CHAPTER I

Introduction: toward a media theory of modern poetics

> He who creates
> Is a mode of these inertial systems –
>
> Louis Zukofsky, *"A"*-6

One of the great temptations of materialist thought is to be entirely literal-minded about the task of demystification. If, for instance, the commodity is a theological fetish, a formal mask behind which social relations between human beings are masquerading as magical relations between things, then it only remains to expose those relations for the charade to collapse. Such optimism is both misplaced and dangerously naïve, for it is in the nature of modern myth that it simultaneously mystifies and disabuses, encouraging at once the enthralled idolatry of the devotee and the cynical wink of the insider. Critical thought is to that extent always implicit within the myth, attending it with a conveniently proximate disavowal. Slavoj Žižek has put the consequence very distinctly: "the fetishist illusion lies in our real social life, not in our perception of it – a bourgeois subject knows very well that there is nothing magic about money, that money is just an object which stands for a set of social relations. But he nevertheless acts in real life as if he believed that money is a magic thing."[1] Myth is resolutely practical, not metaphysical. A crucial challenge when approaching the cultural life of our protracted period of economic history is then to take seriously the practical dimension of myth within it, the collective habits according to which cultural facts are invested with magical properties.

Raymond Williams once invoked the eminent critical myth of "technological determinism" only to conjure it away:

This notion [of technological determinism] has persisted even into some modern communications theory. It reaches its extreme in the assumption of the independent properties of the "medium", which, in one kind of theory, is seen as

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[1] Slavoj Žižek, *For they know not what they do: enjoyment as a political factor*, 2nd edn (London and New York: Verso, 2002), p. lxxi.

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determining not only the "content" of what is communicated but also the social relationships within which the communication takes place. In this influential kind of technological determinism (for example, in McLuhan) the "medium" is (metaphysically) the master.[2]

But despite McLuhan's rhetorical color, the point was never really that technology per se causes our social relations to assume the structures they do, but that we behave exactly as though it did. Rosalind Williams' observation that "ultimately, not machines but people create technological determinisms" enacts the kind of dialectical reversal on her namesake that Žižek's comments do on the subject of commodity fetishism.[3] By treating the fetish of technological determinism objectively, and not immediately dissolving it back into Raymond Williams' supposedly unproblematic "constitutive human activities," what ultimately appears is its social logic – the real ways in which human activities are dictated by technologies collectively felt to be determinant. An artist may "know very well that there is nothing deterministic about new media technologies; but she nevertheless behaves in her artistic practice as if she believed that those technologies did determine it." In this sense precisely, I will want to show that the medium really is the master in modern culture, in ways that have yet to be demonstrated as radically as they might be.

Holding this position might help to explain why it is that today "everyone decries a 'technological determinism' that they secretly harbour in their heart of hearts"[4] – for it is as though the pitiless repression of technology's causal relation vis-à-vis artistic praxis has returned today as a powerful but illicit critical desire. This book is an attempt, in league with a number of recent assays along comparable lines, to bring that disavowed desire out into the open; it is an essay, that is to say, on the "real" of technological determinism. By pursuing the proposition that writers of the early Anglo-American avant-garde behaved as if new media technologies were "causing" the series of formal and technical breaks internal to their work, this study seeks to literalize, for critical purposes, a new myth of cultural modernism – that relations among the media governed the material complexities of modernist forms. I am suggesting that we can provisionally rewrite literary history, not as a tired saga of competing egos and formal projects set

[2] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and literature* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 159.
[3] Rosalind Williams, "The political and feminist dimensions of technological determinism," in Merritt Roe Smith and Leo Marx (eds.), *Does technology drive history? The dilemma of technological determinism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), p. 227.
[4] Fredric Jameson, *A singular modernity: essay on the ontology of the present* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 145.

in a technological environment, but as a sedimented trace-history of the competing media institutions of the moment. Let us imagine the fabled landscape of literary modernity as the geological outcropping of seismic shifts in modern capitalism's media ecology. Rather than see the "talented individual" as one gifted in her ability to exploit the capacities of her chosen medium, I want us to learn to see the medium itself seizing hold of the individual in order to tell the cryptic and allegorical tale of its relations, some friendly, some less amicable, with other media. For that is, as I want to show in this opening chapter, the secret story of modernism itself, of which the avant-garde is simply the most perspicacious scribe.

What follows is thus a critical undertaking consistent with Fredric Jameson's counterintuitive "third maxim" of modernity: namely, that the "narrative of modernity cannot be organized around categories of subjectivity."[5] That most existing versions of cultural modernity have been so organized can be readily ascertained: taking root in a post-New Critical vision of the modernist "deep" subject – its Freudian unconscious and Bergsonian relations to lived duration – the problematic of the subject has persisted through the more recent spate of scholarship engaged with modernist bodies, memories, perceptions, affects and so forth. Indeed, it is as though, in the aftermath of the poststructuralist dismantlement of the subject as an ontologically consistent frame of reference, modernist literary criticism has painstakingly reassembled it under these and other auspices. To be sure, the "subject" it addresses is scarcely what it used to be after this nominalist reinvention; but neither can there be any doubt about the pervasive humanism that inspires most "modernist studies" insofar as they defer to this perdurable problematic. I take as my starting point instead the omphalic place where the humanistically conceived body is turned inside out by media history:

The body is the site upon which the various technologies of our culture inscribe themselves, the connecting link to which and from which our medial means of processing, storage, and transmission run. Indeed, in its nervous system, the body itself is a medial apparatus and an elaborate technology. But it is also radically shaped and reshaped by the networks to which it is conjoined.[6]

An anti-humanist, post-subjective literary criticism begins properly here, in the realization that the "human subject" is already a technological entity through and through, hooked up to the system of media in which

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[5] Jameson, *A singular modernity*, p. 57.
[6] David Wellbery, "Foreword," in Friedrich A. Kittler, *Discourse networks: 1800/1900*, trans. Michael Metteer, with Chris Cullen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. xiv.

it is historically situated. From this perspective – whose theoretical origins in Nietzsche, Benjamin and Foucault scarcely need mentioning – it is not only permissible to play with the heuristic fiction that media and not subjects fashion literary and other texts, it is *necessary* to affirm that, since "the body itself is a medial apparatus," all of cultural history is finally a matter of media determination – provided it can be convincingly demonstrated that this is what the texts themselves have to say on the matter. The consequence is methodologically enabling. The ideological notations that too often pass for knowledge of the modern period – *Gotterdämmerung*, weakening of the *nom du pere*, narcissism etc. – can be decoded into so many media effects, in Kittlerian terms of the dismantlement of one discourse network and the establishment of a new one.[7] The opacity of the modernist text, its recourse to as yet unsystematized informational registers, is not some "inward turn" to the depths of a putative "modern subject," but on the contrary, a raising of the matter of literature to a surface of touch and conversion with other media. A moratorium on the discourse of subjectivity frees media history to decrypt modernist form and lay bare its essential determinations by complex institutional forces: a new materialism according to which not the utterly unknowable matrix of subjectivity but the perfectly objective historical destinies of the various media might serve as the primary referent of modern cultural phenomena.

It is well known that the avant-garde works of literary modernism were already deeply aware of themselves as media artifacts. Marinetti's typographical innovations, Cendrars' blending of type and painted image, Apollinaire's calligrams, Hugo Ball's sound poems, Tzara's "thought is made in the mouth," all the way back to Mallarmé's inaugural gesture of the throw of the dice on a blank page – the sequence is precisely one of heightening medial awareness, strangely inflected. Because of course within the network of media associated with modernism, literature was in this sense poorly served. If other media were intuitively felt to have some material purchase in an elemental substrate of the earth, then literature's affinity with paper, ink and cloth was as ontologically unconvincing as its association with typography or those "nervous stimulation[s] in sounds" produced by speech.[8] Perhaps literature's sudden self-recognition as a medium – which I will be pursuing in more depth below – had more to do with its metaphoric ability to absorb material qualities from the more

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[7] A discourse network is that web of "technologies and institutions that allow a given culture to select, store, and produce relevant data." Kittler, *Discourse networks*, p. 369.

[8] Friedrich Nietzsche, "On truth and lying in a non-moral sense," *c*. 1873, in Vincent B. Leitch *et al*. (eds.), *The Norton anthology of theory and criticism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), p. 880.

substantial media around it; and this is really what we mean when we say that the modernist text is medially self-aware. In Jameson's words, "literature, or a purely literary aesthetic, suffers from a profound envy of the other arts; it longs for the solidity of their teleological histories, and for the solidity of their selected materialities."[9] To make good on that contemporary wish "to be a thing," literature "intelligently and opportunistically" poaches technical and material properties from those other arts and, even more dangerously, the newer media whose advent, as we shall see, was the not-so-secret cause of all the trouble.[10] To speak of media operating in this way, quite independent of the particular human agents enlisted on their behalf, is to take the thesis of "technological determinism" to the limit – and with good reason. It is only at the limit, where the idealism of the premise presses hard against the collective practices of large groups of men and women, that we can see the one convert logically into the other. At the level of social practice, the idealism is perfectly *real*, as socially objective as the value of labor or a stock. Literature's desire to be a thing, the very story that this book tells, is a desire that leads the entire system of the arts, in the critical years 1910–1914, to refashion itself as a "media system" proper, both in order to accommodate itself to the congeries of newer mechanical media, and to protect the gamut of its own practices. Unbeknownst to themselves, *this* is what the writers and artists we call "modern" were collectively engaged in: a concerted becoming-media of the arts.

Such a series of propositions is hardly scandalous within a certain lineage of scholarship in the field. Indeed, while a fully fledged avowal of media determination may be exceptional, many of the conceptual developments that have prepared for it can be located within three interlinked strands of the "new modernist studies." The first of these, and the most enabling, excavates the obscured technological dimensions of literary modernism. Beginning with Tim Armstrong's *Modernism, technology and the body*, and culminating in Sara Danius' *The senses of modernism*, this wing of new modernist scholarship has detailed with vigor and precision the often incalculable debts modern literary form owed to a broader culture of technology, prosthesis and enhanced sense perception. Armstrong argues that the new prostheses of modernity, "the mechanisms of advertising, cosmetics, cosmetic surgery, and cinema," had determinate effects on literary form. The technically augmented body triggered an ideological "crisis" that required "an intervention through which it might be

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[9] Jameson, *A singular modernity*, p. 174.
[10] Jameson, ibid.; *Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1990), p. 68.

made the grounds of a new form of production" – and, we might add, *form-production*.[11] Modernist form, that is to say, is the venue wherein the ideological site of the body is intervened in technically, just as the physical body is intervened in by any number of biological, mechanical and behavioral techniques; but this mediation is, as Armstrong admits, an unstable and perhaps ungrounded one. The "body" is a particularly nebulous category, perhaps more usefully circumscribed by a restriction to what Sara Danius calls modernism's "index of a technologically mediated crisis of the senses."[12] Danius' conviction is that "the marginalisation of the epistemic mandates of the human senses in an age where technological devices increasingly claim sovereignty over and against the sensorium" leads to a situation in which the techniques of aesthetic production are inexorably permeated by technological reproduction, at the cost of more organic form metaphors. Technology supplants the unadorned body as the wellspring of aesthetic practice, to the extent that "technology and modernist aesthetics should be understood as *internal* to one another."[13] Adorno's imposing presence can be felt stirring in the wings of such pronouncements, since they tactically rehearse his great formulation:

The substantive element of artistic modernism draws its power from the fact that the most advanced procedures of material production and organization are not limited to the sphere in which they originate. In a manner scarcely analyzed yet by sociology, they radiate out into areas of life far removed from them, deep into the zones of subjective experience, which does not notice this and guards the sanctity of its reserves. Art is modern when, by its mode of experience and as the expression of the crisis of experience, it absorbs what industrialization has developed under the given relations of production.[14]

So far, so good; but it remains unclear how industrial technology per se can have managed the prodigious feat of overturning centuries' worth of evolved aesthetic protocols, even if (as with Danius) it is limited to the technologies of sensory extension such as microscopes, x-rays, slow-motion cinematography and so on. Indeed, as I shall want to argue at greater length later, "technology" in this context is more usefully seen as an abstraction of something much more specific and conjunctural: namely, the appearance of the mechanical media themselves, whose objectively adversarial relationship to the established system of the arts and literature

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[11] Tim Armstrong, *Modernism, technology and the body: a cultural study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 3–4.
[12] Sara Danius, *The senses of modernism: technology, perception and aesthetics* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 1.
[13] Ibid., pp. 23, 11.
[14] Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Athlone, 1998), p. 34.

is unmistakable. To be sure, "the crisis in sense perception translates onto the crisis in artistic reproduction, and vice versa" in the modern period;[15] but this is less immediately consequential for the arts than the new media's direct contestation of their traditional ways of organizing sense perception into meaningful aesthetic wholes.

For a second string of new modernist critics, not the general category of technology, but its more particular application in the photographic media can be shown to have exerted an unusually strong influence on the literary and artistic practices of modernism. By limiting themselves to the photographic techniques that altered not only the human sensorium from the mid-nineteenth century onward, but the logistics of narrative construction and means of typographic reproduction themselves, critics such as Nancy Armstrong, Michael North, Susan McCabe and David Trotter have convincingly demonstrated the photomechanical and cinematographic mediations embedded in modernist literary forms. Armstrong's account of the rapid growth, during the 1860s, of an immense photographic archive offering "such an accurate reading of the human body that just on the basis of that reading one could assign any body to its proper category," shows how this archive altered the protocols of fictional epistemology.[16] The argument that photography exceeded its indexical limits by becoming a fully articulated semiotic system, stabilized by a multitude of internal subdivisions, foments a realization that "realist" fiction had all along been in negotiation with that "composite photograph" that readers had of the "real" world.[17] Armstrong's brilliant thesis can be seen subtly informing Michael North's and Susan McCabe's more positivist work accounting for modernist form through the circumambient technology of photographic mediation and print. Although in North's and McCabe's view, it is less the photographic "shadow archive" than the dissemination of print within a new photomechanical regime that matters most. North's astute observation that words and photographs are printed "in the same ink" on the pages of avant-garde magazines is crucial to my own work, for it clarifies the medial specificity of all modernism as that of a new photomechanical reproduction technology.[18] But it is David Trotter's work, *Cinema and modernism*, that makes the most fruitful associations. Averse to the rote application of metaphor and simile to the hoary question of

[15] Danius, *The senses of modernism*, p. 53.
[16] Nancy Armstrong, *Fiction in the age of photography: the legacy of British realism* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 17.
[17] Ibid., p. 27.
[18] Michael North, *Camera works: photography and the twentieth-century word* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 60.

mutual determination between film and literature, Trotter takes a much
more productive route:

> It is not my purpose to argue that literary modernism remediated cinema: that
> it took on montage in order to render itself at once newly transparent and newly
> opaque. Modernist writers did something far more interesting than that. Cinema's
> example enabled them to discern in the process of mediation itself, in the original
> and recoverable neutrality of the new medium's approach to existence as such, the
> double logic Bolter and Grusin discern in the process of remediation . . . The will-
> to-automatism was the instrument with which writers and film-makers explored
> the double desire at once for presence to the world and for absence from it.[19]

What Trotter engagingly presents is an image of modern literature (above
all, Joyce, Eliot and Woolf) permeated by the figure of an apparatus
beholden to impersonal automatisms, which at once gives the world and
takes it away. It is within the familiar but forgotten space of Bazin's "cer-
tain aesthetic convergence" of modernity's media system that the proper
logic of remediation can be discerned: so that the cinema can be seen
responding to literary concerns just as surely as literature is to be under-
stood incorporating cinematic problems.[20] Indeed, without this chiasmic
logic, as we shall see, modernism remains deeply inscrutable; but with
it, properly tailored to an historical understanding of the contemporary
media field, the most elusive technical matters promise to be elucidated.

Meanwhile, a third and final strand of the "new modernist studies" takes
us to the bourn of my own present work. Mark Wollaeger's *Modernism,
media, and propaganda* and Juan A. Suárez's *Pop modernism* manifest a
healthy tendency toward a thick descriptive media history of the period.
Wollaeger's book takes as its point of departure a mature media theoretical
picture of the modern era:

> Drawing on the concept of a media ecology, I treat modernism and propaganda
> as proximate information practices operating within a system of interrelated prac-
> tices . . . literary criticism has not yet grasped the degree to which the pervasive
> propaganda made possible by the new media – not just the media themselves –
> contributed to the shaping of modernism.[21]

This, and the meticulously researched demonstrations of it in the sub-
stance of the book, is of the highest value in setting out the usefulness of
a media ecology framework for studying modernism. But what it lacks

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[19] David Trotter, *Cinema and modernism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), pp. 10–11.
[20] André Bazin, "In defence of mixed cinema," in *What is cinema?* Volume 1, ed. and trans. Hugh
Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p. 63.
[21] Mark Wollaeger, *Modernism, media, and propaganda: British narrative from 1900 to 1945*
(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. xvi.

is a dialectical moment whereby this propaganda "made possible" by the new media is simultaneously the *raison d'être* of the media themselves, as cogent ideological forces. For what the "new media" made clear was the degree to which all media were, from this point onward, charged with the responsibility for their own propagation as channels of communication in a violently competitive market. What literary criticism needs above all to grasp, I want to suggest, is the logic whereby "literature" was obliged in the second industrial revolution to become a phatic argument on behalf of its own propagation.

Suárez's scintillating book is (amongst many other virtues) the best work of literary criticism to date to have absorbed the media-theoretical lessons of Friedrich Kittler. Its attention to "the material support, or hardware, of signification" results in a rich haul of new readings of texts such as Dos Passos' *USA* trilogy, Eliot's *The waste land*, and Joseph Cornell's boxes, embedded in their extended media contexts. The great advantage of this fuller media perspective on Eliot's work is that it tactically demotes the ascendancy of visual concepts in histories of modernity, to allow for the return of the modern's more auditory mechanical rustling in its account of *The waste land*'s fabled jaggedness. "At the end of this investigation lie no further interpretations of the text but the unveiling of modes of inscription on which its meaning depends. These modes fragment the 'organic' utterance, replay and recontextualize prerecorded voices, and turn language into a tactile stimulus at the expense of its communicative potential," in a manner that shares its post-subjective method with my own work, and generates perhaps the best analysis of a modernist masterpiece in a quarter-century.[22] Despite *Pop modernism*'s many virtues, however, there is a residual idealism inherent in the concept of a "social imaginary" which, in the following typical sentences, serves as a kind of black box into and out of which media cause and effect mysteriously pass:

he [John Dos Passos] came of age at a time when electronic communication had irreversibly transformed the social imaginary, reshaping the way images and stories were composed and disseminated. Perhaps because of this, the new media left important traces on these writers' work, and they themselves were, at different points in their careers and with varying fortune, involved in media production.[23]

Implicit in these formulations is a familiar three-stage hypothesis according to which new technologies alter the public imagination, which in turn

[22] Juan A. Suárez, *Pop modernism: noise and the reinvention of the everyday* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), p. 123.
[23] Ibid., p. 81.

transforms the raw material and formal strategies of artists and writers. New media allegedly "leave their traces" on literary labor only by way of passage through this putative collective consciousness; but surely the unnecessary idealist term can be dropped to allow the media to interact with one another, structurally and directly. The account Suárez offers of the modern too often hinges on a cautionary subjunctive mood, a kind of modesty, according to which "one could say that the literature of the time attempted to assimilate the vividness of radio, photography, and film, which had displaced the printed word as the main channel of information."[24] Indeed they did, and the question is how precisely they managed it, according to what logic, and within what historical constellation of forces. The "assimilation" in question has, after all, nothing particular to do with a "social imaginary," but is purposive without the intervention of any subject, collective or otherwise.

With such interventions, the new modernist studies have cleared the path I will be taking in this study, without necessarily always pursuing it. My own contribution to the critical literature on the topic is the following: let us be perfectly explicit, and declare that modernism is a structural adjustment within a given social and historical media ecology, or media system. I adopt this category, the "media system," as the privileged mediatory code of all modernism, and seek to employ it as the inescapable horizon within which all cultural production, circa 1910–1914 – and ever afterward – can be understood. As a mediatory code, I mean to assert the primacy of the media system in the critical analysis of literary works relative to their social situation; that is to say, it is within the objective structural relations obtaining between the various media in one overarching, hypothetical system, that acts of literature will first and foremost not only attain to their formal specificity, but engage most meaningfully with their social conditions of possibility. In a word, those conditions are *medial* before they are anything else – psychological, somatic, affective, sensory, political or even economic; or at least it is insofar as they are medial that they are economic to begin with. My omission of the term "culture" here is quite deliberate, as I obviously mean to prefer the category of the "media system" to that of culture in modernity, for the good polemical reason that it effectively extirpates any of the lingering idealism of what Marcuse called "affirmative culture" and urges the translation of all cultural concepts into media ones – without, I hope, lapsing into mere positivism.[25] It is within

[24] Suárez, *Pop modernism*, p. 86.
[25] Marcuse wrote of "affirmative culture:" "This notion is fundamentally idealist." See Herbert Marcuse, "The affirmative character of culture," in *Negations: essays in critical theory*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (London: Free Association Books, 1988), p. 98.