

Film and Literary Modernism

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Edited by

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INTRODUCTION

Films ask us to watch, to “be there,” and to see and interpret a visual world. How does the modernist film confront the modern world? When is modernist film a social critic, a form engaged in an endeavor to remake the world, or to restore enchantment? The modern world signals a crisis of meaning. In this world, one wishes to be fully human, free from alienation, grounded and whole rather than beset by moral anomie, facelessness, and anxiety. Modernism brings provocative questioning of the social order, a desire for clarity and a passion for technique.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the future of the Western world was unclear. Yet, it seemed to literary and filmic artists that one might turn to form in poetry or to pictorial space to deal with the slippage of culture, religion, and ethical norms. This collection explores film and literary modernism. It ranges across theoretical issues of perception, space and time, film and text, the cityscape, and matters of gender, popularity, and audience. Modernists innovated in film, in the visual arts, and in literature, breaking away from conventional language and form. With the emergence of the new medium of film came a concern with time, stream of consciousness, imaginary space, montage, how the gaze is directed, and the impact of impressions upon the ear. Some images from modernist films are immediately stirring and draw our attention to our visual world. In the famous opening of Luis Bunuel’s *Un chien andalou*, we see a man, hands, a razor, a woman, an eye, the moon, clouds and then the cutting of the eye. The unfolding sequence relies upon associative processes, opening our eyes to see, calling upon us to refer to our experience to interpret what is seen. Montage develops through associations and unveils its meaning by gathering, relating, and unfolding many visual moments. Films imply the possible associations that we viewers can make between the shots. They make readers and interpreters of us.

Likewise, literature and language beckon to us for interpretation. The early decades of the twentieth century included an intense consciousness of how language constructed “reality.” This concern with the construction of meaning is a pervasive aspect of modern Western culture. Ferdinand de Saussure underscored the structural aspect of language. He demonstrated how the linguistic sign, the signifier, stands in an arbitrary relation to its external referent, the signified. Meaning is thus created relationally within

the exchange of language. *Ulysses* by James Joyce and *Three Lives* by Gertrude Stein appeared at this time of increased self-consciousness about language. So too did analytical philosophy and works such as Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Poets like T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound thought about language as a cultural resource that mediated the creative historical dimensions of a society. Film, likewise, became a significant cultural resource, one that introduced new ways of seeing the world. The essays in this volume demonstrate the vital impact of this visual "language" of film.

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The modern city is the focus of the first set of essays. With the modern age, the cities of Paris, London, New York, and Berlin became sites of artistic collaboration. In Paris in the 1920s, artists like Picasso, Hemingway, and Fitzgerald, intersected in the circle around Gertrude Stein. Around Ezra Pound, the Imagists formed. In Harlem, there was the circle around W. E. B. Du Bois. In London, there was the Bloomsbury Circle. Modernism has sometimes been viewed as a time when artists retreated into their enclaves, set themselves art apart from the social and historical instability of their time. Yet, that picture of indifference is more caricature than reality. The city was a highly interactive space. The term "city symphony" has been used to describe those films which capture part of that modern urban reality. The phrase itself – one from music-- is a reminder of how fruitfully the various arts interacted during this period.

Meyrav Koren-Kuik provides a view in which she reflects upon changes in perception of reality that occurred by the end of the First World War. She remarks that urbanization and industrialization combined with the horrors of war to prompt a sense of instability and fragmentation. This sense, which was present in the work of Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot and visual artists, also appears in film. Koren-Kuik adds that Russian montage theory acted as a precursor to contemporary documentary.

Architectural attention focuses on the city film in Cecilia Mouat's essay of experimental modernism in the city symphony genre. She explores modernist concerns with space, with machines, and with fragmentation and collage. Her discussion of the city symphony film genre includes a consideration of representative films like *Manhatta*, *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, and *Man with a Movie Camera*. In such films, something much like a cubist painting appears intended. So, another perspective on the city symphony genre seems appropriate.

The ten-minute film *Manhatta* by Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand is next studied as a modern representation of city life. Rather than look at the film's progressive formal elements, Kristen Oehlrich looks at its literary features. The poetry of Walt Whitman forms what she calls "lyric counterpoints to modernist visual imagery." The conjunction of Whitman's "romantic" verse and modern filmic techniques and avant-garde imagery offer a critical commentary on American art in the 1920s. *Manhatta* explores the boundaries between photography and film. It implicitly asks how American art was different from its European counterparts.

Part Two begins by considering film as a visual medium. In the early twentieth century context, film contributed new ways of seeing the world. William Verrone suggests that modernist films created modes of perception that were comparable to the modernist literary text. He approaches the avant-garde film as a text to be read and interpreted. Verrone claims that avant-garde film suggests an alterity: an alternate viewpoint that allows spectators to question reality. With attention to intertextuality, his essay considers Luis Bunuel's *L'Age d'Or*, Joseph Cornell's *Rose Hobart*, Paul Strand's *Manhatta*, James Sibley Watson and Melville Webber's *Lot in Sodom*, and other films.

Next, the films of James Sibley Watson are viewed by Andrew Grossman as transforming literary ideas with stream of consciousness and other techniques. Watson rejects the language and image synthesis of the early "talkies" and argues for a visual aesthetic. "For Watson, the coming of sound was reductive," Grossman points out. Attention is given to avant-garde movements and to counter or oppositional cinema. In Grossman's essay, the avant-garde is seen to challenge the status quo of American film. The plot formulas and cultural assumptions that were developed in the early sound film are interrogated. Grossman examines *Tomato's Another Day* (1930), which satirizes the talkie cinema. In *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1928) and *Lot in Sodom* (1933), he finds the influence of German Expressionism and equivalents of the stream of consciousness present in the writings of modernist authors.

This first section continues with a look at Swedish films and international modernism by Lars Gustaf Andersson and John Sundholm. Their essay points to modernist film as a broad international phenomenon. The authors, who themselves were traveling across Europe as they prepared their essay, recognize that modernism was not a film movement in Sweden between 1910 and the 1930s. Rather, artists sought their inspiration elsewhere. It was only in the 1950s that the films of Alf Sjöberg and Ingmar Bergman became important to an international film audience. Andersson and Sundholm are interested in tracing the work of

earlier filmmakers whose work preceded “the domestication of modernism into major cinema culture.” They point out that the contributions of these filmmakers ought not to be omitted from film history.

With his study on Mae West, Jason Barrett-Fox brings to this collection an important reflection on gender and on the personality of the performer. Mae West is a figure of seductive energy and campiness. Barrett-Fox brings us a reminder of the role of women in film. He often mentions Gertrude Stein, as he discusses Mae West’s scriptwriting. In addition to his essay, one may also consider how attention to “the new woman” arose in Britain during this time. When Post-Impressionist art arrived in London, Virginia Woolf commented that the world had changed in December 1910, or thereabouts. Among Woolf’s acquaintances within the Bloomsbury Group, James Strachey translated Freud and Lytton Strachey, in *Eminent Victorians*, satirically addressed the Victorian past with debunking ‘biographies.’ Virginia Woolf stretched fiction with innovative techniques: stream of consciousness, fluidity of narrative, symbolism, point of view and multiple narratives, fragmentation of the text, and irony. She sought interiority and feminine consciousness. With “Modern Fiction” (1919) and “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” (1924), she articulated the importance of venturing to see through the consciousness of “Mrs. Brown” rather than the unitary, realist coherence set forth in Mr. Bennett’s generally objective descriptions. In *A Room of One’s Own* (1928), Woolf argued for material independence for women so that women could achieve intellectual independence as writers. Some might argue that Woolf herself had this freedom. Lily Briscoe, in *To the Lighthouse* (1927), engages in meditations on perspective and vision, finishing her painting with “a line there, in the centre.” Woolf’s work recalls a period in which modernism coincided with “the new woman” and the suffrage movement. These decades saw a developing orientation toward the public sphere for women and socio-cultural changes that led some writers to reflect upon gender and female empowerment. We see the increasing emergence of female authorship in Virginia Woolf, Willa Cather, Dorothy Richardson, H.D., Gertrude Stein, Katherine Mansfield, Rebecca West, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Kate Chopin, Zora Neale Hurston, Djuna Barnes, Marianne Moore, and others. These writers developed a variety of self-reflexive forms, uses of stream of consciousness, juxtaposition, and fragmentation that parallel montage in film.

Sevcian Sonmez concludes this section with an exploration of memory. Sonmez draws film into consideration with literature and philosophy and the work of Henri Bergson. The stream of consciousness techniques of

Marcel Proust and Virginia Woolf are correlated with Alain Renais' *Hiroshima Mon Amour*. With Bergson's reflections, Einstein's theory of relativity, and stream of consciousness writing in Joyce, Proust, Woolf, Faulkner and others, perception of time was a significant concern for writers and filmmakers.

*

You will see that in this collection several films are discussed in more than one essay. This book is also designed to show how the various arts – visual, musical, theatrical and literary-- each played a role in modernist film. Since this volume is primarily about film and literary modernism, you will see the mention of poets like Ezra Pound and e. e. cummings and fiction writers, such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, John Dos Passos, and others. A collection like this welcomes us to visit the work of some of literature's modernists. Here we encounter the work of T. S. Eliot, James Agee, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, and Graham Greene. We turn first to Eliot, then to an essay on screenwriter-novelist James Agee, to an assessment of Faulkner as a screenwriter, then a probing of racism in a Hemingway text, and a reflection upon Graham Greene and post-war identity in *The Third Man*.

T. S. Eliot was concerned with the spiritual condition of Western civilization. The wasteland suggests social fragmentation. For Eliot, the world is constructed and the poet is "always forming new wholes." The poem will formally reconstruct a kind of wholeness. In Eliot's view, "the problem of the unification of the world and the problem of the unification of the individual are in the end one and the same problem." As a poet and critic, Eliot became influential among his contemporary writers and literary critics.

Avishek Parui shows us that cinematic automatism well-suited T. S. Eliot, whose poems up to *The Waste Land* (1922) corresponded with the cinematic montage of space-time in Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin - The Symphony of a Great City*. Here, Parui revisits reflection upon this film in a new way. Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock is viewed as a character moving between two perspectives: before and behind the overseeing eye. He is the man we see – a visual object-- and the man with a movie camera. The writer argues that Tiresius, the blind seer in *The Waste Land*, signifies the movement of visual reception from the mythic to the cinematic. Parui further argues that cinema in Eliot's poetry is a signifier of technologized trauma in modernity and provides a mode of expression that transcends verbal language. Indeed, one may read modernism as a way to deal with

the wasteland that T. S. Eliot depicted in his poem. It can be a call for reanimation, for life-giving “water.” Yet, this period may also be read as a time of vital energy and artistic experimentation. The creation of films participates in this as an important site of engagement and creative production.

In his essay on James Agee’s modernist experimentation and screenplays, Brent Walter Cline observes: “The histories of modernism and film are seemingly defined by opposite goals.” Some modernists explore the ordinary through experimental form. Populists like Frank Capra depict “ordinary citizens” in Hollywood Golden Age films. James Agee appears to stand between these two apparently opposing mediums. Cline observes that Agee does not struggle with adaptation because he understands both film and prose writing. Agee is the writer of *The African Queen* and *The Night of the Hunter*, as well as the experimental text *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Cline looks at Agee’s film reviews to affirm how well he knew the film medium. He shows how Agee effectively explored writing and film as mediums that informed one another.

William Faulkner is, of course, a fascinating subject for an essay that interrogates the relationship of fictional techniques and film. Michael R. Mauritzen inquires into “Faulkner’s response to the mechanized linearity of film” through his creation of fiction that cannot be easily translated to film. Indeed, as he says, *The Sound and the Fury* demands to be read recursively. Faulkner broke with literary tradition and linearity with *The Sound and the Fury*. In the four major sections of this novel we have the expression of the consciousness of his characters Benjie, Quentin, and Jason and the omniscient narrator that tells us of Dilsey and her care for the fractured Compson family. The difficult, timeless interiority of Benjie, which begins the novel, is in contrast with the exteriority of the book’s final section. It is a book that compels re-reading. Likewise, as Mauritzen points out, Faulkner’s *Light In August* uses a stream of consciousness narrative that intersperses flashbacks and rejects “the static viewpoint of the filmic camera.”

When Ernest Hemingway’s *To Have and Have Not* was adapted for film, William Faulkner was among the screenwriters. Charlí g Valdez takes an incisive look at the racism within the Ernest Hemingway text and at how this is carried into the film.

Post-war identity is the subject of Kelly MacPhail’s probing analysis of Graham Greene’s novel *The Third Man*. Greene also wrote the screenplay for the film. The author points out that the uncertain nature of identity is central to the film’s plot. He suggests that the film is responding to “state certainties of the early twentieth century regarding identity” and that the

film demonstrates that identity is a fluid category that can be disrupted and emptied of meaning. The impact of two world wars brought in their wake the probing questions and perspectives of existentialism.

*

Film is often considered a director's art-- although a film is always an effort with their collaborators: cinematographers, screenwriters, production designers, actors, costumers, and many others. We begin our section on film directors with Daniel Burns's essay on Charlie Chaplin's *Easy Street*, a social text that Burns argues "articulates the director's bleak vision of a disenchanting human race 'fallen' into instrumental reason." Chaplin, who is chronologically the first of the directors considered here, made thirty-five films for Keystone. These include his pratfalls and slapstick. Yet, in films like *Easy Street*, *Modern Times*, *City Lights*, and others, there is an underlying message that offers significant social commentary. Burns assesses this significance with reference to Charles Taylor's arguments on the nature of human authenticity and "the horizon of significance" that gives persons the will to self-definition and to seek meaning.

Through this lens, we begin to see Chaplin's tramp as both a sad clown and a polemicist, a meaning maker. Charlie Chaplin's *Autobiography* is set in an environment that David Robinson, in *Chaplin: The Mirror of Opinion* (Indiana UP, 1983), calls one of "both Dickensian vitality and Dickensian misery." While this remark situates Chaplin in late nineteenth-century London, it also evokes his rise, like that of Dickens, from obscurity to authorship and recalls the lives of Dickens's child characters who, like Chaplin's tramp, vividly entered in the public imagination. Burns reflects upon Chaplin's use of screen space to delineate the rise of the bureaucratic elements of the welfare state. Clearly, the issue of human integrity and worth is at stake, as Max Weber implied in his study of bureaucracy and with his phrase "the disenchantment of the world."

Sergei Eisenstein is typically associated with montage. Oleg Gelikman's essay broadens the picture of Eisenstein's filmic practice from *The Battleship Potemkin* (1924) to *Que Viva Mexico* (1931). Gelikman argues that Eisenstein's filmmaking "involved specific, well-defined ideological commitments." The essay analyzes *The Old and the New* (1926-28), a film that was interrupted by the making of *October* (1927) and eventually released as *The General Line* (1929). Viewers of Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) see a film that is filled with variations of light, ocean mist, and water. The camera holds long upon

faces and upon sailor's hammocks strung across their quarters like the entanglements of their lives. Objects and persons receive the filmmaker's attention.

Modernist poetry, likewise, focused upon the concreteness of images and objects, as poets responded to a diminished romanticism. For some, art had come to seem divorced from society. Shelley's "unacknowledged legislators of the world" were certainly unacknowledged. How would "the future of poetry," in Matthew Arnold's terms, aspire to spiritual and cultural enlightenment? What social response could poetry, art, or film have? With Pound, H.D., Williams, and Stevens, Imagism focused upon craft, precision, and a grasp of the object. Pound would work out *The Cantos*, his long poem, and Williams would build his long poem, *Paterson*. However, Pound would become focused upon concreteness, condensation, lyrical expression, and mythological response. Film directors similarly experimented with innovative techniques.

Imagism in modernist poetry found a corollary in Alain Renais' early films. Ria Banerjee writes that the fascination that literary modernism has with thingness can be further explored with reference to Renais' films *Night and Fog*, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, and *Muriel*. Early in the century, the issue of human perception arose and the knowable nature of the Cartesian-Kantian universe was pressed toward phenomenological thinking upon objects. Echoing the insights of the previous essays, Banerjee reflects upon filmmakers' responses to socio-economic forces and the scale of the modern city, referencing Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* and Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*. Banerjee also refers to Henri Bergson's *Matter and Memory*. This recalls for us Sevcan Sonmez's essay, in its reflection upon Alain Resnais and Henri Bergson.

We conclude with Sheri Chinen Biesen's reflection upon the art of Alfred Hitchcock. She looks at how the director explored experimental modernist techniques as he shifted from Britain to America.

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In this collection of essays, emphasis has been placed upon Anglo-American modernism and European continental modernism. Attention here is given primarily to French, German, Scandinavian, Russian and American films of the 1920s to the 1950s. Our chief concern is how these films intersect with literary forms and writers, or with the arts of music, architecture, and visual art. It is hoped that *Film and Literary Modernism* will enhance your viewing experience – for the first time or the hundredth- of the films mentioned here.

Modernist film has left us with many striking images, both serious and comic: in Charlie Chaplin's *Gold Rush* (1925) a prospector's cabin leans over a cliff. We see the cabin from far away and then up close, as it hangs absurdly over that space. Chaplin and Big Jim move back and forth, balancing the precarious cabin. Then hiccups disrupt the balance. As they escape with their lives, Big Jim finds his lost claim that had settled underneath where the cabin once was. Dziga Vertov, with *Man with a Movie Camera* (1928), gives us the city and the camera's skill in arresting that city in motion. We see a morning, before the city awakens: streets are empty, buses are still in the depot, a woman is asleep, a homeless man is asleep, and the machines are quiet. Then the machines begin to move, the buses roll, the woman awakens and gets dressed, and the tramp turns over. A man with a movie camera appears on the screen, wearing a cap and a checkered sweater. Apparently, he is filming everything in sight.

In *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919) a modern doctor has taken the name of an eleventh-century hypnotist who seeks to get his sleepwalking experimental subject to do things he would not do while awake. Cesar, the subject, causes terror and the doctor disappears into a mental hospital, of which he is the director. One may ask what such a nightmare says about the society that produced it. Siegfried Krakauer wrote in the 1940s on German cinema between the wars and how this reflected culture and consciousness. Similarly, this collection attempts a historicist and intertextual perspective. It intends to jar us awake, to prompt us to think about film and culture, in the modernist period, as well as in our time.

I.

CITY SYMPHONY FILMS

A CITY SYMPHONY: URBAN AESTHETICS AND THE POETICS OF MODERNISM ON SCREEN

MEYRAV KOREN-KUIK

In keeping with the promise of its title, Dziga Vertov's seminal filmic orchestration *A Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) opens with a scene capturing a man and a camera; the positioning of these two objects in a sequence which visually tinkers with dimensions and perspective gives the arrangement a cognitive depth. The first frame of the movie presents a colossal camera standing on its own against a neutral background; a filmmaker emerges, dwarfed by the gigantic camera, and proceeds to film both audiences and urban space. This short opening serves as a metaphorical representation of the artistic rational behind Vertov's masterpiece not only as a film about the cinematographic process but as a thought-provoking pictorial depiction of reality that transpires from the self-reflexive arrangement of images. Filmed mainly in Odessa, the movie centers on capturing scenes and instances of the post-revolution urban experience in a Russian metropolis. The film's significance in paving the way for the advent of the modern documentary whilst utilizing montage principles to invoke thematic concerns is often remarked upon in scholarship. Conversely, it is the film's artful portrayal of urban space and the people in it that affiliates it with the "City Symphony" genre, a distinctive modernist film form that emerged across Europe in the 1920s. Other prominent examples of the genre include Andre Sauvage's *Etudes sur Paris* (1921), Alberto Cavalcanti's *Rien que les heures* (1926), Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927) and Joris Ivens' *Rain* (1929).

"City Symphony" films denote an attempt to capture the post-WWI urban experience by means of the moving image. From an artistic perspective, these films may be seen as an organic expansion of the general mode of modernist art. From a historical perspective, the films demonstrate visually the sense of fragmentation that embodies modernism's episteme as a socio-cultural attitude. By the end of the First

World War perception of reality had radically changed. In Europe, urbanization, industrialization, and swift political changes, combined with the effects of the terrors of war, to generate an acute sense of instability which, in turn, triggered a perception of reality as a fragmented experience. As evident in the styles of cubism, futurism, and surrealism, the visual arts of the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century, depicted fragmentation by utilizing the space of a simple canvas to create the illusion of a fractured vista. This practice of fragmented perception was not limited to the visual arts; authors and poets such as Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot and James Joyce conveyed these same sentiments verbally. “City Symphony” films employed the fledgling techniques of the moving image to express this sense of fragmentation on the screen. The aesthetics of urban mosaic in “City Symphony” films simultaneously expresses both cohesion and fragmentation; in other words, these films stand as a pictorial projection of the matrix of modernist perception from an artistic as well as a historical viewpoint. Images of urban architecture, people, vehicles, streets and industry, that in themselves represent a fragmented collection, become a cohesive whole as instances put together to conjure a city as a vibrant living organism.

In his book *The Idea of Spatial Form*, Joseph Frank asserts that one of modernism’s basic artistic assumptions is ultimately enabling a “unified spatial apprehension.”¹ Appropriately, Frank is referring to an observation made by author James Joyce regarding his novel *Ulysses* –a novel that demonstrates an enthrallment with urban space and the poetics of its perception. The fascination with urban space and its dynamics represents a challenge, a need to explore for the purpose of making sense, which appeals to the inquisitive adventurous mind. In his essays on the life and works of the French poet Charles Baudelaire, philosopher and critic Walter Benjamin coins the term *flâneur*, a person who saunters through city streets for the pleasure of observation. Baudelaire himself remarked on the experience of urban space and its overwhelming impact as one in which a *flâneur* does not simply trespass the labyrinth of the city, but “plunges into the crowd as into a reservoir of electric energy.”² The concept of the *flâneur* as a mechanism for the exploration of city space, and the intricate relationship it represents with its various inhabitants, is established by author Virginia Woolf in her 1923 poetic novel *Mrs. Dalloway*. Literature’s first female *flâneur*, Clarissa Dalloway, walks the streets of post-WWI London and becomes part of its tapestry. The novel’s narrative constructs an urban collage by frequent shifts of focalization; the story oscillates between descriptions of the city as seen through the eyes of characters and encompassing panoramic accounts of crowds, buildings,

streets and the heavens above the city. These frequent focalization shifts, from character to crowd to city space, fragment not only the story but its reading experience. The shifts are often so sudden and fluid that the realization of a change in perspective imprints itself upon the reader's mind with a significant delay. As a result the illusion of a simultaneous experience of space from different vantage points is established. It is as if a panoramic vista of city space composed out of multiple perception points is constructed, much like the effect of the shifting focalization point of a movie camera. Fragmented focalization accordingly offers a selection of spatial perceptions, like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle with which to reconstruct space into a coherent presence. Mrs. Dalloway's story becomes a record of visual instances from which the city of London emerges as a cohesive living metropolis. Likewise, the camera in "City Symphony" films assumes the role of a *flâneur*, it becomes a "mechanical eye" or as Dziga Vertov coins it "Cine-Eye"³ employing the "limitless possibility of the photographic act [...] to move into unknown territories and see the hitherto invisible, only imaginable, realities of life."⁴

"City Symphony" films capture urban space in fragments, these fragments by means of intricate editing project a mosaic collage similar to the fractured images depicted on canvas in the styles of futurism and cubism: a fractured image that nevertheless creates a whole by the unification of its slivers into one complete image, an image that is often distorted but nevertheless makes sense. It is this distortion of the image that makes much of modernist art a challenge of perspective and in turn extracts an emotional reaction from its viewers. Organizing fragments of film for the purpose of strong emotional/visual impact is at the heart of Eisenstein's take on the principle of montage both as a theory and as a practical tool of filmic creation: "For [...] Eisenstein, the director must aim at using all available means to attack the spectator, not in the service of a reaction which is superficial, but rather strike a hammer blow on the psyche."⁵

Eisenstein saw filmmaking and camera work as a way of offering a new perspective on reality, one which connects the visual with the linguistic. For him, montage meant the conscientious placement of film fragments in order to expose new dimensions of comprehension, not by the mere juxtaposing of images but by careful arrangements, thus endowing visual composition with a potential for a dialectical dynamics. In Eisenstein's view, the filmmaker/editor's task is to tell a story, bring to life a narrative not by offering a sequential string of plausible images, but by stacking images as if they were building blocks inside movie space; he advocated to allow the shock of the image to convey a story. In *October*:

Ten Days That Shook the World (1927), Eisenstein tells the story of the first days of the 1917 October Revolution by pasting together images to simultaneously create meaning and impact. The film's opening combines a sequence containing images of people storming the Winter Palace in Saint Petersburg and laboring to dismantle a monumental statue of Tzar Alexander III, with images of a religious ceremony and people cheering. The sequence is interrupted at regular intervals to present title cards dedicating the film to the citizens of Russia. The meaning that emerges out of the montage arrangement in Eisenstein's *October* explicitly advocates the revolution's divine justification while, at the same time, subliminally portraying the revolution as an act performed for the collective well-being of the Russian folks. Traditionally, Eisenstein's creations were viewed in the context of the communist ideological dogma that represents their thematic core and visual purpose. Nevertheless, more recent Eisenstein scholarship promotes an examination of Eisenstein's body of creative work by focusing on the evaluation of its aesthetics—when one divorces ideology from the visual representation, the real revolution in Eisenstein's art is one of aesthetics.

In accordance with the montage principle, “City Symphony” films demonstrate a careful positioning of independent images for the purpose of telling the story of the modern metropolis, in a manner designed to elicit an emotional response. In Vertov's *A Man with a Movie Camera*, the filmmaker's fascination with the body and the mechanical emerges out of repetitive series of shots depicting body parts, machine parts, hands handling machines, and bodies that function as part of machines. Often puzzling and disturbing, the images have a distinct avant-garde quality and are largely reminiscent of Marcel Duchamp's kinetic works, in particular *The Large Glass* and the readymade *Bicycle Wheel*. In the greater context of the movie, these physiques and machine depictions become metaphorical for the city as a bustling organism whose ontological state encompasses the biological as well as the mechanical. In a sense, the meaning composed out of these visual fragments recreates city space as a cohesive whole.

In *Man With a Movie Camera*, editing included a calculated insertion of stills shots portraying a camera lens alternately reflecting the city vista and an observer's eye (that of film editor Elizaveta Svilova, Vertov's wife and lifelong creative partner). These were combined with frames demonstrating the action of filming and frames in which the cameraman (Mikhail Kaufman, Vertov's brother) appears as one of the crowd. These depictions establish the role of the director/editor as a shaper of

perception, not a mere recorder of events; it is perception and interpretation which constitute the conceptual core of modernist art.

The motif of the observant eye, which gives Vertov's film its voyeuristic feel, is also used by Alberto Cavalcanti in *Rien que les heures*, a "City Symphony" expose of Paris from 1926. Cavalcanti utilizes the image of the eye to convey and communicate emotions; the eye opens up in an expression of shock as if reacting to the images that preceded it in the film—a depiction of the more humble parts of the big metropolis. In contrast with Vertov's attitude, which promises the viewers, by means of its opening title-cards, an experience unlike any of those associated with other form of artistic expression, Cavalcanti opens up his film to other modes of art and includes paintings in his mosaic of the city. Depicted within the film, paintings of streets, people and buildings, advertize Cavalcanti's sentiments in viewing the art of filmmaking as an organic expansion of modernist artistic production. The city is perceived as the canvas onto which reality is painted.

The 1929 film *Rain*, by Dutch photographer Joris Ivens, captures a rainy day in Amsterdam. The weather is used as a focalizing element in his movie; people in the streets register a reaction to the change in climate, enclosing themselves behind umbrellas, in the desolate streets and canals only rain drops remain - a scenery suffused with the melancholy of a wet day. The camera moves in and out of various spaces- boats, houses and trams, allowing Ivens to explore the rainy metropolis from different perspectives in order to enhance the mood of his depictions. Raindrops sliding down the glass of a tram window become analogous to teardrops, lamenting the loss of the sun in the city. As the sun comes up again, the shots/frames become brighter and the mood changes again. Ivens' montage, his calculated positioning of images, creates a poetic take on urban atmosphere as a collective reaction of people, vehicles, buildings, and streets to capricious weather conditions.

Light and shade also contribute to mood setting in André Sauvage's *Etudes sur Paris*. In the film, Paris is portrayed through the depictions of canals, both open and covered. Focalizing the images through the metropolis' waterways creates not only the illusion of movement but contributes to the visual construction of the city as a labyrinth of nautical pathways; the camera takes the viewers through the open bright spaces of sunlit canals to the dark and cavernous spaces of underground waterways and bridges. Similarly, a water vista opens Walter Ruttmann's 1927 movie, *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*. The camerawork generates an illusion of movement over water which is quickly replaced with a motion of a different kind—a train ride. The opening sequence of the movie records

images as seen from the inside of a train. As the locomotive enters Berlin, the camera captures scenes of a metropolis waking up to a new day. Ruttmann incorporates still shots of buildings from unusual angles and shots showing fragments of architectural structures. His representation of city industry focuses on the connection between body and machine; a concept that will get a thorough visual investigation in Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera* a few years later. The film pieces together a varied collection of city sites and people: from the factory to the office, from outside to inside spaces, from people in the pub to children playing. A scene showing a crowd filing into a movie theatre and watching what seems to be a Charlie Chaplin film (the actor is identified only by his distinctive leg positioning), contributes to the self-reflexivity of Ruttmann's creation. The movie closes with a sequence of fireworks and the last image is of a lighthouse illuminating the darkness of the city vista with a narrow beam of light - a metaphor for filmic creation and the selectiveness of its presented perspective.

"City Symphony" films, by means of montage and thematic focalization construct urban space as a whole consisting of fragments. These movies propagate a narrative by a mechanism which Hayden White terms "emplotment," "making stories out of *mere* chronicles."⁶ The portrait of the city emerges as a cohesive functioning collection of images—a narrative grounded in the subjective visual perception of the artist/director. Additionally, "City Symphony" films construct the narrative of the metropolis as one that heavily relies on spatial representation. The concept of the chronotope, offered by philosopher and critic Mikhail Bakhtin, is useful in understanding the modernist urban sensibility. The chronotope, Bakhtin surmises, is "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed."⁷ In "City Symphony" films, the modernist urban chronotope emerges as a construction that favors the spatial. Thus, it is an emphasis on spatial perception that marks the modernist artistic creation and subsequently influences the modernist socio-cultural approach.

The First World War brought about the use of recorded images for the purposes of both communication and propaganda. The newsreel, a short informative visual report, brought news and image of the front to theatres across Europe. The camera facilitated a window to events that took place in faraway locations; distance was no longer an obstacle for the flow of information. Filmmakers began to use the techniques of the moving image to produce movies that gave people access to places and realities other than their own. In discussing the origins of the documentary film, Patricia Aufderheide lists Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922), John

Grieson's *Drifters* (1929) and Dziga Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929), as the artistic and conceptual trendsetters of the modern documentary. Each of these three creators chose his own way to represent reality, but one factor is common to all three: their filmic output represents an idiosyncratic take on the subject matter of their visual portrayals. In *Nanook of the North*, a film about the life of the Inuit in the Canadian arctic, Flaherty staged several of the action sequences. Grieson's movie *Drifters*, which documents North Sea fishermen, strives for a realistic, rather than an avant-garde, representation of life at sea but nevertheless subscribes to the principles of montage in the manner of its editing; while Vertov's film, in contrast, is explicitly artistic in nature and makes no claim for a truthful representation of reality. These films, as Aufderheide remarks, "have greatly expanded the repertoire of formal approaches for documentary filmmakers [...] these experiments provide a sharp contrast to the most common conventions, those usually used in broadcast television."⁸ Thus, what separates these seminal examples of the early attempts at documentary filming from their ancestors –the newsreel visual reporting in particular and journalistic reporting in general—is their ability "to exploit cinema's power to articulate an argument."⁹ Documentary filming established itself not as a genre presenting an empirical truth but as a genre of point of view and perspective, a genre that creates a coherent representation out of segments of film and information, much like the cohesive image of the metropolis that materializes out of visual fragments in "City Symphony" films.

In a key segment in her novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf provides a key to understanding the modernist view of the urban. Woolf lets her character Clarissa Dalloway articulate the concept underlying her narrative, a key of sorts for enabling the spatial reconstruction of her era's perception:

[...] sitting on the bus going up Shaftesbury Avenue, she felt herself everywhere; not "here, here, here"; and she tapped the back of the seat; but everywhere.

She waved her hand, going up Shaftesbury Avenue. She was all that.

So that to know her, or any one, one must seek out the people who completed them; even the places.¹⁰

Completeness lies not with the simple visual unity, nor does it have to do with being whole rather than fractured; unity starts with the recognition that everything is fragmented. The city is precisely the network of invisible connections that exists between people, architecture, streets, and vehicles by the sheer fact that they share the same space and thus partake

in its spatial consciousness. The visual narratives that “City Symphony” films conjure express the same sentiment and provide a model for modernist urban aesthetics and the interconnectedness of urban workings.

EXPERIMENTAL MODERNISM IN CITY SYMPHONY FILMS

CECILIA MOUAT

The film medium that provides spectators with new experiences through the reproduction of parallel realities in different temporalities was a revolutionary invention. Cinema not only fascinated early twentieth century's viewers by enlarging their world perception through showing thousands of new places inaccessible for most people, cinema was also fertile ground for early modernists' experimentation. Modernist artists saw the film medium as the most vivid form to represent space and its new conception that animated the artistic debate, especially in Europe during the first decades of the twentieth-century. The modern space was linked to time and motion in a fundamental way relative to the position of the individual observer. In the same way, the cognitive interpretation developed by the incipient psychology provided alternative ways to approach the relationship between the exterior world and the individual. These trends developed by avant-garde artists were contextualized in a changing world, portrayed by the city space and the metropolis, which from the second half of the nineteenth-century had experienced the most significant change in a short time span. A metropolis offered a new scale, unable to be perceived through a unique sense of coherence and unity.

Avant-garde literary movements that emerged in the first decades of the twentieth-century, including representative works such as John Dos Passos' novel *Manhattan Transfer*, portrayed the metropolis as an intense, fragmented, multilayered, and complex space, where multiple stories and characters formed a sort of collage. The metropolis, which was a theme of public discussion during the early twentieth century within disciplines, such as sociology and urban planning, was also a motif of visual exploration developed by avant-garde artists, who aimed to depict the sense of dynamism, speed, and simultaneity so central to the "machine age."

This essay suggests that the films *Manhatta* (United States, 1921), *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (Germany, 1927), and *The Man with the*

Movie Camera (Soviet Union, 1929), commonly classified as “City Symphony films,” crystallize three notions explored by early modernist artists: the new metropolis, the relationship between time, space and motion, and the new cognitive interpretation of the world.

The concept of simultaneity was the way that cubist and futurist artists gave sequential and temporal expression to static two-dimensional figures. The manifesto of the Italian Futurist Movement declared in 1909 the predilection for machines, velocity, and movement in the visual arts, and adopted from the cubists the decomposition of reality through planes. On the other hand, the emerging psychology, which stimulated subjectivity on perception, opened new artistic explorations based not on passive reproduction of reality, but in active transformation of the artist’s own reflections into new forms of expression. From this context, city symphony films, although they use documentary images of cities, non-professional performers, and portray non-fictional sequences, cannot be easily classified within the documentary genre; city symphony films portray the city as a fascinating machine, represented many times by abstract compositions in the way that kinetic artists represented motion and technology. In these films, the metropolitan life appears as a fragmented reality, depicted through diverse angles, like a cubist painting. City symphony films illustrate the dynamic forces of urban life from an experimental and artistic approach. Even the three silent films share many stylistic features, such as : (1) the use of the metropolis as the main character versus individual personalities; (2) a temporal structure that portrays a day-life of the city, starting at the morning and ending at night; and (3) the use of a rhythmic montage accompanied by music. Each film depicts specific cultural and ideological approaches to the city.

Exploring the New Medium

The filmmakers of the three symphonies were primarily experimental and avant-garde artists: Walter Ruttmann, the German director of *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, studied architecture in Zurich in 1906, but switched to painting and music in 1909, moving to Munich where he became close to avant-garde artists like Paul Klee, Karl Feininger, and Louis Corinth, among others.¹ His film career began in the early 1920s with abstract short films, such as *Opus I* and *Opus II* (1921), that functioned as experiments of kinetic art, using painting to create moving abstract forms synchronized with music. In *Berlin*, Ruttmann aimed to explore formal and aesthetic principles using the dynamic city as the main protagonist. As he wrote, “during the long years of my development

through abstractionism, I never lost the desire to build from living materials and to create a film symphony out of the myriad moving energies of a great city.”²

Dziga Vertov, the director of *The Man with the Movie Camera*, first studied medicine in St. Petersburg between 1916 and 1917. While pursuing his studies, he began to explore verbal montage structures through experiments with sound recording and assemblage.³ His earlier filmic exploration started in 1918, when the young Vertov became the editor of the first newsreel produced by the Soviet government. A few years later, his “Kinopravda” series, was the laboratory for his filmic experiments.⁴ This series consisted of short films presented as a mode of reportage on a wide variety of topics developed for the newspaper *Pravda* founded by Lenin. Vertov’s definition of cinema emphasizes the vocation of films to capture the feel of the world using the camera as a more perfect eye than the human eye. His techniques of montage aimed to create a visual linkage between phenomena separated in time and intended to organize fragmented images through a rhythmic visual order.

The creators of *Manhatta*, the American photographers Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand, were also artists. Paul Strand started exploring photography and painting during the 1910s, while Charles Sheeler studied industrial art in Philadelphia, traveling to Europe between 1904 and 1909. In 1912, Sheeler began his explorations in photography, showing an interest in architectural themes, especially the iconic skyscraper, which illustrated simplified cubist compositions through its geometrical forms.

Framing and Editing the Real World

Following the silent films’ tradition, *Manhatta* is structured through the alternation of titles and film sequences, mostly composed by the succession of fixed panoramic shots. These aesthetically composed images illustrate Sheeler and Strand’s previous experience in photography and serve to validate the beauty of skyscrapers as an expression of modernity and progress. Sheeler and Strand emphasize the new scale of the city and the impressive height of skyscrapers through original shots, such as people walking in front of a façade where the scale of the building’s windows miniaturize people; or a high-angle camera with a foreground composed by a solid balustrade that suggests at the distance, a street full of cars, moving like ants.

Berlin, Symphony of a Great City and *The Man of the Movie Camera* do not include titles; in *Berlin*, Ruttmann aimed that every scene spoke by itself,⁵ while Vertov, who believed that “Cine-Eye” would influence man’s

evolution and considered drama as another opiate for the masses, included titles only at the opening of the film. *The Man with the Movie Camera* “presents an experiment in the cinematic communication” in order to create a “truly international language of cinema based on its total separation from the language of theatre and literature.”⁶

Manhatta's titles are not employed to articulate a traditional narrative structure; the three films use the metropolis as the main character over the prevalence of individual personalities and specific stories to create a complete new perception of the city. The emergent film medium was able to reproduce the simultaneous, dynamic, and complex stimulus produced by density rather than capturing a supposedly fixed reality. To create this new perception, editing would be the instrument to construct the metropolitan collage.

When Vsevolod Pudovkin wrote about ‘filmic time’ and ‘filmic space,’ he noted that the laws of real space and time condition each shot, but editing creates a different dimension of filmic space-time.⁷ The filmic space, which is freely created by the director through the conjunction of separate shots, is able to create a new space within the filmic space.

The editing of *Manhatta*, far from the rapid montage developed by Vertov and Ruttmann, creates a filmic space that allows enough time. Spectators understand that first sequences of a crowd disembarking from a ferry portray the start of a common workday. In these sequences, the moving crowd, never portrayed through a close-angle-camera, is set as another aesthetic element, on the same level as buildings, locomotives, and cranes. At the end of the film, a sunset at the ocean shows that the day is ending; however, this is the only shot that portrays the world of nature. In *Manhatta*, *Berlin*, and *Man with a Movie Camera*, moving human bodies not only seem to find in the built environment their natural landscape; they also seem to be part of an assemblage system so necessary for the mechanized era.

Manhatta does not include associative edition in the way of Vertov and Ruttmann; however, the systematic inclusion of smokestacks with dancing vapors that move on the screen suggest how Sheeler and Strand explore the potential of the film medium to represent movement. Their approach also suggests that the built world, the world of the metropolis with its activity in the harbor, the dense crowd moving, the vapors, cranes, and iron pieces of construction dancing in the highest plane, have a poetic and aesthetic value. In the same way that naturalistic painters display nature as a source of infinite inspiration and beauty, these modernist artists display Manhattan and its modern image as a new iconic symbol of beauty, able to crystallize the pulse of the new era.

Gilles Deleuze points out that in Vertov's film, buildings, machines, humans, and cinema itself all appear on the same plane. This plane is not composed in the manner of Sergei Eisenstein, who used a dialectical montage to link the organic connection between the individual and his world, but through dialectic in matter by which "the whole merges with the infinite set of matter, and the interval merges with an eye in matter."⁸ Vertov believed that cinema was one piece within the larger Soviet project, which aimed to construct a new society for the "new man." This new society, founded on the aspirations of the revolutionary proletariat, must improve the intellectual existence of society as a whole, replacing the nature of artistic activity by production, equalling art with labour. For Vertov, films not only represented the process of industrialization; the film director was the engineer who guided the thoughts and associations of the spectator.

In *Berlin*, editing serves to portray the metropolis as a collage in motion. The use of associative editing with social content, such as laborers' legs walking on streets, followed by legs of cows going to the slaughterhouse, or mechanical toys on store windows followed by real people going to their jobs, does not represent a dominant discourse within the film. Ruttmann's insistence to portray industrial production, and to celebrate the beauty of machines, motion and activity, even through domestic images, such as the opening of shutters and blinds, suggests how the German director uses documentary images of the metropolis as a canvas to compose his artwork rather than an instrument of social reform. The close-angle camera shot of rippling water at the opening of the film, which turns into moving lines of light and shadow through visual transition, creates an abstract composition that turns again into train barriers, and later, into a train approaching at high speed. The next sequence, made by a rapid montage of railroad tracks, pylons, and mechanical parts of a moving locomotive, serves to illustrate Ruttmann's fascination with machines and motion. Even the natural landscape seen from the train windows is transformed by the effect of speed into sophisticated images, closer to avant-garde works of abstraction and kinetic art. In *Berlin*, the scanned surfaces of buildings and avenues, as multilayered, fractioned spaces, inhabited by diverse and anonymous people, represent the modern perception of urban space. The simultaneous fractions of space-time can never sum up the complexity in a single view.

In *Man with a Movie Camera*, the experimental approach is evident from the opening: the image of a cameraman standing over a film camera, followed by a theater where the seats are folded up and later occupied by the audience ready to see a film, are examples of Vertov preparing the