Daniel M. Feige – Tilmann Köppe – Gesa zur Nieden (Hg.)

Funktionen
von
Kunst

PETER LANG

Frankfurt am Main · Berlin · Bern · Bruxelles · New York · Oxford · Wien

Inhalt

Einleitung

Daniel Martin Feige / Tilmann Köppe / Gesa zur Nieden

Die Frage nach den Funktionen von Kunst beschäftigt verschiedene Disziplinen. In der philosophischen Kunsttheorie gibt es Versuche, den Kunstbegriff funktionalistisch zu definieren; in den Geschichtswissenschaften bilden die Künste und ihre Funktionen wichtige Themenkreise der neueren Kultur- und Sozialgeschichte; die Literaturwissenschaften untersuchen im Rahmen von Einzelstudien funktionale Aspekte bestimmter literarischer Texte; als Teil der Kunst-, Musik- und Filmwissenschaften beschäftigen sich Kunstsoziologie und Sozialgeschichte mit Kunstfunktionen, um das Spannungsfeld von künstlerischer Produktion und Rezeption zu analysieren. Diese Liste ließe sich leicht verlängern. Sie wäre beispielsweise zu ergänzen um die Rolle, die Kunstfunktionen jenseits akademischer Kontexte spielen – etwa, wenn es um die Begründung der Förderung von Kunst durch die öffentliche Hand oder auch die Motivation des Kunstkonsums einzelner Rezipienten geht.

Die in diesem Band versammelten Beiträge untersuchen Funktionen von Kunst innerhalb unterschiedlicher Zusammenhänge. Die Autoren beschäftigen sich mit aktuellen Debatten zum Thema ‚Funktionen von Kunst‘, die in ihren jeweiligen Fachgebieten auftreten, und sie beleuchten fachspezifische Themenbereiche anhand der Frage nach Kunstfunktionen neu. In den einzelnen Disziplinen treten dabei unterschiedliche ästhetische, philosophische, soziologische oder auch historische Gewichtungen in den Vordergrund. Der Band ermöglicht somit einen Vergleich zwischen einzelnen Ansätzen verschiedener Fachgebiete: In transdisziplinärer Hinsicht kristallisierten sich drei wesentliche Bereiche heraus, die sich als „Künstlerische Autonomie vs. Funktionalität“, „Transmediale und medienästhetische Funktionen von Kunst“ und „Kunstfunktionen im geschichtlichen Wandel“ beschreiben lassen.

Die Beiträge der ersten Gruppe fragen aus philosophischer Perspektive nach den begrifflichen Grundlagen der Rede von Kunstfunktionen. Besonders wichtig ist hier das Verhältnis von kunstbezogener Funktionalität und deren Gegenpol, der künstlerischen Autonomie. Der Zusammenhang funktionalistischer und autonomieästhetischer Überlegungen wird dabei in mehreren Hinsichten thematisiert:

Reinold Schmückers Beitrag „Lob der Kunst als Zeug“ zeichnet das Aufkommen des Autonomiegedankens in der Ästhetik nach. Dieser wird verständlich als Reaktion auf die zunehmende Ausdifferenzierung des Kunstsystems und die damit verbundene Unübersichtlichkeit der verschiedenen Kunstformen: Mit dem

Between Technology and Art:
Functions of Film in Transitional Era Cinema

Shane Denson

It is easy to say that film, a thoroughly technological art form, challenges the modern differentiation of *technē* into the separate realms of functional technology and functionless art. It is important, however, not to essentialize this challenge as an ontological property of the filmic medium itself. If film's assemblage of art and technology announces a crisis for the distinction between 'applied' and 'fine' arts, this crisis was not coeval with the birth of cinema but had to wait until film-as-technology came into contact and competition with the conception of film-as-art, which did not occur until the 1910s, during cinema's so-called transitional era. Starting with a brief look at the historical context in which an initial disjunction (film *versus* art) gave way to a tentative conjunction (film *and* art), I will investigate two transitional era theoretical attempts to identify film *as* art: Vachel Lindsay's *The Art of the Moving Picture* (1915) and Hugo Münsterberg's *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* (1916). In both works, we find a struggle to delineate intrinsic from extrinsic functions of filmic art, as well as a tension between pure aestheticism or formalism on the one hand and the imperative to endow film with definite social functions on the other. Finally, I will relate these tensions to the material, technological basis of film, which, as it resists containment in aesthetic, psychological, social, and cultural frames of discourse, truly blurs the lines between art and artifice, technology and technique, *Kunst* and *Künstlichkeit*.

I. Functions in Transition

The earliest films (for example, the short scenes displayed by the Lumière brothers in December 1895) had a clearly defined function: unimportant in themselves, they served simply to demonstrate a novel technology. Cinema emerged from a nineteenth-century tradition of technological exhibitions, where devices and techniques ranging from the telegraph to x-rays were put on public display. Moreover, the apparatus had been invested with epistemological and scientific functions (based in the camera's supposed ability to capture reality more faithfully than the human eye). Thus, cinema was initially appreciated as a technology in the narrow (modern) sense of 'applied science', and this conception changed very little in the cinema's first decade.

In the years 1904–1906, two related developments began changing the face and functions of cinema: the rise of the story film and the nickelodeon boom. With the nickelodeon, film entertainment became cheap and accessible, and the class makeup of audiences shifted. Cinema became associated with the working-class, immigrants, and 'less cultured' portions of society. Popularity posed a problem for the guardians of morality and culture. Controversy arose over the nickelodeon's influence on women, children, and other 'impressionable' members of society, and there were calls for censorship; but social reformers also perceived a potential for film to 'uplift' or educate audiences. Overdetermined by industry interests in avoiding legal censorship and attracting higher-paying clientele, the need arose for more respectable wares: cinema turned to masterpieces of literature and drama. By 1910, art had become a *subject-matter* or *content-object* of film, but film itself was not thereby transformed into an artistic medium.

With the story film, the motion picture had taken on a more pronounced narrative function. Technology was asked to recede into the background, so that dramatic expression could come to the fore. Shakespeare and Ibsen became objects of the camera, but these adaptations were largely just filmed theater productions (complete with painted backdrops and shot at stage distance by a static camera); art and expression, in these cases, remained on the far side of the camera. Accordingly, cinema was variously labeled the 'theater of science', the 'poorman's theater', or, worst of all, 'canned drama'. Film was seen not as producing new artworks, but as disseminating preexisting ones to a mass audience. Depending on one's perspective, this could either imply the degradation of art or the edification of the masses. The industry in transition paid lip-service to art as a means of uplift, but it consistently demonstrated that it was interested above all in profits. Producers and exhibitors cleaned up their acts, established moral standards, and increasingly suppressed the technological spectacle that came to be associated with the supposedly uncultured, naïve masses, thereby expediting the transition from a 'cinema of attractions' to the classical paradigm of narrative integration. But this progression was motivated by mounting social pressures that made nickelodeons an increasingly risky business and by the rise of film palaces that were not only more respectable but also far more profitable. From the side of production, it seems that any social, cultural, or aesthetic considerations were subordinate to the central economic function of film as commodity.[1]

---

1   This section draws on recent work done by a wide range of historians of early and transitional era film. Especially useful resources for the period in question are Musser (1990) and Bowser (1990).

II. Vachel Lindsay: Fighting the Camera, Reforming the World

It was thus a statement of bold idealism, and hardly a sober description of reality, when Vachel Lindsay asserted in 1915: "THE MOTION PICTURE ART IS A GREAT HIGH ART, NOT A PROCESS OF COMMERCIAL MANUFACTURE."[2] Setting the narrative film or 'photoplay' on a par with sculpture, painting, and architecture, Lindsay envisions the "disinterested, non-commercial film" (4) as a "production not for the trade, but for the soul" (5).[3] Addressing an immutable, transcendent, and autonomous human essence, the artistic film would be free not only from economic interest but also from the vicissitudes of history itself.

Film as art, for Lindsay, is not functionless but defined by a central communicative function, an ability to express essentially human truths, emotions, and experiences. However, the timeless and universal address of this expression would seem to put serious constraints on the other sorts of functions that a filmic artwork can legitimately serve. Specifically, any historically or socio-culturally particular purposes must be seen as superfluous at best – at worst as positive obstacles to 'great art'. In the second half of his book, though, Lindsay praises the cinema for replacing saloons and "reunit[ing] the lower-class families" (208); he advocates using the artistic photoplay as political propaganda (cf. 228–232), putting it in the service of local communities (cf. 235–239), the nation (cf. 244–251), or even the church (cf. 241–243). But, anticipating the charge that such instrumentalization cannot be reconciled with art's 'disinterested' nature, Lindsay prefaces these considerations with a disclaimer, advising the reader that they are not, in his words, "a part of the dogmatic system of photoplay criticism" (188).

---

2   Lindsay (1922), 17, emphasis in original. Subsequent citations, all of which refer to the 1922 edition, are indicated in the text.

3   These two quotations, in contrast to all the others cited in the present essay, are original to the 1922 edition and occur in a significantly revised Chapter I. This chapter, entitled "The Point of View", originally consisted (in 1915) of a summarizing preview of the book's structure and its arguments. In 1922, it now told the story of the book's use in university courses and discussed its role in, and the prospects for, establishing film's place in art museums. This focus, and the audience it implies, marks a significant change from the 1915 version, which began thus: "This book is primarily for photoplay audiences. It might be entitled: 'How to Classify and Judge the Current Films.' But I desire as well that the work shall have its influence upon producers, scenario-writers, actors, and those who are about to prepare and endow pictures for special crusades" (1915, 1). Compare the opening of Chapter I from 1922: "While there is a great deal of literary reference in all the following argument, I realize, looking back over many attempts to paraphrase it for various audiences, that its appeal is to those who spend the best part of their student life in classifying, and judging, and producing works of sculpture, painting, and architecture. I find the eyes of all others wandering when I make talks upon the plastic artist's point of view" (1922, 1).

However, the neat separation suggested here between filmic art's intrinsic and extrinsic functions is complicated by the cinema's functional technology and the camera's involvement in a modern technological world. Recognizing the tension, Lindsay describes his book as "a struggle against the non-humanness of the undisciplined photograph", one that mirrors the artistically-minded director's "fierce struggle with the uncanny scientific quality of the camera's work" (193f.). Artistic expression requires that technology be 'disciplined' and the material medium of film subordinated to the message or vision it conveys.

Lindsay's discussion of D.W. Griffith's short 1912 film, *Man's Genesis*, sets the stage for the struggle. The film tells the story of the caveman Weak-Hands, whose bride has been taken from him by rival Brute-Force. This is the tale, in Lindsay's words, of "a race between the brain of Weak-Hands and the body of the other" (9f.). The underdog eventually wins the allegorical race with his invention of a primitive technology, the stone club. According to Lindsay, the film "provoke[s] the ingenuity of the audience, not their passionate sympathy" (10). He describes this audience as "mechanical Americans, fond of crawling on their stomachs to tinker their automobiles, [...] eager over the evolution of the first weapon from a stick to a hammer" (10). The film's prehistoric setting mirrors the uncultivated condition of the photoplay, still in the thrall of early or 'primitive' film, and its depiction of technology self-reflexively allegorizes early film's mode of appeal as a technological spectacle.

Such films gratify Americans' "speed-mania" (13), but they must be careful that viewers are not "jolted into insensibility" (12). Lindsay reinterprets transitional era calls for censorship: "It is not that our moral codes are insulted, but what is far worse, our nervous systems are temporarily racked to pieces" (13). Comparing the effects to the unbearable bodily sensations evoked by the sound of "scratching with a pin on a slate" (14), Lindsay implicitly sees film, as a technology not unlike the stone club in this respect, as capable of impacting us directly at the level of our raw embodiment.

To progress beyond its primitive beginnings and develop its latent potential, the photoplay must constantly keep this power in check, just as the director must tame the 'undisciplined photograph'. In the action film, "the actors hurry through what would be tremendous passions on the stage *to recover something that can be really photographed*" (15, emphasis added). Film's photographic basis cannot be dispensed with, but to achieve artistic status the photoplay must transmute mere photographs into symbolic representations that transcend the materiality of both the medium and the objects photographed. Lindsay recounts a Civil War film in which the armies fight over a steam-engine with more "personality", "character and humor" than any of the human characters (15). As

'something that can be really photographed', the steam-engine nevertheless transcends its photographability, becomes something more than a physical object or image, and "in its capacity as a principle actor" demonstrates the basic transformation required to establish film as art (16). This is the story of *Man's Genesis* all over again – the triumph of brain (the director's) over body (the locomotive's or the photograph's) through the mastery of technology.

Later, Lindsay claims: "It is a quality, not a defect, of all photoplays that human beings tend to become dolls and mechanisms, and dolls and mechanisms tend to become human" (25). Challenging the barrier between nature and technology, this principle delineates both the artistic potential of film and the pitfalls that must be avoided. Lindsay cites *Moving Day*, a 1905 film in which a complete household magically and humorously moves itself to a new apartment. Through stop-motion and substitution techniques, books, dishes, furniture, and clothing come to life, climb out the window, and make their way down the street. Without focusing visually on technological artifacts, the trick film highlights cinema's own technology and enacts what Tom Gunning calls the 'operational aesthetic' of early film.[4] The spectacle of inanimate objects coming to life draws the viewer's attention back to the wondrousness of the cinema, and away from narrative content – recalling the demonstrative function of the earliest films.

This is precisely what the artistically-minded director has to struggle with. Criticizing *Moving Day* as "too crassly material" and lacking "creative imagination" (35), Lindsay nevertheless sees the trick film as doing something "fundamental in the destinies of the art" (34). He writes, "the mechanical or non-human object [...] is apt to be the hero in most any sort of photoplay while the producer remains utterly unconscious of the fact. Why not face this idiosyncrasy of the camera and make the non-human object the hero indeed?" (35). The solution, therefore, is not to resist film magic and aim for pure realism, which would lead more directly back to the scientific camera, but to intensify the camera's subordination of physical reality. The only condition is that technical tricks must be "disciplined" (35), subordinated to the director's creative vision, so that they can become what Lindsay calls "thoughts in motion and made visible" (114).

Here we have the general formula for the artistic evolution of the photoplay: technology is necessary to film, but true expression is only achieved through its *Aufhebung*. The artist-director must simultaneously embrace and fight against film's technological nature. If film is to make expression available for communication, it must embody the director's vision in a sensible medium. But since the camera receives its images from and transmits them back into a commer-

---

4   See, e.g., Gunning (1995), where the term (adopted from Neil Harris) is applied to early-film comedy.

cialized, technological world, the director's task involves nothing less than an *Aufhebung* of the modern world itself. On film, cityscapes, bustling market-places, even modern warfare become the forces and phenomena of nature. Mobs and nations are whirlwinds, rushing rivers, calm or turbulent seas. As art, according to Lindsay, film transforms "natural and artificial magnificence [into] more than a narrative, more than a color-scheme, something other than a drama" (53f.). In short, nature and artifice are hybridized into a visible spectacle.

Finally, communication requires a comprehending recipient. The basis for comprehension is established by a correspondence between viewers' lifeworlds – their experience of technological modernity as second nature – and the hybrid realities projected on the screen. Film becomes a potent "Mirror Screen" for the audience (50), as Lindsay argues in his discussion of Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*. When Lincoln is assassinated, he writes, "The mimic audience in the restored Ford's Theatre rises in panic. [...] [T]he freezing horror of the treason sweeps from the Ford's Theatre audience to the real audience beyond them. The real crowd touched with terror beholds its natural face in the glass" (49). But having described so forcefully the transformative powers of cinematic technology, its naturalization of artifice and denaturing of nature, the idea of the 'natural face' is highly paradoxical. The true artist must communicate with a timeless nature, but the director's medium, with its operational aesthetic, speaks powerfully and directly to the masses of "mechanical Americans" (10). The struggle to subdue 'the non-humanness of the undisciplined photograph' and 'the uncanny scientific quality of the camera's work' becomes, then, the struggle to tame the non-humanness of the undisciplined audience and the uncanny scientific quality of the modern world. Lindsay's disclaimer notwithstanding, the artistic struggle with technology leads seamlessly into the social functionalization of art, for the disciplining of the photograph becomes a disciplining of socially situated, embodied viewers. Intrinsic and extrinsic functions merge together.

III. Hugo Münsterberg: "True beauty in the turmoil of a technical age"

Though not a direct response to Lindsay, Hugo Münsterberg's *The Photoplay* can be read as an attempt to rescue Lindsay's core notion of film as expressive art by rendering it more radically useless. Münsterberg also sees cinematic communication as enabled by a reflexive mirror-like property of film, but its reflections are less historical and thus more reliable than Lindsay's 'Mirror Screen' as a means of reaching humanity's timeless essence. Placing poetic talk of the 'soul' on the firmer scientific basis of empirical psychology, Münsterberg maintains that simple properties of perspective, focus, and framing correspond

to basic acts of the perceiving mind, which he conceives on an ahistorical model of mental faculties. Close-ups objectify the "mental act of attention"; flashbacks and flashforwards mirror the faculties of memory and imagination.[5] In this symmetry of objective expression and subjective reception, the photoplay has the ability to make it appear "as if [the] outer world were woven into our mind and were shaped not through its own laws but by the acts of our attention [and other mental faculties]" (91).

For Münsterberg, the aim of art (and the achievement of art alone) is the establishment of a state of "harmony, in which every part is the complete fulfillment of that which the other parts demand, when nothing is suggested which is not fulfilled in the midst of the same experience, where nothing points beyond and everything is complete in the offering itself" (153). This implies that the artwork, and our experience of it, must be freed from the "thousandfold ties with nature and history" that condition every real entity, liberated from "the causes and effects" by which things are naturally "enchained" (151), and "sharply set off from the sphere of our practical interests" (160). Artistic genius therefore finds expression in an object that "cuts off every possible connection" (149) and "overcomes reality" (144), provoking happiness in the isolated experience itself. Propaganda and political interest are categorically excluded from the realm of aesthetic experience: "We annihilate beauty when we link the artistic creation with practical interests and transform the spectator into a selfishly interested bystander" (188).

Combining these aesthetic principles with his psychology of the film-viewing experience, Münsterberg derives the following thesis:

> *The photoplay shows us a significant conflict of human actions in moving pictures which, freed from the physical forms of space, time, and causality, are adjusted to the free play of our mental experiences and which reach complete isolation from the practical world through the perfect unity of plot and pictorial appearance.* (190, emphasis in original)

Defined by the intersection of two ahistorical models, one aesthetic and one psychological, the ideal photoplay is decidedly deaf to the contests for socio-cultural standing and influence that shape the cinema of the 1910s. The perfect photoplay has absolutely nothing to say about these struggles, and yet the *theory of* the perfect photoplay can hardly be divorced from its historical context. With or without Münsterberg's approval, his theory is thrust into a number of relations with its era and takes on relevance in 'the practical world' of transitional

---

5   Münsterberg (1916), 88, 95f. Subsequent citations will be indicated in the text.

cinema – including, but not limited to, the obvious utility that an able defense of film as art would have for the film industry.

In the concluding chapter of his book, Münsterberg addresses the relation of his timeless model to the 'timelier' issues of his day. Identifying the "esthetic feeling" (220) elicited by film, even in its poor state of artistic development, as the reason for film's initial popularity and for its upward transition, Münsterberg situates his own ideal of the artistic photoplay as the hidden, final cause or *telos* of the cinema's historical development. To the extent that its ideal form is realized, film serves the purpose of "esthetic cultivation" (228), thus defusing transitional era concerns that film poses a "social danger" (222). But intellectual, moral, and aesthetic uplift are only the consequences or "social effects" (221) of, and not the motivation for, the artistic photoplay, the inner justification of which is established on independent and ahistorical grounds.

Finally, Münsterberg addresses the fundamental objection that film cannot be art simply because it is a technology. For Münsterberg, the achievement of beauty and meaning in any art form is nothing more or less than a process of tuning the material medium to the dual (and equally timeless) demands of self-enclosed aesthetic harmony and the human mind's receptive processes; hence, the production of the artistic photoplay requires no greater a struggle with technology than artistic expression in any medium requires effort and skill in crafting its materials. As a result, Münsterberg can dismiss the technological challenge to the possibility of film art quite simply:

We hear the contempt for "canned drama" and the machine-made theater. Nobody stops to think whether other arts despise the help of technique. The printed book of lyric poems is also machine-made; the marble bust has also "preserved" for two thousand years the beauty of the living woman who was the model for the Greek sculptor. (230)

In the hands of the artist-director, film's technology is no different from the inert matter and the applied technique of any artist. When well-wrought, it disappears into the timeless experience of beauty – film gives us "a new form of true beauty in the turmoil of a technical age" (233).

IV. Filmic Art and Photographic Causality

Sixty-five years later, philosopher Roger Scruton formulates a challenge to the project of film aesthetics that is especially helpful in grasping what is at stake in transitional era film theory. Scruton's argument runs as follows.[6] Film is essen-

---

6   See Scruton (1981). Citations will be indicated in the text.

tially dependent on photography as the source of its images. And while photography appears to share the property of *representation* that characterizes (non-abstract) painting's relation to its objects, there is a significant difference between the two that distinguishes painting, and *not* photography, as a representational art. Representation in art is a matter of the communication of an artist's thoughts about a subject by means of a mediated depiction of that subject. Accordingly, representational painting embodies in visual form an intentional relation between the painter and the depicted subject-matter. To appreciate the painting, the spectator must be able, on the basis of visible traces alone, to decipher the meaning of the artist's intention – which is equivalent to understanding what the picture represents and at the same time comprehending the artist's expressed thought about it – whereby the communicative act is consummated. An aesthetic interest in the painting is an interest in the representation as such and for its own sake – not an interest in the object represented but in the thoughts that the representation communicates and essentially *is*.

By contrast, the photographic image stands in a purely *causal* rather than intentional relation to the object it depicts. Based on the causal mechanism of the camera, the image is transparent to the world in such a way that bypasses the intention of the photographer, who is unable to completely control the details of the image and embody in it the expression of a representational thought. The photographer can attempt to assert his or her control over details by carefully staging the scene before taking the picture; but if the scene is representational in the relevant sense, the photograph itself will be irrelevant to the representation – merely existing as a reminder of a dramatic scene. Or one might intervene in the developing or printing process, but the resulting image, if representational and not abstract, will then embody the artist's thoughts more in the mode of painting than as a photograph. The interest we take in a photograph can be either non-aesthetic (as when we view press photos in search of information), aesthetic but abstract (and thus not representational), or representational but not essentially photographic (because the representation involved is logically – and usually temporally – prior or subsequent to the mechanically causal process of photography). As a concatenation of photographs, film will similarly fall into one of these categories. If a film manages to be art, and if this art is representational, the film itself will be inessential to the representation involved. *Q.E.D.*: films will either not be artworks, or their artistic status will be dependent on another art form, most likely drama.

The argument goes straight to the heart of the Lindsay-Münsterberg project of establishing film as an independent art not reducible to 'canned drama'. Both theorists conceive the photoplay as an author-centered, expressive medium, and each of them accepts Scruton's premise that pictorial representation requires

perfect coextension with the artist's intention for communication to take place. That is, the representational artwork must embody completely, and without remainder, the thought it expresses. For example, with his notion of "harmony, in which every part is the complete fulfillment of that which the other parts demand, when nothing is suggested which is not fulfilled in the midst of the same experience" (153), Münsterberg is committed to precisely this isomorphism of intention, expressive embodiment, and spectatorial experience – and thus also to an ideal of complete artistic control. Furthermore, Münsterberg explicitly extends this ideal from the film as a whole to its atomic parts as well: "Every single picture of the sixteen thousand which are shown to us in one reel ought to be treated with this respect of the pictorial artist for the unity of the forms" (190). Each frame, in short, should be a work of representational art.

But according to Scruton, "[t]he causal process of which the photographer is a victim puts almost every detail outside of his control" (593). Thus,

[t]he history of the art of photography is the history of successive attempts to break the causal chain by which the photographer is imprisoned, to impose a human intention between subject and appearance so that the subject can be both defined by that intention and seen in terms of it. It is the history of an attempt to turn a mere simulacrum into the expression of a representational thought […]. (594)

Here we have Lindsay's 'struggle against the non-humanness of the undisciplined photograph'. Though he believes the battle can be won, Lindsay acknowledges the dilemma emphasized by Scruton as genuine; Münsterberg, on the other hand, sees no significant problem. And yet he too emphasizes that "[t]o imitate the world is a mechanical process" (144) that has little to do with art. Artistic representation, for Münsterberg, takes reality as its starting point, "[b]ut it becomes art just in so far as it overcomes reality, stops imitating and leaves the imitated reality behind it" (144). What could be a more 'mechanical process', though, than photographic 'imitation'? The photographic image cannot simply and definitively 'leave the imitated reality behind it' because, as the result of sheer causality, the photograph captures "the real things which are enchained by the causes and effects of nature," freedom from which Münsterberg stipulates as a necessary condition of artistic beauty (151). Lindsay's struggle with the camera is thus implicit in Münsterberg's central claim that art "overcomes reality" and frees the spectator from "the unalterable [causal] law of the outer world" (181).

V. Filmic *Technē*, Material Displacements, and the Function of Functionless Art

In the present context, Scruton's argument is most usefully read as a theory-immanent critique of the Lindsay-Münsterberg system, an attempt to refine their aesthetic paradigm and save its core. It just so happens, according to Scruton, that the system of narrative film as a representational art is made consistent precisely by eliminating film from the equation. Right or wrong, the argument not only reveals an apparent instability between an artistic 'inside' and a material-technical 'outside'; additionally, it helps to understand the historical function of theorizing filmic art as ahistorical or functionless.

We might begin by asking what it is that Lindsay, Münsterberg, and Scruton are most afraid of. An immediate answer would be: popular culture and its supposed cheapening of art to the status of mere entertainment. Scruton writes: "Art is essentially serious; it cannot rest content with the gratification of mere fantasy, nor can it dwell on what fascinates us while avoiding altogether the question of its meaning" (602). But a commercialized entertainment industry, against which Lindsay defines filmic art, is ignorant of these deeper significances, is content in its pursuit of profit to cater to the superficial desires of the masses. The latter are desperately in need of reform, and art, in the form of the artistic photoplay, will save them from their fallen state. Münsterberg writes in this vein: "The people still has to learn the great difference between true enjoyment and fleeting pleasure, between real beauty and the mere tickling of the senses" (230). Even if Münsterberg succeeds in subordinating film's didactic function to the primary uselessness of aesthetic interest, he is still obviously involved in a functionalization of functionless art. Both he and Lindsay have a vested interest in making film a disinterested art, and it has to do with the preservation of cultural standards, distinctions, and boundaries. Responding to the uncertain transformations of society and culture to which transitional cinema speaks – and in which it centrally partakes – the project of film aesthetics remains complicit in the period's larger efforts to police the cinema as a public sphere.[7]

But even if popular culture (or its gendered, classed, and ethnic audience base) is the *perceived* threat to which transitional film aesthetics responds, the Lindsay-Münsterberg system also, and more fundamentally, reacts to a threat that it *cannot perceive* because it is radically exterior to the discursive frames of aesthetic representation and human thought at the root of film art's expressive-communicative function. As such, Lindsay's and Münsterberg's film-aesthetic theories and the artworks they envision – which are nothing if not discursive

---

7   Hansen (1991) is especially illuminating on the competition of interests in transitional era cinema.

constructs and enunciations – cannot countenance that threat directly; if a relation (one of response or reaction) nevertheless obtains, then there must be a pre-discursive experience of this threat in need of suppression. In many ways, the elitist opposition to pop culture's seductions is a means of channeling this experience back into discourse, defusing it by displacement, and preserving the integrity of culture against a more radically destabilizing form of alterity than class or gender difference.

The 'outside' I have in mind is *technology* and its impact on human individuals and collectives – in particular, the direct impact that modern technologies, including those of the cinema, have on human *bodies* and the *material lifeworlds* that ground psychic subjectivities and social formations. The impact is *direct* in the sense that it bypasses conscious, discursive perception and affects human beings at the level of pre-reflective experience; technology, that is, makes up a part of the phenomenally unthematized 'flesh' of the world. Of course, technology is always (also) situated in discursive space: in modernity, it has most centrally been configured as 'applied science' – as a practical extension of human thought and theoretical knowledge. Taken as technology's essence, this notion enabled, and was enacted in, the nineteenth-century tradition of technological exhibitions out of which cinema was born. Simultaneously, these exhibitions extended the possible 'applications' of science beyond the realms of epistemology and the mastery of nature, opening new technologies to the equally discursive context of entertainment. Indeed, science and commercial entertainment are the two discursive frames of technology that Lindsay and Münsterberg most explicitly recognize and from which they aim to distance film *qua* art. They thus follow a characteristically modern impulse to contrast sharply the 'applied arts' (technology) from pure or 'fine art'. With the aid of the related distinction between 'technology' and 'technique', they are then able to resolve the tension between film's technical basis and its ideal artistic flourishing. Camera, projector, and screen become the director's brush, paint, and canvas – tools for the higher and independent purpose of expression. In this way, one discursive frame of technology, 'applied science' (and, by extension, the entertainment it may afford), is simply replaced by another discursive frame: 'technique' in the service of fine art.

It is easy enough to claim that these are defense mechanisms against a destabilizing experience of technology in material excess of discourse, but proving that claim is a bit more difficult. What evidence is there, then, that this experience is present as something to be avoided in and with the system of transitional era film aesthetics?

At one point, Münsterberg defines his "real problem" as "the right of the photoplay [...] to be classed as an art in itself *under entirely new mental life conditions*" (39, emphasis added). It would be tempting to read Münsterberg's ambiguous formulation here as an early assertion of the notion, widely associated with Walter Benjamin, that cinema is both product and causal agent in a fundamental reconfiguration of human subjectivity and perception that occurs under the novel conditions of urban and technological modernity. But this interpretation is hardly borne out in Münsterberg's book, which conceives the human mind as a stable, ahistorical system. Film's novelty therefore consists in its new *means* of doing what art always did: viz. to effect a structural mirroring of our ahistorical psychological makeup.

This brings us back to Lindsay's 'Mirror Screen' as an element in a system that is both more fascinated and more troubled by the novelty of technological modernity. As we have seen, it is here that disinterested art finally gives way to putatively extrinsic interests and film becomes an ideological weapon for social control. The audience Lindsay describes is moved directly and infected with the uncontrolled passions of the mob on the screen, thus presenting a danger that requires restraint and a sense of moral and political responsibility on the part of the filmmaker. Scruton also recognizes this danger, complaining that film is "beguiling in its immediacy" (602) because "[i]t can address itself to our fantasy directly without depending upon any intermediate process of thought" (602f.). Again, it is tempting to trace Scruton's objection back to an elitist phobia with regard to pop culture; Lindsay's own turn to the socio-political instrumentalization of film would seem to bear out this diagnosis of the expressivist paradigm. But the response to filmic immediacy registers technology's deeper threat to expression, representational thought, and 'human nature' itself.

In the audience's confrontation with the Mirror Screen, the artist's (and the theorist's) struggle with the 'undisciplined photograph' reaches its climax, demanding a sublimating *Aufhebung* of the material medium to a transparent expression of thought. Lindsay fails, as Scruton says he must, but his failure sheds light on the relation between technical historicity and the goal of timeless representation. As Scruton suggests in his discussion of photographic causality, the filmic image eludes the artist's control; it is opaque to thought precisely because it is transparent to the real world.[8] In Lindsay's own examples, film is open to a

---

8 To say that the camera captures the objects of reality so that we really see *them* in mediated form – and not (just) *representations* of them – is emphatically not equivalent to the more radical statement that the image is identical with its object. However, in discussions of photographic and cinematic realism there has been considerable slippage between the two positions. Bazin (1967), for example, claims that "[t]he photographic image is the object itself" (14), a claim of identity that he relates to the causal claim that

world of machines (cars, elevators, steam engines, and technicized cities) more so than to ideal forms, and this openness shatters the mirror as a neutral reflection of the soul. Rather than passively reflecting our 'natural face', film deconstructs the nature/technology dichotomy and transforms viewers in its own image, making cinemagoers, as Lindsay says of film's characters, into 'mechanisms'. By resisting submission to the artist's will, the material basis of film asserts its autonomy from human purposes. Reducing film to a tool of social engineering not only compromises Lindsay's aesthetic ideals; more fundamentally, it represents a last ditch effort to retain some modicum of control.

But film's technical materiality haunts the soul itself, unmasks its timelessness and sets it in historical relation to the shocks, velocities, and technologies of modernization. This is not just a matter of film's content, of the prevalence of technologies in the subject-matter of popular films. Instead, it is a question of an entirely new type of vision, one that is only possible with cinema's enabling technical infrastructure. The camera does not just extend the filmmaker's vision; it significantly reduces *and* augments direct experience. Like painting, it channels experience into a framed visual form, but it also enables new visions that are impossible to the unaided eye. Substitution techniques, slow and reverse motion, for example, are not seen directly by the cinematographer but made possible only when the camera's photographic record is processed and projected properly. In this way, the projector offers the spectator a visible spectacle that is radically incommensurate with the structure of a pre-technical or pre-modern mind. It is not without reason that the trick film occupies a central role in Lindsay's struggle with the apparatus. The notion that communication nevertheless takes place here between the filmmaker and the viewer becomes positively radical: the Mirror Screen reflects not a timeless spirit but a technically restructured one. Both recognizing and resisting the implications, Lindsay writes: "Man will not only see visions again, but machines themselves, in the hands of prophets, will see visions" (270).

Modern technologies, including those of the cinema, reorganize the material basis of experience; they alter the framework within which perception, expression,

---

"an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man" (13) so that the relation between it and the object is similar to "a fingerprint" (15). Arguably, Metz (1974) also equivocates between the two views: "The cinema is the 'phenomenological' art *par excellence*, the signifier is coextensive with the whole of the significate, the spectacle its own signification, thus short-circuiting the sign itself" (43). Kendall L. Walton (1984) makes a strong case for the transparency of photographs — "the viewer of a photograph sees, literally, the scene that was photographed" (252) — while clearly distinguishing his position from the identity thesis. Furthermore, he argues that this transparency is not equivalent to, and is irreducible to, an alleged 'illusion' of seeing reality.

and communication take place and place human subjectivity on an unprecedented new footing. No form of *Aufhebung* will be able to undo this displacement, which is essentially at odds with an ahistorical model of artistic communication. Film's ability to bypass rational thought and control, which Scruton takes as a refutation of its artistic aspirations, in fact signals the technologically induced demise of art's 'aura'. Against his will, Lindsay thus anticipates Benjamin in this regard, suggesting that film destroys the basis for such art because it participates in modernity's technological revision of the human sensorium and its deterritorialization of human thought.[9] Judged by the standards of his own theory, Lindsay's greatest weakness – his habit of falling into practical concerns by way of filmic technology – might in fact prove to be the most interesting aspect, if not the greatest critical strength, of his program. For it opens up a perspective for regarding technology as a material force that stubbornly resists discursive framing, whether in terms of aesthetics, as applied science, or for the practical and political goals of artists, activists, or theorists. The gaps in Lindsay's theory point to a different interpretation of Münsterberg's ambiguous expression of film's novelty: that it is *we* who live 'under entirely new mental life conditions', within new parameters of subjective being, and that these new conditions have their root source not only in socio-cultural negotiations but in material shifts in the structure of the human lifeworld.

Technological materiality strains the ahistorical system of film as expressive-representational art to the breaking point. As I have been arguing, this tension is present within that system, but its true significance only becomes apparent from an external vantage point. Working within their chosen paradigm, transitional era theorists were acutely aware of the need to resist certain forces that threatened to undermine artistic autonomy. But they necessarily misidentified the threat and sought to contain it in the discursive frames of science, commercial entertainment, and popular culture. Nevertheless, we discover in their writings an experience of filmic *technē* as radically displacing thought, expression, and culture and effacing the barriers between art and artifice, technology and technique. Accordingly, while Lindsay's and Münsterberg's efforts to establish filmic art as useless or disinterested cannot be separated from the conservative social interests they in fact served, this objection only goes halfway. Beyond this, the ultimate – and ultimately impossible – function of the transitional era photoplay was to preserve the integrity of art, expression, and the human psyche or soul itself against the destructive, deterritorializing force of the photoplay's own technology.

---

9   The reference, of course, is to Benjamin (1968). Especially interesting in this regard is the relation between Lindsay's 'Mirror Screen' and Benjamin's materialistic notion of mimesis.

Literature

André Bazin, The Ontology of the Photographic Image, in: André Bazin, *What is Cinema?*
      Volume 1, Berkeley 1967, 9–16.
Walter Benjamin, The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, in: Walter
      Benjamin, *Illuminations*, New York 1968, 217–251.
Eileen Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema: 1907–1915*, Berkeley 1990.
Tom Gunning, Crazy Machines in the Garden of Forking Paths: Mischief Gags and the Ori-
      gins of American Film Comedy, in: Kristina B. Karnick/Henry Jenkins (Hg.), *Classi-
      cal Hollywood Comedy*, New York 1995, 87–105.
Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film*, Cambridge,
      Mass. 1991.
Vachel Lindsay, *The Art of the Moving Picture*, New York 1915.
—, *The Art of the Moving Picture*, Revised ed., New York 1922.
Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, New York 1974.
Hugo Münsterberg, *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study*, New York 1916.
Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907*, Berkeley 1990.
Roger Scruton, Photography and Representation, in: *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1981), 577–603.
Kendall L. Walton, Transparent Pictures: On the Nature of Photographic Realism, in: *Critical
      Inquiry* 11 (1984), 246–277.

Montagephantasie
Zum Verhältnis von Medienästhetik und soziologischer Erkenntnis in Siegfried Kracauers Filmkritiken der zwanziger und dreißiger Jahre

David Wachter

I.

In seinem Aufsatz *Zur Ästhetik des Farbenfilms* (1937) schreibt Siegfried Kracauer über den russischen Avantgarde-Regisseur und Filmtheoretiker Vsevolod Pudovkin:

> Indem Pudowkin [sic!] der Montage das Wort redet, setzt er sich für eine filmische Verfahrensweise ein, die im Interesse der Herausarbeitung des jeweiligen Gehalts der Dinge deren Oberflächenzusammenhang zerreißt. Die gewohnten Alltagsbilder müssen gesprengt werden, damit aus den Stücken Bilder montiert werden können, denen Bedeutung innewohnt.[1]

Dieses kurze Zitat enthält *in nuce* das zentrale Anliegen und die Leitbegriffe von Kracauers filmästhetischen Überlegungen zur Aktualität der russischen Avantgarde um Vsevolod Pudovkin, Sergej Eisenstein und Dziga Vertov. Es lassen sich aus ihm aber auch wichtige Impulse zum Verständnis von Kracauers eigener literarisch-kultursoziologischer Essayistik gewinnen, die im Verlauf der zwanziger Jahre eine eigene Poetik des zwischen theoretischer Reflexion und literarischer Anschauung changierenden „Denkbildes" entwickelt.[2] Die Frage nach ‚Funktionen von Kunst' soll im vorliegenden Beitrag mit Blick auf Kracauers kritische Diskussion des zeitgenössischen Kinos der zwanziger und frühen dreißiger Jahre konkretisiert werden, deren geschichtsphilosophische, kulturtheoretische und filmästhetische Grundlagen es in diesem Zusammenhang herauszuarbeiten gilt. Kracauers Interesse für den Film bewegt sich dabei, so die Grundthese des vorliegenden Beitrags, in einem Spannungsfeld zwischen ideologiekritischer Gesellschaftsanalyse, utopisch orientierter Medienästhetik und literarischer Gegenwartserkenntnis. *Gesellschaftskritik*: Am Leitfaden des populären Kinos als paradigmatischem Unterhaltungsmedium der Weimarer Republik untersucht der Autor ab Mitte der zwanziger Jahre die Interferenzen zwischen kapitalistischer Gesellschaftsorganisation und Filmindustrie und deutet die illusionären Phantasmagorien der ‚Vergnügungspaläste' als Indikatoren ei-

---

1   Kracauer (2004c), 195.
2   Zur Stellung von Kracauers Denkbildern im Rahmen einer Poetik der „modernist miniature" (Huyssen), welche die Tradition der „kleinen Form" (Köhn) im Kontext der Klassischen Moderne aktualisiert siehe Huyssen (2007); Köhn (1989); Pralle (1996). Zum journalistischen Kontext dieser Poetik siehe Stalder (2003), bes. 71–112.