Paris* is that of Haussmannized Paris, where modernization had evicted the working class from its traditional quarters in the center of the city and then segregated the city along class lines. But abstract space is riddled with contradictions; most importantly, it not only conceals difference, its acts of division and exclusion are productive of difference. Distinctions and difference are not eradicated, they are only hidden in the homogeneous space of the *Plan*. *The Naked City* brings these distinctions and differences out into the open, the violence of its fragmentation suggesting the real violence involved in constructing the city of the *Plan*. (65)

The only reference to the SI and their concepts and practices which appears in *London* is a fleeting and somewhat indirect one. The moment comes early in the film as the Narrator (and the viewer) is still in the process of being introduced to the nature of Robinson's investigation. It also comes on the heels of the Narrator's comments on Baudelaire and Romanticism. As the shot of the McDonald's restaurant comes to a close, the Narrator recounts:

> He [Robinson] was searching for the location of a memory: a vivid recollection of a row of small factories backing onto a canal. But they no longer exist and he has adopted the neighborhood as a site for exercises in psychic landscaping, drifting, and free association. . .
> He seemed to be attempting to travel through time.

In addition to his treatment of the city as a mnemonic device, and the way in which this scene calls to mind Benjamin's experiments with "time travel," Robinson is clearly engaging in Situationist-inspired spatial practices, with "drifting" being a

clear reference to the *dérive*, and "psychic landscaping" being some kind of

euphemism for psychogeography. Moreover, the entire narrative serves as a virtual

ode to the psychogeographic activities of the SI.[120] Robinson's three expeditions

across London and its environs are ideal examples of the *dérive*, which as Debord

pointed out is most "fruitful" when carried out in "small groups of two or three

people who have reached the same awakening of consciousness;" and although "the

average duration of a *dérive* is one day. . .certain *dérives* of a sufficient intensity

have been sustained for three or four days, or even longer" (as those of Robinson and

the Narrator do) ("Theory" 51-2). The *dérives* and investigations carried out by

Robinson and the Narrator are also clearly inspired by a vast number of literary

sources (including the SI's works, presumably), and the film acts as a sort of "essay

written in space"—reinscribing Rimbaud's work into the surface/s of the city, for

instance—as well as a "narrative," both in the sense that the characters' *dérives* serve

as the writing of narratives on/in the city, and in the sense that they are part of

Keiller's narrative. And just as the psychogeographic maps provide examples of

synecdoche and *asyndeton*, so does *London*. Arguably, *London*'s play with

synecdoche is even more forceful than, say, *The Naked City*, because its title goes

even further towards replacing the abstract space of the dominant London, with

Keiller's heavily fragmented version (which reflects Robinson's claim, "that London

was now a city of fragments that were no longer organized around the centre…").

And *London*, too, uses the concept of *asyndeton* towards "opening up gaps in the

spatial continuum" while "retaining only selected parts of it" towards a radical

reinterpretation of the urban environment (McDonough, "Situationist" 65).

---

[120]This hardly shocking given the influence of the SI on British counterculture
historically, and especially since "On the Passage of a few people through a rather
brief moment in time: the Situationist International, 1957-1972," a major exhibition
on the SI showed at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, in the summer of
1989.

London's turn towards these means and methods was a reaction to the deleterious effects of Thatcherism on the city of London, much in the same way that the SI developed their "critique of urbanism" in the face of unprecedented modernization in Paris.

Perhaps the most concrete example of the SI's influence on *London* comes if one looks at the concept of the *plaque tournante* as it appears in Keiller's film. While there are a few locations that qualify as *plaques tournantes* on some level, the most significant of these is the City of London itself, and especially the area that immediately surrounds St. Paul's Cathedral. As we've seen, Keiller is fascinated by the City for two principal reasons: on the one hand, having been the former limits of London proper, it contains a particularly dense concentration of London's history, and, on the other hand, the City is the seat of British finance, and in an era of intense crises during which London as a whole was felt by many to have been under siege, the City continued not only to prosper and to wield an enormous amount of influence over British politics, but it managed to solidify its status as a center of global finance as well.[121] Robinson and the Narrator visit and re-visit the City over and over again, and it becomes a hub for two of their expeditions. They come to study its streets and its spaces, to uncover its forgotten monuments (such as "the Stone of London") and to build other invisible monuments (such as that for Rimbaud), and they come to draw attention to its affluence (and influence) and its failures, and to search out its gaps. This focus on the City sheds a great deal of light on what exactly characterized "Thatcherism," and it serves to argue that "the problem of London" is wrapped up in the City and its ties to Westminster. However, the City, because of its deep (and oftentimes strange) well of history, is also a positive attraction for Robinson and the Narrator. In his SI text "Formulary for a New Urbanism," Ivan Chtcheglov wrote:

---

[121]For more on this see Rubinstein (1993).

All cities are geological; you cannot take three steps without
encountering ghosts bearing all the prestige of their legends. We
move within a *closed* landscape whose landmarks constantly draw us
toward the past. Certain *shifting* angles, certain *receding*
perspectives, allow us to glimpse original conceptions of space, but
this vision remains fragmentary. (1)

If this is the case for "all cities," it is certainly the case for London, and especially the City, as depicted by Keiller. And it is this "geological" character of the City which provides Robinson and the Narrator with fleeting glimpses of utopia, of hope, even within the heart of "the problem of London." One of the more interesting of these moments comes late in the film, as Robinson and the Narrator had been drifting in the vicinity of St. Paul's. As the camera displays shots of ancient and anonymous buildings on an anonymous cobblestone street, the Narrator recounts the following:

We found ourselves in a street that neither of us knew. In fact,
Robinson was convinced that the last time he'd visited St. Paul's the
street had not been there at all. We heard music then laughter and
voices. . .not in English, but in French. We tried the door but could
not get in. Robinson had wandered London for years searching for
the conviviality of café life. At last he had found it, and where else
but in the City, with its ancient sanctuaries and superstitions.

Although the scene clearly calls to mind de Quincey's account of having discovered *terrae incognitae*, what is crucial here is that in their disoriented state they have experienced a vision (an aural hallucination) of *French* café life. In other words, their utopian vision, fueled by French literature, is of some Parisian bohemia that no longer exists. In his astonishment Robinson makes an enthusiastic prediction: "As the City decayed it would become reclaimed by artists, poets and musicians—the pioneers of urbanism—as the docks and markets had been twenty years before." Keiller, however, knows better; he knows that the City is not really decaying, quite the opposite. By the film's end, as the camera captures images of destruction in the form of a Guy Fawkes' Day pyre, the Narrator pronounces Robinson's conclusions on "the problem of London," its requiem:

The failure of London was rooted in the English fear of cities. . .The fear of Europe that had disenfranchised Londoners and undermined their society. . .The true identity of London. . .is in its absence. As a city it no longer exists. In this it is truly modern. London was the first metropolis to have disappeared.

Chapter 6: *Robinson in Space*

> Reality as it evolves sweeps me with it. I'm struck by everything and
> though not everything strikes me in the same way, I'm always struck
> by the same basic contradiction. Although I can always see how
> beautiful anything could be if I could only change it, in practically
> every case there is nothing I can really do. Everything is changed into
> something else in my imagination. Then the dead weight of things
> changes it into what it was in the first place. A bridge between
> imagination and reality must be built.

With this passage from Raoul Vaneigem's *The Revolution of Everyday Life*—the

book that, along with Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, is one of the two

literary bombshells dropped by the Situationist International in 1967—spoken by the

Narrator (once again, performed with great panache by Paul Scofield) and set against

a tracking shot taken from a train heading west away from London's Paddington

Station, Patrick Keiller launches *Robinson in Space*, his 1997 sequel to *London*.

Once again we, the audience, are presented with the exploits of Robinson and the

Narrator, and neither is ever depicted onscreen. Once again, the film displays an

interest in what Keiller (following Vaneigem) calls "revolutionary subjectivity" or

"more-or-less radical subjectivity,"[122] phrases he associates with, "the subjective

transformation of already existing space" through the use of the motion picture

camera and the "phenomenon of *photogénie*," through its ability to transform space

(Wright, "A Conversation" 230; Kerr 82; Keiller, "Port" 445; Keiller,

"Architectural" 37). "Films don't represent experience of architecture," Keiller has

said, "they reconstruct it" (Kerr 83). But here this concept is quite explicitly tied to

---

[122] The passage above comes from a section in chapter 23 of Vaneigem's book
entitled "Radical Subjectivity" (245).

the notion of representational space that Henri Lefebvre opposes to the abstract space

and its "reproducibility, repetition, and reproduction of social relationships" in *The*

Production of Space:

> Representational spaces… need obey no rules of consistence or
> cohesiveness. Redolent with imaginary and symbolic elements, they
> have their source in history—in the history of a people as well as in
> the history of each individual belonging to that people. (Dimendberg,
> *Film Noir* 106; Lefebvre 41)

In fact, the Narrator so much as announces so minutes later. Having lost his job as a

university lecturer and suffered from a bout of depression in the years since the

publication of his study of London, the film begins with Robinson living in Reading

where he teaches English in a language school. Despite the squalor of his day-to-day

existence (poor accommodations, a "poorly paid and insecure" job, a bad diet, and

no friends), the Narrator finds Robinson strangely upbeat, entranced by Reading's

literary associations (Rimbaud, Jane Austen, Oscar Wilde, and even a vague

connection to Sherlock Holmes) and seemingly oblivious of the town's

overwhelming provincialism. The Narrator is skeptical of Robinson's newfound

enthusiasm and his Rimbaldian "commitment to *the derangement of the senses*" in a

locale as inhospitable as Reading. "I did not think that Robinson's move to Reading

was a good one," he announces.

> Despite his vision, "that other people could become fellows and
> neighbors," the fact is that, as Lefebvre says, "The space which
> contains the realized preconditions of another life is the same one as
> prohibits what those preconditions make possible."

The passage comes from a section of *The Production of Space* where Lefebvre

discusses modernity and "mirage effects"—the fact that, "the illusion of a new life is

everywhere reinforced"—and what he concludes, in a passage that speaks directly to

Robinson's state of mind (not to mention Vaneigem's), is that,

> [the] seeming limpidity of... space is… a delusion: it appears to make
> elucidation unnecessary, but in reality it urgently requires elucidation.
> A total revolution—material, economic, social political, psychic,
> cultural, erotic, etc.—seems to be in the offing, as though already
> immanent to the present. To change life, however, we must first
> change space. (189-190)

With *Robinson in Space*, Patrick Keiller presents the audience once again with what

one might call a Kracauerian cinema of surfaces—in fact, the film's opening section

on Reading[123] also includes a clever *détournement* of a famous passage from Wilde's

The Picture of Dorian Gray which underlines the film's cinematographic approach:

"It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The true mystery of the

world is the visible, not the invisible." And once again, while fully admitting that his

method might not be entirely revolutionary, Keiller's film attempts to "change

space" with the use of a camera, evidently as some kind of first step towards

something more radical. This time, however, the film is terser, somewhat less

meandering, and, following Lefebvre, it makes a more concerted effort to elucidate

space. As Keiller himself puts it,

> Whereas *London* set out to transform appearances through a more-or-
> less radical subjectivity, *Robinson in Space* addresses the production
> of actual space: the manufacture of artifacts and the development of
> sites, the physical production of the visible. ("Port Statistics" 444)

---

[123] Typical of Keiller's bizarre sense of humor, a footnote to *Robinson in Space* (the
heavily annotated book version) reads:
> Robinson's decision to move to Reading was reinforced by his hasty
> misreading of Michel de Certeau's *Practice of Everyday Life*:
> "Reading frees itself from the soil that determines it" and "…reading
> is… a place constituted by a system of signs." (2)

The Narrator needn't have worried too much about Robinson's state of mind. As in the case of *London*, it turns out that the Narrator has been summoned by Robinson to act as witness to a series of investigations. Whereas Robinson's study of the "problem of London" was self-motivated, though, this time things are different. The Narrator explains:

> He told me that some weeks before, he had received a letter from a representative of a well-known international advertising agency inviting him to a meeting at the hotel. These people had heard of his study of London and wished to commission him to undertake a peripatetic study of the *problem* of England. He had accepted this offer with alacrity and insisted that I join him as researcher.

The pair make a series of initial investigations in the Reading area, seemingly at random—including an HMV where Adam Ant is making an appearance, a neo-con stronghold ("admired by Gingrich Republicans in the United States") known as the Winnersh Triangle, and West Green, the former home of General Henry "Hangman" Hawley—and the Narrator remarks upon these apparently benign locations with a well-known but nevertheless choice quote from *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, one that will become something of a mantra for the rest of the film:

> "It is my belief, Watson," said Holmes, "founded upon my experience, that the lowest and vilest alleys in London do not present a more dreadful record of sin than does the smiling and beautiful countryside."

On their way back to Reading not long afterwards, Robinson informs the Narrator that he has received instructions from their mysterious employer and that they are to begin the first of seven journeys back and forth across the English countryside the very next day. This odd method had been derived from Robinson's reading of Daniel Defoe's *Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, which, as G.D.H.

Cole has argued, is essentially the account of a man witnessing "the transition from the old to the new order, and the things he looked for on his journeys were by no means those which appealed to the ordinary tourist of his day or our own" (v). Defoe is fascinated by the juxtapositions between "novelty" and "antiquity" that he sees all around him as he travels the nation, and in the opening pages of his *Tour* he describes the sea change underway:

> The Fate of things gives a new Face to Things, produces Changes in *low* Life, and innumerable incidents; plants and supplants Families, raises and sinks Towns, removes Manufactures, and Trade; Great Towns decay, and small Towns rise; new Towns, new Palaces, new Seats are Built every Day; great Rivers and good Harbours dry up and grow useless; again, new Ports are open'd, Brooks are made Rivers, small Rivers, navigable Ports and Harbours are made where none were before, and the like. (1-2)

Robinson appears to be engaged in a very similar pursuit, except that, unlike Defoe, who was employed as a spy for the government of Queen Anne, Robinson seems much less concerned with protecting England's "Face," and much more willing to, "write a History of her Nudities, and expose… her wicked part to Posterity" (Defoe 2). "The narrative of Britain since Defoe's time is the result of a particularly *English* kind of capitalism," the Narrator tells us, in a configuration that we might call the project's hypothesis. So with a copy of *Port Statistics*, "a publication of the Government's Statistical Service," and a copy of *Capitalism, Culture and Decline in Britain, 1750-1990*, W.D. Rubinstein's groundbreaking debunking of the critique of "gentlemanly capitalism,"[124] Robinson and the Narrator set off on the first of their

---

[124] In his essay "Port Statistics," Keiller writes that this critique, "sees the United Kingdom's economic weakness as a result of the City of London's long-term (English) neglect of the (United Kingdom's) industrial economy, particularly its manufacturing base" (443).

journeys, "[following] the Thames downstream to the sea" but carefully sidestepping

London for fear of "reprisals" due to Robinson's earlier study.

While Keiller's project shares a lot in common with that of Robinson and the

Narrator, and one might also characterize it as amounting to a study of the "problem

of England," as was the case with *London*, one can point to a number of

discrepancies between the two projects, both diegetic and extradiegetic. After all,

why else adopt such an unorthodox multi-layered form if you're not going make use

of the multiple layers? So, for instance, as Keiller suggests in a footnote to *Robinson*

in Space, Robinson's commissioned study is a satirical reference to what would soon

blow up into the "Elwes Affair" in 1997: "*Nations for Sale*, a study of Britain's

overseas image, was produced in 1994 by Anneke Elwes for the international

advertising network DDB Needham." He adds, with a few well-chosen phrases (and

characteristic irony), "that Elwes found Britain 'a dated concept,' difficult 'to

reconcile with reality,' with a 'brand personality' entrenched in the past" (6).[125] (The

Tories are still in power as *Robinson in Space* unfolds, there are signs that that

---

[125] What Keiller didn't know at the time was that *Nations for Sale* was about to blow
up into the "Elwes Affair," as Elwes' former employer, Chris Powell, suddenly
became the Chief of Staff at 10 Downing Street following "New" Labour's landslide
victory in 1997:

> Suddenly, "Nations for Sale" was being read by powerful people
> committed to shaking things up, to making an old nation young again.
> Studies were undertaken. Consultants were hired. The prestigious
> Panel 2000 of business and government leaders was assigned to the
> task. *Time* and *Newsweek* splashed London across their pages as the
> epicentre of cool. Hipster think-tank Demos released a paper called
> "Britain™ Renewing Our Identity"… The rebranding of the place
> called Britain had begun. (Taylor 1)

Next stop: Cool Britannia.

situation is finally about to change,[126] but part of what makes the film so chilling is its Lefebvrian pessimism with regards to "mirages." Fittingly, the nation is undergoing an unprecedented heat wave throughout the film.) More generally, though, while Keiller is clearly sympathetic to his characters, and there's even a certain degree of autobiography that's thrown into his narrative,[127] he uses them to explore his own discovery that his, "perception of the UK's economy was completely out of date," locked in an "'80s perception"—the film's narrative is very much about this particular epiphany. His protagonists are not making a film, though, and, unlike *London*, there's no mention that they're even carrying still cameras to shoot "postcards" with—the images we're presented with are Keiller's and frequently they're used in counterpoint with his narrative. Put another way, Keiller's protagonists might cite Lefebvre, but it's Keiller himself who attempts to translate Lefebvre's thoughts into an aesthetic that's cinematic, photographic, *and* essayistic, and while Robinson's contract is terminated abruptly, his study incomplete and its future uncertain, not only did Keiller's filmic study of "the problem of England" see the light of day, but Keiller produced an accompanying book and a considerable number of probing extra-filmic texts (including his essay "Port Statistics," which can be understood as a *détournement* of the GSS's document much in the same way as Keiller's *London* amounts to a *détournement* of the actual, official city) in the years that followed the film's release, all of which attempted to reinforce and expand upon the film's critique in such a way as to transform the film into something more than

---

[126] Early in the film the Narrator mentions the coincidence of the Conservatives' massive losses in the local elections of May 4, 1995 and the fiftieth anniversary of VE Day.

[127] For instance, both Keiller and Robinson hail from Blackpool.

just an example of "provocative, determinedly left-field filmmaking" (Andrew 69).

Thus, *Robinson in Space* is both a narrative of the attempt "to undertake a peripatetic

study of the *problem* of England" and the mixed-media documentary results of such

a study.

Not surprisingly, given the type and scale of the two studies—one

metropolitan, the other national—the movements of the two peripatetic studies are

rather different. The portrait of London that one gets in *London* is an unconventional

one, to say the least, largely avoiding the city's major sights and consisting of a

series of obscure pilgrimages which travel the very fringes of the metropolitan region

with some frequency. Unsatisfied with what much of what he sees in the city centre,

in some of his more desperate moments Robinson appears to hold out hope that the

suburbs might hold the key to the "problem of London." However, over and over

again the two investigators keep being drawn back towards the centre, back towards

the City, London's historic and financial core. In the end, though, this attraction has

to do with the void that they, like Kracauer before them, find there:

> The true identity of London. . .is in its absence. As a city it no longer
> exists. In this it is truly Modern. London was the first metropolis to
> have disappeared.

This empty focal point is a hallmark of the, "increasingly prevalent mode of

centrifugal space" that Dimendberg (following Lefebvre) describes as defining both

late modernity and postmodernity (15). And not surprisingly, given the indebtedness

of the Situationists to Lefebvre, we see this view echoed in Vaneigem's *The

Revolution of Everyday Life* in a thumbnail account of urbanism through the ages:

> The first cities grew up around a stronghold or sacred spot, a temple
> or a church, a point where heaven and earth converged. Industrial

towns, with their mean, dark streets, are focused on a factory or
industrial plant; administrative centres preside over empty rectilinear
avenues. Finally, the most recent examples of city planning simply
have no centre at all. (242)

That said, in order to reach such a conclusion, Robinson and the Narrator's
movements (as well as Keiller's) remain largely centripetal, reflecting their nostalgia
for a bygone form of urbanism.

Robinson in Space reflects something altogether different. Though the film
begins in the centre of London, as the Narrator's train leaves Paddington Station en
route for Reading, it only revisits the metropolis once, and then only in passing, the
camera jumping from Heathrow Airport to Greenwich, "near the site subsequently
chosen for the Millennium exhibition," while Robinson and the Narrator travel
through the maze of tunnels that make up the London Underground. Otherwise, the
film visits a number of small, medium, and large cities—including Birmingham,
Liverpool, and Manchester—but none exerts any more pull than any of the rest,[128]
and, if anything, the film's focus is diffuse. Instead of letting *London*'s
melodramatic and vaguely millenarian conclusion dangle, *Robinson in Space* follows
up on it, seeking to make sense of the void. Thus, as Keiller explains:

[Towards] the end of *London* there is a line—"The true identity of
London is in its absence"—to which the viewer might reply:
"Absence of what?" London began and grew as a port city; its port
activity is now mostly absent, but it continues elsewhere. *Robinson in
Space* was an attempt to locate some of the economic activity that no
longer takes place in the cities. (Wright, "A Conversation" 223-4)

---

[128] Not *much* more, in any case. Manchester gets a bit more attention than any of the
rest because "[from] the film's point of view" it was "the most interesting city," as
we shall see (Wright, "A Conversation" 228).

Like *London*, *Robinson in Space* is very much a film about urbanism, but it's about

urbanism according to another economic logic, one that's predominantly centrifugal.

There's the sense here that what Iain Sinclair (echoing Defoe) has called "a new kind

of England," a transitory, transient England, requires a new approach. But whereas

Sinclair's approach (in both the book and then the film versions of *London Orbital*)

is to circumnavigate the M25, London's gigantic postmodern *péripherique*, on foot

because central London is "overwritten," Keiller's method is somewhat more

profound, motivated by the belief that if one is to understand the reign of abstract

space, one must visit those sites where what he calls "new space" is being produced

and reproduced, and one must contend with its "immateriality, invisibility, and

speed," while sharing an appreciation and understanding of English culture that

recalls Raymond Williams' landmark *The Country and the City* (1973) (Dimendberg

177).[129]

  Thus, explaining the film's peculiar approach to urbanism, Keiller told

Patrick Wright:

> The subject was *new space*, and generally *new space* is found outside
> or on the edge of cities. The pictures are more or less what we found.
> In fact, we didn't find it for a long time; we spent quite a lot of time
> early on in the project wondering where the *new space* was—it wasn't
> visible enough. ("A Conversation" 228)

---

[129] Towards the end of *The Country and the City*, Williams writes a passage that
speaks directly to Keiller's approach with this film:
> The country and the city are changing historical realities, both in
> themselves and in their interrelations. Moreover, in our own world,
> they represent only two kinds of settlement. Our real social
> experience is not only of the country and the city, in their most
> singular forms, but of many kinds of intermediate and new kinds of
> social and physical organization. (289)

Dimendberg describes "the most striking feature of centrifugal space" as being its "frequently *nonarchitectural* character" and this is exactly the paradox that we're confronted with *Robinson in Space*: a sweeping depiction of the built environment of contemporary England that's highly "nonarchitectural," even when representing "the architecture of the future" (*Film Noir* 178). As materialists who value "an authenticity of *appearance*" and who rue "the passing of the *visible*," Robinson and the Narrator are often bewildered by the new spaces that are characteristic of its new economy, and by the immateriality and insubstantiality that defines them. The very blankness of these spaces requires an aesthetic that is consistent with *London*, but which is able to navigate a very different environment. As Keiller explains in his essay "The Dilapidated Dwelling,"

> Most of the *new space* is occupied by large corporations of one sort or another, a few of them international in scope, and it is not urban in the conventional sense. It includes retails sheds, supermarkets, fast food restaurants, a *Travel Inn*, a business park, distribution warehouses, tyre, exhaust and windscreen service centres. Most of these places have large car parks and security cameras. There is a lot of new space under construction, it goes up fast, and more is proposed. Buildings in *new space* do not have to last very long. In some of the older *new space* the original buildings have already been replaced by new ones. (22)

In order to capture the shock experienced by his protagonists while at the same time elucidating the spaces depicted—situating them, contextualizing them, establishing linkages between them, making sense of them—Keiller utilizes what we might call (following Dimendberg) "layered spatialities" (Dimendberg, *Film Noir* 8).

In order to get a better sense of how Keiller goes about analyzing the production of space in *Robinson*, one might cite three types of sites that are returned to repeatedly during the course of the film: country houses, industrial spaces (both

"old" and "new"), and what we might call "post-industrial spaces," sites that epitomize Lefebvre's notion of abstract space since World War II: shopping malls, corporate headquarters and industrial parks, motels, housing developments, correctional facilities, and so on (Dimendberg, *Film Noir* 106).

The film's depictions of country houses are concentrated in its first half and especially during the first two journeys undertaken by Robinson and the Narrator, the first heading west towards the Thames estuary, and the second encompassing Oxford, Milton Keynes, Cambridge, Dover, Brighton, and Southampton, before winding up in Bristol. These visits provide some of the clearest examples of the cruelty that lurks behind the outer face of "the smiling and beautiful countryside," but they also display the ambivalence of our protagonists towards the cultural landscape of England. Thus, at Cliveden we're presented with its neo-Baroque Fountain of Love, which we're told was purchased in typical Grand Tour fashion in Rome in 1897 by William Waldorf, "the first Lord Astor," as well as its magnificent view along the Thames, which, "was compared by Garibaldi with the mighty river prospects of South America." But the Fountain of Love is used to inform us that it was here, "that John Profumo first met Christine Keeler"—"[she] was naked beside the swimming pool"—while Cliveden's prospect upon the Thames is used to emphasize the fact that its, "prominence has always rested on its proximity to London," and that, notoriously, the estate played home to the so-called Cliveden Set, "a conspiracy giving tacit support to Hitler's conquest of Europe" that reached the highest echelons of power.

Similarly, between Southampton and Dorchester, Robinson and the Narrator

pass Charborough Park, prompting the Narrator to divulge the story of Colonel

James Drax, the Royalist whose successor married into the estate:

> Colonel James Drax left Yorkshire after the Civil War and settled in
> Barbados, where, in a few years, from £300 in sugar plantations, he
> acquired an estate of £8,000 to £9,000.

From a shot of a sculpture garden at the edge of Charborough Park, Keiller's camera

cuts to a monument to the Tolpuddle Martyrs in Dorset, whose ranks included one

George Loveless, before the Narrator explains the following:

> Following the Enclosure Acts, agricultural wages in Dorset had
> dropped to nine shillings a week. George Loveless and others [the
> Tolpuddle Martyrs] tried to get the wages increased, but they were
> lowered to six shillings…

and then reads the monument's inscription:

> "We have injured no man's reputation, character, person or property;
> we were uniting together to protect ourselves, our wives and our
> children from utter degradation and starvation."

Keiller's take on the English country house is clearly not part of the neo-

conservative discourse that made them such an essential part of the resurgence of the

heritage industry in the 1980s and its culture of "descent not consent" and "evolution

not revolution," including the heritage film cycle[130] and the blockbuster "Treasure

Houses of Britain" show at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. (Wright,

A Journey 94; Brown 11). Whereas the catalogue for the "Treasure Houses of

Britain" show describes the United Kingdom's country houses as "vessels of

civilization" and "temples of the arts" largely defined by their "spirit of hospitality,"

and the show itself created what Thomas Richards, writing about the Great

---

[130] See Higson 1993 and 1996.

Exhibition of 1851, has called "a centripetal space of representation," one which elevated the artwork-as-commodity to the status of fetish object and downplayed the actual sites from which they came and the conditions under which this obscene wealth was amassed, Keiller's approach to the country house is rather different (Jackson-Stops 10, 11, 14; Richards, *Commodity Culture* 53). Here, it's the spaces occupied by these estates that are the focus of attention, and, thus how and where they are situated, their place within the socio-cultural matrix that is Britain, what they represent, and how they came to be. And whereas the heritage films of the 1980s and 1990s repeatedly used some of Britain's more sumptuous country houses as anonymous *mise-en-scène* towards the commodification of Britain and Britishness (which, as Higson insists, was generally meant to convey Englishness), something Keiller draws attention to during the second journey,[131] *Robinson in Space*'s country houses are never mere scenery, never the kind of packaged visual pleasure that is the stock in trade of heritage tourism (Higson, "Re-presenting" 109; Higson, "Rural Spaces" 252). The Charborough Park sequence is particularly illuminating in this regard. Though we're only presented with the faintest glimpse of its premises, its whimsical, apparently benign sculpture garden is quickly and economically linked to the English Revolution, the history of British colonialism, the Enclosure Acts, and the failed resistance to this Parliament-sanctioned redistribution of wealth.[132] And

---

[131] Overtop a view of yet another fantastic country house, the Narrator tells the audience:

> We knew of six Jane Austen film or television adaptations under way, all involving country houses, mostly in the west of England. *Sense and Sensibility* was made at Montacute.

[132] Williams writes: "By nearly four thousand Acts, more than six million acres of land were appropriated, mainly by the politically dominant landowners" (96).

that's just within the space of a few frames of the film. If we take a look at how this sequence is situated more generally, we see that it comes not long after the film's trip to Portsmouth, where the audience is presented with the *Victory*, Admiral Nelson's flagship, and the Narrator informs us that here,

> is the principal monument of the eighteenth-century British navy, the largest industrial unit of its day in the western world, on whose supremacy was built the capitalism of land, finance and commercial services centred on the City of London, which dominates the economy of the south of England.

Moments later Robinson and the Narrator visit Southampton, the port that the *Titanic* once called home and where the Spitfire fighter plane was developed, but which today is dominated by ships like the *Colombo Bay*, which, "has a crew of twenty and carries up to 4,200 containers, each one of which may be the full load of an articulated lorry." We also see that the sequence comes just before the Narrator's announcement of a statistic that indicates the legacy of the Enclosure Acts and the fact that they helped *produce* both the urban-industrial order and the reign of "new space" that followed: "In England, 1.1 per cent of employees work in agriculture."[133] In other words, Charborough Park is representative of an entire complex of forces—political, economic, and cultural—dating back to the seventeenth century that shaped the English landscape, and its story helps to provide what one might call a Rubinsteinian perspective on the socio-economic history of England, forcing one to reconsider standard economic histories of England with their emphasis on the

---

[133] Writing about the parliamentary enclosures, Williams has this to say: "The links with the Industrial Revolution are again important, but not as the replacement of one 'order' by another" (98). Keiller's analysis of the space of contemporary England seems to bear this out.

centrality of the Industrial Revolution. Summarizing this perspective himself,

Rubinstein writes:

> Our argument is that the most fundamental assumption made by the advocates of the "culture critique" [what Keiller refers to as the critique of "gentlemanly capitalism"] is wrong, namely that Britain's was centrally an *industrial* economy whose industrial and manufacturing lead vanished through qualitative decline after 1870. The view which will be advanced here is that Britain's was *never* fundamentally an industrial and manufacturing economy; rather, it was *always*, even at the height of the industrial revolution, essentially a commercial, financial, and service-based economy whose comparative advantage always lay with commerce and finance. Britain's apparent industrial decline was simply a working out of this process… What is so often seen as Britain's industrial decline or collapse can be seen, with greater accuracy, as a transfer of resources and entrepreneurial energies into other forms of business life. (24)

The film's seven journeys only confirm Rubinstein's revisionist argument, and

having set out on their adventure still clinging to their "out of date" understanding of

the English economy and its apparent decline, Robinson and the Narrator are left

stupefied. This helps to explain the tone of the film and Robinson's increasingly

erratic behavior—it also helps to explain the film's very different approach to

representing Britain's urban and ex-urban environment and what one might call its

post-Machine Age aesthetics.

While the Charborough Park episode places the English country house in a

critical light, as mentioned earlier, *Robinson*'s treatment of country houses shows a

certain ambivalence, and as was the case with Patrick Wright's *A Journey Through*

Ruins, they aren't simply dismissed (54-64). Robinson and the Narrator's visit to

Stowe provides a case in point. Situated somewhere between the air of secrecy that

surrounds the odd military-industrial architecture of "the United States Air Force's

603rd communications squadron, at RAF Croughton" and the banality of Milton

Keynes, with its "multi-denominational Cathedral" and its shopping mall, the

grandeur of Stowe, which the Narrator informs us has been referred to by National

Trust as "Britain's largest work of art," offers some welcome relief.   There,

Robinson and the Narrator locate another important pilgrimage point:

> In the landscaped gardens, based on Milton's description in *Paradise
> Lost*, is Kent's Temple of British Worthies, where we paid our
> respects to Milton for *Pandaemonium*; to Shakespeare for Yorick; and
> to Locke for *duration and its simple modes*, and *the succession of
> ideas*: "For whilst we received successively ideas in our minds, we
> know that we do exist, and so we estimate the existence, or the
> continuation of ourselves…"

Aside from a wry allusion to cinema and the persistence of vision, not to mention

another clear nod to Humphrey Jennings and his legacy,[134] the visit to Stowe and its

Temple of British Worthies has even great significance. Not only does Stowe

encompass a massive country house, one that has operated as what the British call a

"public school" since 1923,[135] but its grounds stand as the most important landscape

garden of early eighteenth century England, a virtual "landscape of symbols" that

includes a Temple of Ancient Virtue and Elysian Fields in addition to its pantheon of

great British "men" (the group includes Elizabeth I) (Crandell 125). It's well known

that English landscape designers of the eighteenth century were in thrall with the

work of the French painter Claude Lorrain, with the sense of the fantasy that one

finds in his paintings, the sense of a "mental refuge from the real world," and that in

---

[134] In all likelihood, the reference to Yorick has to do with Keiller's strange narrative
form and its address of disembodied characters, a practice he's sometimes
participated in quite directly, as he did when he conducted an "Interview with
Robinson" for the pages of *Time Out* in 1997.

[135] As such, Stowe amounts to a prime example of the "wonderful" sense of "English
understatement" that J. Carter Brown associates with the phrase "country house"
(10).

order to achieve these painterly effects the English countryside as it existed had to be

"totally recomposed." Stowe, with its explicitly Claudian look, is a prime example

(along with Stourhead and a few other country houses) of this phenomenon (Ford

47). And here the meaning of Stowe becomes apparent, for as Gina Crandell

explains, the word *landscape* came into the English language from the Dutch

landschap in the early seventeenth century as, "a painter's word introduced to

describe sixteenth-century Dutch paintings" and their interest in "natural inland

scenery" as opposed to sea pictures, portraits, and other genres (Crandell 9, 101).

Soon, however, the word took on other meanings:

> In English, *landscape* was first used to describe a representation of a
> countryside, either as background or the subject of a picture. Later
> the word came to mean a piece of the actual countryside which lay in
> prospect: that is, an extensive piece of the landscape which could be
> seen from a fixed point of view, as in a painting. (ibid 101)

The seventeenth century had brought about "profound changes in the scenic habits of

the Western world." This was when mental images first began to be described as

"pictures," "the first box camera with a lens for viewing landscapes was produced,"

and landscape became a major genre for the first time ever (ibid 94). The English

began to style their gardens according to what they saw in landscape paintings

(principally those from Italy) beginning later that same century, but in the eighteenth

century things took a more radical turn: they began to transform the actual

countryside in order to fulfill this view of the world and a "fundamental inversion"

took place as a result:

> For the first time in history a garden, or a designed landscape, had
> exchanged places with "nature." Before this century, unmodified
> land, such as wilderness or swamp, had surrounded carefully
> maintained gardens and agricultural landscapes. But in eighteenth-

century England swamps were drained for agricultural expansion, and forests were planted in gardens. Landscape gardens, representing nature, had become enclaves surrounded by maintained landscapes… Indeed, both the land inside gardens and the land outside them were now landscapes, designed for quite different purposes. (ibid 10)[136]

If English country houses represent an early manifestation of that "particularly

English kind of capitalism" which is the subject of *Robinson in Space*, then

landscape represents both its pictorial language and its spatialization. And suddenly

Keiller's entire historical project becomes clear (as opposed to that of Robinson or

the Narrator). *London* led one to believe that its scope had something to do with the

English Revolution. *Robinson in Space* leads one to believe that Defoe might hold

the key. But the truth of the matter is that Keiller's historical project runs exactly

parallel with the history of English landscape—as a genre, as a concept, and as an

embodiment of that "particularly *English* kind of capitalism."[137] Much more

fundamental to Keiller's cinematic aesthetic in his Robinson films than even the

notion of *photogénie* and "radical subjectivity," this focus on landscape, its meaning,

---

[136] Not only were the English country house and the Enclosure Acts intimately linked ("Landowners, after 1750, could afford such extravagant gardens mainly because of the parliamentary enclosure acts that authorized the fencing of open fields and abolished common rights to the fields."), but English landscape design of the eighteenth century explicitly sought to disguise the effects of the enclosure movement, making these sweeping changes a part of the new natural order of things (Crandell 129-130).
Paradoxically, Williams notes that the outward appearance of the "great houses" were designed to call attention to themselves:

> …[Look] at the sites, the façades, the defining avenues and walls, the great iron gates and the guardian lodges. These were chosen for more than the effect from the inside out… They were chosen, also, you now see, for the other effect, from the outside looking in: a visible stamping of power, of displayed wealth and command: a social disproportion which was meant to impress and overawe. (106)

[137] This is precisely the reason that even though the history of the country house dates back over "Five Hundred Years," according to Jackson-Stops (1985) and others, Keiller only takes interest in its history beginning in the seventeenth century.

and its history provides us with the particular sense in which Keiller's films

articulate and analyze the "production of space." In her book-length discussion of

landscape and its semiotics, Anne Whiston Spirn writes:

> The language of landscape is a powerful tool. A person literate in
> landscape sees significance where an illiterate person notes nothing…
> To know landscape poetics is to see, smell, taste, hear, and feel
> landscape as a symphony of complex harmonies. (22)

Patrick Keiller is clearly just such a person. What sets him apart even further is that

he realized that landscape in many ways held the socio-economic and aesthetic key

to the "problems of London and England" and that it also held the key to

reinterpreting the city film in the British context.

This fascination with landscape extends well beyond the English countryside

to include everything from industrial spaces, so-called "new space," and townscapes.

Within the category of industrial spaces we can distinguish two different sorts: old

(and generally failed) and new (and apparently a successful part of the new order).

Perhaps the most glaring example of old industrial space and its failure that we find

in *Robinson in Space* appears, appropriately enough, in the film's segment on

Manchester. Here, faced with shots of a decrepit industrial complex, made all the

more squalid by the sight of a white Rolls-Royce seen driving past, not to mention

the "To Let" and "British Jean Corporation" signs that adorn one façade, the

Narrator announces: "Murray's mill in Ancoats was built in 1798. It is the world's

oldest steam-driven mill, and as such is described as 'the first factory.'" Adding to

the poignancy of the scene, the Narrator continues: "Engels visited Ancoats

frequently in 1842, while working for the firm of Ermen and Engels in Manchester.

His *Condition of the Working Class in England* was published in 1845, but not in

Britain until 1892." The implication here is that if Engels' *Condition of the Working Class in England* had been published in Britain in 1845 and not in 1892, maybe—just maybe—things might have turned out differently.[138] A similar mood of left-wing melancholy hangs over Keiller's treatment of the remnants of Britain's coal industry. Thus, accompanying a shot of a Yorkshire coal pit set against what appears to be a nuclear power plant in the background, the Narrator tells a tale that underlines the peculiar cruelty of the Thatcherite war on British coal miners, which cut the domestic coal industry's workforce down to 1% of its number in 1946:

> Bentley used to be one of the most left-wing pits in Yorkshire. When it closed, it was producing the UK's cheapest coal, undercutting even Colombian imports. There were 600,000 tonnes stockpiled at the pit. (Keiller, *Robinson* 157)

Similarly, earlier in the film, Keiller provides a classic example of his palimpsestic approach to the English countryside when Robinson and the Narrator visit the Llandoger Trow, a pub in Bristol, "where Defoe is supposed to have met Alexander Selkirk, the real Robinson Crusoe." As the Narrator explains, the pub's name alludes to the old economic order, the one that Robinson and the Narrator are so nostalgic for: "A Llandoger Trow was a boat which carried coal to Bristol from South Wales."

The industrial sites that appear to have the greatest effect on Robinson and the Narrator, however, are those that are closely connected to their obsession with

---

[138] In a 1939 letter to his wife, Cicely, Humphrey Jennings wrote the following impressions of Manchester:
> At Manchester there was a sort of thin wet sunlight which makes it look pathetic. It has a grim sort of fantasy. And a certain dignity of its own from being connected with certain events in history…
> (Jackson 5)

There is something of this description in Keiller's depiction of Murray's mill.

twentieth-century "manufacturing and innovative, modern design," such as the numerous auto plants visited by the two investigators. Typical in this regard is a sequence during the film's fourth journey between their stops in Birmingham and Liverpool. Despite an intentionally homely shot of the back of the Jaguar body plant in Castle Bromwich, Robinson and the Narrator are "very relieved" to visit the site because Ford, Jaguar's parent company, has, "secured government investment for the X200 small saloon," and because this factory was the very one that built "thousands of Spitfires… during World War Two" (a fact confirmed by Keiller's camera, which shows the audience a close-up of one of the building's drainpipes, which still features the RAF's distinctive markings). A couple of days later, Robinson and the Narrator visit the Rolls-Royce plant in Derby where the company appears to be doing well, but the news is rather more mixed:

> The day we arrived in Derby, Rolls-Royce announced half-year
> profits up 43 per cent to £70 million, though the chairman would not
> rule out more job losses, and the shares fell 8 per cent.

What makes the sequence interesting, however, is a voice-over-free musical interlude that comes sandwiched in between the Jaguar and Rolls-Royce factories. First, we're shown a road sign which lists "Toyota" as an actual place alongside "The North" and "Derby;" then we're shown a sign announcing a roundabout up ahead, one offshoot of which leads to "Toyota;" and finally we're presented with yet another sign, this one reading "Welcome to Toyota," set against the Japanese company's thoroughly nondescript, faceless, and postmodern auto-plant in the background. The Narrator's silence on this matter suggests both the factory's

unproblematic place within the new economic order and our protagonists' shock over this state of affairs.

Of greater significance to Robinson and the Narrator than Britain's luxury car manufacturers, however, is what one might call the tragedy of the Morris motor works and of the British Motor Company (BMC) more generally. Overtop a sequence of shots that includes a bleak and depressing shot of a construction site where a "Beefeater and Travel Inn" is being built (typically, a banner reads "Recruiting Now"), a view of BMW's Rover factory near Oxford shooting out of the semi-rural landscape, a seemingly anachronistic shot of the cottage-like Oxford Spiritualist Church, and a tightly cropped image of a parked Morris 1100, the Narrator has the following to say:

> Most of what was once the Morris motor works at Cowley was demolished in 1993, and the site is now a business park owned by British Aerospace, who sold the Rover group to BMW in 1994.

> There has been little made of the fact that Bernd Pischetsrieder, the chairman of BMW, is the great-nephew of the late Alec Issigonis, whose innovative designs for Morris and its successors could probably have given the company a ten-year lead over Volkswagen in the European mass market.

Alec Issigonis is something of a spiritual godfather for Robinson and the Narrator (hence the shot of the church). Born in Turkey, Issigonis emigrated to England with his family, and although his family wanted him to become an artist, he went into engineering.[139] Joining Morris Motors in Oxford in 1936, Issigonis went on to

---

[139] This unlikely trajectory is of great significance to Keiller. Early in the film, following a shot of Brunel's 1837 bridge at Maidenhead, whose famous brick arches (the longest-spanning in Europe) were immortalized in Turner's *Rain, Steam and Speed*, the Narrator suddenly recounts that Rimbaud once, "imagined a son who would become 'a famous engineer, a man rich and powerful through science…'"

design the Morris Oxford, the Morris Minor, the Mini, and the 1100, the last three of

which in particular are examples of Issigonis' revolutionary attempts to design a

simple, dependable "world car" that could have competed with Volkswagen

internationally had not BMC,

> [thrown] away the initiative… either because they were provincial
> conservatives and wanted to go on selling Austin Cambridges to men
> in trilby hats, or because the car industry was a casualty of the UK's
> failure to join the EU in the '60s, which is a much more plausible
> explanation. (Keiller, *Robinson* 210; Wright, "A Conversation" 225)

In other words, in spite of the "capitalism of land, finance and commercial services

centred on the City of London, which dominates the economy of the south of

England," and therefore the economy of Great Britain *in toto*, the case of Alec

Issigonis provides a glimpse of a Minor or Mini utopia that might have been. Not

surprisingly, when the advertising firm suggests that Robinson and the Narrator buy

a car to help them with their research, Robinson decides to buy an "old 1100"

(apparently the very one pictured earlier), a nostalgic reminder of the absent Morris

motor works.

If industry is no longer a part of the British identity in the way that it was, its

"decline" has hardly been total, it's just that the notion of industry has changed, as

Robinson in Space makes clear. Robinson and the Narrator discover many signs of

newly built and apparently successful industry, but over and over again these

operations are highly automated and depopulated, and, like the Toyota plant in

Derbyshire, the very architecture of these sites is one of impermanence and what

David Harvey and others have labeled "flexible" post-Fordist accumulation

(*Condition* 147). Thus, while exploring the Thames estuary as part of their first

journey, the pair encounter the "fully automated" Knauf plant at Ridham, which, "produces 120 square metres of plasterboard per minute, the fastest-running production line in Europe," and the Co-Steel operation at Sheerness, the first of many scrap operations in *Robinson in Space*. It's only in the Narrator's brief but pointed commentary on Co-Steel that one gets a sense of the labour politics that help make these operations so profitable: "The Canadian company evangelizes 'total team culture' in which overtime is unpaid and union members fear identification." However, the industrial sites that most captivate and horrify Robinson and the Narrator are Britain's numerous postmodern ports. These fall under two groups: "*out-of-the-way* places like Sheerness or Immingham," and apparently derelict historically important ports like Liverpool's (Keiller, "Port Statistics" 453). Confronted with the apparent contradiction between the statistics in the GSS's *Port Statistics* and the physical appearance of Immingham, the Narrator has the following to say:

> To *materialists* like us, Immingham is the second-largest port in the UK, and yet there are few ships, and we saw no seafarers. Ships come in and out on a single tide. No-one has time to get off.

The reason for utter lack of manpower is that along with Sullum Voe, Felixstowe, and Tees, Immingham specializes in a particular type of traffic (Keiller, "Port Statistics" 447). As the Narrator explains:

> Volvo, Saab and BMW import cars, but most of the traffic is in bulk fuel and iron ore, which involves very little labour. Three million tonnes of coal a year are imported through Immingham.

Stranger still is the port of Liverpool with its massive tonnages of scrap waiting for export, "mostly to the Far East and Spain," and its derelict appearance, for as the

Narrator announces with astonishment, "In the statistics for 1993, the Mersey Dock

and Harbour Company was the most profitable of any port authority listed." The

port's traffic had fluctuated to a greater extent than that of any other British port, but

despite its shabbiness this traffic was, "now about the same as in 1965, three times

more than in the early '80s," and Liverpool was once again one of the biggest, most

important ports in England. As Keiller explains in "Port Statistics," Liverpool's

condition is actually, perversely, an outward sign of its success:

> Like many people with a tourist's familiarity with the waterfronts of
> Liverpool and Birkenhead, I took the spectacular dereliction of the
> docks to be symptomatic of a past decline in their traffic, and
> Liverpool's impoverishment to be a result of this decline in its
> importance as a port. In fact, in September 1995, when the images of
> Liverpool in the film were photographed, Liverpool's port traffic was
> greater than at any time in its history. (446)

It is the insubstantiality of Britain's ports that is the source of the outward

appearance of Liverpool, the fact that they employ very few people (but maintain an

aggressive anti-labour attitude to those they do employ), occupy relatively little

space, and contribute relatively little to neighboring towns and cities. That said,

together these ports deal in an enormous amount of traffic and generate enormous

profits, it's just that these profits travel elsewhere—to the City and beyond. As

Jonathan Glancey has argued, if the City has long been a part of capitalism's

globalization, it is so now more than ever:

> It is the largest centre for institutional equity management in the
> world and is the major supplier of capital to the global economy. In
> its own words, the City, "lubricates the world." (116)

But this wealth is so concentrated as to be invisible throughout much of England.

Keiller writes:

> [The] United Kingdom does not look anything like as affluent as it
> really is. The dilapidated *appearance* of the visible landscape…
> masks its prosperity… The United Kingdom's GDP is the fifth
> largest in the world, after the United States, Japan, Germany, and
> France. What has changed is the distribution of wealth. (453)

The cruel and callous logic of Britain's economy leaves our protagonists utterly

bewildered. Thus, it is with bitter irony that the Narrator reads from Baudelaire's

Paris Spleen during their visit to Southampton: "A seaport is a pleasant place for a

soul worn out with life's struggles," says Baudelaire. "The wide expanse of sky, the

mobile clouds, the ever-changing colours of the sea…"

Equally troubling to Robinson and the Narrator are those industrial sites

which one might describe as being both "old" and "new." Thus, with an image of

the iconic Redcar Rocks, the Narrator announces the pair's arrival in Redcar, a town

dominated by British Steel. The British Steel plant is first glimpsed way off in the

distance, a group of people frolicking along the coast in the middleground—but the

second time we see it it's from a much closer distance, its awesome dimensions (and

awesome amounts of pollution) looming over a drab industrial town (Redcar) in the

foreground. What's "new" about British Steel is its automation and its odd

disconnectedness (given how much it looms in the image we're shown) from the

neighbouring region, especially given its enormous profits. The Narrator informs us

that this particular plant,

> produces 70,000 tonnes of steel a week, 70 per cent of which is
> exported, much of it to the Far East, and employs hardly any people.
> The steel industry's current export surplus is about three-quarters of a
> billion pounds.

Meanwhile, the nearby Tees, we're told, "is the UK's biggest single port," even

though the shots of it that we're presented with make it look just as desolate as every

other port we've seen during the course of the film, and the town of Middlesbrough, the region's biggest urban centre (pictured with a shot of the massive Middlesbrough Transporter Bridge[140]), doesn't appear to be reaping any benefits:

> Unemployment in Middlesbrough is 17 per cent, the highest in the country, which has the least-regulated labour market in the industrialized world and the highest prison population of any nation in Europe.

Britain's misguided priorities are underlined by the following sequence, which shows the Queen's limousine and motorcade passing by to visit another nearby factory—a Samsung plant that has received £58 million in government aid in order to produce microwave ovens and computer monitors (no British steel here) with a workforce of 500-600. Perhaps the most telling examples of Britain's "old" and "new" industry, though, are those companies (unlike Murray's Mills) who've remained relevant (i.e. productive and profitable) since the days of the Industrial Revolution, and whose business confirms the uneasiness one feels when confronted with England's vaguely "disconcerting" appearance. As Keiller explains in "Port Statistics,"

> The windowless sheds of the *logistics* industry, recent and continuing road construction, spiky mobile phone aerials, a proliferation of new fencing of various types, security guards, police helicopter and cameras, new prisons, agribusiness (BSE, genetic engineering, organophosphates, declining wildlife), U.K. and U.S. military bases (microwaves, radioactivity), mysterious research and training centers, "independent" schools, eerie commuter villages, rural poverty, and the country houses of rich and powerful men of unrestrained habits are visible features of a landscape in which the suggestion of *cruelty* is never very far away. (454)

---

[140] Keiller's interest in the Middlesbrough Transporter Bridge calls to mind Moholy-Nagy's interest in Marseille's great feat of early-twentieth-century engineering, the Pont Transbordeur, minus the "new vision" and the "Rodchenko angles" that went along with it.

Thus, skirting Birmingham, Robinson and the Narrator pay a visit to the Hiatt works.

And, again, though the firm's drab mid-twentieth-century façade looks harmless

enough, the Narrator reveals that there's much more to Hiatt than meets the eye.

> Hiatt is one of the oldest firms in Birmingham, established in 1780, in
> the era of the slave trade, who make handcuffs and other items, and
> whose name recently still appeared on leg-irons used in Saudi prisons.

Troubled but blessed with a perverse sense of humor, "Robinson went in and bought

a pair of handcuffs." But it is the Narrator that voices the clearest understanding of

what places like the Hiatt factory mean to the English landscape:

> "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite ideas of pain, and danger, that
> is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible," says Burke, "is a source of
> the *sublime*."[141]

When it comes to what Keiller calls "new space," the "so-called *market-*

driven space" of business parks, distribution estates, and leisure parks, one of the

things that makes the treatment of these sites in *Robinson in Space* so fascinating—

against all odds—is the way Keiller embeds the banal landscaping so typical of late-

twentieth century corporate architecture into a centuries-old history of English

landscape, a tradition "widely acknowledged to be the most influential force in the

last two centuries of landscape design" and, as Keiller would have it, a signal

moment in the history of capitalism's production of space (Crandell 9). This point is

---

[141] The quote comes from Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our
Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1756), of course, and as Crandell has pointed
out this treatise was of enormous importance to the English landscape garden of the
late eighteenth century as well as to the issue of landscape more generally (127).
Of Burke and the landscape of Thatcherism, Keiller quips:
> The high esteem in which Margaret Thatcher and her colleagues held
> Burke leads one to wonder how much the Thatcher project's pursuit
> of policies which brought misery to millions was simply a matter of
> taste, or indeed of sexuality. (*Robinson* 67)

made all too clear early on in the film in a sequence which connects West Green, "the former home of Alistair, Lord McAlpine, treasurer of the Conservative Party between 1975 and 1990" (i.e. the Thatcher era), with the "Winnersh Triangle business and distribution park" mentioned earlier, by way of Sherlock Holmes' assessment of "the smiling and beautiful countryside." The images that Keiller chooses to illustrate Winnersh Triangle, which sits in the constituency of John Redwood, "admired by Gingrich Republicans in the United States as the leader of the 'revolutionary wing of Great Britain's Conservative Party,'" include a shot of the landscaped grounds of US Robotics' UK headquarters and a shot of enormous American-style mansions sitting clumped together in the heavily landscaped confines of a gated community. The combination of landscaped lawn, shrubs, and trees that define these American-style "new spaces" are imitative of the eighteenth-century English garden style established by estates like West Green, and, thus, in this particular example, the history of English landscaping has come full circle, right down to Keiller's twentieth-century, avant-garde pictorial intervention. Generally, though, the connections that tie Keiller's representations of "new space" with landscape aren't quite so clear. More often than not these representations are like that of Merry Hill, whose "affirmative culture" Keiller brackets between Blakenhurst Prison and an exclamation mark-bearing road sign calling attention to an accident. The thicket of signs in the sequence's first shot announces that Merry Hill is something of a commercial hub, but, as the six-shot scene proceeds, the Narrator informs us as to the scope:

> Merry Hill, near Dudley, is the largest shopping centre in Europe.
> More than 4.5 million people are within a sixty-five-minute drive.

It is connected to the nearby Waterfront development by a monorail, though this was not operating on the day of our visit…

Merry Hill attracts 25 million shopping visits a year, and its effects are felt in towns 200 miles away.

The significance (and the poignancy) of Merry Hill and the Waterfront comes from the fact that, as the Narrator indicates, these developments "were built on the site of the former Round Oak steelworks," a factory which dated back to the nineteenth century, when "the majority of iron-making in the world was carried out within thirty-two kilometers" of this very location. Most of the Merry Hill shots convey a sense of the chaos (both vehicular and architectural) that defines its sprawl, but continuing with the "arcades project" he began in his first Robinson film, Keiller also provides the audience with a rare interior shot—sunlight streaming through the skylights in one of the mall's many arcades—to give a sense of Merry Hill's inner workings. And here, in a reprise of Robinson's "The failure of the English Revolution is all around us" quote from *London*, Keiller cleverly uses the complex's interior itself to deliver his verdict on Merry Hill—a sign in the foreground, the sign that's most clearly legible, reads "Cromwell's Mad House."

As we have seen, Keiller's focus on contemporary England and its production of space in *Robinson in Space* is developed as part of a rather insightful and surprisingly in-depth examination of the history and meaning of landscape in Britain. This necessarily gives *Robinson in Space* an orientation that is surprisingly Early Modern for a film that is so concerned with "the problem of England" circa 1995. That said, the clear interest in modernism and *modernité* that we see in *London* hardly disappears in *Robinson in Space*, it just becomes a part of an analysis

that is more probing and perhaps less naïve. There are still the references to early

French modernists like Baudelaire and Rimbaud, as we have seen, and *Robinson in

Space* features quotes from these icons, just as its predecessor did, but they aren't

given quite the prominence that they were given in *London*, and other French and

Francophilic modernists, like Guillaume Apollinaire and Walter Benjamin, vanish

entirely. In addition to the clear presence of Lefebvre and the Situationists, a more

important carryover from *London* to *Robinson in Space* is the legacy of Surrealism,

and thus the history of "radical subjectivity" from Surrealism to post-Surrealist

thought. As Keiller describes his project,

> [*Robinson in Space*] documents the explorations of an unseen
> fictional character called Robinson, who was the protagonist of the
> earlier *London*, itself a reimagination of its subject suggested by the
> surrealist literature of Paris. *Robinson in Space* is a similar study of
> the *look* of present-day England in 1995… ("Port Statistics" 443)

We can see this Surrealist "reimagination" of 1990s England in the film's keen eye

for the landscape's uncanny features (e.g. the "Brain Haulage" sign that Keiller

locates in Dagenham, or the Cerne Abbas Giant near Dorchester, a gigantic and

emphatically phallic Celtic hillside sculpture that someone has outfitted with a

condom), as well as its attention to its outmoded elements (e.g. the Holy Well at

Stevington, the "gold mine" marker at Malvern, and the pair's many "pilgrimages,"

such as that to Scarborough "to confirm the details of Rimbaud's *Promontory

Palace*" and that to Stowe to pay homage to the Temple of British Worthies). The

film's most obviously surrealistic sequence comes near the end of the film when the

two investigators pay a visit to Robinson's hometown, Blackpool, and its famous

seaside amusement park.   Given the number of strange, haunting, depopulated ports

Robinson and the Narrator have sought out over the course of the narrative,

Blackpool, with its festive lights, its rollercoaster and its Ferris Wheel, its long pier

stretching out into the sea, its modern-metropolis-in-miniature appearance (complete

with an Eiffel Tower-like structure), and its crowds, has the look of bustling

surrealist port town,[142] a surrealist inversion of contemporary Britain's highly

automated container ports. Not surprisingly, Robinson tells the Narrator, "that

Blackpool holds the key to his utopia." The Narrator goes on to quote the landscape

architect Mawson who designed Blackpool's Stanley Park, and who apparently saw

his task in terms that paralleled Frederick Law Olmsted's Central Park and the other

"pressure valve" city parks that were built in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries:

"Blackpool stands between us and Revolution." But for Robinson, Blackpool offers

a glimpse of revolution. As Keiller explains to Patrick Wright (with language that

recalls the title of Vaneigem's post-surrealist 1967 book):

> Robinson says what he says in Blackpool because he is a surrealist
> and believes in the carnivalization of everyday life. Blackpool is
> probably the nearest you get to that… ("A Conversation" 230)

Like Benjamin and Kracauer before him, and W.G. Sebald

contemporaneously to him, Keiller's modernism is a particular (and peculiar)

modernism, one characterized by an ongoing project, "to recuperate the past in an

effort to redeem the future," and therefore a modernism quite different from the

Machine Age modernism that dominated the early twentieth century (Clarke 41). As

we have seen time and time again, his method consists of attempts to locate "trap

doors" and "fissures" in the landscape, gateways to the past that help facilitate the

---

[142] The only thing it lacks are (surrealist) ships.

reimagination of the present and the redemption of the future, but it also involves

drawing on the inspiration of a spiritual heritage, a constellation of spiritual ancestors

who sought to transform the world around them and who might still have some

lessons to impart. What's even better, from Keiller's standpoint, is when these two

elements come together. While Rimbaud and especially Defoe are both of great

importance to *Robinson in Space*, perhaps the film's two most important

touchstones, the two characters who appear to hold the greatest significance to

Robinson, are Robert Burton and Laurence Sterne.[143] Of the two, Burton is the only

one of the two to "appear" in the film, his bizarre, Othello-like bust appearing during

the film's Oxford segment.[144] In fact, much of that segment is devoted to Burton,

who spent a "silent, sedentary, solitary, private life" as a librarian at Christ Church

and the vicar of St. Thomas the Martyr, and whose significance to Robinson appears

to be based largely on the merits of *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, which was

published in 1621, right at the beginning of Robinson's (and Keiller's) historical

project, for he turns to the Narrator and tries to make sense of his saturnine state of

mind using Burton as a reference point: "The Jacobean melancholy, like our own,"

said Robinson, "was the result of a disorientation: you and I are deeply disillusioned

people…" Robinson is characteristically vague here, and Oxford being an early stop

on his itinerary, he's still a long way off from the seventh journey, when the

cumulative effects of "the problem of England" cause him to "act strangely," but

---

[143] Also of great importance are Oscar Wilde, Henri Bergson, Alan Turing, and Alec
Issigonis, but of these only Bergson is of importance to the form of *Robinson in
Space*, and his connection to the landscape of England is much more tenuous.
[144] Laurence Sterne had already "appeared" in *London* in the form of a statue in
Leicester Square.

given the project's historical scope, the suggestion here already is that this shared

disorientation and disillusionment has to do with the capitalist production of space

and the profound changes (scenic and otherwise) it brought about. Aside from a

shared disposition and an important historical *correspondance*, the significance of

Burton has to do with the peripatetic form of Keiller's Robinson films. In this, his

attachment to Burton parallels that of a couple of other renowned peripatetic *auteurs*.

Thus, as Jo Catling has pointed out,

> Sebald's *Wanderer*, whether subjects of his essays or protagonists of
> his prose, have, with their powers of observation and often slightly
> detached, outsider status, something in common with Walter
> Benjamin's *flâneur*, his ragpickers and archaeologists (this last is
> perhaps most noticeable in *Austerlitz*, arguably the most urban of the
> books), and yet also have at times something of the beguiling
> innocence of Bruce Chatwin's nomads about them. Indeed
> 'Anatomist of Restlessness' might have been a fitting alternative title
> for this volume [as opposed to *Anatomist of Melancholy*]; both
> Chatwin (whose work W.G. Sebald knew and commented on…) and
> Sebald can be said to take Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* as
> a point of reference (as does the present volume), and it is no
> coincidence that Chatwin's posthumously published *Uncollected
> Writings* appeared under the title *Anatomy of Restlessness*. If Burton
> saw walking as a cure for melancholy,[145] a view later echoed by
> Kierkegaard (both authors cited by Chatwin in the notebook extracts
> which make up part of *The Songlines*…), Chatwin goes on to aver, in
> 'The Nomadic Alternative', "The best thing is to walk…"

Robinson and the Narrator do a lot less walking than they did in *London* (when

Robinson came to more or less the same conclusion as Chatwin: "he had thought

---

[145] Burton writes:
> But the most pleasant of all outward pastimes is that of Aretaeus,
> *deambulatio per amoena loca* [strolling through pleasant scenery], to
> make a petty progress, a merry journey now and then with some good
> companions, … see cities castles, towns,… to walk amongst orchards,
> gardens, bowers, mounts, and arbours, artificial wildernesses, green
> thickets, arches, groves, lawns, rivulets, fountains, and such-like
> pleasant places…. (74)

that he might learn to drive, but now he says it would be better if we walk"), but this is due to both the scope of the project, their interest in the state of the UK automobile industry (and, it must be added, their attachment to Alec Issigonis), and their occasional pragmatism,[146] and not to an improved state of mind (*Robinson in Space* confirms that Robinson is a melancholic worthy of Burton, Benjamin, Sebald, and Chatwin). That said, walking still entails a primary mode of investigation in *Robinson in Space*, the film feels nearly as flâneuristic as its predecessor, and, as suggested above, Keiller's interest in Burton is closely tied to his cinematic and cultural-historical methodology. Ironically (and this is classic Keiller humor), it is the anatomist of melancholy who marks the high point of our protagonists' entire journey: "I think we were never so happy as on the day of our pilgrimage to the memorials of Robert Burton."

If Robinson and the Narrator's visit to Oxford is motivated in large part by the town's associations with Burton, their visit to Cambridge is motivated in part by its associations with Laurence Sterne. There they visit Jesus College and Keiller shows the audience an image of a hideous sign displaying the many interests taking part in constructing Cambridge's version of the "architecture of the future"—in this case, a "new library and computing centre." Jesus College was "where Laurence Sterne was an undergraduate," according to the Narrator,[147] but apparently this fact had received none of the pomp of Burton's tenure at Oxford. Later, after their investigations of some ominous "new spaces" in the Middlesbrough region,

---

[146] As Keiller put it once, "The present day flâneur carries a camera and travels not so much on foot as in a car or on a train" ("The Poetic" 75).

[147] Jesus College was also the college where Raymond Williams was a fellow.

including the Samsung factory and a motel ("This plaque commemorates the opening

of the Forte Travelodge and Little Chef Restaurant at Sedgefield by the Rt Hon Tony

Blair, 25th March 1995"), and right prior to running some counterintelligence on "the

US National Security Agency's installation at Menwith Hill… the largest signals

intelligence base in the world," Robinson and the Narrator make another important

pilgrimage. They visit the meticulously landscaped premises of Shandy Hall, were

they find yet another plaque, but this time the Narrator deems the plaque worth

reading aloud:

> "Here dwelt Laurence Sterne, many years incumbent of Coxwold.
> Here he wrote *Tristram Shandy*, and *The Sentimental Journey*. Died
> in London in 1768."

The landscaped frontage here is important. As we have seen, the eighteenth century

landscape garden was part of a process whereby the English landscape was

transformed (and subdued) according to a rationale that was both economic and

aesthetic. Laurence Sterne was an eighteenth-century artist who sought refuge in

Shandy Hall so that he might transform the English landscape (cultural and

otherwise) in a radically different manner, and so that he might (as Keiller would

have it) imagine the cinema *avant la lettre*. Equally important, however, is Sterne's

place within a secret history that Robinson is desperately trying to cobble together as

an antidote to "the problem of England." Keiller explains Robinson's arcane

method, and his attachment to Burton and Sterne, in an interview with Patrick

Wright:

> PW: Does history as it is still written in the landscape provide some
> sort of perspective on the contemporary overlay? I mean, there's
> Robinson, looking for Rimbaud at the beginning, and digging up all

sorts of cultural references as he goes. Is history just disconnected debris, or does Robinson find it still potent and challenging?

PK: He's always trying to reconstruct his culture, so he looks for things which will enable him or other people to do the same.

PW: So, he's a reconstructor in that sense?

PK: Yes. He comes to Oxford and picks out Robert Burton, because *The Anatomy of Melancholy* was an important source for Laurence Sterne, and because Sterne was an important source for the Russian Formalists, for Shklovsky—for modernism, for the cinema, for the twentieth century. (229)

To say that Sterne was an important source for Shklovsky is something of an

understatement. Shklovsky based the title for his experimental memoir on Sterne's

The Sentimental Journey, and one of his most important Formalist theoretical essays

was a close analysis of *Tristram Shandy*. In fact, in the pages of *A Sentimental*

Journey he had this to say about Sterne:

> I resurrected Laurence Sterne in Russian by knowing how to read him.
>
> When my friend Eikhenbaum was leaving Petersburg for Saratov, he asked an English professor friend of his for Tristram Shandy to read on the train. His friend replied, "Forget it. It's a terrible bore." Now he considers Sterne an interesting writer. I revived Sterne by understanding his system.

According to Shklovsky, the "most remarkable feature" of this system was its

emphasis on content, or, rather, its understanding that content is indivisible from

form. More specifically, Shklovsky found a clear antecedent for this theory of

defamiliarization in Sterne's work, not to mention a model for his theory of montage:

"In a work of art, thought is juxtaposed to thought, just as word is to word and image

to image" (232). This particular aspect came directly from Sterne's discussion of

"literary time" in *Tristram Shandy*, where he defends the novel's unorthodox form

against those defenders of the traditional novel by claiming that its roots lie in human

consciousness:

> If the hypercritic will go upon this… I would remind him, that the
> idea of duration and its simple modes, is got merely from the train and
> succession of our ideas,—and is the true scholastic pendulum,—and
> by which, as a scholar, I will be tried in this matter, —adjuring and
> detesting the jurisdiction of all other pendulums whatever.
> (Shklovsky, "Sterne's" 39)

And if this passage sounds familiar, it's because Sterne's experiments with "literary

time" were based directly on John Locke's "succession of ideas," the very first

instance of, "the conception of the mind as a *stream of consciousness*," a fact that

Keiller rather coyly alludes to during *Robinson in Space*'s Temple of British

Worthies sequence when he pays homage to Locke by quoting from Sterne

(Gallagher 8).[148]

In fact, in many ways the Temple of British Worthies sequence holds the key

to Keiller's peculiar modernism and its attempts to reimagine the English landscape.

Although Robinson and the Narrator single out three of the Temple's sixteen British

Worthies (significantly, all three come from its "men of thought" half and not from

the "men of action" side), it's the allusions to Keiller's own personal list of British

Worthies that are really worth noting. Thus, the homage to Locke consists of a

subtle homage to Sterne (and Shklovsky), and the homage to Milton consists of an

---

[148] Keiller and Shklovsky are certainly not the only ones with an affection for Sterne
and *Tristram Shandy*. In *History*, Kracauer cites a long passage where Sterne
discusses the problems of the historiographer as compared with the "muleteer"
driving a mule (i.e. the nature of history is not "straight forward"), and Debord closes
Panegyric, vol. 2, his autobiographical set of "iconographical evidence," with a
passage on history and spatiality which begins as follows: "But I must here, once
and for all, inform you, that all this will be more exactly delineated and explained in
a map, now in the hands of the engraver…" (Kracauer, *History* 189; Debord,
Panegyric 167).

even more subtle homage to Humphrey Jennings. They don't pay their respects to

Milton for *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, *Samson Agonistes*, or any one of a

number of other possible literary masterpieces, many of which have very powerful

connections to the English Revolution and its aftermath (see Hill 1977 and 1984),

one of Robinson's (and Keiller's) favorite topics, they pay them quite specifically for

Pandaemonium, Milton's vision of the Palace of Satan and its construction from

Book 1 of *Paradise Lost*, the very same reference that Jennings used as the starting

point and title for his "imaginative history of the industrial revolution." And this

brings us back to the legacy of Surrealism, for Jennings, like Benjamin, "went a

stage beyond the surrealists" and created a sweeping history of the prehistory of

modern capitalism (in this case, a history of the Industrial Revolution and its impact

from 1660 to 1886), one intended to awaken the English from their "sleep," out of a

montage of "Images" (Raine 51; Saler 127, 131). Milton's image of Pandaemonium

was absolutely key to Jennings' account—one of his earliest notes read:

> Pandaemonium is the Palace of All the Devils. Its building began
> c.1660. It will never be finished—it has to be transformed into
> Jerusalem. The building of Pandaemonium is the real history of
> Britain for the last three hundred years. (Jennings, *Pandaemonium* 5)

Keiller had since developed a very different interpretation of the Industrial

Revolution and its place in English history, of landscape, industrialization,

urbanization, and the meaning of "pandaemonium," from the time Jennings wrote,

> The furious industrial epoch, of which England was the pioneer and
> of which she is still much the extreme example, cannot be so put
> aside. There is no country as urbanized as England. There is no
> country with so small a percentage of its population engaged on the
> land. There is no country with such an energy of horse-power heaped
> and crammed into so small a space. In spite of the fact that a grocer's

calendar will carry a picture of a cottage in the snow…, England,
Modern England, is a series of city streets.

but he clearly appreciates Jennings' poetical eye and his historical mind (Jennings,

Humphrey 43). Lindsay Anderson once described Jennings as, "the only real poet

the British cinema has yet produced," but, again, it's the connection between

Jennings' cine-poetics and his historical imagination that really sets him apart

(87).[149] As Kathleen Raine puts it,

> Certainly no poet, since Blake, has understood English history, and in
> particular the Industrial Revolution, with the twofold intensity of
> observation and imagination that Humphrey Jennings brought to bear
> on the industrial landscape… (51)

He also is clearly a student of Jennings' lyrical cinematic treatments of Britain, his

"symphonic" approach to everyday life in England, and his desire to reinvent the city

film.[150] Perhaps most importantly, Jennings provides something of a model for a

historically informed British avant-garde aesthetic, one very much in tune with the

landscape of "the problem of England" and willing to attempt reimagining it. As

"Robinson" put it in his interview with Keiller following the release of *Robinson in*

Space:

> The modernist avant-gardes envisioned the transformation of
> everyday life, initially through a revolutionary subjectivity. Modern
> artists were enthusiastic about things like radio, ships and aeroplanes,
> factories and big ports. The poetics of modernity were the inspiration
> for designers' attempts to transform the world by making *new things*.

---

[149] At the time that Anderson first wrote his essay on Jennings in 1954,
Pandaemonium was still unpublished.

[150] In 1944, Jennings conceived of a city film that he thought would mark something
of a breakthrough:
> There is a subject for a film to be made… which, to my surprise,
> seems to have escaped everybody, a film of the two cities
> themselves—London and New York—living simultaneously through
> twenty-four hours. (Jennings, *Humphrey* 37)

We are more critical of our own modernity, but it's still the key to imagining what a new world might be like. (69)

Conclusion

Now, this is neither the time nor the place to open up a thorough discussion of the "afterlife" of the city film, but we might still make a few pertinent observations. First of all: what happened to the city film movement? Well, it didn't entirely disappear, of course. In so far as many within the post-World War II avant-garde remained attached to the urban sphere, it's hardly surprising that we see should continue to see films being made in the city films tradition throughout the second half of the twentieth century, with New York and Paris being the two cities that received the most attention. Thus, in the United States, one might point out Helen Levitt and James Agee's *In the Street* (1948), with its focus on New York's children and their street games, Frank Stauffacher's ode to San Francisco, *Notes on the Port of St. Francis* (1952), and Rudy Burckhardt's series of lyrical, gritty New York city films, like *Under the Brooklyn Bridge* (1953). While in the case of France, the films that did the most to reinterpret the city film and expand upon its potential were films like Agnes Varda's *L'Opera Mouffe* (1958), her tribute to her beloved rue Mouffetard, Chris Marker and Pierre Lhomme's stunning assessment of Paris at the end of the Algerian crisis, during "the first springtime of peace," *Le Joli Mai* (1963), and even Jean-Luc Godard's *2 ou 3 choses je sais d'elle* (1967), whose difficult, disjointed form displayed more of a documentary eye than was typical in Godard's work of the period as it played upon the parallels between "the Paris region," the new city in the process of being reconstructed, and (fittingly) the split figure of Juliette/Marina. But there was never what we might call a *movement*, and much of

the reason for this must be attributable to the fact that the city, in some ways, had been displaced. As the spatial organization of the industrialized nations of the West became increasingly centrifugal, the city was no longer the focus it once was, but perhaps more importantly, there weren't the triumphant "new cities" to fuel such a movement, or, rather, the former "new cities" of New York, Berlin, and Moscow no longer held the same allure. With few exceptions—Lewis Jacobs' explicitly Vertovian treatment of Depression-era New York from his never completed *As I Walk* (ca. 1934), being the most glaring—the classical era of the city film was overwhelmingly affirmative. This is certainly one of the reasons that Benjamin and Kracauer were so critical of this image of modernity, and the films that resulted from it, and this level of affirmation was apparently difficult to generate in the post-war period, at least within the ranks of the avant-garde.

One can see this problematic quite clearly in the opening scenes of Chris Marker and Pierre Lhomme's *Le Joli Mai*, a film whose cinematography and calendrical structure make it particularly pertinent to our discussion. Thus, the film begins with a series of haunting high-angle shots of Paris at dawn, the city "quiet" and still largely "empty." Gradually, the city awakens and begins to come alive again, and eventually, the fog having lifted, the cinematographer uses a telephoto lens to create a highly compressed "tiers of space" shot of a series of bridges and the ceaseless traffic that flows back and forth across them, one highly reminiscent of compositions in both *London* and *Robinson in Space*. Meanwhile, with an eerie electronic tone ringing in the background, Simone Signoret narrates (in the English

version), introducing us to the city in a manner that recalls the opening moments of

London and the Narrator's homecoming, as well as Keiller's working method:

> This, the most beautiful city in the world—one would like to see it for
> the first time, at dawn, without having seen it before, without
> memories, without habits, one would like to track it like a detective,
> with a telescope and a microphone.
>   One would like to return to Paris after a long absence to find out
> whether the same keys open the same doors…
>   It's the most beautiful set in the world.

The film's lyrical introduction then continues with Signoret reading from Jean

Giraudoux's 1923 *La Prière sur la tour Eiffel*, the work that provides the title of Part

One, while the camera (presumably shooting from the top of the Eiffel Tower)

continues to scan the city's surfaces with its "telescope," and the credits play overtop

an extreme high-angle shot of pedestrians casting long shadows in the style of

Vertov, Rodchenko, or Umbo. Clearly there is great love and admiration in this

opening sequence, but it's there largely as counterpoint, because the rest of the film

is about "the problem of Paris," about its misplaced values and its lack of focus, and

the film crew's movements follow suit, creating a fragmented portrait of the city that

has little to do with Paris's sights, with Paris as "the most beautiful set in the world."

As in the case with Keiller's work, this makes for compelling cinema, but one can

understand why there wasn't a movement of such films.

The other thing is that, not only did the city film phenomenon become diffuse

in the era of centrifugal space, but, as *Le Joli Mai* showed, in order to truly capture

the late modern and postmodern city, one might have to adopt a centrifugal approach

to filmmaking. In this regard, the films of people like Patrick Keiller follow in the

footsteps of art photography (once again), as the emphatically urban visions that

were such a vital part of the photographic market from the time of Stieglitz, Coburn,

and Strand, were displaced to a certain extent by the work of photographers who

gravitated towards the unfocused urbanism of cities like Los Angeles and Vancouver

(like Ed Ruscha and Jeff Wall), or who moved out to the edges of the urban centers

and beyond (like the Bechers, William Eggleston, and Lee Friedlander). Again, of

particular relevance to this study, is the work of Robert Smithson, who, on Saturday,

September 30, 1967, ventured from the bus terminal of New York's Port Authority

building to Passaic, New Jersey to explore and document (in words and photographs)

the "monuments" that skirt the periphery of the New York metropolitan region, to

transform this industrial wasteland into an allegorical landscape, and to do so on

foot. Smithson's project was a complicated affair inspired in no small measure by a

profound understanding of art history, and especially issues of landscape, one that

saw the connections between Passaic, Frederick Law Olmsted's construction of

Central Park, and the theories of Uvedale Price, the great theorist of the picturesque:

> When a rawness of such a gash in the ground is softened, and in part
> concealed and ornamented by the effects of time, and the progress of
> vegetation, deformity, by this usual process, is converted into
> picturesqueness; and this is the case with quarries, gravel pits, etc.,
> which at first are deformities, and which in their most picturesque
> state, are often considered as such by a leveling improver. (Smithson,
> "Frederick" 159)

There are two things that I find interesting about this particular example. The

first has to do with the way in which Smithson's engagement with the urban

landscape (albeit its periphery) is "geological," that his bus ride to New Jersey

coupled with this walk through its industrial *zones* transforms mere surfaces into

something composed of historical layers, something worthy of examination. We saw

earlier how New York's hyperbolic centripetalism was translated into the recurring image of the vortex, seen everywhere from the work of the Futurists, to that of proto-Constructivists like Tatlin, to the films of Ruttmann and Vertov. We also saw how part of Benjamin and Kracauer's response to the modernity of the Berlin-Moscow-New York triangle and its "vorticism"—frequently configured as forward, future-directed thrust—consists of what we might call a "spatio-temporal vertigo" or "historical vertigo," a phenomenon that is clear in Benjamin's discussions of "precipitous" city streets that lead "downward" "into a vanished time" in *The Arcades Project*. At its best, this process is dialectical, plunging into the past, but surging back into the present as well. In fact, Smithson referred to the work of Price and Olmsted in just such terms, as, "forerunners of a dialectical materialism applied to the physical landscape." "Dialectics of this type," he added, "are a way of seeing things in a manifold of relations, not as isolated objects" ("Frederick" 159-160).

The second is connected to Smithson's lifelong interest in physics, and the theory of entropy that resulted. The title of the present work refers directly to Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's famous "typophoto," and therefore to the earliest chapter in the history of the city film and the energy, the enthusiasm, and the faith in technology that fueled the city film movement of the inter-war period. In part the reasons for this were ironic, as the trajectory of this thesis should have made clear. Smithson, especially around the time of his "The Monuments of Passaic" photo-essay, became fixated on the idea that entropy was the key to understanding the course of history, that, "energy is more easily lost than obtained, and that in the ultimate future the whole universe will burn out…" ("Entropy" 11). Famously, he even performed a

simple experiment towards the end of his Passaic expedition in order to "[prove] entropy."

> Picture in your mind's eye [a] sand box divided in half with black sand on one side and white sand on the other. We take a child and have him run hundreds of times clockwise in the box until the sand gets mixed and begins to turn grey; after that we have him run anti-clockwise, but the result will not be a restoration of the original division but a greater degree of greyness and an increase of entropy. (51)

Film, he noted, could be used to "prove the reversibility of eternity" using a (Vertovian) illusion, "but," Smithson deadpanned, "sooner or later the film itself would crumble or get lost and enter the state of irreversibility" (ibid). In some ways, following Smithson, the title of this thesis might have been called "Thermodynamics of the Metropolis." But what's truly interesting about Keiller's oeuvre is that distinction between his project and the project of his protagonists. For all their melancholy, for all their *spleen*, Keiller's films themselves are testament to an unwavering belief that a "radical subjectivity" coupled with an understanding of the *production* of space might still yield something of a breakthrough, some glimpse of another future.[151] In other words, that the city film is still very much alive.

---

[151] Given "Tram Rides and Other Virtual Landscapes" and *The City of the Future*, Keiller apparently hasn't given up hope on dusty old films either.

Bibliography

Ades, Dawn, ed. *The Dada Reader: A Critical Anthology*. London: Tate
      Publishing, 2006.

--. *Photomontage*. 1976. London: Thames & Hudson, 1993.

Anderson, Lindsay. "Only Connect: Some Aspects of the Work of Humphrey
      Jennings." O'Pray 87-96.

Andrew, Geoff. "Robinson in Space." *Time Out*. 8 January 1997: 69.

Anonymous. "Definitions." Knabb 45-6.

--. "Preliminary Problems in Constructing a Situation." Knabb 43-5.

--. "Unitary Urbanism as the End of the 1950s." Sussman 143-147.

Aragon, Louis. *Le Paysan de Paris*. 1926. Trans. Simon Watson Taylor. London:
      Jonathan Cape, 1971.

Arnheim, Rudolf. *Film as Art*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California
      Press, 1966.

Balazs, Béla. *Theory of the Film: Character and Growth of a New Art*.
      Trans. Edith   Bone. New York: Arno Press, 1972.

Barnouw, Dagmar. *Critical Realism: History, Photography, and the Work of
      Siegfried Kracauer*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University
      Press, 1994.

Barnouw, Erik. *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film*. 1974. Oxford:
      Oxford University Press, 1983.

Barwell, Claire. "*Flâneur* of London." *Pix 2*. London: BFI, 1997.

Baudelaire, Charles. *Flowers of Evil and Other Works*. 1962. Ed. and trans.
      Wallace Fowlie. New York: Dover Publications, 1992.

--. *One Hundred Poems from Les Fleurs du Mal*. Trans. C.F. MacIntyre. Berkeley,
      CA: University of California Press, 1947.

Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin
      McLaughlin. Cambridge, MA: Belknap-Harvard University Press, 1999.

--. *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1968.

--. *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*. Ed. Peter Demetz. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. New York. Schocken Books, 1978.

--. *Selected Writings*, Volume 1: 1913-1926. Ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA: Belknap-Harvard University Press, 1996.

--. *Selected Writings*, Volume 2: 1927-1934. Ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith. Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap-Harvard University Press, 1999.

--. *Selected Writings*, Volume 3: 1935-1938. Ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap-Harvard University Press, 2002.

--. *Selected Writings*, Volume 4: 1938-1940. Trans. Edmund Jephcott et al. Eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA: Belknap- Harvard University Press, 2003.

Berman, Marshall. *All That is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity*. 1982. New York: Penguin Books, 1988.

Blazwick, Iwona, with Mark Francis, Peter Wollen, and Malcolm Imrie, eds. *An Endless Adventure…Endless Passion. . .An Endless Banquet: A Situationist Scrapbook*. London: ICA/Verso, 1989.

Bochner, Jay. *An American Lens: Scenes From Stieglitz's New York Secession*. Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2005.

Bohan, Ruth L. *Looking Into Walt Whitman: American Art, 1850-1920*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006.

Bohan, Ruth L. "Whitman's 'Barbaric Yawp' and the Culture of New York Dada." Gaughan 35-57.

Bowser, Elizabeth. *The Transformation of Cinema: 1907-1915*. 1990. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994.

Breton, André. *Nadja*. 1928. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Grove Press, 1960.

--. *What is Surrealism?* Trans. David Gascoyne. New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1974.

Brown, J. Carter. Introduction. *The Treasure Houses of Britain: Five Hundred Years of Private Patronage and Art Collecting*. Ed. Jackson-Stops. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985. 10-13.

Brownill , Sue and Cathy Sharp. "London's Housing Crisis." Thornley 10-24.

Buck-Morss, Susan. "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered." *October* 62 (1992): 3-41.

--. *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*. 1989. Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1999.

Bunnell, Peter C. "Towards New Photography: Renewals of Pictorialism." Frizot 311-326.

Burrows, Edwin G. and Mike Wallace. *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Burton, Robert. *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, Volume 2. London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1949.

Butler, Christopher. *Early Modernism: Literature, Music and Painting in Europe, 1900-1916*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994.

Cadava, Eduardo. *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997.

Cardinal, Roger. "Soluble City: The Surrealist Perception of Paris." *Architectural Design* 48.2-3 (1978): 143-9.

Cendrars, Blaise. *Modernities and Other Writings*. Ed. Monique Chefdor. Trans. Esther Allen. Lincoln, NE and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1992.

Charney, Leo and Vanessa Schwartz, eds. *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995.

Chtcheglov, Ivan. "Formulary for a New Urbanism." Knabb 1-4.

Clark, T.J. "El Lissitzky in Vitebsk." Perloff and Reed 199-210.

Clark, T.J. *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers*. 1984. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986.

Clarke, David B. "*The City of the Future* revisited or, the lost world of Patrick Keiller." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 32.1 (2007): 29-45.

Coady, Robert, ed. *The Soil*. New York: The Soil Publishing, 1916-1917.

Coburn, Alvin Langdon. *Alvin Langdon Coburn, Photographer*. 1966. Ed. Helmut
        and Alison Gernsheim, New York: Dover Publications, 1978.

--. *Alvin Langdon Coburn: Symbolist Photographer, 1882-1966*. New York:
        Aperture, 1986.

--. "The Future of Pictorial Photography." *Photographers on Photography*. Lyons
        53-5.

--. "The Relation of Time to Art." *Photographers on Photography*. Lyons 52-3.

Constantine, Mildred and Alan Fern. *Revolutionary Soviet Film Posters.* Baltimore
        and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974.

Crandell, Gina. *Nature Pictorialized: "The View" in Landscape History*. Baltimore
        and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.

Crone, Rainer and David Moos. *Kazimir Malevich: The Climax of Disclosure*.
        Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

Danino, Nina and Michael Mazière, eds. *The* Undercut *Reader: Critical Writings
on   Artists' Film and Video*. London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2003.

Debord, Guy. *In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni*. London: Pelagian Press,
        1990.

--. "Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography." Knabb 5-8.

--. *Panegyric, Volumes 1 & 2*. Trans. James Brook and John McHale. London and
        New York: Verso, 2004.

--. "Theory of the Dérive." Knabb 50-54.

--. "Two Accounts of the Dérive." Sussman 135-139.

De Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steven Rendall.
        Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984.

Defoe, Daniel. *A Tour Thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain*. 1724-6. London:
        Frank Cass and Co., 1968.

De L'Ecotais, Emmanuelle and Mark Levitch. "Dada Films." Dickerman 410-415.

De Quincey, Thomas. *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*. 1821. London:
    Penguin Books, 1986.

De Zegher, Catherine and Mark Wigley, eds. *Another City for Another Life:
    Constant's New Babylon*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001.

Dickerman, Leah, ed. *Dada: Zurich, Berlin, Hannover, Cologne, New York, Paris*.
    Washington and New York: National Gallery of Art and Distributed Art
    Publishers, 2006.

Dimendberg, Edward. *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity*. Cambridge, MA:
    Harvard University Press, 2004.

--. "From Berlin to Bunker Hill: Urban Space, Late Modernity, and Film Noir in
    Fritz Lang's and Joseph Losey's *M*." *Wide Angle*, 19.4 (1997): 62-93.

Doherty, Brigid. "Berlin." Dickerman 87-112.

Durozoi, Gérard. *History of the Surrealist Movement*. Trans. Alison Andrews.
    Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002.

Eagleton, Terry. Foreword. *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the
    Paris Commune*. By Kristin Ross. Minneapolis, MN: University of
    Minnesota Press, 1988. vi-xiv.

Eisner, Lotte. *The Haunted Screen*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press,
    1973.

Elsaesser, Thomas. *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany's Historical Imaginary*.
    London and New York: Routledge, 2000.

Elsaesser, Thomas. "Dada/Cinema?" Kuenzli 13-27.

Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration. *The WPA Guide To
    New York City: The Federal Writers' Project Guide to 1930s New York*.
    1939. New York: The New Press, 1992.

Ferriss, Hugh. *The Metropolis of Tomorrow*. New York: Ives Washburn, Publisher,
    1929.

Fiedler, Jeannine. *Photography at the Bauhaus*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press,
    1990.

Finkelstein, Haim. *The Screen in Surrealist Art and Thought*. Aldershot, UK and
    Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2007.

Forgács, Éva. "Definitive Space: The Many Utopias of El Lissitzky's *Proun Room*." Perloff and Reed 47-75.

Fowler, Catherine and Gillian Helfield, eds. *Representing the Rural: Space, Place, and Identity in Films About the Land*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2006.

Fricke, Roswitha, ed. *Bauhaus Photographs*. 1982. Trans. Harvey L. Mendelsohn. Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1985.

Friedberg, Anne. *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993.

Friedman, Lester, ed. *Fires Were Started: British Cinema and Thatcherism*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

Frisby, David. *Fragments of Modernity: Theories of Modernity in the Work of Simmel, Kracauer, and Benjamin.* Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1988.

Frizot, Michel. "Another Kind of Photography: New Points of View." Frizot 387-397.

--. "Metamorphoses of the Image: Photo-graphics and the Alienation of Meaning." Frizot 430-455.

--, ed. *The New History of Photography*. 1994. Köln: Könemann, 1998.

Gallagher, Shaun. *The Inordinance of Time*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998.

Ganly, Raymond. "*Man With The Camera* [sic]: No Appeal for American Fans." Tsivian 363.

Gaughan, Martin Ignatius, ed. *Dada New York: New World for Old*. New Haven, CT: Thomson Gale, 2003.

--. "The Diagrammatic as Abstractive Representational Mode in New York Dada, the Historiographical Problem: No Such Thing as New York Dada." Gaughan 131-159.

Glancey, Jonathan. *London: Bread and Circuses*. London: Verso, 2001.

Gleber, Anke. *The Art of Taking a Walk: Flanerie, Literature, and Film in Weimar Culture*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999.

Goldberger, Paul. *The Skyscraper*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981.

Greenough, Sarah. *Alfred Stieglitz: The Key Set, Volume One 1886-1922*. Washington and New York: National Gallery of Art and Harry N. Abrams, 2002.

Grierson, John. "*Man With a Movie Camera*." Tsivian 374-5.

Gunning, Tom. "The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant- Garde." *Wide Angle* (1986): 63-70.

Halberstadt, Ilona, ed. *Pix 2*. London: BFI, 1997.

Hale, Dorothy J. *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory, 1900-2000*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006.

Hambourg, Maria Morris. *Paul Strand, Circa 1916*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Harry N. Abrams, 1998.

Hansen, Miriam Bratu. "America, Paris, the Alps: Kracauer (and Benjamin) on Cinema and Modernity." Charney and Schwartz 362-402.

--. "Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street." *Critical Inquiry*. 25.2 (1999): 306-343.

--. "Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: 'The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology.'" *New German Critique* 40 (1987): 179-224.

--. "Decentric Perspectives: Kracauer's Early Writings on Film and Mass Culture. *New German Critique* 54 (1991): 47-76.

--. Introduction. *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*. 1960. By Siegfried Kracauer. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997. vii-xlv.

--. "'With Skin and Hair': Kracauer's Theory of Film, Marseille 1940." *Critical Inquiry* 19 (1993): 437-469.

Harvey, David. *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Cambridge, MA and Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1990.

Haus, Andrea. "Laszlo Moholy-Nagy." *Photography at the Bauhaus*. Fiedler 15-18.

Hebbert, Michael. "Governing the Capital." Thornley 134-148.

Herbert, D.T. "The Changing Face of the City." Johnston and Gardiner 258-293.

Hight, Eleanor M. *Picturing Modernism: Moholy-Nagy and Photography in Weimar Germany*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995.

Hight, Eleanor M., ed. *Moholy-Nagy: Photography and Film in Weimar Germany*. Wellesley, MA: Wellesley College Museum, 1985.

Higson, Andrew, ed. *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema*. London: Cassell, 1996.

--. "A Green and Pleasant Land: Rural Spaces and British Cinema." Fowler and Helfield 240-255.

--. "The Heritage Film and British Cinema." Higson 232-248.

--. "Re-presenting the National Past: Nostalgia and Pastiche in the Heritage Film." Friedman 109-129.

Hill, Christopher. *The Experience of Defeat: Milton and Some Contemporaries*. New York: Viking, 1984.

--. *Milton and the English Revolution*. London: Faber & Faber, 1977.

Hodges, Mike. "The Secret City." *Pix 2*. London: BFI, 1997.

Hodgkinson, Anthony W. and Rodney E. Sheratsky. *Humphrey Jennings: More Than a Maker of Films*. Hanover, NH and London: Clark University and the University of New England, 1982.

Hoffman, Katherine. *Stieglitz: A Beginning Light*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004.

Homer, William Innes. *Alfred Stieglitz and the American Avant-Garde*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1977.

Horak, Jan-Christopher. "The First American Film Avant-Garde, 1919-1945." Horak 14-66.

--. *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Film Avant-Garde, 1919-1945*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995.

--. "Modernist Perspectives and Romantic Impulses: *Manhatta*." Stange 55-71.

--. "Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler's *Manhatta*." Horak 267-287.

House, John and Patrick Keiller. "River of Dreams: John House and Patrick Keiller
        on *Turner Whistler Monet*." *Tate Etc.* 3 (2005): 1.
        www.tate.org.uk/tateetc/issue3/riverofdreams.htm

Huyssen, Andreas. *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture,*
        Postmodernism. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press,
        1986.

Jackson, Kevin, ed. *The Humphrey Jennings Film Reader*. Manchester, UK:
        Carcanet, 1993.

Jackson-Stops, Gervase, ed. *The Treasure Houses of Britain: Five Hundred Years*
        of Private Patronage and Art Collecting. New Haven and London: Yale
        University Press, 1985.

Jacobs, Lewis. *The Rise of the American Film: A Critical History*. 1939. New
        York: Teachers College Press, 1967.

James, Henry. *The American Scene*. Ed. W.H. Auden. New York: Charles
        Scribner's Sons, 1946.

Jameson, Fredric. "Rimbaud and the Spatial Text." Wong 66-93.

Jay, Martin. *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century*
        Thought. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

Jennings, Humphrey. *Pandaemonium, 1660-1886: The Coming of the Machine as*
        Seen by Contemporary Observers. Ed. Mary-Lou Jennings and Charles
        Madge. New York: Free Press, 1985.

Jennings, Mary-Lou, ed. *Humphrey Jennings: Film-maker, Painter, Poet*. London:
        BFI, 1982.

Jentsch, Ralph. *George Grosz: L'oeil de l'artiste*. Paris: Adam Biro, 2002.

Johnston, R.J. and V. Gardiner, eds. *The Changing Geography of the United*
        Kingdom. London: Routledge, 1991.

Jones, Amelia. *Irrational Modernism: A Neurasthenic History of New York Dada*.
        Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2004.

Kaes, Anton. "Leaving Home: Film, Migration, and the Urban Experience." *New*
        German Critique 74 (1998): 179-192.

Kaliski Miller, Andrea. "Films." Hight 122-129.

Kaplan, Louis. *Laszlo Moholy-Nagy: Biographical Writings*. Durham, NC and
        London: Duke University Press, 1995.

Kauffman, Vincent. "Angels of Purity." *October* 79 (1997): 49-68.

Keiller, Patrick. "Architectural Cinematography." Rattenbury 37-44.

--. "Atmosphere, Palimpsest and Other Interpretations of Landscape." Danino and
        Mazière 75-83.

--. "The Dilapidated Dwelling." Wigglesworth and Till 22-7.

--. "Interview with Robinson." *Time Out* 8 January 1997: 69.

--. "Port Statistics." *The Unknown City: Contesting Architecture and Social Space*.
        Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001.

--. *Robinson in Space*. London: Reaktion Books, 1999.

--. "Tram Rides and Other Virtual Landscapes." *The Lost World of Mitchell and
        Kenyon: Edwardian Britain on Film*. Eds. Vanessa Toulmin, Simon Popple,
        and Patrick Russell. London: BFI Publishing, 2004.

--. "The Visible Surface." *Sight and Sound* 4 (1994): 35.

Kern, Stephen. *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918*. Cambridge, MA:
        Harvard University Press, 1983.

Kerr, Joe. "'To Change Life, However, We Must First Change Space': Patrick
        Keiller Interviewed by Joe Kerr." *Architectural Design* 70.1 (2000): 82-5.

Kiefer, Geraldine Wojno. *Alfred Stieglitz: Scientist, Photographer, and Avatar of
        Modernism, 1880-1913*. New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1991.

Knabb, Ken, ed. and trans. *The Situationist International Anthology*. Berkeley, CA:
        Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981.

Koch, Gertrud. "'Not yet accepted anywhere': Exile, Memory, and Image in
        Kracauer's Conception of History." *New German Critique* 54 (1991):
        95-109.

Koolhaas, Rem. *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan*.
        1978. New York: The Monacelli Press, 1994.

Kotanyi, Attila and Raoul Vaneigem. "Elementary Program of the Bureau of
        Unitary Urbanism." Knabb 65-7.

Kozloff, Max. "The Futurist Campaign: Art Can Only Be Violence, Cruelty, Injustice." *Artforum* X.6 (1972): 46-51.

Kracauer, Siegfried. *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1947.

--. *History: The Last Things Before the Last*. 1969. Ed. Paul Oskar Kristeller. Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1995.

--. *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays.* Trans. and ed. Thomas Y. Levin. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995.

--. *Orpheus in Paris: Offenbach and the Paris of his Time*. Trans. Gwenda David and Eric Mosbacher. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1938.

--. *The Salaried Masses: Duty and Distraction in Weimar Germany*. Trans. Quintin Hoare. London and New York: Verso, 1998.

--. *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*. 1960. Intr. Miriam Bratu Hansen. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997.

Krauss, Rosalind E. *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1985.

Kuenzli, Rudolf E., ed. *Dada and Surrealist Film*. New York: Willis Locker & Owens, 1987.

--. *Dada: Themes and Movements*. New York and London: Phaidon Press, 2006.

Lacey, Catherine. "The Poetry of Fact: Beyond Documentary in Three Narrative Works." O'Pray 274-283.

Landau, Sarah Bradford and Carl W. Condit. *Rise of the New York Skyscraper, 1865-1913*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996.

Leach, Neil, ed. *The Hieroglyphics of Space: Reading and Experiencing the Modern Metropolis*. London and New York: Routledge. 2002.

Leahy, James. "Image Picture Frame." *Vertigo* 2.1 (2001): 30-2.

Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. 1974. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Blackwell, 1991.

Lepik, Andres. *Skyscrapers*. Munich, Berlin, London, and New York: Prestel, 2004.

Leyda, Jay. *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1960.

--. Leyda Papers, The Elmer Holmes Bobst Library, New York University, New York.

Leys, Colin. *Politics in Britain: From Labourism to Thatcherism*. London: Verso, 1989.

Lista, Giovanni. *Futurism and Photography*. London: Merrell Publishers, 2001.

Lodder, Christina. *Constructive Strands in Russian Art, 1914-1937*. London: The Pindar Press, 2005.

--. "El Lissitzky and the Export of Constructivism." Perloff and Reed 27-46.

Lowe, Sue Davidson. *Stieglitz: A Memoir/Biography*. 1983. Boston: MFA Publications, 2002.

Lucic, Karen. *Charles Sheeler and the Cult of the Machine*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991.

Lyons, Nathan, ed. *Photographers on Photography*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966.

Macdonald, Kevin and Mark Cousins, eds. *Imagining Reality: The Faber Book of Documentary*. London and Boston: Faber, 1996.

Marcus, Greil. *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.

Marinetti, F.T. *Critical Writings*. Ed. Günter Berghaus. Trans. Doug Thompson. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006.

Mayer, Robert. "Not Adaptation but 'Drifting': Patrick Keiller, Daniel Defoe, and the Relationship between Film and Literature." *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 16.4 (2004): 802-827.

McDonough, Thomas. "Fluid Spaces: Constant and the Situationist Critique of Architecture." De Zegher and Mark Wigley 93-104.

--. "Situationist Space." *October* 67 (1994): 59-77.

McDonough, Tom, ed. *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*. Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2002.

Meyer, Esther da Costa. *The Work of Sant'Elia: Retreat into the Future*. New
     Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995.

Michelson, Annette. "Dr. Crase and Mr. Clair." *October* 11 (1979): 30-53.

Miller, Michael and Ben Rebel, eds. *Avant-Garde: Interdisciplinary and
     International Review*. Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 1988.

Misselbeck, Reinhold. "Alvin Langdon Coburn's Vorticist Experiments."   Steinorth
     177-9.

Moholy-Nagy, Laszlo. *Painting, Photography, Film*. 1969. Cambridge, MA: The
     MIT Press, 1973.

Mülder-Bach, Inka. "History as Autobiography: *The Last Things Before the Last*."
     New German Critique 54 (1991): 139-157.

--. Introduction. *The Salaried Masses: Duty and Distraction in Weimar Germany*.
     By Siegfried Kracauer. Trans. Quintin Hoare. London and New York:
     Verso, 1998. 3-22.

Mumford, Lewis. *The Culture of Cities*. 1938. San Diego, New York, and London:
     Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1970.

Naremore, James and Patrick Brantlinger, eds. *Modernity and Mass Culture*.
     Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991.

Nash, Eric P. *Manhattan Skyscrapers*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press,
     2005.

Naumann, Francis M. *New York Dada: 1915-1923*. New York: Harry N. Abrams,
     1994.

Neumann, Dietrich. "Before and After *Metropolis*: Film and Architecture in Search
     of the Modern City." Neumann 33-38.

--, ed. *Film Architecture: Set Designs from* Metropolis *to* Blade Runner. Munich
     and New York: Prestel, 1996.

Newhall, Beaumont, ed. *Photography: Essays & Images, Illustrated Readings in
     the History of Photography*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1980.

Newhall, Nancy. "Alvin Langdon Coburn—The Youngest Star." Steinorth 23-45.

Nye, David E. *American Technological Sublime*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1994.

--. *Electrifying America: Social Meanings of a New Technology, 1880-1940*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1990.

O'Pray, Michael, ed. *The British Avant-Garde Film, 1926 to 1995*. Luton: University of Luton Press, 1996.

Pachnicke, Peter. and Klaus Honnef, eds. *John Heartfield*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1992.

Pack, Susan. *Film Posters of the Russian Avant-Garde*. Köln: Taschen, 1995.

Perego, Elvire. "The Urban Machine." Frizot 196-223.

Perloff, Nancy. "The Puzzle of El Lissitzky's Artistic Identity." Perloff and Reed 1-23.

Perloff, Nancy and Brian Reed, eds. *Situating El Lissitzky: Vitebsk, Berlin, Moscow*. Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2003.

Perry, Ted, ed. *Masterpieces of Modernist Cinema*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006.

Peterson, Elmer, ed. *Paris Dada: The Barbarians Storm the Gates*. Farmington Hills, MI: Gale Group, 2001.

--. "Paris Dada: Publications and Provocations." Peterson 1-32.

Petit, Chris. "The Tattered Labyrinth: A Selective A-Z of London Cinema." Webber and Wilson 226-233.

Petric, Vlada. *Constructivism in Film:* The Man with the Movie Camera*, a Cinematic Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Phillips, Christopher. Introduction. *Montage and Modern Life*. Ed. Matthew Teitelbaum. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992. 21-35.

Pile, Steve. "'The Problem of London,' or, how to explore the moods of the city." Leach 203-216.

--. *Real Cities: Modernity, Space and the Phantasmagorias of City Life*. London: Sage Publications, 2005.

Pultz, John, "Austerity and Clarity: New Photography in the United States, 1920-1940." Frizot 477-486.

Rattenbury, Kester, ed. *This is not Architecture: Media Constructions*. London and New York: Routledge, 2002.

Rayns, Tony. "Simply Capital." *Time Out* 1 June 1994: 61.

Reeh, Henrik. *Ornaments of the Metropolis: Siegfried Kracauer and Modern Urban Culture*. 1991. Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2004.

Remy, Michel. *Surrealism in Britain*. London: Ashgate, 1999.

Richards, Thomas. *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851-1914*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990.

Rodowick, D.N. "The Last Things Before the Last: Kracauer and History." *New German Critique* 41 (1987): 109-139.

Ross, Kristin. *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988.

--. *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996.

--. "Lefebvre on the Situationists: An Interview." *October* 79 (1997): 69-83.

Roth, Nancy. "Heartfield and Modern Art." Pachnicke and Honnef 18-29.

Rotha, Paul. *Robert J. Flaherty: A Biography*. Ed. Jay Ruby. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983.

Rotzler, Willy. *Constructive Concepts: A History of Constructive Art from Cubism to the Present*. 1977. New York: Rizzoli, 1989.

Rubinstein, W.D. *Capitalism, Culture, and Decline in Britain, 1750-1990*. London: Routledge, 1993.

Sadler, Simon. *The Situationist City*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998.

Schlüpmann, Heide. "The Subject of Survival: On Kracauer's *Theory of Film*." *New German Critique* 54 (1991): 111-126.

Schwartz, Frederic J. "The Eye of the Expert: Walter Benjamin and the Avant Garde." *Art History* 24.3 (2001): 401-444.

Scott, William B. and Peter M. Rutkoff. *New York Modern: The Arts and the City*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.

Sheldon, Richard. Introduction. *A Sentimental Journey: Memoirs, 1917-1922*. 1970. By Viktor Shklovsky. Trans. and ed. Richard Sheldon. Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1984. ix-xxv.

Shklovsky, Viktor. *A Sentimental Journey: Memoirs, 1917-1922*. 1970. Trans. and ed. Richard Sheldon. Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1984.

--. "Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*: Stylistic Commentary." Hale 31-53.

Sider, Larry. "Looking for the Wind." Halberstadt 168-170.

Simmons, Sherwin. "Advertising Seizes Control of Life: Berlin Dada and the Power of Advertising." *Oxford Art Journal* 22.1 (1999): 121-146.

Sinclair, Iain. *Lights Out for the Territory: Nine Excursions in the Secret History of London*. London: Granta, 1997.

--. *London Orbital: A Walk Around the M25*. 2002. London: Penguin Books. 2003.

--. "Necropolis of Fretful Ghosts." *Sight and Sound* 4 (June 1994): 12-15.

Singer, Ben. *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and its Contexts*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.

Smithson, Robert. "Entropy and the New Monuments." Smithson 10-23.

--. "Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape." Smithson 157-171.

--. "The Monuments of Passaic." *Artforum* 6.4 (1967): 48-51.

--. *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*. Ed. Jack Flam. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996.

Soja, Edward. *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*. London and New York: Verso, 1989.

Spirn, Anne Whiston. *The Language of Landscape*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998.

Stange, Maren, ed. *Paul Strand: Essays on His Life*. New York: Aperture, 1990.

Stebbins, Jr., Theodore E. and Norman Keyes, Jr. *Charles Sheeler: The Photographs*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1987.

Steinorth, Karl, ed. *Alvin Langdon Coburn: Photographs 1900-1924*. Zurich and New York: Edition Stemmle, 1998.

Stern, Robert A.M., Gregory Gilmartin, and Thomas Mellins. *New York 1930: Architecture and Urbanism Between the Two World Wars*. New York: Rizzoli, 1987.

Stieglitz, Alfred. "Alfred Stieglitz: Four Happenings." Lyons 112-135.

--. "The Photo-Secession." *Photography: Essays & Images, Illustrated Readings in the History of Photography*. Newhall 167.

Stoneman, Rod. "Incursions and Inclusions: The Avant-Garde on Channel 4, 1983-1993." O'Pray 285-296.

Strand, Paul. "Photography." Lyons 136-7.

Strand, Paul. "Photography and the New God." Lyons 138-154.

Suarez, Juan Antonio. *Pop Modernism: Noise and the Reinvention of the Everyday*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2007.

Sussman, Elizabeth, ed. *On the Passage of a Few People Through a Rather Brief Moment in Time: The Situationist International, 1957-1972*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989.

Tashjian, Dickran. "Magnetic Fields in Manhattan: Stieglitz, Dada, and the Photography Debate." Gaughan 58-77.

Tashjian, Dickran. *Skyscraper Primitives: Dada and the American Avant-Garde, 1910-1925*. Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1975.

Taylor, Michael R. "New York." Dickerman 275-299.

Taylor, Timothy. "This Brand is Your Brand." *EnRoute*. May 2005.   (http:// www.enroutemag.com/e/may05/essay.html)

Teitelbaum, Matthew, ed. *Montage and Modern Life*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992.

Thornley, Andy, ed. *The Crisis of London*. London: Routledge, 1992.

Tsivian, Yuri, ed. *Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and the Twenties*. Trans. Julian Graffy. Gemona, Italy: La Giornale del Cinema Muto, 2004.

--. "*Man with a Movie Camera*—Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and the Twenties." Perry 85-110.

--. "Turning Objects, Toppled Pictures: Give and Take between Vertov's Films and Constructivist Art." *October* 121 (2007): 92-110

Tupitsyn, Margarita. *The Soviet Photograph, 1924-1937*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996.

--. "After Vitebsk: El Lissitzky and Kazimir Malevich, 1924-1929." Perloff and Reed 177-195.

--. "From the Politics of Montage to the Montage of Politics: Soviet Practice, 1919 Through 1937." Teitelbaum 83-127.

Van Dyke, John Charles. *The New New York, A Commentary on the Place and the People*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1909.

Vaneigem, Raoul. *The Revolution of Everyday Life*. 1967. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. London: Rebel Press/Left Bank Books, 1994.

Van Rheeden, Herbert. "Metropolis, The 1920's Image of the City." Miller and Rebel 11-31.

Vertov, Dziga. *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*. Ed. Annette Michelson. Trans. Kevin O'Brien. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1984.

Vidler, Anthony. *Warped Space: Art, Architecture, and Anxiety in Modern Culture*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2000.

Walker, Ian. *City Gorged With Dreams: Surrealism and Documentary Photography in Interwar Paris*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002.

Warehime, Marja. *Brassaï: Images of Culture and the Surrealist Observer*. Baton Rouge, LA and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1996.

Weaver, Mike. "Beyond the Craft." Coburn 6-74.

Webber, Andrew and Emma Wilson, eds. *Cities in Transition: The Moving Image and the Modern Metropolis*. London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2008.

Wees, William. *Light Moving in Time: Studies in the Visual Aesthetics of Avant- Garde Film*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.

Wigglesworth, Sarah and Jeremy Till, eds. *The Everyday and Architecture*. London: Architectural Design, 1998.

Willett, John. *Art and Politics in the Weimar Period: The New Sobriety, 1917-1933*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.

Williams, Raymond. *The Country and the City*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1973.

Wilson, Richard Guy, Dianne H. Pilgrim, and Dickran Tashjian. *The Machine Age in America, 1918-1941*. New York: The Brooklyn Museum and Harry N. Abrams, 1986.

Wollen, Peter. *Raiding the Icebox: Reflections on Twentieth-Century Culture*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993.

Wong, Tak-Wai and M.A. Abbas, eds. *Rewriting Literary History*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1984.

Wrathnall, John. "Patrick Keiller." *Blueprint*. 158 (February 1999): 10-11.

Wright, Frank Lloyd. *The Disappearing City*. New York: William Farquhar Payson, 1932.

Wright, Patrick. *A Journey Through Ruins: The Last Days of London*. London: Radius, 1991.

--. *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain*. London: Verso, 1985.

Young, Hugo. *The Iron Lady: A Biography of Margaret Thatcher*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1989.