

Juan A. Suárez

Objects, Speed, and the Film within the Film: Vachel Lindsay and Classical Cinema as an Alternative Public Sphere

Discussions of cinema as a modern public sphere have taken as one of their privileged subjects the transition from early to classical cinema in the United States – especially the period that stretches from the rise of the Nickelodeon, which started around 1905, to the consolidation of the classical style, around 1917. Overall, the narrative of this transition is a story of upward mobility and gentrification. It tells how a medium that initially engaged working class and immigrant experience and allowed for participatory forms of spectatorship went up market and progressively engaged a ›classless‹ mass audience, adopted the values of a dominant bourgeoisie, and acquired some of the trappings of high art. Gentrification was not merely a matter of themes but also of style of address. Classical cinema tried to monitor viewers' responses and to minimize the variability of the screening situation by establishing a closed diegetic world that addressed an ›abstract‹ spectator without overt ethnic or regional marks; yet this spectator was still socially coded: it was to respond to the screen with the passive absorption characteristic of the bourgeois theater, opera, or symphony hall, not in the active, demonstrative manner typical of popular shows. From a formal perspective, the transition from early to classical film is a story of streamlining. Early cinema was quite heterogeneous in terms of styles and strategies of appeal: programs combined narrative or pseudo-narrative sketches with travelogues, sensationalistic spectacle, newsreels, reconstructions of newsworthy events, and filmed versions of sports matches or vaudeville turns. However, the onset of the classical style as a normative standard subordinated the manifold attractions of early cinema to the pull of character-centered narratives. It is important to keep in mind that, for all their reductiveness, these developments did not entail the complete subordination of the cinema to commercial and industrial interests, or the complete erasure of pre-clas-

sical forms of spectatorship and address. Since classical cinema fashioned itself as a mass spectacle with the widest possible appeal, it engaged a variety of class positions and occasionally contained moments of scandal or anarchic subversion. And while the classical style curtailed the hybridity and exhibitionism of early film and suppressed its dynamic spectatorial modes, these last remained encrusted in the classical system – either in moments of spectacular excess, which occasionally punctuated the narrative, or in the practice of ›deviant‹ readings.¹

These instances of excess and subversion are extremely important because they effectively demonstrate that, as a public sphere, the classical cinema (and popular culture at large) cannot be thought of merely as a form of regulation and containment (an agent of acculturation for immigrants, of patriarchal interpellation for women, of consumerist seduction, etc.). It also prompted marginal, non-sanctioned meanings and practices and thus occasionally functioned as an alternative public sphere. This ambiguity is intrinsic to the workings of modern mass culture. Along with advertisement, recorded music, or spatial organization, the cinema has, from its inception, been a means for the manufacture of everyday life, and, in this respect, it belongs to what Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge have called »the public sphere of production.«² Through the institutions of this sphere, elements of daily life that in earlier historical stages were locally and spontaneously organized – elements such as temporality, intimacy, fantasy, corporeality or sensuality, to name a few – became mass-produced by industrial sectors such as the commodity market or (Enzensberger's term) »the consciousness industry.« But as Negt and Kluge point out, the manufacture of the quotidian contains contradictions and unevenness in coverage. In order to attain some hegemony, the public sphere of production has to feed on real contents and needs, on kernels of non-reified experience; and these, however transformed, simplified, or muted in their passage through the media channels, are made available for audiences. These real contents can be activated in reception by viewers and listeners who may draw from popular texts emancipatory desires and images. In the specific case of cinema, these contents are actualized as viewers inflect what they see through their desires and needs, or, conversely, as the world on the screen stimulates in spectators critical awareness, redemptive memory, and autonomy. Yet what components in the image prompt spectators to active response? Answering this question has been one of the driving motivations of film and cultural studies in the last three decades; and during this time scholars have most often looked for answers in a series of overlapping components such as character, plot, mode of address, ideology and bodily and generic configurations. All of them have tended to be contextualized in relation to narrative, the primary concern of commercial cinema. At the same time, other aspects of the image – also potential catalysts for critical spectatorship – have remained relatively understudied. One of

these is the material horizon revealed by the camera – a horizon largely made up of things and spaces. What is the role of these elements in the functioning of the film as a public sphere?

The question is important because it tackles specifically cinematic elements: before it was a narrative system, cinema was a means for the contemplation of objects and the delineation of (more or less fantastic) spaces, and early theorists and observers dwelled at length on this fact. Béla Balász, for example, saw the cinema as a means for exploring the physiognomy of matter, an idea later elaborated, with significant variations, by Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, or Ernst Bloch. For Fernand Léger the cinema was part of a new visual regime characterized by »the advent of the object« and abrupt juxtapositions – that is, suddenly conjoined spaces. And for Sergeij Eisenstein the aesthetic watershed in the evolution of the medium was Griffith's elaboration of the close-up (he ›discovered‹ it in the fiction of Charles Dickens), which instaurated intimacy with things and their settings. It is no coincidence that filmed spaces and things were at the center of two popular early genres: panoramas and trick films respectively. Hence the scrutiny of objects and locations figures prominently in the childhood memory of the medium; but they are also a pervasive ingredient of narrative film, where, as a material backdrop for the action – a sort of film within the film³ – they remain subordinated to the narrative. But are they always subordinate? What is their potential for agency? And what does this agency tell us about the functioning of the cinema as a public sphere? In order to explore some of these questions, I would like to take a long detour through Vachel Lindsay's film writings. But why Lindsay?

A poet associated to the so-called Chicago Renaissance of the 1910s, Lindsay wrote *The Art of the Moving Picture* (1915), allegedly the first aesthetic treatment of the cinema in the United States. Written when the classical style was still young, the book can be read as a defense of an aesthetically integrated cinema of the kind that culminated in D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, also premiered in 1915. The book made him a celebrated expert whose views were frequently solicited by some of the main journals of the day, such as *The Nation* or *The New Republic*.⁴ However, his success was short-lived. The book was revised and reissued in 1922 but Lindsay quickly fell out of favor with the public and the intellectuals. A lengthy follow-up project, tentatively titled *The Best Movies Now Running*, never saw the light during his lifetime (he was victim to a deteriorating mental condition which made sustained intellectual effort quite difficult) and has only recently been published.⁵ This work applied many of the ideas of *The Art* to the analysis of a number of films from 1923 and 1924. One of Lindsay's recurring motifs throughout the manuscript is the persistence of the style and affect of early cinema in the classical system – a persistence that he decried – and in this respect he ratifies that the classical system was an un-

even development, which did not completely standardize cinematic representation or spectatorial response. In his view, this was largely due to the potentially dispersive effect of filmed objects and spaces, elements that were tangential to the narrative diegesis but had the ability to derail it or else – Lindsay’s preferred option – to tighten it up into a well-made whole. What is quite clear is that, for Lindsay, the classical codes alone could not produce aesthetically coherent films and (consequently) homogenize audience reaction. No matter how cohesive the diegesis, how self-sufficient the fictional world, things and spaces exerted a centrifugal pull, which the classical style could not fully master; because of this, they could act as textual support for an alternative public sphere in film reception.⁶

To start with objects: they figured prominently in two genres that Lindsay called, in his peculiar terminology, »intimate« photoplays and »films of fairy splendor« – or trick films. While the »intimate« picture tends to take place indoors and to dwell on faces and gestures, the trick film explores the realm of objects. Both genres offer a surgical examination of everyday matter – including the body and face of the performers – which Ernst Bloch called a »micrology of the incidental« (»Mikrologie des Nebenbei«) and Walter Benjamin, his friend and contemporary, related to an »unconscious optics«.⁷ These genres exploit the cinema’s ability to give objects and body parts human qualities and to turn humans into things. »Now the mechanical or non-human object (...) is apt to be the hero in most any sort of photoplay.«⁸ And elsewhere: »I have said that it is a quality, not a defect, of the photoplay that while the actors tend to become types and hieroglyphics and dolls, on the other hand, dolls and hieroglyphics and mechanisms tend to become human. By an extension of this principle, non-human tones, textures, lines, and spaces take on a vitality almost like that of flesh and blood.«⁹ The trick film literalizes this by making objects act like people. Lindsay’s example is a Pathé film, *Moving Day*, in which furniture, clothes, tools, and a whole train of personal belongings follow a family in its relocation to a new home. A film such as this demonstrates the ability of the camera to re-enchant the daily life of modernity and to bring about a return to an earlier animistic stage. But at the same time, by representing a chiasmus according to which humans and objects exchange attributes and eventually occupy the same plane of existence, trick films are also symptomatic of a modern disorder, one that Marx, no less than Lindsay, was quite aware of.

Filmed objects are what objects always are in modern capitalism: commodities, or in Marx’s famous wording, »very queer thing(s) abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.«¹⁰ Their queerness stems from the way in which they translate labor into value. Labor, a social relation between producers and capital owners, solidifies in a commodity as value, and when this happens, the social character of value disappears and takes on the appearance of a natural quality of the

object, an emanation of its very essence that market prices simply translate into the language of currency. In commodities, then, producers confront the result of their own activity in an alien form, which acts independently of their will or intention: »their own social action (that is, their work, J.S.) takes the form of the action of objects, which rule the producers instead of being ruled by them.« This is partly why, in Marx's well-known formulation, in commodity exchange social relations between people take »the fantastic form of a relation between things« and, simultaneously, things become strangely possessed. A humble table that ›steps forth‹ as a commodity becomes ›something transcendental: «It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than ›table-turning‹ ever was.«¹¹

But the table behaves so giddily for other reasons as well. The social life of commodities cannot be explained only by appealing to use- and exchange-values; there is an additional quality in things, which emanates from what we could call their cultural value: their connotations and symbolic weight. These attributes circulate in consumption, a complex activity that involves much more than simple exchange of money for goods; it is also an important means for the articulation of social identities in modernity. As contemporary sociologists Thornstein Veblen or Georg Simmel diagnosed, who one is is often a function of what one buys and wears, of the kind of persona one constructs through a selective appropriation of market goods. Or, inversely, the things one buys and wears endow one with specific roles and a sense of self. Just as in dreams, in consumer culture objects acquire peculiar latencies; they (dis)place and control subjects rather than being controlled by them. In Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen's words: »Within the logic of consumer imagery, the source of creative power is the object world, invested with the subjective power of ›personality‹.«¹² Yet it must be noted that use and display do not completely exhaust the life of things. After they become appropriated as markers of identity and personal circumstance, there remains in them an unaccountable density, which eludes pricing and social meaning and has to do with their concrete immediacy – a quality that Michael Taussig has named their »particulate sensuousity«, and that, for Lacan, is a »gratuitous, proliferating, excessive, nearly absurd« trait in matter.¹³ This excess is at the center of all the varied object tropisms; it is in fact what consumption and desire try to bind but constantly fail, so they have to start again with something else, something new.

The haunted character of things became especially visible in the last decade of the nineteenth century, in a number of cultural institutions such as department stores, illustrated magazines, universal exhibitions, museums and the cinema.¹⁴ In movies, Lindsay pointed out, »moving objects, not moving lips, make the words of the photoplay«: »When two people talk to each other, it is by lifting and lowering objects rather

than their voices. The collector presents a bill: the adventurer shows him the door. The boy plucks a rose: the girl accepts it.«¹⁵ Beyond the narrative functionality of things, the screen also showcased their sensuous power, and this was not always to the good. If allowed to radiate untrammelled, this power might derail the spectator's attention through gratuitous stimulation.¹⁶ In a section of *The Art of the Moving Picture* titled *Furniture and Inventions*, Lindsay discourages the gratuitous trickery of a film like *Moving Day*; films like this provided the spectator with senseless accumulation: »heaped-up material merely bought and paid for, the loot of a robbed civilization« rather than »the well-organized splendor of a growing culture.«¹⁷ The way to manage the unruly thingness of things was to ›spiritualize‹ matter and make objects the bearers of transcendent meaning. To show how it might be done, he fantasized a possible good object: a film version of the story of Cinderella. The plot should naturally revolve around the protagonist's shoe, whose material, glass, is »chosen to imply a sort of jeweled strangeness from the start.« When Cinderella loses her footwear, »it should flee at once like a white mouse to hide under the sofa. It should be pictured there with special artifice, so that the sensuous little foot of every girl-child in the audience will tingle to wear it.« As the plot develops, it should »move« and »peep« from its hideout until found by the prince, and at the scene of the coronation, it should be »more gazed at than the crown, and on as dazzling a cushion«, aglow with »inner life«.¹⁸ Notice, however, that the ›inner life‹ of the shoe stimulates a corporeal response on the part of the audience and certain unabashed fetishism on the part of the critic. It seems as if the more exalted and overcoded the object the stronger its sensual appeal, as if the attractions of matter grew in proportion to the efforts to eradicate them. In passages like this Lindsay recreates something akin to what contemporary French critics were at the time calling *photogénie*:¹⁹ that defamiliarization of objects that the cinema, with its ability to reveal in extreme close-up the physiognomy of the material horizon, was uniquely capable of conveying.²⁰ But he is also placing the connection between film viewing and the enticements of material in quite a different scene.

While early film theorists, such as Hugo Muensterberg, Béla Balász, and Jean Epstein, among others, psychologized the material basis of cinema by identifying the apparatus with mental faculties, psychoanalysis materialized the psyche, demonstrating its connection to bodily and objectual supports. Lindsay's first film book was published at the time when Sigmund Freud was producing his first extended formulations of the psychoanalytic object (breast, phallus, feces) and its substitute, the fetish. These concepts concretized fantasy and desire by attaching them to elusive object series, lures of a wholeness always near at hand yet always irretrievable. The fetish, in particular, revealed the radical dis-organ-ization of desire, its independence of the organic body, and its detours through the world of commodities and matter. The fetish is inevitably a commodity (an accessory, an item of clothing, a

type of fabric or a texture, such as leather or fur) or a commodifiable item. Let us say hair: a body part that can be ornamented, trimmed, teased, curled, braided, or flipped after the dictates of the fashion system and the codes in place around it. But it is also something that desire raises to the status of ideal object, a status that the fetish cannot always keep up, and, consequently, often ends up reverting to idiotic (no)thingness, to absurd material accretion. Lindsay's work helps us see that, just like psychoanalysis, the cinema dwelled on the strange pulses of matter – its uncontrollable oscillation between animate and inanimate, over-signification and blankness, ideal object and excreta.

According to Lindsay, this oscillation had to be contained. The enveloping sensuousness of filmed objects had to be reduced and their anarchic pulses tamed. But how? Lindsay's answer was: through hieroglyphics. These were to be the basic building blocks in the construction of orderly films devoid of distracting stimulation. In *The Art of the Moving Picture*, Lindsay described them as cinematic renderings of the ancient ideographs combining the photographic representation of »elementary and familiar things« with »a more abstract«, or symbolic, meaning.²¹ The examples he gives in *The Art* are literally based on Egyptian script and run from the obvious to the wildly whimsical. The ideograph »duck«, for example, will be translated into shots of the said bird that will »suggest the finality of Arcadian peace«²². The Egyptians' wavy line, which mutated into the »n« of the Latin alphabet, reappears in film in »the glittering water scenes« – »a dominant part of moving picture Esperanto« – and they refer to a restricted symbolic constellation: »the spiritual meaning of water will range from the metaphor of the purity of the dew to the sea as a sign of infinity.«²³ The sign shaped like a lasso crops up in modern films as a literal lasso or a noose. Its symbolic value is »solemn judgment and the hangman« or »temptation.« Connected with it, at least in Lindsay's mind, is the spider web, »representing the cruelty of evolution.«²⁴ Lindsay's hieroglyphics were not always such close transpositions of Egyptian ideographs; in a broader sense, any visual image susceptible of a symbolic interpretation became for him a hieroglyph. In his analysis of the Douglas Fairbanks vehicle *The Thief of Bagdad*, contained in his second film book, the image of an all-curing magic apple, which crops up at the end of the film is »a hieroglyphic of promise, of hope, and (...) healing«,²⁵ in turn, the image of a scepter with a deadly serpent in its hollow combines »(t)he scepter, the hieroglyphic of authority, the serpent, of death – the two together have become the hieroglyphic of official death.«²⁶ Balancing the concrete and the abstract, matter and sense, film hieroglyphics reduced the unmanageable world of things and articulated »a delineation of experience«, »pictures with a soul.«²⁷

While they are deeply indebted to Swedenborgian mysticism and to the nineteenth-century literary tradition in the United States, Lindsay's hieroglyphics also

find their place in a wider modernist idiom. As they tried to communicate abstractions through the sensuous surfaces of everyday things and, conversely, to spiritualize the quotidian, and as they tried to highlight the symbolic underpinnings of the commonplace, they were structurally analogous to the »mythic method« of Yeats, Joyce, or Eliot; to Benjamin's dialectical images, to Pound's »intellectual and emotional complexes«, to Eisenstein's montages and Simmel's *Momentbilder*. All of them used the principle of assemblage (of concrete and abstract; present and past) to establish connections between seemingly distant realities and to open paths of sense through the visible.²⁸ In addition, Lindsay's hieroglyphic perception was also replicated in the writings of a number of contemporary modernists seeking to understand mass culture.

One example was the writing published in the New York »little magazine«, *The Soil*, which appeared for a little over a year between 1916 and 1917. The review was inspired by the enthusiastic »Americanism« of photographer Alfred Stieglitz and his group and by the playful anti-art stance of the French avant-garde, which championed devalued cultural forms. Its editors and contributors praised machinery, skyscrapers, and hanging bridges as ultimate emblems of modernity, and they interpreted urban popular phenomena as contemporary avatars of ancient myths and timeless archetypes. They compared boxers in the ring to Greek statues (»Phidias might sign his name under that frieze of nakedness«) and mythological figures (»Jack Britton was the Theagenes (...) and Ted Lewis was Euthymus«), or invested them with allegorical value (»this is Skill against the Brute.«) The head of the rhinoceros at the Bronx zoo was to a commentator »more powerful than the Minotaur« – an example of »mythology in the flesh«. And magic acts at revues and cabarets seemed reincarnations of ancient religious rituals.²⁹

Along similar lines, for imagist poet H. D. the cinema unveiled »a classical vibration« in the everyday. She often saw film images as visual palimpsests: quotidian objects and landscapes evoked, in a sort of superimposition, traditional artistic iconography and myth. Hence she discovered in Kenneth Macpherson's experimental film *Borderline* (1930), in which she starred next to Paul Robeson, visual echoes of the art of Mena period Egypt, Hokusai Japan, classical Athens or quattrocento Florence. She praised the mythic overtones of Pabst's *Joyless Street*: one of its protagonists, Greta Garbo, seemed to H. D. to be a new Helen and the film's urban setting a modern Troy or »a mournful and pitiful Babylon«. In turn, the excellence of Russian films lay for her in their »Biblical« qualities; their politics were destined to fade with time, but the ideas in them were »as great (...) as those carved in lightning on the rock of Sinai.«³⁰ As is the case with Lindsay's, these views express an anti-modern modernism. If, in Baudelaire's famous definition, the modern was »the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent« half of art,³¹ H. D. or the commentators writ-

ing for *The Soil* focused instead on that other half which is »the eternal and immutable« – on mythological resonance and »classical vibrations.« Through them the dizzying heterogeneity of the present could be made to signify; its strangeness could be reduced and redeemed.

This way of reading replicates, perhaps unwittingly, the discourse of popular culture, which abounded in hieroglyphic gestures at the time. The central motif of the 1893 Chicago World's Fair was the *White City*, a large pastiche of ancient Roman architecture built out of staff around an artificial lagoon. Intended as the central display at the fair, it seemed a suitable symbol for the nation as a whole, as it clothed American imperialist ambitions and economic and technological prowess in the style of an earlier empire. Years later, visitors to the 1900 World's Exhibition in Paris were greeted by *La Parisienne*, a huge allegorical statue symbolizing the city and perched on a golden ball on the main entrance to the fair grounds. In New York City, the famous Coney Island amusement parks, *Luna Park* and *Steeplechase*, were fantasy landscapes straight out of the *Arabian Nights*. They featured belly dancers, camel rides and elephants, and their flashy architecture combined Renaissance and Levantine elements with minarets, domes, and pagodas. Some of the most popular restaurants and cabarets in New York in the 1910s and 1920s followed suit: Murray's Roman Gardens mixed Roman and Egyptian styles and Louis Martin's Restaurant boasted Assyrian columns and Babylonian balconies allegedly imitating the legendary hanging gardens. In turn, live entertainment often collapsed the »primitive« and the latest dance crazes: 1920s performer Gilda Gray, who made her name with the shimmy, consolidated her career doing South Sea and Oriental dances in Ziegfeld's Follies. The point of these orientalist and primitivist gestures was not to impose order on the new or to lend it the weight of tradition, as attempted by Lindsay, *The Soil*, or H. D. Rather, it was to separate fun from normality and to revive historical image repertoires as mere play of surfaces and masks. But as they did so, they transcended their immediate circumstances and gained a symbolic, archetypal dimension. These gestures may have had a legitimating function as well. If popular entertainment embodied transhistorical impulses and mythic archetypes, attempts to police it, suppress it, or even to resist its lure, would seem to contradict a timeless kernel in human nature.³²

If trick films depicted the unruliness of the object world, action films depicted another modern disorder – one projected across space. Based on chases, coincidences and frantic transitions, action films subverted spatial perspective by means of accelerated movement and revealed the connection between the cinema and the cult of speed. To an extent, Lindsay proposed, all films are action films: »The hurdle race«, Lindsay states, »is the fundamental movie plot and all others derive from it.«³³ For him, as for a number of subsequent film theorists and historians, filmic pleasure derives to a great extent from the enjoyment of movement and, more concretely,

from the bodily sensations and optical distortions afforded by mechanical transport – by trains, cars, fairground rides, and elevators.³⁴ The idea makes perfect historical sense: the Lumière brothers had already paid homage to railway journeying and one of the main pre-nickelodeon genres was the travel film, which showed panoramas taken from moving boats, balloons and, especially, trains. The connection between film watching and movement has survived in later narrative film, especially in action and adventure genres, as well as in other forms of popular culture. Speed, simulated or real, remains an important component of contemporary popular cinema as well as of video and computer games, skateboarding, risk sports and dance – all of which have developed synergical connections with film. But the association between cinema and speed is not just a matter of historical antecedents or peripheral links. Film viewing always provides a form of virtual transit. The spectator is transported across vast distances by the image and spared ›meaningless‹ space by virtue of the editing and the fast-paced plot. And this transport often intensifies bodily sensation and attenuates reflective consciousness.³⁵

The pleasure of movement arises from placelessness, dehumanization and the undoing of common perspectival coordinates.³⁶ Going beyond much contemporary theory, which has tended to locate cinematic pleasure in the way commercial cinema centers spectators ideologically and cements social identities, Lindsay shrewdly acknowledges other important sources of enjoyment: the spatial disorientation and dislocation attached to speed.³⁷ But for him this type of amusement is unseemly, carnivalesque, attached to the bodily substratum. It is part of the medium's early history and occasionally erupts through the interstices of the more reputable films, threatening to dissolve their organic unity and to distract spectators from the purported message and aesthetic wholeness. When this happens, the consequent ›jumping‹, ›twitching‹ and ›sharp edges‹ result in distorted spaces and distorting texts – ›galvanized and ogling corpses‹, ›misplaced figures of the order Frankenstein‹ – which affront the spectators' morals and rack their nervous system.³⁸ In this manner, the intoxicating enervation produced by the filmed image adds to that of factory work, mechanization, metropolitan life and the increased tempo of existence. And it also brings film close to jazz, which in Lindsay's second book condensed everything dissonant and destructive in contemporary culture: ›the dirty dance‹ and ›hysteria‹ – that is, uncontrolled female sexuality, the flapper³⁹ – surface, clock time and ›glaring light.‹ Its antidotes are ordering female presences (›Our Lady of Springfield‹, the Princess, the mother), hieroglyphics, depth, ›eternity‹ (as he calls the epiphanic perception of the past in the present) and ›indirect lighting‹: the ›light of romance‹, which pervades fairy tales and reveals, he claims, the true essences of things.

A further antidote could be a tidy architectural design. Lindsay thus anticipated an idea that later critics have theorized more fully: that the cinema offers spaces for

virtual habitation and transit⁴⁰ and, besides, that these spaces have a largely unconscious effect, since, as Walter Benjamin would later state, they are appropriated »in distraction«, by »tactile habituation«, not by rapt concentration and engrossed study.⁴¹ The main influence on Lindsay's insights here is the ›City Beautiful‹ ideal, in vogue at the time he wrote his first film book, and whose main promoters were art historian Charles Eliot Norton and architect Daniel H. Burnham, designer of the *White City* of the 1893 Universal Exposition in Chicago and of some early high-rises, such as the *Flatiron Building* in New York. The goal of the movement was to provide urban centers with a recognizable outline and aesthetic unity by means of monumental public spaces, open vistas and civic monuments expressive of the city's history, self-image, and aspirations. Modeled after the World's Fairs, these environments should be globally planned. They would substitute ›synthetic‹ for spontaneously lived space and would standardize the perception of the city, directing the free-floating gaze of the urban dweller to predetermined points of interest, to particular meanings and narratives. In this respect, their effect was similar to that later promoted by the style of the classical Hollywood film, which can be seen as well as a form of spatial regulation seeking to standardize audience response. At bottom, the ›City Beautiful‹ movement was a form of environmental behaviorism rooted in aestheticism: it attempted to fuse the disparate urban masses through unitary design and to attain social harmony through aesthetics while leaving untouched the structural causes of fragmentation and unrest.

Like new civic centers, Lindsay maintained, film sets should be designed with a view toward harmony and proportion. Spatial backgrounds should provide the main motifs, »moods«, and »effects« of the plot; and, conversely, characters and events should embody the spirit of the film's spaces. These should not be treated as neutral backdrops but as symbolic actants in their own right: »backgrounds that clamor for utterance through the figures in front of them, as Athens finds her soul in Athena.«⁴² The desired goal was a tight matching between material space, character, and action, a matching that should be both ideological and graphic, with the »definite system of space and texture relations retained throughout the set« acting as a conduit for edifying ideals.⁴³ For Lindsay, one of the few films that lived up to these standards was James Cruze's epic of the 1840s Westward migration, *The Covered Wagon*. He read it as a collection of graphic patterns and correspondences dominated by »the overarching cover of the end of the wagon«, which frames the main actions of the film: under it the hero meets the heroine and their love story gradually unfolds. In addition, this space is laden with symbolic and cultural resonances: »Every single covered wagon is a temple of domesticity, religion and aspiration on lumbering west-going wheels. The arch of some of these covered wagon canopies is so perfectly curved it could be made the model of some gigantic dome, as beautiful

a curve as the curve of the Taj Mahal, and it may yet possibly suggest some of the domes and minarets of the Northwest Pacific Coast.«⁴⁴ The shape of the wagon's cover is echoed across the landscape (in the curves of cliffs, rivers, and rolling hills), and in the mass scenes: the Indian army is »a mass of moving architecture« and so are the wagons, especially when they close in a circle, forming an improvised fort.

These idealized spaces invoke an ideal polity. They should embody national character and community spirit, providing spectators with figurations of their collective identity. In them, Lindsay proposed, »America (...) must visualize itself again.«⁴⁵ This may be the reason why the »crowd picture« is the favorite of the unstructured urban »mob«, which gathers nightly in the theaters »to watch its natural face in the glass«, presumably to find out what it is.⁴⁶ A film like Cruze's, with its patriotic charge and harmonic visuals, might give the mob the self-image it needs; and, in the process, it will help appease many »spites, hates, and race rivalries«, blending the different cultural strands of the nation into a unity. Even the obstreperous »alien« element will be integrated and »immigration will be something else than tide upon tide of raw labor.«⁴⁷ This sounds like a blithe attempt to negotiate an open, responsive public sphere but is actually an exclusionary statement. Immigration, which for Lindsay is a shapeless flow, will become structured by joining in on a postulated American tradition. And in the compact logic of the sentence, this tradition predates the alien flood; it can order and reduce it but remains at all times a self-enclosed entity which does not engage in dialogue with it.

Naturally, Lindsay's formulations are more useful for their structure than for their content and explicit goal. His prescriptions for a unified cinema pervaded with spiritual symbolism and his defense of a homogeneous social body are certainly questionable. But his writings perceptively capture the constellation of contrary impulses at work in the commercial cinema of his time. He shows that the classical cinema, especially in its early stages, was a site of conflict: between the unity of the classical codes and the centrifugal pull of filmed spaces and objects, between narrative and the material background of the action, between a dominant-bourgeois organization of experience and a range of alternative public spheres. These last emerged in relation to those elements that had the largest potential for dispersion – objects and spaces – but whose proper deployment could counter the dispersive (Siegfried Kracauer called it »distracting«) effect of the medium. Lindsay engaged these elements so persistently because, in his view, it was through them, more than through narrative enunciation or character construction, that the cinema engaged the spectators' attention and worked its effect. These elements, which belong to the material backdrop of the narrative, provided the textual support for film as an alternative public sphere: they were sites of contestation and digressive reading, potential sources of disruptive enjoyment and sensual play. Yet, at the same time, their affect

could be turned around and used to civic purpose, since through them the cinema could convey intimations of unity and order.

By focusing on these »peripheral details«⁴⁸ Lindsay's criticism crystallizes what we could call a modernist style of reading popular cinema – one actualized by *photogénie* theorists, dadaists, surrealists, as well as by a line up of American critics, from Lindsay to Parker Tyler and James Agee, who were involved in experimental artistic milieus. They disregarded narrative and instead favored isolated moments, the augmentation of objects on the screen, the virtual transports, the synthetic – often fantastic – architectures of the film image; they favored, in short, the most media-specific components of the image. Perhaps because these components were the most cinematic, and therefore most unprecedented in traditional cultural production, they held the attention of critics linked to oppositional cultural formations. But they may also have attracted attention because through these elements, which combine cinematic specificity and the de-familiarization of the quotidian, the cinema invokes an organization of experience and addresses – either confirms or disrupts – everyday life at the most immediate, micropolitical level.

The investments of modernist film critics are also congruent with those of the contemporary experimental cinema. In fact, most early avant-garde cinema was primarily about spaces and things: city films, dada and surrealist cinema, and, to an extent, Soviet montage brought spectators up close against the material life and the architectures of modernity; they tracked the paths of things and explored (and resisted) existing spatial configurations. Their purpose was to create webs of association usually ignored by routine perception and to produce alternative figurations of desire, sociality, and subjectivity. In turn, popular reading formations similarly delve into the micropolitical aspects of film. Mary Ann Doane and Miriam Hansen, for example, have called attention to the way in which female spectators read commercial cinema against the grain, bypassing the macro-structures that rule characterization and plot development and focusing their attention on peripheral details on the surface of the image. And the same could be said of queer audiences, whose relation with cinema has often hinged on the attraction of particular textures and fragments rather than on overall narrative structures. After all, the characters and plots of commercial cinema have often worked to marginalize these alternative counter-publics, which may have felt exiled to the peripheries of the image – to relatively under-codified moments and elements where they could make visible their meanings, desires, and fantasies.

As the site for an alternative public sphere, this textual periphery works intermittently and ephemeraly. It is activated less through articulate ideological proposals than through tactile, sensuous moments, flashes of enjoyment that gesture to an inchoately intuited elsewhere. It then forces us to take into account forms of cul-

tural practice that are often hard to cartograph but, as both popular culture and the avant-garde have insistently shown, are also enormously decisive. Lindsay traced the textual supports for this activity in a shadow text within the film text, and did so with the purpose of disciplining the film and the public. Much as one may (should) disagree with his ultimate intentions, his luminous insight endures: it is in the subterranean realms of the image – in the recesses of the film within the film – where much of what matters takes place.

Notes

- 1 The classic work on American silent cinema as a public sphere is Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon. Spectatorship in American Silent Film*, Cambridge 1991, esp. 60-125, some of whose ideas I have summarized in this paragraph.
- 2 Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *The Public Sphere and Experience*, Minneapolis 1993, 12.
- 3 I am adapting this formulation from Siegfried Kracauer's *Marseille Notebooks* via Miriam Hansen's commentary, see Miriam Hansen, *With Skin and Hair. Kracauer's Theory of Film*, Marseille 1940, in: *Critical Inquiry* 19 (Spring 1993), 437-469, here 461. Kracauer speaks of »the action below the action« to describe the material »basic layer« of cinema.
- 4 See Stanley Kauffmann, Introduction, in: Vachel Lindsay, *The Art of the Moving Picture*, New York 1970, ix-xix.
- 5 The unpublished film text has been wonderfully edited by Myron Lounsbury, whose lengthy commentary is indispensable, see Vachel Lindsay, *The Progress and Poetry of the Movies*. Ed. by Myron Lounsbury, Lanham, Maryland and London 1995.
- 6 Lindsay's idiosyncratic work has been explored by Glenn Wolfe and Myron Lounsbury, who provided detailed glosses of *The Art of the Moving Picture*, and, from a more critical perspective, by Nick Browne and by Miriam Hansen. These last have pointed out Lindsay's difficulties with social and cultural difference but have not perceived how he was aware of an internal ›otherness‹ in the classical text. See Myron Lounsbury, *Origins of American Film Criticism, 1909-1939*, New York 1973, 50-58, and 67-77; Glenn J. Wolfe, Vachel Lindsay. *The Poet as Film Theorist*, New York 1973; Nick Browne, *Orientalism as an Ideological Form. American Film Theory in the Silent Period*, in: *Wide Angle* 11 (October 1989), 23-31; and Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, as in note 1, esp. 76-89, and 188-98.
- 7 Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*. Bd. 1, Frankfurt am Main 1959, 471-73; Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, in: idem, *Illuminations*, New York 1969, 217-51, 225-227.
- 8 Lindsay, *Art*, as in note 4, 63.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 161.
- 10 Karl Marx, *The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof*, in: Robert Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*, New York 1978, 319-329, here 319.
- 11 Marx, *Fetishism*, as in note 10, 320.
- 12 Stuart Ewen and Elizabeth Ewen, *Channels of Desire. Mass Images and the Shaping of American Culture*, Minnesota 1992, 49.
- 13 Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity. A Particular History of the Senses*, New York 1993, 22-23; and Jacques Lacan, *El Seminario de Jacques Lacan. Libro 7. La ética del psicoanálisis (1959-60)*, Buenos Aires 1992, 141 and 157 (Spanish version of the Book VII of *Séminaire de Jacques Lacan*).
- 14 See Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things. The Object Matter of American Literature*, Chicago 2003, 34; see also Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing. Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940*, Chapel Hill 1989, 40-72.
- 15 Lindsay, *Art*, as in note 4, 189.

- 16 Ibid., 142.
- 17 Idem, Progress, as in note 5, 184.
- 18 Idem, Art, as note 4, 143 and ff.
- 19 For a comparison between Lindsay's and *photogénie* theorists' (especially Jean Epstein's) views on filmed objects, see: Rachel O. Moore, *Savage Theory. Cinema as Modern Magic*, Durham 2000.
- 20 Passages like this, and the general liveliness of mass-made things in modernity, should perhaps make us question the widespread acceptance of Benjamin's assumption that the »auratic« (the world's ability to »return the gaze«) disappears under mechanical reproduction (whether iconic, as in film and photography, or industrial, in the case of mass manufacturing), see: Benjamin, *Work*, as in note 7, 220-222.
- 21 Lindsay, *Art*, as in note 4, 200.
- 22 Ibid., 202.
- 23 Ibid., 205.
- 24 Ibid., 208.
- 25 Idem, Progress, as in note 5, 176.
- 26 Ibid., 176-177.
- 27 Idem, *Art*, as in note 4, 200.
- 28 On the modernist poetics of (re)assemblage and construction see Sanford Schwartz, *The Matrix of Modernism. Pound, Eliot, and Early Twentieth-Century Thought*, Princeton 1985.
- 29 R. A. Sanborn, *The Fight*, in: *The Soil* (January 1917), 67-68; J. B., *To the Bronx Zoo*, in: *ibid.*, 73; and Adam Hull-Shirk, *Prestidigitation*, in: *ibid.*, 86.
- 30 The texts excerpted here are H. D., *The Borderline Pamphlet* (1930), in: Bonnie Kime Scott, ed., *The Gender of Modernism*, Bloomington 1992, 110-125; H. D., *Cinema and the Classics*, in: *Close-Up* 1/1 (1927), 22-33; and H. D., *Russian Films*, in: *ibid.* 3/4 (1928), 18-29.
- 31 Charles Baudelaire, *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*, in: idem, *Oeuvres complètes*, Paris 1969, 296-97, my translation.
- 32 See Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair. Visions of Empire at America's International Expositions, 1876-1915*, Chicago 1984; John Kasson, *Amusing the Millions. Coney Island at the Turn of the Century*, New York 1978; and Lewis A. Erenberg, *Steppin' Out. New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1930*, Chicago 1984.
- 33 Lindsay, *Art*, as in note 4, 36-44; see also idem, Progress, as in note 5, 166.
- 34 See Tom Gunning, *An Unseen Energy Swallows Space*, in: John Fell, ed., *Film Before Griffith*, Berkeley 1983, 355-366; Charles Musser, *The Travel Genre in 1903-1904. Moving Towards Fictional Narrative*, in: Thomas Elsaesser, ed., *Early Cinema. Space, Frame, Narrative*, London 1990, 49-62; and Lynn Kirby, *Parallel Tracks. The Railway and Early Cinema*, Durham 1997.
- 35 See Paul Virilio, *Esthétique de la disparition*, Paris 1980, 77 and 120 ff.
- 36 On placelessness, or atopicality see Avital Ronell, *Finitude's Score. Essays for the End of the Millennium*, Lincoln, Nebraska 1994, esp. 83-103 and 219-235.
- 37 1970s *Screen* theory, following Louis Althusser's partial reading of Jacques Lacan, focused on how the classical cinema, through the interplay of the imaginary and symbolic registers, lured spectators into a (masculine-identified) position of centrality and power. Starting in the late 1980s, new readings of Lacan have inflected these views by highlighting the importance of the Real as a manic core of enjoyment, a destabilizing, formless undergrowth that gives filmic pleasure a destructive edge; in fact, without this edge there would be no pleasure at all. See, for example Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London 1989; idem, *Looking Awry. An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, Cambridge 1991; idem, *Enjoy Your Symptom. Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*, London and New York 1992; and idem, *The Plague of Fantasies*, London 1997.
- 38 See Lindsay, *Art*, as in note 4, 41.
- 39 See idem, Progress, as in note 5, 368.
- 40 See Giuliana Bruno, *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map. The City Films of Elvira Notari*, Princeton 1993, 35-57; and idem, *Site-Seeing. Architecture and the Moving Image*, in: *Wide Angle* 19/4 (1997), 8-25.
- 41 Benjamin, *Work*, as in note 7, 239-40.
- 42 Lindsay, *Art*, as in note 4, 171.

- 43 Ibid., 170.
- 44 Idem, Progress, as in note 5, 274-275.
- 45 Idem, Art, as in note 4, 276.
- 46 Ibid., 234, 78, 93.
- 47 Ibid., 275.
- 48 Roger Cardinal, Pausing Over Peripheral Detail, in: Framework 30-31 (1986), 112-133.