

MOVING THE MODERNIST IMAGINARY: CINEMATIC INTERVENTION IN THE FRENCH AND AMERICAN AVANT-GARDE, 1920-1935

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“Moving the Modernist Imaginary: Cinematic Intervention in the French and American Avant-Garde, 1920-1935” is an interdisciplinary, trans-continental study of modernism that emphasizes the growth of the theoretical and practical interest in cinema in primarily Parisian and New York modernist art communities. Grounded upon the emergence of experimental cinemas in Europe and America that stem from American literary modernism and straight photography, and from the movements of the historical avant-garde such as Cubism, Dada, Surrealism, and constructivism, as well as the collective, theoretical and practical enterprise of the French Impressionists, this study reconsiders the central moments of cinematic exhibition, criticism, and theory that manifested in the spaces and publications formerly devoted solely to the plastic arts. In turn, this project launches a new consideration of the modernist transformation in the arts by way of cinema. This dissertation questions not only the degree to which cinema challenged the institutional control of the traditional arts, the traditional arts’ hold on the popular and avant-garde imagination, but also the hegemonic parameter of the fine arts. The central, resulting thesis of this study posits that the discursive terrain of the cinema in fact initiated a new, modernist dynamic based upon an inter-arts discursivity, temporality and visuality associated with an expansion of the attributes of modernity – a critical expansion only the moving image could foster.

Presently, it continues to be all too easy to contain the circulation, exhibition, and hybridity of experimental film production and the fine arts of the 1920s in proximate yet distinct realms. For a fuller historical and theoretical account of modernism, it has become increasingly important to examine how cinema, in its varied manifestations during this period, demands a place within the cultural framework for the arts, and therefore presents a viable material, conceptual, and theoretical alternative in which artists could ground an aesthetic and ideological critique of modernity. We need only consider the presence of cinema in exhibition spaces formerly devoted to painting – the Salon d’Automne, and the Musée Galliera, for example – to see that the “alternative cinema network,” as Richard Abel identifies the French avant-garde, represents an interesting, if not somewhat contradictory exhibition strategy if seen within the long history of critique and cession from the national structures of fine art exhibition in France by independent artists. The “museumification” of cinema during this period is admittedly and effort of legitimisation for this heretofore dominant an narrative distraction; however, the importance of the gallery, most importantly in New York, as an initial, intermediary zone of cinema, literature, and the plastic arts, cannot be underestimated. It is this level of integration that supplies the first significant paradigm shift in the conception of modernism, that bridged the often opposing strains of modernist production

in art, literature, and cinema, and that finally complicated the terms and parameters of modernism by film's own ties to the popular, and to economic and technical necessity.

To an equally important degree, the inclusion of cinematic discourse in publications formerly centered around modernist literary experiment – in America *The Dial*, *The Little Review*, and *Broom* –, not to mention the grown of French inter-arts publications such as *Le Crapouillot*, *Le Gazette des Sept Arts*, and *L'Esprit Nouveau*, suggests that the direct influence of cinema upon early 20th century literary modernism and its communities is a central, however repressed, area of study. Certainly, the cinematic influence in the writing of Dos Passos or E. E. Cummings, to name two writers at the center of the American project, is clearly marked; however, the expanse of cinema's influential dynamism in the enterprise of literary modernism in terms of a pictorial and organizational plasticity in their pages is an area of consideration that is taken up in this project. In this respect, the pre-war pages of Ricciotto Canudo's *Monjoie*, the early 20s efforts of Jean Epstein's *Bonjour cinéma*, and Breton, Aragon, and Soupault's *Litterature*, are studied as evidence of cinema's impact on the traditional art of literature and its criticism.

During the important decade of the 1920s, the industrial cinema of Hollywood solidified its narrative form as well as its popular dominion abroad thanks to the effects of WWI on European production centers. On the one hand, the cinema is, from this standpoint, clearly the ultimate manifestation of mass spectacle entertainment toward which both European and American avant-gardeists were often quite ambivalent. On the other hand, however, the 20s and early 30s is an era wherein a thoroughly art-centered film discourse begins to further transform the modernist and cinephilic enterprise most significantly in France. Indeed, the experimental film form becomes for the diversely positioned practitioners of the avant-garde an important secondary pattern of response in their sustained critique of the institution of art and high culture. As a secondary provocation, these films and their theory elaborate the modernist notions of perception, spectatorship, exhibition, and economics, as well as demonstrate the degree to which the cinema was perceived as a medium naturally, ontologically, embedded within the modernist "great divide," as Andreas Huyssen calls it, between high art and mass culture. Thus, this dissertation makes clear how the cinema offered a range of perceptual and representational strategies for the avant-garde's praxis to everyday life, as well as how the cinema becomes a means through which modern artists could further intervene in the historical evolution of the traditional arts. A close examination of the appearance and production of films within the spaces, publications, and communities of American and French avant-garde movements complicates and expands the often neat theoretical and historical parameters past theories of modernism have used to understand the lineage of modern experiment in the arts.

By tracking the inclusion of cinema in these modernist spaces and formations traditionally aligned with painting and literature, my aim is also to introduce the following criteria to the modernist dialectic as it has been understood, after Adorno, as a complex set of interactions with urbanity, and the academicization and historicization of art: the cinema generally, and the American industrial cinema specifically. To incorporate the American industrial cinema's place in the historical avant-garde's culture, theory, and, importantly, imaginary, is indeed to reframe the continental divide between France and America. Insofar as modernism has been normatively framed as a one-way flow from Europe to America, the European avant-garde's reception of the American feature film

presents a definitive fissure in the theorization of European – and American – modernism. While the historical avant-garde's theory of the American cinema becomes a traceable, trans-Atlantic dialectic with America and mass culture, their specific interest in Chaplin and DeMille, for example, further complicates the modernist divide between high art and mass culture. This project considers the film experiments of Sheeler and Strand, Dulac, Epstein, Ray, Clair, Duchamp, and Watson and Webber, to name a few, as equally important as Canudo's and Epstein's elaborate theoretical considerations of Charlot – perhaps the most important figure from the American industrial cinema to the European avant-garde. By evaluating the difference between the American and European avant-garde's interest in mass-cultural cinema, this project also considers the degree of appropriation of and interaction with mass cultural form and figuration to a modernist end on both sides of the Atlantic.

Founded on a desire to wed the themes and recurring theses in the study of modernism, the avant-garde, silent cinema, and modernity, this project provides a new methodological account of the trans-Atlantic flux and exchange surrounding cinema's intervention, disruption, and contribution to modernism in the arts. While my interdisciplinary research undertakes to link certain non-filmic texts and theoretical and literary traditions into the canon of early avant-garde cinema, my most important goal is to re-orient our historical understanding of the interdependence between modernist experiment in the arts and in the cinema, and to clarify the full range of impact the cinema had on the arts and its culture during this period. It is from here that modernism can be newly understood in its post-cinematic incarnation. Yet, beyond challenging the continental divide that frames the proliferation of the modernist project as a one-way flow from Europe to America, this thesis aims equally to disrupt the disciplinary divide between film studies and art history. It is the central work of this thesis to discover what this particular divide has stymied, neglected, or repressed in the study of American and European modernism in the arts after cinema.