The Age of Distraction: Photography and Film

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CULT OF DISTRACTION

In the immediate post–World War I period, distraction was perceived as one of the fundamental elements of the modern condition.[1] These years—described as *folles* in French, *roaring* in the United States, and *wilden* in German[2]—were also "distracted" years, in every sense of the term: in the sense of modern man's new incapacity to focus his attention on the world, as well as a thirst to forget his own condition, to be entertained. In the eyes of then-contemporary observers, the new cinema—with its constant flux of images and then sounds, which seemed in contrast with the old contemplation of the unique and motionless work—offered the best illustration of this in the world of the visual arts (fig. 1).

In 1926, in his essay "*Kult der Zerstreuung*" (Cult of distraction), Siegfried Kracauer made luxurious Berlin movie theaters—sites par excellence of the distraction of the masses—the point of departure and instrument of analysis of German society in the 1920s. In the temples of distraction, he wrote, "the stimulations of the senses succeed each other with such rapidity that there is no room left for even the slightest contemplation to squeeze in between them,"[3] a situation he compared to the "increasing amount of illustrations in the daily press and in periodical publications."[4] The following year, in 1927, he would pursue this idea in his article on photography,[5] deploring the "blizzard" of images in the illustrated press that had come to distract the masses and divert the perception of real facts.

In Germany between the two world wars, Kracauer's voice was not isolated. The idea that new means of reproduction and communication were profoundly changing modern man's perception was at the heart of intellectual debates and in the press. In 1927, the philosopher Martin Heidegger, in his critique of modernity, *Being and Time*, denounced the preeminence that the contemporary era had accorded the sense of sight, which was thought to lead to the impoverishment of perception in favor of distraction: a purely curious, incessant gaze that would fall on the new and give the sensation of never focusing, "of never dwelling anywhere."[6] The German word for distraction, *Zerstreuung*, comes from the verb *streuen* and the idea of dispersion, scattering. In the late 1930s, Heidegger would explicitly connect this way of seeing to new forms of mass communication—the cinema and the illustrated press. Around the same time, in the mid-'30s, Walter Benjamin, in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," defined
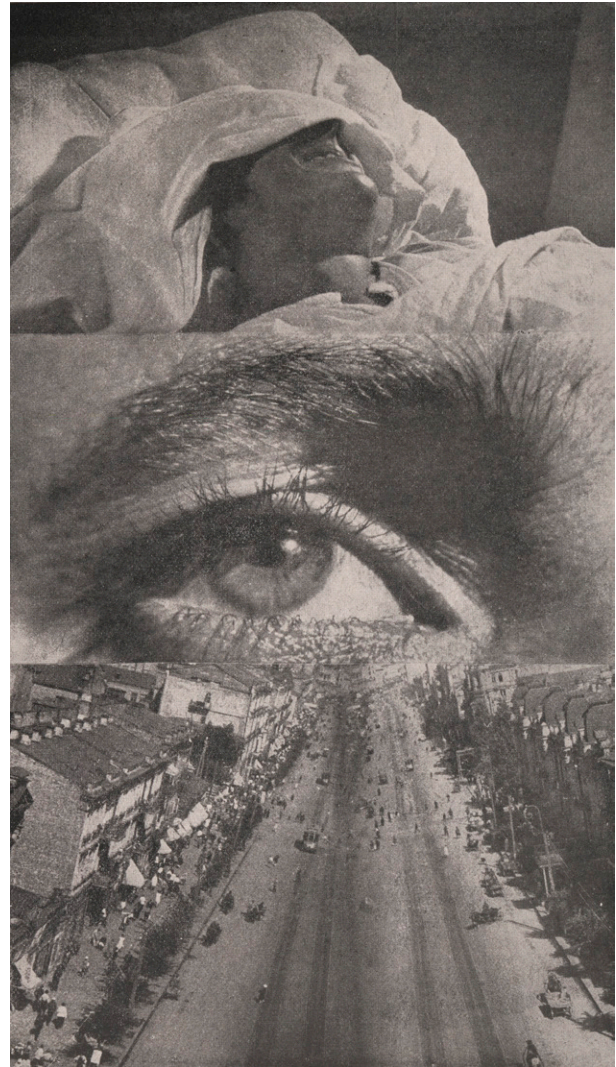

fig. 1 Dziga Vertov. Photomontage of film from Franz Roh and Jan Tschichold. *Foto-Auge: 76 Fotos der Zeit* (Photo-eye: 76 photos of the time). Stuttgart: F. Wedekind, 1929. Plate 76. The Museum of Modern Art Library, New York

what he called the viewer's "reception in distraction": a floating attention, in which sensations were more the fruit of a chance impression than of sustained attention. Less critical regarding this phenomenon, he saw its paroxysmal culmination, as Kracauer did a decade earlier, in the spectacle of film.

The first characteristic of the cinematic model is the sensory overload it proposes: what Kracauer noted in 1927, Benjamin took up in turn, contrasting the contemplative model of painting with the distraction of cinema: "The painting invites the spectator to contemplation; before it the spectator can abandon himself to his associations. Before the movie frame he cannot do so. No sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it is already changed. It cannot be arrested."[7] The grammar of cinema—a democratic and mechanical art, one of movement and motion—as well as the industry itself would play a fundamental role in upending modern man's system of perception. These became the central elements of a revolution of the gaze and of the Beaux-arts system, with the mode of distracting reception making its mark in every domain of art. As Benjamin summarized in his *Arcades Project*: "film: the unfolding...of all the forms of perception, the tempos and rhythms, which lie preformed in today's machines."[8] At the same time, in an article devoted to Charles Baudelaire, Benjamin showed how instant photography was invented at the very moment modern man saw everyday life become increasingly punctuated by the short, swift, staccato gestures associated with increasing mechanization: "The camera gave the moment a posthumous shock, as it were."[9] The click of a button could fix an event in time forever.

For Benjamin, the visual overload that results from the filmic spectacle and engenders a "reception in distraction" was similar, in its intensity, to what modern man feels in the metropolis. The cinematic experience, he noted in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," evokes the everyday life of "every pedestrian in a big city"[10]—an everyday life that he described, in his essay on Baudelaire, as a form of visual and sonic trauma, "a shock experience" that turns the individual into a "kaleidoscope equipped with consciousness," a phrase borrowed from the French writer. Published in 1940, a few decades after sociologist Georg Simmel wrote "The Metropolis and Mental Life" in 1903, Benjamin's idea that the urban environment exposes the individual to a succession of various shocks on a daily basis that deeply modify the individual's perception and behavior became an accepted concept in the interwar period.

In 1907, Rainer Maria Rilke began his novel *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* (*The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*) with a description of this urban sensory overload, experienced as trauma: "To think that I can't give up the habit of sleeping with the window open. Electric trolleys speed clattering through my room. Cars drive over me. A door slams."[11] A few years later, Fernand Léger linked the advent of the modern city and the birth of Cubism: the abandonment of traditional perspective in favor of multiple and synchronic points of view and sensations echo, to him, the visual cacophony of the big city and the arrival of more rapid locomotion, thanks to which "a modern man registers a hundred times more sensory impressions than an eighteenth-century artist."[12]

In 1928, in his manifesto on the future of photography, "*Puti sovremennoi fotografii*" (The paths of contemporary photography), Aleksandr Rodchenko also drew a link between contemporary metropolises and changes in human perception. "The contemporary city with its multistory buildings, specially erected factories, plants, etc., two- to three-story-high windows, trams, automobiles, light and space advertisements, ocean liners, airplanes—all of the things that you so marvelously described in your article 'One hundred and three days in the west,' all of this, like it or not, has shifted the customary psychology of visual perception, though only a little."[13] If Rodchenko noted the timidity artists display in the description of the (mostly fantastical) modern urban environment, he called for a deeper revolution of the gaze, which photography might help bring about. This revolution would first require the abandonment of classical perspective, often a single point of view, in favor of a multiplicity of viewpoints, discordant and egalitarian—like the optical experience of the modern urban dweller composed of a multitude of quick and fragmentary views, and similar to the mobile and always changing approach of the

fig. 2 Germaine Krull. Untitled (*Eiffel Tower*). 1927–28. Gelatin silver print, 1927–39, 9 × 6¼" (22.9 × 15.9 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Thomas Walther Collection. Gift of Thomas Walther (MoMA 1750.2001). © Estate Germaine Krull, Museum Folkwang, Essen

filmmaker. As he underscored in the same 1928 manifesto: "The object must be seen in several different photos from different viewpoints and positions, as though looking around it, and not as though peeking through one keyhole."[14]

FORMS OF DISTRACTION

While fragmentation has been a constituent part of the photographic act since the dawn of the medium—the idea of the synthetic composition of painting versus the analytical process of framing in photography appears in the 1850s[15]—the photographers of the interwar period systematized it into an aesthetic. Extending the idea, already dear to philosopher Henri Bergson and the Cubists, that reality in motion should be caught from multiple points of view, the interwar photographic avant-garde envisioned taking photos in the context of a broader—filmic—continuum, the only artists at the time to take this new perception fully into account.

The approach was advanced by the commercialization and success of the Leica camera in 1925. Using 35mm film that unwound horizontally, resulting in a negative of 24

to 36 millimeters, the Leica brought photographic technology closer to film technology. The technical superiority of cinematography, likelier to have a finer grain than standard photographic film, was a selling point for the camera. The success, especially in '30s Europe, of other small, easy-to-handle cameras—especially ones that used celluloid film (such as the Ermanox and Rolleiflex cameras)—promoted the increase of images and works in sequence or in series, often considered more significant than the single image. Rodchenko himself experimented with this style of photographing during his stay in Paris in 1925, with the Eiffel Tower as his subject, one of the subjects taken on by many photographers, including Germaine Krull, László Moholy-Nagy, and El Lissitzky. At first, the subject, considered too unoriginal, barely held his attention. It was only by approaching it swiftly, in a bus, that this new experience, moving and fragmented, modified his initial perception and produced a more overpowering but also more interesting impression than the more general view: "I remember in Paris when I first saw the Eiffel Tower from afar, I did not like it at all. But once I was passing nearby on a bus, and when I saw the lines of the metal diminishing upward, from right and left through the window, this perspective gave me the impression of the mass and the construction, which 'from the navel' creates only a gentle spot, the one we are so sick of on all the postcards."[16]

Faced with the same subject a few years later, Krull came to the same conclusions: that of an architectural object at once imposing in its mass and delicate in its structure, made of positive and negative space, where it becomes difficult to tell interior from exterior (fig. 2). And thus the impression it produces can only be translated by the use of multiple views taken at close range, capable of representing both the sense of being crushed and the disorientation the photographer is experiencing. More than producing an image, the point for Krull, as well as for Rodchenko, was to render an experience. Krull experimented with this often in her work, confronting impressive industrial subjects and re-creating their magic in a single image. Thus, the ships in the port of Rotterdam: "I wanted to see them, to show their force. I wanted to capture them on film. But how to photograph them? They were so big and strong, and so impressive. To see them one had to move back a long way and then they lost their impact. I was haunted by them for days and days; I dreamed of them. I photographed them and could never express what I wanted. It took weeks to come up with new ideas."[17] In order to achieve a cinematic effect, it seemed sensible to try a strategy of fragmentation, facilitated by the little Ikar camera she owned, and to multiply the various points of view: high-angle and low-angle shots offering partial views and therefore doing away with more traditional perspectives, giving the viewer a visual shock or disturbance as well as a sense of the architecture's power.

Krull learned this approach partly in Holland, in contact with the Dutch avant-garde—César Domela, Paul Schuitema, Piet Zwart, as well as filmmakers from the review *Filmliga* and from her husband, Joris Ivens—and partly from Soviet directors such as Sergei Eisenstein, whom she met in Paris. It is interesting to see how similar *Métal* (fig. 3), the book she published in 1928 in Paris, is in its composition and spirit to the film *De Brug* (The bridge; fig. 4), which Ivens made the same year in Holland and in which she participated. Aside from a layout that might at first appear rather classic and not very dynamic, with one photograph isolated per plate, *Métal* still represented the loss of traditional spatial markers for the reader. The images were often taken from above or from below, and appear in the book in no particular order (they can be read and appreciated from various directions). There is a mix of views, both close-up and from a distance, and a succession of subjects of varying scales—monumental architecture and small, decorative objects. The use of superimposed images can also make for difficult reading. In a similar way, *De Brug*, filmed at a newly constructed railway bridge in Rotterdam, favors a fragmented and syncopated approach, most often refusing a general view in favor of analytical, almost photographic shots, in high angle and low angle, on the details of the structure. Heavily influenced by the ideas of Dziga Vertov (fig. 5), the opening of *De Brug*, with its close-up on the camera lens, tells us at the outset that the film's subject can be found as much in the methodology as in the object of study itself.

This modern photographic form of distraction—a floating gaze that never manages or tries to settle—recalls a multiplicity of points of view and an influx of images. Superimposition (a double exposure of the negative resulting in the presence on the same image of two distinct spatiotemporal situations), which Krull used in *Métal,* has as much to do with cinema as with avant-garde photography of the time. In a 1926 article, Moholy-Nagy explicitly linked the two forms by explaining that "failed photographs, two events recorded on the same plaque, gave cinema the idea of superimposition."[18] What was once seen as photographic failure was in the '20s claimed as a conscious practice on the part of the avant-gardes, who exploited all of its creative possibilities. It was a form that Vertov would use a great deal in cinema, to narrative ends but also to poetic and aesthetic ends, especially in his *Man with a Movie Camera*, filmed in 1929. The form also became central to Moï Ver's photography book *Paris* (1931; fig. 6). Suspended in the arrested time of the photographic image, superimposition offered a sort of *trop plein* of images— a visual saturation—that related to the genre of photomontage, creating a relationship between two distinct images. It could serve to translate movement and speed (MoMA 1766.2001), or an extreme sensory experience similar to vertigo (MoMA 1660.2001 and 1751.2001), or to depict a relationship between interiority and exteriority, often in the
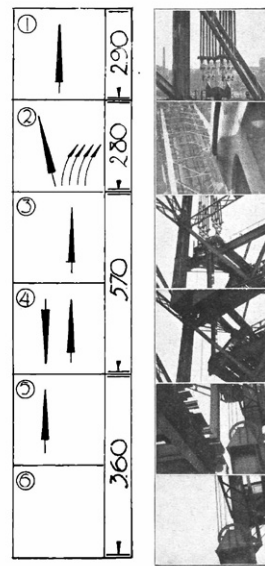

fig. 4 Illustration from A. Boeken. "*Bij een fragment van 'De Brug' van Joris Ivens*" (On a fragment of Joris Ivens's *The Bridge*). *Filmliga* 2, no. 5 (February 1929). © Foundation Digital Library of Dutch Literature (dbnL), Leiden (Rhineland Chamber of Commerce 2808 2851)

fig. 5 Dziga Vertov. *Man with a Movie Camera*. 1929. Still from 35mm film, black and white, silent, 65 min. © Courtesy Vertov-Collection, Austrian Film Museum, Vienna

same image (MoMA 1658.2001, 1763.2001, 1816.2001, 1842.2001, and 1920.2001), as in the dissolve of cinema's dream sequences.

Whatever the function of these photographic superimpositions, all of them share a certain difficulty in being read, inherent in the genre: the eye flits ceaselessly, unable to focus, trying to settle. A similar effect was obtained without special effects: the modernist technique of photographing a glass window, with its effects of transparency and interpenetration of interior and exterior. It offered the
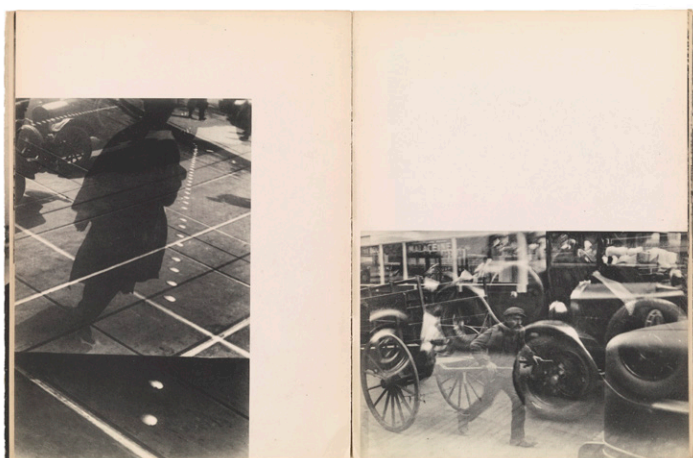
fig. 6 Spread from Moï Ver. *Paris. 80 Photographies* (Paris: 80 photographs). Paris: J. Walter, 1931. The Museum of Modern Art Library, New York. © Moï Ver (Moshe Raviv-Vorobeichek), courtesy Moï Ver (Moshe Raviv) Estate, Tel Aviv

fig. 7 Umbo (Otto Umbehr). *View of Berlin's Department Store Karstadt* (*Blick auf das Berliner Kaufhaus Karstadt*). 1929. Gelatin silver print, 1929–35, 9 5/16 × 6 ⅛" (23.7 × 15.5 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Thomas Walther Collection. Gift of Shirley C. Burden, by exchange (MoMA 1889.2001). © 2014 Umbo/Gallery Kicken Berlin/Phyllis Umbehr/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

photographer as well as the viewer a new visual challenge, that of a true montage or collage in reality, made with no trickery at all. Such is the image of a Berlin street (fig. 7), in which Umbo (Otto Umbehr) makes the interior space of a department store interpenetrate the exterior space of the street, thereby producing a destabilizing, almost kaleidoscopic perspective.

It is interesting to note that even genres that appear to be "purely" photographic were contaminated, in the minds of the era's critics, by the cinematic paradigm. The same for the photogram: in its technical simplicity, the process was very much appreciated in avant-garde circles, which saw it as an expression of the essence of photography—a pure luminous imprint made without the mediation of a camera. At the same time, Man Ray's photograms were considered by certain critics as having "cinematic" qualities. For Man Ray himself, who since his first film, *Retour à la Raison* (*Return to Reason*) in 1923, practiced photography and cinema at the same time, the photogram appeared to be the transposition of cinematic experience to photography. Herein lies the paradox—a technique, the photogram, perceived as both the essence of photography, with a certain purity of the medium, and a substitute for cinematography, a luminous projection on a sensitive surface. Happy to blur the boundaries, Man Ray used the photogram process freely for his Rayographs on paper as well as for *Retour à la Raison*, placing small objects—fleas and trombones—directly on rolls of celluloid exposed to light.[19]

STOP READING! LOOK!

From superimposition to the fragmentary view, for a number of photographers of the period the increase in points of view only truly took on form and sense when linked through visual arrangements that borrowed from the principles of montage. That is what Jan Tschichold—graphic designer, selection committee member of the great exhibition *Film und Foto* of 1929, and one of the main theoreticians of the "New Typography"—underscored in 1928: "The initially accidental form of the individual photo (gray tones, structural effect, line movements) acquires artistic meaning through the composition of the whole."[20] In this undertaking of reconstruction, it was once again the cinematic model that made itself felt, as much on the printed page—in general-interest magazines, avant-garde reviews, and books of photography—as in the exhibition spaces themselves. A printed layout contributed to reinforcing the new dynamism, attempting to put an end to the classic reading from left to right, to the traditional preeminence of the text over the image, in favor of a synthetic layout, saturating one's vision with images that have become signs—that is, elements of language. It followed the organization of New Typography: the isolated image lost its primacy and autonomy in favor of a relationship—on the page or on the wall of the exhibition—in which it was treated more or less like visual punctuation. The work as a whole tried to incite new reading reflexes in the viewer by reproducing a distracted visual excitation, similar to a filmic unfolding or to the imagery being spread in advertising.
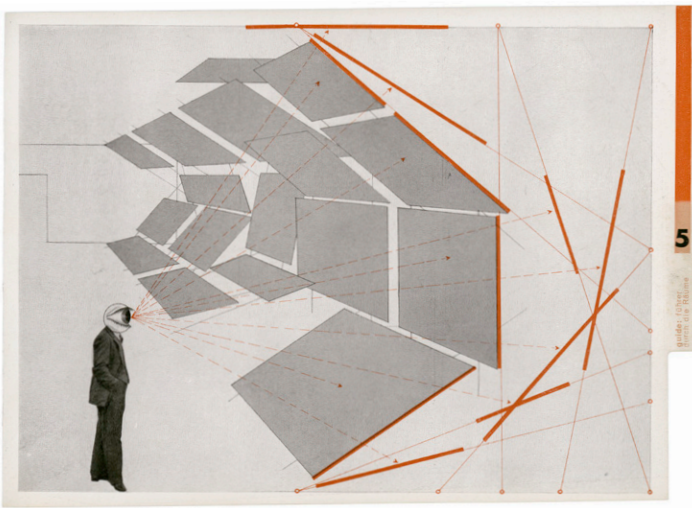
fig. 8 Herbert Bayer. *Diagram of the Field of Vision*. Reproduction in the catalogue for the Deutscher Werkbund exhibition in the Salon of the Société des Artistes Décorateurs, Paris, 1930. Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin. © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

The paroxysm of these practices was reached in the exercise of photomontage, which alone seemed to embody, according to its first theoreticians, the maximal fusion of photographic and cinematic practices: Domela saw it as "an intermediary state between photography and film," while Raoul Hausmann defined it as a combination of photography and printed text "transformed into a kind of static film."[21] At the same time, camera users' manuals recommended that photographers take inspiration from the technique of film montage to edit their own photographic reportage, either by preparing real storyboards ahead of time or by editing later.[22] Herbert Bayer translated this photomontage concept for the art of the exhibition in his famous *Diagram of the Field of Vision*, which he conceived and published for the first time for the 1930 Deutscher Werkbund exhibition in Paris (fig. 8) before reworking it in 1935 to make it even more engaging for the viewer. The viewer-as-eye, totally surrounded by images, saw his or her visual field saturated on all sides, without the slightest chance of escape. The unilateral and frontal contemplation of a single work was replaced by the simultaneous presence of a multitude of images. If the principle evoked was that of an anti-cinema, because it inverted cinema's schema (a viewer in
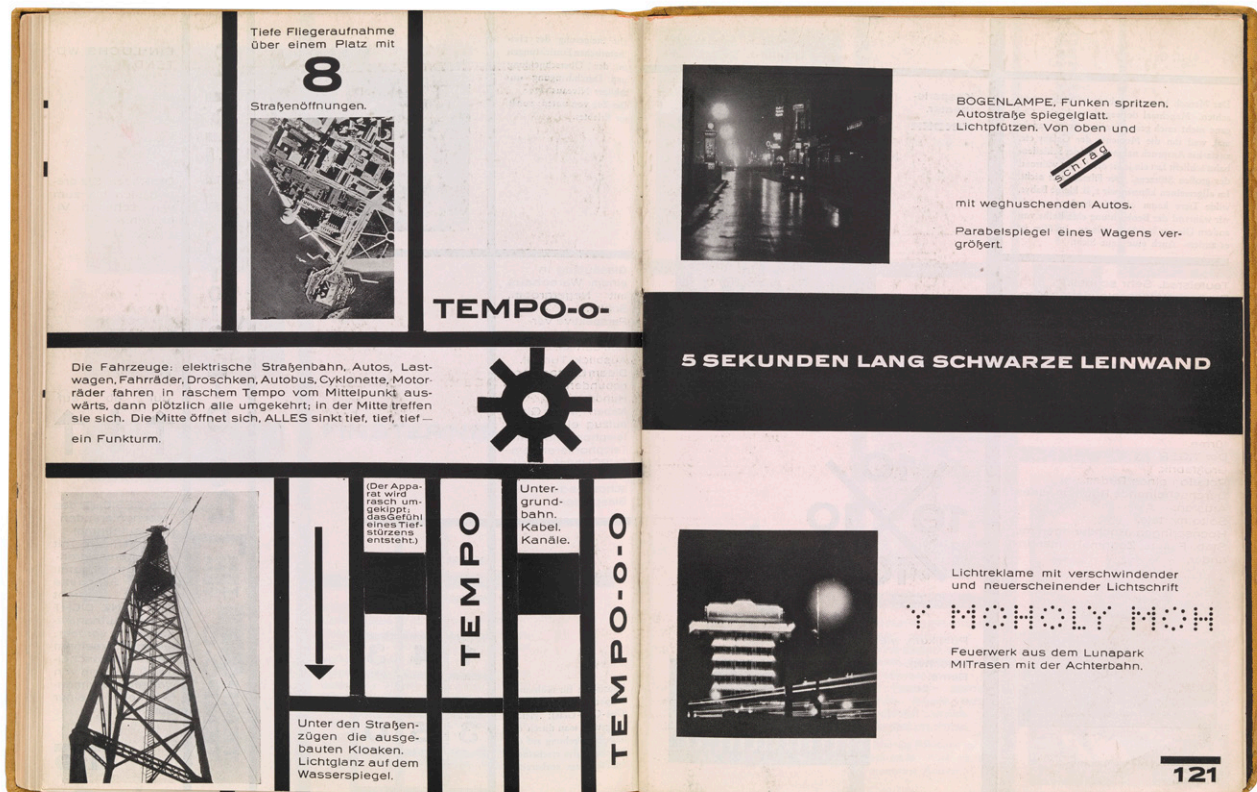

fig. 9 Spread from László Moholy-Nagy, "*Dynamik der Gross-Stadt*" (Dynamic of the Metropolis), a section in *Malerei, Fotografie, Film* (*Painting, Photography, Film*). Munich: Albert Langen Verlag, 1925. The Museum of Modern Art Library, New York. © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

motion with a multiplicity of motionless images), it nevertheless restored the primary idea of visual overload.

Kurt Korff, editor-in-chief, from 1905 to 1933, of the _Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung_, one of the main German periodicals featuring photography at the time, pointed out what those layouts owed to cinema and how they had to respond to the new habits of a readership that read more quickly and whose attention was more scattered: "It is no coincidence that there are parallels between the development of the cinema and of the _Berliner Illustrirte_. Life has become more hectic and the individual has become less prepared to peruse a newspaper in leisurely reflection. So, accordingly it has become necessary to find a keener and more succinct form of pictorial representation that has an effect on readers even if they just skim through the pages."[23] Echoing this observation, Johannes Molzahn, in a 1928 article evocatively titled "_Nicht mehr sehen! Lesen!_" (Stop reading! Look!), saw the definitive culmination of this movement in the advent of a purely optical era, in which the "optical media" and, more specifically, photography, would occupy a primordial place: "The photo is the pace setter for the tempo of time and development; the multitude and arrangement of visual sensations forces the uninterrupted work of assimilation on the eye and the psyche."[24] The individual would from then on have to adjust constantly to new visual stimuli, increasingly numerous and rapid—a variation on the idea already expressed by Moholy-Nagy that "the illiterate of the future will not be the uneducated person but the person who is not conversant in photography."[25] Ten years later, in the essay that accompanied Walker Evans's _American Photographs_, Lincoln Kirstein could in turn lament the fact that "the American reading public is fast becoming not even a looking public, but a glancing or glimpsing public."[26]

The book or review provided the favored experimental terrain for these motionless films. Two books published in 1925 summarize these explorations well. The first is the aforementioned _Malerei, Fotografie, Film_ by Moholy-Nagy, in particular the book's last section, "_Dynamik der Gross-Stadt_" (fig. 9). After the theoretical development in the first section, this suite of fourteen pages seems to implement, as a final illustration, some of those ideas. It is a book (within a book) of photographs envisioned as a form of cinema. Moholy-Nagy himself described the sequence as a "film script" and wrote in an epigraph to the sequence: "The intention of the film 'Dynamic of the Metropolis' is not to teach, nor to moralise, nor to tell a story; its effect is meant to be visual, purely visual. The elements of the visual have not in this film an absolute logical connection with one another; their photographic, visual relationships, nevertheless, make them knit together into a vital association of events in space and time and bring the viewer actively into the dynamic of the city."[27]

Wanting to provoke greater activity from the reader, Moholy-Nagy combined photographs and typographical
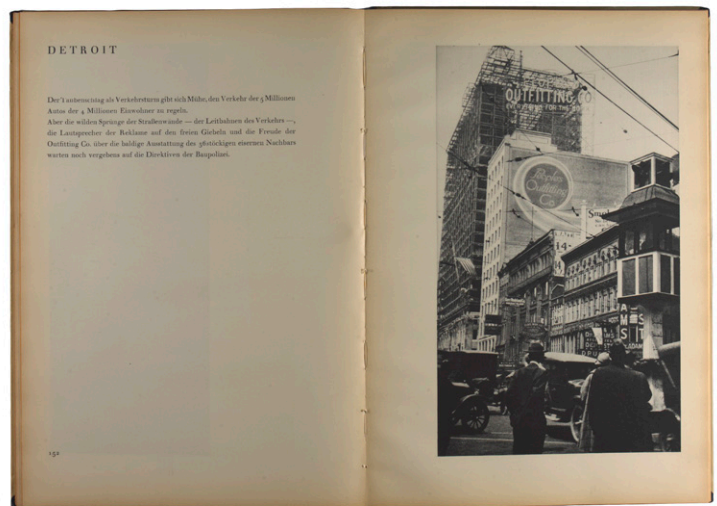
fig. 10 Spread from Erich Mendelssohn. _Amerika—Bilderbuch eines Architekten_ (America: An architect's picture book). Berlin: Rudolph Mosse, 1925, rev. ed. 1928. The Museum of Modern Art Library, New York. Courtesy the Knud Lönberg-Holm Archive from the Marc Dessauce Collection. Right: Knud Lönberg-Holm. _Detroit, Traffic Tower_ (_Detroit, Verkehrsturm_)

fig. 11 El Lissitzky (Lazar Markovich Lissitzky). _Record_ (_Rekord_). 1926. Gelatin silver print, 10 ½ × 8 13/16" (26.7 × 22.4 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Thomas Walther Collection. Gift of Thomas Walther (MoMA 1766.2001). © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

materials—short texts, poems, letters, and signs—in a continuum where each spread intends to re-create, beyond vision, the sensory stimulation experienced by a pedestrian in a large city, confronted by advertising, sounds, signs. With its images of varying subjects (architecture, science, sports, film) bursting on the page, its pages loosely organized into grid patterns, its arrows pointing in different directions depending on the page, "*Dynamik der Gross-Stadt*" offers an experience that is fundamentally different from traditional reading. Each of its seven spreads was conceived to be seen in an overall, unfocused way, so that the eye is unable to settle amid the scattering and variety of elements. Disjointedness and swiftness were encouraged by Moholy-Nagy: the term *tempo*, meaning "rhythm" as well as "speed" in German, is present on almost every spread, functioning as a leitmotif of the section, which is itself closer to a musical score than to a written text or film script. The rhythm he wished to impose on the reader is assuredly a rapid and syncopated one, similar to jazz, which Moholy-Nagy referenced specifically in the sequence. Jazz, the musical genre dear to Bauhaus artists and the Weimar avant-garde, was perceived as an eminently contemporary form; as a critic of the time noted, it "makes audible some quintessential modern experiences: of being run over by a car, of electrical shock, of a locomotive horn, and of sharpening a razor."[28]

The second work is *Amerika* (1925), a book of photographs taken mostly by the architect Erich Mendelsohn during a trip to the United States (fig. 10).[29] Benefiting from the new fascination for American civilization, the work was a great success, reprinted five times in the two years following its publication, before an expanded edition came out in 1928. Despite dealing with a subject similar to Moholy-Nagy's sequence—the contemporary metropolis—and being published the same year, the book, at first glance, appears as its total opposite. By design, Mendelsohn chose a layout of great simplicity, mostly one image per spread with descriptive text on the opposite page, between the caption and the plate, so as not to distract the reader. Yet by choosing to modify the size of each image and its placement on the page, he gave the reading a syncopated rhythm, which does evoke Moholy-Nagy's sequence as well as the abstract films of Hans Richter and Viking Eggeling.[30] El Lissitzky, true to form, interpreted the work as a "dramatic film,"[31] going so far as to invite the reader to use new modes of reading—such as placing the book above one's head—to re-create the impression of being crushed or replicate the perspective of an urban pedestrian in the American metropolis.[32] Lissitzky later used one of the most dynamic photographs published in the work—with multiple exposures and a somewhat blurred aspect seeming to suggest rapid displacement—to serve as a background to his *Record* (*Rekord*) of 1926 (fig. 11).

At the same time that photography was nearing aspects of cinema, film was acquiring a photographic status.

Reproduced at times in the form of an isolated image or a synoptic tableau, but most often in the form of a filmic ribbon (fig. 12), the film still made a big appearance in the '20s in the columns of popular magazines, avant-garde publications, and photography exhibitions, to the point of becoming a sign of modernity. This new visual form, which extracted certain images from a strip of film by freezing a moment of the filmic unfolding, underscored the contiguity between the two techniques, insisting on the photographic nature of cinema. Stopping the images and revealing shots that are otherwise indiscernible during the projection indirectly reinforced one of the ideas dear to modern circles and to Benjamin in particular—that of the camera as revealer of an "optical consciousness."

Starting from these ideas, the sculptor Constantin Brancusi used film that Man Ray had shot as a point of departure to create his own photographic portrait, as Man Ray recounted in his memoirs: "I shot about a hundred meters of film while they milled about in the studio. We were making a slow-motion film and he showed me which shot he approved of with his fingers."[33] An attentive reader
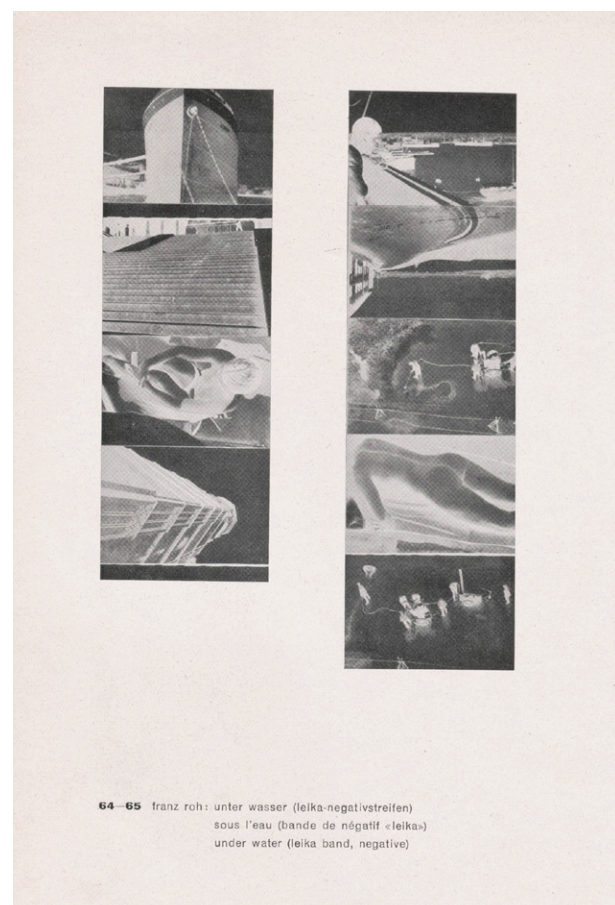

fig. 12 Franz Roh. *Under Water* (*Unter Wasser*). MoMA 1838.2001. Nine negative contact prints, shown here as plate 64 of Roh and Jan Tschichold. *Foto-Auge: 76 Fotos der Zeit* (Photo-eye: 76 photos of the time). Stuttgart: F. Wedekind, 1929. The Museum of Modern Art Library, New York. © Estate Franz Roh, Munich
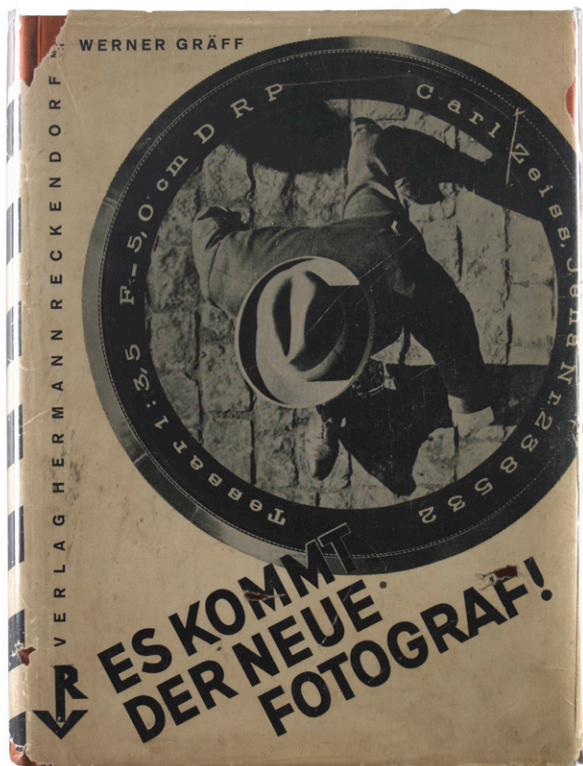
fig. 13 Werner Gräff. *Es kommt der neue Fotograf!* (Here comes the new photographer!). Berlin: H. Reckendorf, 1929. Courtesy Rob Warren Books, New York

fig. 14 Hans Richter. *Filmgegner von Heute—Filmfreunde von Morgen* (Film haters today, film lovers tomorrow). Berlin: Herman Reckendorf, 1929. Courtesy Andrew Cahan: Bookseller, Ltd. © 2014 Hans Richter

of the philosopher Henri Bergson, Brancusi had taken from him the belief that "what is real is the continual changing of form; form is only a snapshot of a transition,"[34] and that the best way to give a face to this constant change was in the subtle shifts from photography to film and vice versa.

PHOTOGRAPHY & CINEMA

This entangling of techniques is on full display in the '20s in the exhibitions *Kipho* (*Kino und Photo*), organized in Berlin in the fall of 1925, and *Fifo* (*Film und Foto*), which took place in Stuttgart in the early summer of 1929. While *Kipho* focused more on cinema and photography as industries, *Fifo* was more artistic in its ambitions. The interdisciplinary crossroads at *Fifo* included photographers, multidisciplinary artists (Moholy-Nagy, Lissitzky, Richter), historians of architecture (Sigfried Giedion), designers, and typographers (Zwart, Tschichold). *Fifo*, in spite of its fusional title, presented itself as a photography exhibition with an avant-garde film festival organized by Richter. It was the first exhibition to address the two mediums at the same time. The hanging of certain sections more clearly underscored the link between the two techniques, transcending the distinction between the exhibition of photographs, on the one hand, and the festival of films on the other: the Soviet section, designed by Lissitzky and Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, presented film stills from Russian productions of the '20s and films in viewfinders alongside photographic prints—thus beginning cinema's migration into the traditional exhibition space. In the hanging of his section, Moholy-Nagy used a number of resources from film montage, envisioning it as a storyboard. Two publications were printed in conjunction with the exhibition, although neither constituted the official publication: one on photography, *Es kommt der neue Fotograf!* (Here comes the new photographer!) by Werner Gräff, the other on cinema, *Filmgegner von heute—Filmfreunde von Morgen* (Film haters today, film lovers tomorrow), by Richter (figs. 13, 14).[35]

As Gustaf Stotz, *Fifo*'s director, pointed out, the exhibition differed fundamentally from the usual international photography shows organized each year here and there, while happily leaving it to the gentlemen art historians to argue about whether or not photography and film should be part of the vast domain of "art."[36] That question, Stotz pointed out, in response to *Fifo*, went well beyond the circle of art historians to include writers, philosophers, and artists themselves. When in the early '30s Benjamin described a cinematic model that would affect all the arts, the idea was no longer new—there were numerous echoes of it elsewhere, including in the artwork of the avant-gardes: in the filmmaker Eisenstein's conceptions of cinema as an extension of painting, or Hausmann's first photomontage from 1920, entitled *Cinéma synthètique de la peinture* (Synthetic cinema of painting) as a way to announce the broadening of painting by means borrowed from film—in this case, montage.[37] Beyond painting or photography, no

artistic discipline would escape the contamination of the cinematic model, from the idea of the architectural promenade by Le Corbusier to that of the moving sculpture by Brancusi. This shift extended itself more generally to the overall hybridization of techniques and disciplines across the arts, not just with cinema. Thus the photography of the period also held sway as a literary paradigm: in 1924, Blaise Cendrars chose the title *Kodak (Documentaire)* for his collection of short poems looking like newspaper clippings; in 1928, in the journal *Novyi lef* (New left), under the guidance of Rodchenko, photography and its documentary character were erected as a model for literature called *factography*.[38] This porosity of the medium in relation to other disciplines is sharply revealed in the emergence of new terms featuring the word photography—"photomontage," which appeared after World War I in Dadaist circles, where photography was becoming one element of a new mechanical art not unlike engineering. Or "typophoto," a term coined by Moholy-Nagy in 1925 to designate a new visual language that would fully combine the image and the letter, photography and typography.

After the initial idea of film as projected "moving photography," which was found in the writings of critics at the turn of the nineteenth century, the interwar period saw the emergence of more complex questions and a more fruitful interdisciplinary exchange. The era produced a significant number of photographers lured by the cinematic experience. Without compiling an exhaustive list, and limiting ourselves to photographers represented in the Walther Collection, let us mention Moholy-Nagy and Man Ray, both the creators of so many experimental films in the '20s and '30s; Henri Cartier-Bresson, maker of two activist films, in 1937 and 1944, who said that cinema had taught him to see; Alexandr Hackenschmied, who would

fig. 16 Paul Strand. *City Hall Park, New York*. 1915. Photogravure, 8 ½ × 4 ⅛" (21.6 × 10.5 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Anonymous gift. © Aperture Foundation Inc., Paul Strand Archive

fig. 15 Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler. *Manhatta*. 1921. Still from 35mm film, black and white, silent, 9 min. The Museum of Modern Art, Department of Film. © Aperture Foundation Inc., Paul Strand Archive

go from Europe to the United States and from photography to cinema; but also Richter, Roh, Leni Riefenstahl, Maurice Tabard, the Thermersons, and many others. To these names we would have to add collaborations between photographers and filmmakers, such as Rodchenko and Vertov in the Soviet Union, Jean Painlevé and Eli Lotar in France, and Krull and Ivens, as cited earlier. On the other side of the Atlantic, though examples were more rare, we must mention Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler, who together in 1920 made *Manhatta*; Strand later pursued the cinematic experience as part of the Nykino collective in the '30s. Shot in stills, with subjects that had already been extensively treated by the photography of the time (the skyline of the port of New York, pedestrians on Wall Street and in City Hall Park, rooftops and smoke) by Strand himself as well as by Alfred Stieglitz (figs. 15, 16), *Manhatta* appears to be an extension of the photographic aesthetic by means of the moving image. A critic of the time described the film as "superbly photographic and not afraid to show it."[39] Never had the cinema seemed more deserving of the name "moving photography."

One of the strong concepts of the avant-garde was the understanding that photography and film could be used to represent the world. The observation is clearly stated by Moholy-Nagy in 1925 in the first line of his introduction

to his manifesto, *Malerei, Fotografie, Film*: "in the exact mechanical procedures of photography and film we possess an expressional means for representation which works incomparably better than did the manual procedures of the representational painting we have known hitherto."[40] For Moholy-Nagy, film, particularly in the realm of movement and light, extended and amplified research conducted with photography—which was the point of departure of his reflection and remained his main preoccupation. For each time the question arose of the relationship between photography and film, Moholy-Nagy recalled the preexistence of the photographic over the cinematic.

For certain critics of the time, on the other hand, the photograph would be freed from the pictorial model only to fall under the influence of a new model, now cinematic. In their writings, the relationship of paternity between the photograph, a hundred-year-old medium, and the cinema, poised to become the major art form of the century, seems to be reversed. As the French art critic Waldemar George wrote in 1930, in an article central to modern photography in France, "the rehabilitation of photography is the work of the filmmaker."[41] This remark can only be understood in light of another idea George mentioned in the same article: namely, that after being invented a century ago, photography would only finally be discovered in all its artistic possibility in the contemporary era, an idea that Moholy-Nagy had already expressed in *Malerei, Fotografie, Film* in 1925 and that would become a leitmotif of the photographic avant-gardes of the period. For George, the increasing artistic legitimacy of cinema, notably in France, would reflect well on photography, according it a new youthfulness and a new modernity.

An extension of this idea was the thesis developed shortly thereafter by the critic Jean Vetheuil in an article entitled "*Renouveau du cinéma*" (The revival of cinema): "Cinema has doubly influenced photography. With the art of increasing camera angles, showing the power of close-ups, the power of suggestion of moving objects, the use of double exposures, caches, blurs, distortions, while perfecting the negative supports and also educating the masses, teaching them to have a taste for these effects."[42] The influence was so profound that, for Sigfried Kracauer in the early '30s, it was no longer possible for photography to claim its autonomy without running the risk of looking outdated and irrelevant. To stay modern, this immobile model had to imitate the cinematic paradigm, becoming more mobile and dynamic: photography, "when claiming its autonomy,"[43] appeared to be a form in the process of becoming historic. "It is detached slowly from the present to take on an outmoded appearance. In this, it is similar to the railroad, which is to the plane what photography is to film … today we are detached from the rails in the same way that we are detached from the immobility once indispensable to the camera."[44]

Translated from the French by Jeanine Herman

NOTES

1. See esp. Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1990) and *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2000). On the culture of Weimar see Patrice Peto, *Joyless Streets: Women and Melodramatic Representation in Weimar Germany* (Princeton: at the University Press, 1989).

2. *Années folles*, Roaring Twenties, and *wilden Jahre* are the accepted expressions characterizing this period of the 1920s.

3. Siegfried Kracauer, "Kult der Zerstreuung," *Frankfurter Zeitung*, March 4, 1926, Eng. trans. as "Cult of Distraction: On Berlin's Picture Palaces" in Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, ed. and trans. Levin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 323–29.

4. Ibid.

5. Kracauer, "Die Photographie," *Frankfurter Zeitung*, October 28, 1927, Eng. trans. as "Photography" by Levin in *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 3 (Spring 1993):421–36.

6. Peto, "Perceptions of Difference: Woman as Spectator and Spectacle," in *Women in the Metropolis: Gender and Modernity in Weimar Culture*, ed. Katharina von Ankum (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 49.

7. Walter Benjamin, "L'œuvre d'art à l'époque de sa reproduction mécanisée," in *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, Jahrgang V (1936), Eng. trans. in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Levin (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 53.

8. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 394.

9. Benjamin, "Ober einige Motive bei Baudelaire," *Zeitschrift fur Sozialforschung*, January 1940, Eng. trans. as "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt and Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 175.

10. See Olivier Lugon, "Le marcheur: Piétons et photographes au sein des avant-gardes," *Études photographiques*, November 8, 2000, pp. 68–91.

11. On the relationships between certain modern literary forms and the photographic paradigm see Andreas Huyssen, *Modernist Miniatures: Literary Snapshots of Urban Spaces*, PMLA 122, no. 1 (January 2007):27–42.

12. Fernand Léger, "Les réalisations picturales actuelles," *Les Soirées de Paris*, no. 25 (1914), Eng. trans. as "Recent Achievements in Contemporary Painting" in Léger, *The Function of Painting*, trans. Alexandra Anderson (New York: Viking, 1973), p. 4.

13. Aleksandr Rodchenko, "*Puti sovremennoi fotografii,*" *Novyi lef* no. 9 (1928):31–39, Eng. trans. as "The Paths of Contemporary Photography" in *Aleksandr Rodchenko, Experiments for the Future: Diaries, Essays Letters, and Other Writings*, trans. Jamey Gambrell, ed. Alexander A. Lavrentiev (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2005), p. 209.

14. Ibid., p. 211.

15. Some of these ideas are expressed in the French Romantic painter Eugène Delacroix's *Journal*, in particular an entry from September 1, 1859.

16. Rodchenko, "The Paths of Contemporary Photography," p. 210.

17. Germaine Krull, quoted in Kim Sichel, *Germaine Krull, Photographer of Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1999), p. 67.

18. László Moholy-Nagy, "Fotoplastische Reklame," *Offset, Buch und Werbekunst*, 1926, repr. in *Moholy Nagy: Compositions lumineuses, 1922–1943*, ed. Ute Eskildsen and Alain Sayag (Paris: Editions du Centre Pompidou, 1995), p. 190.

19. Noam Elcott, "Darkened Rooms: A Genealogy of Avant-Garde Filmstrips from Man Ray to the London Film-Makers' Co-op and Back Again," *Grey Room* 30 (Winter 2008):6–37.

20. Jan Tschichold, "Fotografie und Typografie," *Die Form* 7 (1928), trans. in Christopher Phillips, ed., *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913–1940* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989), p. 123.

21. Both César Domela's and Raoul Hausmann's texts appeared in the context of the exhibition on photomontage organized at the Berlin Staatliche Kunstbibliothek in April and May 1931. The former was published in *De Reclame*, Amsterdam, May 1931, pp. 211–15, and is trans. in Phillips, ed., *Photography in the Modern Era*, pp. 305–8; the latter appeared in *a bis z*, May 1931, pp. 61–62, trans. in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, ed. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 651–53.

22. See Lugon, "Series, Sequences, and Contact Sheets," in *O olho Fotografico: Marcel Gautherot e seu tempo*, ed. Heliana Angotti-Slagueiro (São Paulo: Museu de Arte Brasileira—Fundação Armando Alvares Penteado, 2007), p. 399.

23. Kurt Korff, "Die illustrierte Zeitschrift," 1927, trans. as "The Illustrated Magazine" in Kaes, Jay, and Dimendberg, *Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, pp. 646–47.

24. Johannes Molzahn, "Nicht mehr sehen! Lesen!" *Das Kunstblatt* 12, no. 3 (March 1928), trans. as "Stop Reading! Look!" in ibid., pp. 648–49.

25. Moholy-Nagy, "From Pigment to Light," *Telehor* 1, no. 2 (1936): 30–36.

26. Lincoln Kirstein, "Photographs of America: Walker Evans," in Walker Evans, *American Photographs*, 1938 (reprint ed. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2012), p. 193.

27. Moholy-Nagy, *Malerei, Fotografie, Film*, Bauhausbücher series (Munich: Albert Langen Verlag, 1925), trans. as *Painting, Photography, Film* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1969), p. 5.

28. Cornelius Partsch, "That Weimar Jazz," *New England Review* 23, no. 4 (Fall 2002):182.

29. Some of the images used by Erich Mendelsohn were made by the Danish photographer Knud Lönberg-Holm. See fig. 10.

30. Michele Stavagna, "Image and the Space of the Modern City in Eric Mendelsohn's 'Amerika: Bilderbuch eines Architekten,'" available online at http://e-pub.uni-weimar.de.

31. El Lissitzky, quoted in Wolfgang Jacobsen and Werner Sudendorf, eds., *Metropolis: A Cinematic Laboratory for Modern Architecture* (London and Stuttgart: Axel Menges, 2000), p. 9.

32. See Phillips, "Twenties Photography: Mastering Urban Space," in Jean Clair, ed., *The 1920s: Age of the Metropolis* (Montreal: Musée des Beaux-Arts, 1991).

33. Man Ray, quoted in Philippe-Alain Michaud, "Brancusi filme," in *Brancusi, film, photographie: Images sans fin*, ed. Quentin Bajac, Clément Chéroux, and Michaud (Paris: Centre Pompidou, Le Point du jour, 2011), pp. 33–39.

34. Henri Bergson, *L'Évolution créatrice* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1994), pp. 301–2.

35. See Timothy O. Benson and Michaud, eds., *Hans Richter. La Traversée du siècle* (Metz: Centre Pompidou–Metz, 2013).

36. Gustaf Stotz, "Werkbund-Austellung 'Film und Foto,' Stuttgart 1929," *Das Kunstblatt* 13, no. 5 (May 1929), repr. in *La Photographie en Allemagne. Anthologie de textes, 1919–1939*, ed. Lugon (Nîmes: Éditions Jacqueline Chambon, 1997), pp. 78–80.

37. The location of this photomontage is unknown, but it is reproduced in Michel Giroud, ed., *Raoul Hausmann. "Je ne suis pas un photographe"* (Paris: Éditions du Chêne, 1975), p. 35.

38. Leah Dickerman, "The Fact and the Photograph," in "Soviet Factography: A Special Issue," *October* 118 (2006):132–52.

39. Gilles Mora and Theodore E. Stebbins Jr., *Charles Sheeler. Une modernité radicale* (Paris: Seuil, 2002), p. 121.

40. Moholy-Nagy, *Malerei, Fotografie, Film*, p. 6.

41. Waldemar George, "Photographie, vision du monde," *Arts et métiers graphiques* no. 16 (1929–30), repr. in Dominique Baqué, *Les Documents de la modernité. Anthologie de textes sur la photographie de 1919 à 1939* (Nîmes: Éditions Jacqueline Chambon, 1993), p. 50.

42. Jean Vétheuil, "Considerations sur l'évolution de la photographie," *Photographie, Arts et métiers graphiques*, Paris, 1935, repr. in ibid., p. 87.

43. Kracauer, quoted in Lugon, "La Photographie mise en espace. Les expositions didactiques en Allemagne, 1920–1930," *Études photographiques* no. 5 (November 1998), available online at http://etudesphotographiques.revues.org/168?lang=en.

44. Ibid.