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INTRODUCTION

FILM AND MODERNISM IN AMERICA

Documentary and a Democratic Aesthetic

Gertrude Stein once claimed that "America was the oldest country in the world" because America was "the first country to enter into the twentieth century." She went on to explain that while America entered the new century in the 1880s, "other countries were still all either in the nineteenth century or still further back in other centuries."[1] Stein's idea vividly dramatizes the influence of America upon modernistic consciousness and life during the twentieth century. By the 1920s, American leadership of film as both an art form and a popular art for the masses became especially significant in energizing and defining this modernist impulse. For some, as Gilberto Perez notes, the conventional association of modernism with film as the newest art form of the last century can be considered problematic.[2] However, for himself, Perez clearly adheres to a school of thought that finds film and modernism to be inexorably interlinked in complex and important ways throughout the last century. On the debate over the modernism of film as an art form, Perez maintains, "Film, which sets in motion the photographic look into the actual appearance of things, has been the preeminent art form of the twentieth century as the novel was of the nineteenth."[3] Dudley Andrew in a recent article on the history of film studies would seem to agree.[4]

This special relationship between film and modernism provides insight into the complexity of film as an aesthetic form and cultural force and into the diversity of modernism as a way of thinking and living. Film as an expression, engine, and source of modernism, brings together in the same discussion two basic ways of viewing modernism that have often diverged from each other in critical and historical discussion. Film relates literary and intellectual modernism to the social, economic, and political forces of modernization that have

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revolutionized life for millions throughout the world since the late-nineteenth century.

Miriam Bratu Hansen makes a convincing case for the importance to both modernism and film of their inherent interconnections. She argues,

> [t]he cinema was not just one among a number of perceptual technologies, nor even the culmination of a particular logic of the gaze; it was above all (at least until the rise of television) the single most expansive discursive horizon in which the effects of modernity were reflected, rejected or denied, transmuted or negotiated. It was both part and prominent symptom of the crisis as which modernity was perceived, and at the same time it evolved into a social discourse in which a wide variety of groups sought to come to terms with the traumatic impact of modernization. This reflexive dimension of cinema, its dimension of *publicness*, was recognized by intellectuals early on, whether they celebrated the cinema's emancipatory potential or, in alliance with the forces of censorship and reform, sought to contain and control it, adapting the cinema to the standards of high culture and the restoration of the bourgeois public sphere.[5]

Hansen's articulation of film as a bridge between modernism as thought and expression, and modernization as public and social life, suggests a multiplicity of modernisms that involves a concomitant danger. Asserting "there is more than one modernity – and that modernism can, and should, be used in the plural," Hansen presciently warns that efforts to overcome previous monolithic notions of modernism can create new forms of the old problem of narrow definitions. She says the "attack on hegemonic modernism runs the risk of unwittingly reproducing the same epistemic totalitarianism that it seeks to displace."[6] She continues,

> the critical fixation on hegemonic modernism to some extent undercuts the effort to open up the discussion of modernism from the traditional preoccupation with artistic and intellectual movements and to understand the latter as inseparable from the political, economic, and social processes of modernity and modernization, including the development of mass and media culture. In other words, the attack on hegemonic modernism tends to occlude the material conditions of everyday modernity which distinguish living in the twentieth century from living in the nineteenth, at least for large populations in western Europe and the United States.[7]

Hansen stands among many students of modernism, including Christine Stansell, who try to mitigate the putative "opposition" of "hegemonic modernism" to the "modern life-world." Hansen writes,

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"We should not underrate the extent to which modernism was also a popular or, more precisely, a mass movement."[8]

Among these other contemporary thinkers Hansen provides a substantive addition to earlier studies of modernism by an influential generation of scholars who tended to concentrate on defining modernism as intellectual and artistic movements and sensibilities, and psychological states of mind and being. Literary and cultural critics, such as Irving Howe, Richard Ellmann, and Charles Feidelson, Jr., were disposed to describe the origins and meaning of modernism and "the modern tradition" in such terms of thought and imagination, as opposed to emphasizing historic associations and social conditions. These thinkers, as I once noted, consider "the modern as referring to more than contemporaneity." As Ellmann and Feidelson say, "The term designates a distinctive kind of imagination – themes and forms, conditions and modes of creation, that are interrelated and comprise an imaginative whole."[9]

Similarly, an essay and collection on modernism by Howe, which coincidentally mimic the ontological complexity of their subject by appearing and reappearing in a variety of published forms, identify and delineate the various elements and forces that comprise modernism. Howe's essay summarizes succinctly "modernist culture" by associating it with widely-recognized themes:

> the collapse of the certainty of the "Voltairean I," the symbolism of Virginia Woolf's claim that "On or about December 1910 human nature changed," the idea of culture and the self at war with themselves, the artistic quest to reinvent reality, the emergence of a pervasive ironic consciousness, skepticism regarding the value of history and tradition, the notion of the problematic nature of being human, the fascination with perpetual change and movement as well as the obsession with inner being and psychology, the uncertainty of objective reality, and the dominance of subjectivity.[10]

Howe then proceeds to itemize nine other specific categories or "topics concerning the formal or literary attributes of modernism." These topics include: the rise of the avant-garde as a movement, the loss of belief, artistic autonomy or self-sufficiency, the decline of aesthetic order or coherence, the minimal concern for nature, the dependence upon the shock value of perversity, an identification with primitivism, a new novelistic arrangement of the character and personality of the hero, nihilism as a crucial literary force.[11]

Now, after years of theorizing about postmodernism, a new generation of scholars and thinkers, such as Hansen and Perez, has recently

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More information

returned to the modernistic imagination to discuss the development since the late-nineteenth century of an original relationship of art to society and of the individual to culture and history. Thus, James Naremore and Patrick Brantlinger aver the interrelation of modernistic consciousness and social forms of modernity. They proffer a "cultural typology" that relates "social formations and artistic production" in the form of "six artistic cultures."[12] These cultures include: high art, modernist art, the avant-garde, folk art, popular art, and mass art.

Other recent critics and thinkers of modernism readdress Stein's insight about America and modernism by associating the creative imagination of modernism specifically with the transforming power of America. For example, Peter Nicholls writes, "Modernity was now imagined as a kind of disease whose ravages, felt equally in aesthetic, moral, and psychological realms, were attributable to a general malady often called "'Americanisation.'"[13] Proffering a more generous view of America's influence on modernism, Christine Stansell writes: "By 1915, even Europeans had overcome their snootiness to pronounce New York as that place to which all roads led."[14] Thomas Crow relates the liberations and turmoil of the avant-garde to the New York School's history of promoting various interactions of modernism involving high art, popular and mass culture, and the commodification of artistic fashion and taste from the late 1930s to the early 1950s.[15]

The advent of film, as previously noted, occurred concomitantly with the breakthrough of modern consciousness and sensibility in multiple forms and modes throughout all domains of public and private life. At the same time, America, which entered the twentieth century early, as Stein asserted, also became a fertile ground for nurturing this special new art form of modernism – film. Although America shared with Europe in the origins of film, with the rise and success of Hollywood, American technology, innovation, and wealth came to dominate the development of the medium as an art form and an industry. The cultivation of film as both art and entertainment for the masses soon became a major aspect of America's contribution to what Nicholls considers the transformation by modernism of the relationship of language to experience.[16]

The constructive and meaningful "juncture of cinema and modernity" that Hansen desires occurs at the intersection where documentary and fiction film meet.[17] Documentary does more than merely complement the connection between film and modernism. Documentary helps to define that relationship, strengthening the links that sustain film's adherence to modernism.

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What many critics claim to be the intrinsic documentary nature of all film probably requires greater appreciation. Arguably, even in a fiction film the photographic image constitutes a form of documentary representation, the classic Bazinian notion of the visual image of reality. A fiction film invariably becomes its own documentary. As Perez says,

> Every film has an aspect of documentary and an aspect of fiction.... All films may be documentary and all films may be fictional, but some are more documentary, and some are more fictional, than others. The term *nonfiction film*, though often used, is not to be preferred. Documentary film doesn't mean avoiding fiction, for no film can avoid fiction: it means establishing a certain relationship, a certain interplay, between the documentary and the fictional aspects of film so that the documentary aspect may come forward in some significant way.[18]

By virtue of its innate documentary nature, all film, including fiction film, comprises some documentary record. Such documentary self-consciousness contributes to the modernism of film as an art form. Following these proclivities, the earliest films often were, in fact, primitive documentaries of modern experience and existence. Ever since the Lumière brothers' *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* (1895), documentary has informed and entertained audiences about their lives in the modern age. Often credited for making the first documentary with their footage of the female factory workers, the Lumieres' work led to an initial predominance of documentary in the form of "actualities," or brief films, about random subjects from everyday life. However, as experience and developing techniques of editing and filmmaking made fiction easier to film, such fictional works replaced documentaries in popularity.[19]

Often defined in terms of nonrepresentation and abstraction, modernism also incorporated documentary realism. In the 1920s, the connection of modernism with documentary achieved fulfillment in the work of several major directors and editors. The documentary films of Dziga Vertov and Walter Ruttmann justify the claim of the importance of both film and documentary in the development of modern consciousness. The seminal cinema of Vertov and Ruttmann records the emergence of documentary as crucial in film's complex work of generating, structuring, and mediating modern self-awareness. In their documentary films, the movie screen forms a topography of moving visual images that integrates various modernisms, popular culture and thought, and felt experiences of common, everyday reality.

Vertov's documentary, *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929), synthesizes artistic creativity and technical innovation with social and cultural

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consciousness. Founded on an ideology and style of filmmaking that epitomize modernism, Vertov's work exudes energy and vitality, incessant movement, compression, and the interrelation of time and space, creative montage, and systematic self-reflexivity. These qualities make *Man With a Movie Camera* a milestone of modernism and film, what Seth Feldman describes as "a high point in early modernism's desire to wed art and the machine."[20] Vertov's film captures in the excitement and volatility of its very artistic form the exuberance and chaos of its subject – everyday modern urban life. Like Ruttmann's *Berlin – Symphony of a Great City* (1928), Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera* dramatizes a major function of documentary of surveying and structuring aspects of modern life. It creates a visual ambience for the formation of social and personal identification in the midst of urban alienation and chaos. Even in its brilliantly mobile and dynamic style of modernism, the film frames and structures the chaos of modern urban existence.

A sunrise to sunset composite urban portrait, Vertov's film compares with other urban documentaries of the time, but also contrasts with them in its self-reflexive fascination with an ideology and aesthetic of the camera itself as a means for presenting and portraying reality even more efficiently and creatively than the human eye. What Vertov dubbed kino-pravda or "cinema truth" later became widely known through the French translation as cinema-verite. Given the complexity, diversity, mutability, and mobility of modern life – especially in the growing cities – documentary mediated such turmoil by helping people accommodate and assimilate themselves to the modern experience. Vertov's film enacts and exhibits his revolutionary thesis of the potential of documentary to convey and transform reality through its capacity to supersede "the limits of time and space." In his provocative manifesto, *The Council of Three* (1923), he asserted:

> I am kino-eye, I am a mechanical eye. I, a machine, show you the world as I see it. . . . Free of the limits of time and space, I put together any given points in the universe, no matter where I've recorded them.[21]

Unfortunately, the brilliant and original impulses of both Vertov and Ruttmann for creating and pursuing a form of pure documentary were eventually deflated and ultimately undermined. This was due, in part, to the engagement of both men with totalitarian forces from opposite ends of the political spectrum.

Denis Arkadievitch Kaufman was born in Bialystok, Poland while that region was annexed by Czarist Russia. Vertov's two brothers,

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Mikhail and Boris, were also pioneers of cinema. Mikhail became an important Soviet filmmaker in his own right, as well as the cameraman for his brother's films, including *Man With a Movie Camera*. Boris escaped during the revolution, gained recognition for his film work in Paris, and went on to the United States to become an exceptional cinematographer for such directors as Sidney Lumet and Elia Kazan, receiving an Academy Award for his work on Kazan's *On the Waterfront* (1954).[22] Early in his career, Denis Kaufman adopted the name Dziga Vertov, meaning spinning top in Ukrainian, as a sign of his commitment to the innovation and dynamism of modern film and documentary. Under the bureaucratization of Soviet film and art, he faded into the shadows as an editor and compiler of newsreels and documentaries. Vertov's steady withdrawal from prominence and leadership contrasts sharply with the career of another politically radical and artistically modernistic innovator of film and documentary, Luis Buñuel. Buñuel was born in Spain but worked famously throughout the world on his films, although his only documentary, *Las Hurdes* (*Land Without Bread* [1932]), a brief film about peasants living in abominable conditions was shot in the poorest region of Spain. The unconventional surrealism of the documentary continues a style he achieved through his collaboration with Salvador Dalí on *Un Chien Andalou* (1928) and *L'Age d'Or* (1930).

In contrast to both Vertov and Buñuel, Ruttmann's documentary innovations became aligned with reactionary, fascist politics through his association with Nazi film, especially with his involvement as an advisor to Leni Riefenstahl on the notorious documentary, *Triumph of the Will* (1936), her classic propaganda film about the Nuremberg Nazi Party Convention of 1934. Ruttmann died while making a war newsreel for the Germans on the Eastern front.

The work and experience of Vertov, Ruttmann, and Buñuel seem relevant to many of the issues raised by Perez about the innate relationship and tension between documentary and fiction in film. Fiction as aesthetic and social mediation, even in the kino-pravda of Vertov and Ruttmann and the surrealism of Buñuel, suggest the difficulty of achieving the ambitious hopes of Vertov and others to create a form of pure documentary that captures reality with minimal intrusion from fiction. Also, extreme political and social forces from the left and right seem to have helped subvert the fulfillment for both Vertov and Ruttmann of their initial impulses and ideals concerning documentary.

Bill Nichols, a leading authority and scholar of documentary theory, seems somewhat less sanguine than Perez over the implications

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of the intrinsic relationship between fiction and documentary. Nichols delineates the practical and theoretical difficulties facing the documentary filmmaker who wishes to attenuate fictional elements. He writes,

> Stopping the action to realign the camera transforms history into mise-en-scene; it becomes a cue that we have crossed into the realm of narrative fiction. Subjectivity, rather than enhancing the impact of a documentary, may actually jeopardize its credibility and shift the focus of attention to the fictional representation of an actual person or event. Our identification with specific social actors therefore has less of the intensity common to fiction.[23]

While this crossing "into the realm of narrative fiction" may pose no oppressive danger for some students of documentary, to Nichols it typifies a new trend that should be taken into account when theorizing about or making documentary film. He says, "A tendency in recent writing on documentary is to stress its link to narrative. Documentaries are fictions with plots, characters, situations, and events like any other." To Nichols, such contamination of documentary by narrative and fiction vitiates the hopes of classic documentary directors – he cites Vertov, John Grierson, Paul Rotha, and Pare Lorentz – to establish in documentary "a morally superior form of filmmaking" that can contribute to understanding society with a sobriety that remains unavailable to fiction. He says, "This insistence on a narrative, constructed basis to documentary undercuts claims for the moral superiority of documentary to fiction."[24]

Nichols recognizes that the power of the argument for "documentary as a fiction" to degrade documentary's alleged moral superiority will not be answered adequately by making another case for the superiority of documentary as verifiable empirical evidence and argument. He persuasively writes, "This critique of documentary as a fiction like any other needs to be questioned without resorting to the assumed superiority of an analytical, essayist, and fact-based discourse."[25]

Instead of proclaiming a new faith in the importance of documentary by virtue of its capacity for critical analysis, Nichols delineates differences between fiction and documentary that need to be appreciated for documentary to retain its uniqueness and potency as an art form and social force. He says,

> Documentary shares many characteristics with fiction film but it is still unlike fiction in many ways. The issues of the filmmaker's control over what she

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> or he films and of the ethics of filming social actors whose lives, though represented in the film, extend well beyond it; the issues of the text's structure, and the question of the viewer's activity and expectations – these three angles from which definitions of documentary begin (filmmaker, text, viewer) also suggest important ways in which documentary is a fiction unlike any other.[26]

As Noel Carroll says, "Nichols eschews those facile deconstructions of the boundary between fiction and nonfiction that conclude that nonfiction film is just like any other kind of fiction." While oppugning Nichols's argument against a "viable notion of objectivity" in nonfiction film, Carroll notes that to Nichols "nonfiction film is fiction, but it is not exactly like other forms of fiction film."[27] Thus, Nichols's theoretical argument helps install valuable aesthetic and social criteria for employing and analyzing documentary without requiring documentary's abandonment of relevant and applicable forms of fiction that can help documentary tell its story or deliver its message. Nichols's introduction into the discussion of the "three angles" from which to examine documentary institutes a process for analyzing and evaluating documentary. This emplaces a workable method and strategy for "testing" the validity, legitimacy, and authenticity of documentary. Nichols notes, "This testing depends on the work of realism and its ability to render the impression of reality, a sense of the historical world as we, in fact, experience it, usually on a quotidian basis."[28] Such pragmatic testing of documentary, in William James's sense of investigating the consequences of beliefs and actions, could inhibit the propensity to turn documentary into propaganda for various totalitarianisms, ideologies, groups, and enterprises. Examining and testing the relationship of fiction and documentary in all of its implications and manifestations in a particular work or body of work obviously should render insight into the aesthetic and social significance of such work.

As a dynamically mobile frame in continuous action that opens to endlessly expansive interior and outer spaces, film and documentary continue more than a century of cultivating modernisms. Modernisms as states of being, mind, social life, and interaction achieve expression and regeneration in film. The admixtures of fiction and documentary that dramatize and represent modernisms in film occur with challenging rapidity. A phrase by Jean-Luc Godard graphically suggests how cinema aesthetics and structure intrinsically relate to the volatility of modernism. A character in Godard's *Le Petit Soldat* (1960), says, "To photograph a face is to photograph the soul behind it. Photography

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is truth. And the cinema is the truth, twenty-four times a second."[29] Of course, this statement, as Gilberto Perez reminds us, concerns the number of frames of film per second that usually are both shot and projected. Godard's insight about film suggests that the inherent nature of film as a medium of movement – as a representation of experience and reality that in itself entails ephemerality and transition – makes film seem to many to be especially appropriate as a source and means for rendering, dramatizing, and documenting a society and culture of modernisms built on change. Itself constructed out of movement and change, film as an art form can be identified fairly with modernism as the culture and consciousness of change.

The movement and change that define film art accentuate its nature as an art of fragments and pieces of imagination and reality. For twenty-four frames a second, only slashes and pieces of reality occur, confirming Buñuel's visual metaphor for film and modernism of the sliced eyeball in *An Andalusian Dog*. Here again Perez's insights into the modernism of film proves helpful. Citing earlier observations by Raymond Williams, Perez emphasizes how modernism inheres in the temporal, spatial, and narratival fragmentations of film. Indeed, the very techniques of filmmaking and the elements of film construction emphasize such fragmentation. The actual language of filmmaking and construction with such terms as shots, cuts, angles, and fades dramatizes a composition process of slices, pieces, and parts consistent with multiple modernisms. Referring to this essential fragmentary nature of film and modernism, Perez says:

> The fragmentary view characteristic of our modernity has been . . . especially characteristic of film. Film is indeed an art of fragments: a painting is a whole, a theater stage is a whole, but on the movie screen we see merely a part, a piece of a larger field extending indefinitely beyond our view.[30]

However, in making this continuing case for the inherent modernism of film, Perez also pushes beyond the importance of the modernistic fragmentation of film to maintain the originality of the way such fragmentation ultimately coheres in film art. The genius of film concerns the operation of fragmentation within broader aesthetic and cultural contexts. Film gives form and significance to the tension between on screen and off screen spaces, between presence and absence. Film represents reality through suggestion and assumption regarding unknown offscreen frontiers. Perez urges that in contrast to the completeness of framed paintings, "film images make sense . . . only as fragments of an

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