

Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band: 26 (2011)

Artikel: Modernity : the troubled trope
Autor: Elsaesser, Thomas
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-389645>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 31.03.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Modernity: The Troubled Trope

Thomas Elsaesser

The essay argues that the term Modernism, since the 1970s, has to be seen within a divided semantic field of force, where Modernism, Modernisation and Modernity connote different approaches and even embody opposed world views in the face of the changes and transformation that the idea of the “modern” wants to signal. In particular, a number of distinct tropes of “modernity” can be identified, such as “the metropolis and modern life” (taking its cue from Walter Benjamin), “the cinematic city” (focused on the impact of moving pictures on urban lifestyles, questions of gender and consumption) and the “history of vision” trope which, following Michel Foucault’s disciplinary regimes, argues that modernity is characterised by the soft, but coercive and regulatory powers of vision. Reviewing these tropes from the perspective of cinema studies, and its renewed investigation of “early cinema” and the pre-history of cinema, the essay comes to the seemingly paradoxical conclusion that in these particular fields at least, the most exciting aspects of twentieth-century modernity from our contemporary situation are not necessarily visual, while the most pertinent thinking about the visual today leads us beyond the twentieth into the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Modernism – Modernisation – Modernity

My essay – for whose level of abstraction and lack of specificity I apologize in advance – wants to make an intervention to our volume at the meta-level, where we allow ourselves to look once more at the very terms that underpin our discussion about “The Visual Culture of Modernism.” As the conference prospectus rightly pointed out: “A landslide of innovations in material and media culture brought about . . . new me-

The Visual Culture of Modernism. SPELL: Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature 26. Ed. Deborah L. Madsen and Mario Klarer. Tübingen: Narr, 2011. 21-40.

thods of representation and reproduction. Consequently, ‘the visual’ received multilayered attention in innovative artistic expression, reading, and theorizing.” Before we zoom in on the “visual” in this conjuncture and configuration, I want to pull back a little and challenge this “consequently” in the sentence just quoted, by focusing first on the modernism/modernisation/modernity debate,¹ as it impinges on the various discourses of “material and media culture.”² At the forefront of this “landslide” have been consumer culture and the lure of the commodity, next to the cinema and life in the metropolis, as well as neurasthenia, trauma, fatigue and other pathologies of the nervous system and the psyche, associated with the modern age, the latter sometimes referred to as “neural modernism” (see Taussig) – in other words, aspects that exceed the visual and encompass not only capitalism and technology, but the history of the body and the senses quite generally.

For much of the 1950s and 1960s, the first two terms of the triad “modernism, modernisation, modernity” were seen as antagonistic. Modernism designated the high-culture critique and ultimate rejection of what modernisation stood for: the technologically driven, capitalist modes of consumption and leisure, responsible for creating a mass-culture whose outwardly most striking sign was the cinema, with its immense and near-universal popularity, at least since the end of WW I (see Charney and Schwarz). The sudden introduction of the third term—that of “modernity” – signalled the moment when modernism and modernisation seemed ready for a truce of sorts, prepared to leave behind, not the questions, but some of the answers that these two terms once were meant to provide.

¹ Historians tend to mean by *modernisation* the twin processes of urbanisation and industrialisation, including broadly based improvements in sanitation, hygiene and universal education typical of the late nineteenth century. Sociologists in the tradition of Max Weber see modernisation across the twin processes of secularisation and rationalisation, and see it set in with the Reformation, while for political theory, modernisation has meant the spread of liberal democracy and the application of basic human rights, usually coupled to the consolidation of the nation state. Modernisation thus implies quite divergent time-scales and time-frames (see Black). *Modernism*, on the other hand, as a literary and artistic episteme, is much more tightly conceived around the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, associated with a number of distinct but interlocking avant-garde movements, such as Impressionism, Fauvism, Cubism, Futurism, Dada and Surrealism, and although benefiting from urbanisation and technologies of communication, is often the declared enemy of rationalisation, rediscovers “magic” and the occult, and tends to be either suspicious of liberal democracy or actually favour versions of dictatorship (see, for instance, Norris).

² On the concept and emergence of “material culture” in the humanities, as it migrates from anthropology, see Buchli.

Although “modernism” and “modernisation” are semantic fields that refer to European cultural life roughly between the 1870s and the end of WW II, it is fairly clear that the terms of the debate that pitted them against each other belong primarily to the post-war period. While the etymology of “modern” takes us back to the 1490s, i.e. the beginning of the Renaissance, and tends throughout the subsequent centuries to pit the “ancients” against the “moderns,” the term only acquired its connotations of radicality and rupture in the late nineteenth century (famously, both Baudelaire and Rimbaud used the term in our present sense). On the other hand, the distinction between “modernism” and “modernisation” (and the terms’ increasing polarisation beyond the disciplinary gap between, say, art history and sociology) was promoted inside the academy and put into wider circulation mostly after 1945, while “modernity,” as a separate term, would seem to have been a creation of the 1970s and 1980s, thanks chiefly to the “rediscovery,” in the English speaking world, of the writings of Walter Benjamin, followed by a quasi-universal reception, re-interpretation and appropriation of his thinking.³

Thus, the term “modernity” is anything but unambiguous. It came to acquire its present-day meaning and intellectual traction because it was itself a compromise formation, emerging as it did at the end of the post-68 period, in the struggle over what was critical theory and what was progressive practice in culture, politics and the arts. It offered a solution in the antagonism between modernism and “modernisation,” because it bridged the ideological gap between the “high modernism” of early twentieth-century literary studies and art history (generally technophobe and elitist), and “modernisation” as used by sociologists in the wake of Max Weber, generally acknowledging the technologically driven and bureaucratically implemented changes in industrialised and capitalist societies, which included technology and popular culture. “Modernity” is thus Janus-faced, in that it partakes in the engineering ethos of assemblage and constructivism, it identifies mobility (motor car, train, ocean liner and airplane) as key phenomena of everyday life, and it recognises that mass production has led to the commodity status of all activities and services – including art and entertainment. But “modernity” also still resonates with the countervailing critique of some of these tendencies and developments, by highlighting – be it from a Marxist or phenomenological perspective – the fragmentation,

³ An influential text in the Marxist tradition was Berman. For a definition and broader application of the concept of “modernity” as I use it here in the context of the reception of Walter Benjamin, see Osborne. A more apocalyptic interpretation of modernity can be found in the writings of Zygmunt Bauman, e.g. *Liquid Modernity*.

alienation and anomie of the individual in the crowd, and above all, the shock to the senses and trauma to the body that resulted from perceptual overload. It was to counter and compensate for this overload, so the argument went, that the urban masses preferred sensation, distraction and surface stimuli as provided by the cinema, over concentration, contemplation and introspection as required by literature and the traditional fine art forms.

Key thinkers of this Janus-faced modernity were the intellectuals of Weimar Germany, besides Walter Benjamin also Siegfried Kracauer, both philosophically trained intellectuals, who themselves built on a previous generation of sociologists and critics such as Max Weber, Georg Simmel and Walter Rathenau: all of them rediscovered, and rescued from near-oblivion in the 1970s, not least because they seemed to keep an open mind and have an eye and ear for popular culture. The shift of intellectual pedigree also suited academic politics, as it tried to loosen the grip on academic discourse of two generations of French intellectuals, from Sartre and Merleau-Ponty to Claude Levi-Strauss, Roland Barthes and Jacques Lacan, freeing the post-68 generation from the harsher strictures of their task masters T.W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, without becoming entirely unfaithful to their critical legacy. Against the severe negativity of Adorno's high modernism, Kracauer and Benjamin's often difficult relationship to this Frankfurt School figurehead gave the latter a certain valuable "outsider" status.

But the reliance on Benjamin for this version of modernity had another consequence: it tied modernity to the metropolis. Thanks to Benjamin's keen sense of place and moment in the observations about his Berlin childhood, his affinity with both Paris surrealism and Moscow futurism, his essays about Baudelaire, Proust, Kafka and Brecht, and his more philosophical-materialist "Passagenwerk" project on Paris in the nineteenth century, that is, thanks to this powerful intellectual, but also political input, the conjunction "modernity/ metropolis" came to signal epoch-defining changes in consciousness and mental life, shifts in perception and sensory attention, which in turn challenged century-old concepts of linearity and temporal succession. By breaking up cause-and-effect chains, it introduced – besides the ideas of trauma and shock – notions of chance and risk, of the moment and the instantaneous, but also of the fleeting, the transient and the evanescent.

If I am right to argue that modernity came to the fore in the 1970s, then it owes its widespread use to the dominant term of the 1980s, namely postmodernism. Postmodernism felt the need to construct for itself a new genealogy and pedigree, which marked its self-description as "coming after" rather than being "against." Replacing both modernism and modernisation, "modernity" came to mean what postmodernism

saw itself as inheriting, or rather – from its own vantage point – what it was coming to terms with was “modernity” rather than modernism. Modernity bridged the old antagonism while not effacing the conflicts and issues that had given rise to them. In particular, the emphasis of sight (where modernity equals visibility, rather than the culture of writing and script),⁴ combined with the location of the city (modernity equals mobility and process within a given space and its multi-directional articulations), provided an alternative strategy to also keeping in mind the *political* tensions between elite and mass-culture, capitalism and socialism, the artist and the engineer, craft skills and techné versus industrial technology and mass production.⁵

Modernity, it seems, was able to have this mediating or even transcending role, because the term encompasses the now familiar associations of the city with a whole range of characteristics, including the cinema. The metropolis quickly came to stand for more than an accumulation of people in an urban settlement serving as a centre of commerce and trade. Besides the shifts in perception and sensory attention just mentioned, it even foreshadowed such “digital” concepts as random access and parallel processing. In this fashion, the complex “modernity/metropolis” helped validate the emergence of different modes of orientation (no longer merely upright and frontal), of a thinking in processes and becomings, of a way of life that requires new perceptual skills and cognitive habits, including the reflexes of improvisation and rapid reaction, which positively register as “the urban experience” and its “attention economy,” or are coded negatively as “urban anomie” and “cultural amnesia.”

Modernity, rather than modernism, is in this context associated with the primacy of the eye, with vision as the modern master-sense, across the various scopic regimes of modernity, and accompanied among philosophers by the different anti-Cartesian critiques of ocular-centrism that Martin Jay so painstakingly analysed in his study *Downcast Eyes*. Across the central perspective projection from Alberti’s open window, to Descartes’ optics; from topographical models in Dutch art to the embedded / embodied eye of the Baroque, from the kinds of somatic perception (which, according to Jonathan Crary, surfaced in the nineteenth century across the different “techniques of the observer”) to Foucault’s revival of the Panopticon, Jay’s book traces a rich history of a

⁴ The most detailed historical tracking of the rise of the visual as pre-eminent in the definition of Modernity can be found in Jay and Crary.

⁵ See in this context the influential article by Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology.”

lustful obsession with and a deep-seated paranoia about vision, that he grounded not in the antagonism between the fine arts and popular culture, but in Western philosophy and thinking. At the same time, the semantic clusters around “visuality and the city” also inspired major revaluations of the historical avant-gardes, especially surrealism (as in the work of Rosalind Krauss on the “optical unconscious,” and in Hal Foster’s *Convulsive Beauty*), but also futurism (Strauven’s work on the re-evaluation of Marinetti), and – in the German context – a renewed interest in Berlin dada, with hitherto neglected figures such as Hanna Höch coming to the fore (see Lavin).

The Rise of the Cinematic City

It was within this field of inquiry and the concept of the modern metropolis, that the cinema – especially in the paradigm of the cinematic city – found a new respectability. The modern metropolis gave it both its historical ground as primarily an urban phenomenon, as well as its richest metaphorical tissue of references, spreading outward from this or that film to the cinema as an episteme.⁶

At the metaphorical level, and thanks again to Benjamin’s reading of Paris as a multi-layered allegory and palimpsest, these references to the cinema refracted in the city, and vice versa, as the new lens of visuality, tended to group themselves around the backdrop provided by the new department stores, like La Samaritaine, and the emergent practice of window-shopping along the new boulevards, created in the wake of the “Haussmannisation” of central Paris. Revolutionary though Haussmann’s creative destruction of medieval Paris proved to be, its language of French neo-classicism was soon challenged by much more radical urbanist designs, if we think of Le Corbusier’s plans for Paris, as formulated in his 1925 *Plan Voisin*, where he proposed to bulldoze most of central Paris north of the Seine, and replace it with his sixty-storey cruciform towers, placed in an orthogonal street grid and park-like green space, much on the model of how US planners had begun to develop American cities from the turn of the century onwards, in order to deal with cramped housing and slum conditions (see Fishman).

The historical ground of the cinematic city favoured cities, which were also centres of filmmaking: First it was Paris, then New York; Berlin followed in the 1920s and ’30s, then London during the War, and

⁶ Three books in particular are helping to mark out the scope and boundaries of this trope: Clarke; Webber and Wilson; Shiel and Fitzmaurice.

once again, Paris in the 1950s and '60s, after which came Los Angeles, then Tokyo and since the 1990s, the mega-cities of Asia – Hong Kong, Taipeh, Mumbai – and Latin America – Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro.

For much of the first half of the twentieth century, city planners, as well as modernist artists and philosophers divided into those who favoured spatial ensembles of abstract forms and the separation of elements (holding to Baudelaire's famous dictum from *Les Fleurs du Mal*: "je hais le mouvement qui déplace les lignes"), against those eager to implement – whether in the built environment, on canvas or in musical composition – a space of dynamic interaction, of mixture and mingling, of lines dancing and paths crossing.

The cinema, on the other hand, did not feel similarly constrained. Predicated on movement, and proud of it, the cinema could as easily take the God's eye view, from the top of a skyscraper, as it delighted in ground-level strolling and urban *dérives*. Cinema – the "elephant in the room" for much of twentieth-century art history, literary theory and aesthetics – was given the code name "modernity," in order to have a place at the table. This place at the table was once more laid out with implements taken from Benjamin, and especially from his re-reading of Baudelaire. As a consequence, many of these metaphoric constructions of cinema around modernity are now referenced back to such archetypal city figures of split subjectivity as Baudelaire's flaneur turned Hollywood private detective, the prostitute turned femme fatale, the gambler turned gangster and the rag-picker turned street-hustler. These icons of the nineteenth-century city and twentieth-century movies conveniently lead from literary text and painterly motifs, to movies both French and "made in Hollywood."

From the perspective of architecture, the refracting links to the cinema were more diffuse. As already suggested, movies did make palpable and rendered legible some of the key concepts of twentieth-century planning and urbanist designs, and not only in films like *The Fountainhead* and *The Belly of an Architect*, or Jacques Tati's *Mon Oncle* and *Playtime*. Whether inadvertently or not, the cinema has always excelled at highlighting as the ideological battlegrounds of the modern city, such unresolved tensions and dynamic lines of force as those that centre on ground-level face-to-face human interaction (i.e. the Little Italy of New York in Scorsese's films or Los Angeles' Chinatown, the Parisian "quartiers" of French cinema, the Berlin "Kietz" films) contrasted with those that take us to God's eye views of order and control, with helicopter shots over Manhattan or Los Angeles, and Batman's flights through the skyscraper canyons of Gotham. Hollywood as easily celebrated the geometry of International Modernism's utopian aspirations, manifest in reflecting glass and soaring concrete and steel, say in Hitchcock's *North*

by *Northwest*, as it glamorised in the noir films from the 1940s to the '70s, the back-alleys and tenements, the pizza parlours and parking garages – quite accurately reflecting, in the urbanist discourse, the polarities of topographical elevation (highways slicing through residential blocks) and ethnic (or neighbourhood) sedimentation, as one finds them in Jane Jacobs' diatribes against large-scale developers and urban planners such as Robert Moses, in her book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), or as documented in Marshall Berman's *All That is Solid Melts Into Air* (1982). In Hollywood movies, on the other hand, the rigid grids of Manhattan looked as majestic and beautiful as the gritty concrete jungle of film noir proved visually beguiling and fatally attractive. Hollywood, as a mode of production, is all order and planning, but in its *noir* narratives it favoured gambling and risk, chance and contingency as the driving forces of its own kind of libidinal modernity. By the end of the twentieth century, one could note almost a reversal, where Manuel Castells' idea of "the space of flows" as typical of the network society, and Marc Augé's "non-spaces of hypermodernity" – as indeed Bernard Tschumi's architecture – seem more inspired by the movies than the movies taking their cue from architects and city planners.⁷

Be that as it may, references to the city, to the metropolis and to urban life have created one of the densest discursive clusters for putting the cinema at the heart of some of the most crucial processes of social transformation, by joining technology and capitalism to the human body and the senses. *The Cinematic City* as the central conceptual metaphor of modernity and trope of an embodied visuality (as opposed to the disembodied gaze of modernism) has not only had a profound impact on how we have come to view the interrelation between the modernism in the arts and modernisation of life and life-styles. In the case of film studies, it bridged the gap between the "cinema-as-art-and avant-garde" position and the "cinema-as-mass-medium and popular-entertainment" position. The association of modernity with the city, and of the city with the cinema has helped to locate the cinema as an object of study within a broader "culturalist" perspective, extending film studies' appeal to other disciplines within the Humanities and Social Sciences, such as gender studies, and significantly shifting the terms of debate about the spatial turn in art history, cultural geography, public policy and many other fields, where the physical environment, our collective existence and our cognitive-sensory experiences intersect.

Furthermore, the Cinematic City did not only displace the various discourses of self-definition and autonomy across the disciplines. The

7. Castells; Tschumi; Augé.

trope also cancelled the residual debt that film studies still owed to literary models and to art-historical assumptions about authors, texts, movements, genres, influence – just as surely as it modified high modernist notions of medium specificity, anti-illusionism and formalism as the sole indices of a progressive film practice. Perhaps the debt now even flows the other way, when we think of how central the cinematic city has become to cultural studies, and how central cultural studies are to the future of literature as a discipline.

For instance, the sort of archaeology of the cinema that we now associate with the New Film History, which has tracked the cinema as a popular medium across practices and institutions such as vaudeville and music halls, across event-scenarios such as World Fairs and Hale's Tours, across technologies of assisted sight such as panoramas, dioramas and stereoscopy, this archaeology of imagined futures usually justifies itself by claiming to offer a better understanding of that core aspect of modernity, namely the "urban experience" and its intertwining with the various image cultures, their distinct gendered spaces and visual displays, mostly based on photographic, projected, printed, but above all moving images.⁸

Because of these contending forces, both inside the various academic departments in the Humanities, fighting to preserve their distinctiveness, while having to cooperate with the social sciences as well as the neuro-sciences in order to ensure their survival, the concept of "modernity" has become the big tent for all those forces unleashed in the wake of industrialisation and the rise of an urban middle class between the 1870s and the 1920s. "Modernity" means speed and dislocation, new modes of transport and communication, along with such diverse disciplinary regimes of the body as standardising timetables and regulating working hours, introducing sports as spectacle and fingerprints as forensic evidence. "Modernity" is now the agent that brought an unprecedented expansion of leisure and consumption, and it made women enter the industrial labour force in large and indispensable numbers. It created the masses of the urban poor, but also the white-collar worker, with upwardly mobile social aspirations. It fostered the proud militancy of the working class, but it also invented the blasé intellectual with an aristocratic disdain for bourgeois self-discipline and the virtues of hard work. Thus the nominalism of the word entailed an all-powerful but also problematic agency, more specific than the

⁸ Besides the essays collected in Charney and Schwartz, see also Rabinowitz. For the postmodern in architecture, see Venturi, Izenour and Brown, which celebrates the urban environment as theme-park and the city as spectacle.

“Zeitgeist,” but less precise than capitalism, the class struggle, or any of the other classically determining forces in human history.

In an obvious sense, the cinema – where active and passive seem to merge, where the eye is predatory and voracious, where objects and subjects reflexively double each other – fits perfectly into the two-faced physiognomy of modernity. Cinema at once *mimetically reproduces* the epiphenomena of modernity, like speed, adventure, ephemeral encounters and intermittence, while also *therapeutically compensating* for these very same epiphenomena, by telling melodramatic stories of men and women in high places and remote locations, or of working class girls abandoned by their city lovers, but redeeming themselves through noble sacrifice. Early cinema’s social melodramas, detective serials, slapstick comedies and chase films all illustrate this conjunction of modernity and the big city, while offering quite old-fashioned moral fables. In many ways, the cinema is not only the extension of these forces, it is also part of the disease, of which it pretends to be the cure.

In other words, the trope of “modernity and visuality” correlates urban life with cinematic space, but also suffuses external reality with subjective states of mind and feeling. Among the associations it now carries are the porous boundaries between subjective anxiety and objective threat (as in the film noir city, from *Phantom Lady* to *Heat*), the reversal of intimate sign and public gesture (as in so many romantic comedies, from *Roman Holiday* to *Notting Hill*), or the mirroring of inside out and outside in (as in *Taxi Driver*), while redefining a fertile tissue of references around gender and space, ethnicity and the community, memory and architecture, desire and anonymity.

The wide acceptance of the term “modernity” as a short-hand for all these aspects did the cinema in general and the new film history concerned with the teens and twenties in particular an invaluable service: it enlarged the scope of the phenomena that could be legitimately studied under the heading of cinema studies (whether or not it was renamed “visual studies”), and it provided an intellectually respectable pedigree of theorists and canonical texts for students to draw on and quote. The Benjaminian frame of reference gave these studies – of movie house architecture and world fairs, of railway journeys and panoramas, of colonial expeditions and modern art primitivism, of wax works and cemetery sculpture, of shopping arcades and forensic photography, of fairground attractions and spiritist séances, of optical toys and taxidermist collections – a philosophically sound, politically progressive and historically informed conceptual framework: sufficiently authoritative and learned to support such disparate lines of inquiry and their objects, sufficiently enigmatic and utopian, to en-

courage extensive commentary as well as sustained empathy and identification (see Russell).

Modernity and Visuality

It is at this point that doubts arise, and questions may have to be asked. I come back to my earlier suggestion, namely that we owe the emergence of these tropes of modernity and visuality, of the cinematic city, to postmodernism, which needed it as a compromise formation for its own agenda, at a time when the debate between high culture modernism (art) and popular culture modernisation (commerce) had become obsolete, and even an obstacle to thinking the present productively.⁹ So the question arises: what happens to concepts such as “modernity,” the “cinematic city” and “visuality,” if even postmodernism itself – the horizon against which we had come to define them – has in turn become a historical marker of limited shelf-life? As postmodernism joins other terms as a mere period idiom, replaced by a term such as globalisation, a plethora of other locutions has emerged, each covering aspects of what used to be understood by modernization / modernism / modernity: creative industries, conver-gence culture, social networks etc do not just name a specific medium or practice, but like the concepts we are concerned with, they suggest a more encompassing set of values, attitudes and world-views. Are these not equally jeopardised in their validity, becoming problematic in their pertinence as *critical categories*, once they shrink to time-bound labels, mainly retained for their patina, within the history of ideas?

This is reminiscent of Ronald M. Buergel and Barbara Noack’s theme-question for *documenta* 12, 2007: “Is modernity our antiquity?” they ask, meaning presumably that “modernity” today is what Greek and Roman antiquity was to the Renaissance, to the French Revolution or to German Romanticism (in Buergel, Schillhammer and Noack, n.p.). It provides both inspiration and pastiche revivals; it is a burden and a legitimating pedigree; it is a retrospective construction for the benefit of those who come after, and also a foundational moment supporting the sense of identity and self-esteem; it can be worn like a mask at the ball of clichés (as Umberto Eco might put it), while its typical characteristics can be repurposed, like *spolia*, i.e. building materials or decorative elements triumphantly or pragmatically incorporated in new work. A visit to any art show or exhibition today produces this recognition

⁹ A good overview can be found in Friedberg.

effect, with the ghosts of Duchamp, Warhol, Beuys, Jasper Johns or Nam Jun Paik hovering over almost every artefact. To quote Buergerl:

It is fairly obvious that modernity, or modernity's fate, exerts a profound influence on contemporary artists. Part of that attraction may stem from the fact that no one really knows if modernity is dead or alive. It seems to be in ruins after the totalitarian catastrophes of the twentieth century (the very same catastrophes to which it somehow gave rise). It seems utterly compromised by the brutally partial application of its universal demands (*liberté, égalité, fraternité*) or by the simple fact that modernity and colonialism went, and probably still go, hand in hand. In short, it seems that we are both outside and inside modernity, both repelled by its deadly violence and seduced by its most immodest aspiration or potential: that there might, after all, be a common planetary horizon for all the living and the dead. (n.p.)

On the other hand, if one agrees that the combination of “modernity and visuality” names the cinema without naming it (what I have called “the elephant in the room”), then one also has to ask: which cinema is one referring to? What under the heading of visuality and visual culture has gradually emerged, is not only a vastly expanded repertoire of practices, habits and crafts, based on images and image-making, using iconic modes of representation for the purpose of persuading and commemorating, of documenting and display. Also in progress is the displacement of classical cinema, understood as the narrative feature film, usually originating either in Hollywood or made according to the Hollywood mode of production. There, the term “visuality” registers a shift of emphasis, also away from European art cinema and experimental cinema, towards what was once called “expanded cinema” and now encompasses the moving image in all its forms and manifestations. It includes instructional films and medical films, advertising films and old surveillance footage, vintage pornography and home movies, newsreel and raw reportage – in short, everything somehow recorded and stored on celluloid, if it is lucky enough to have survived. A concerted effort is under way to re-classify and sort, to re-assemble and rehabilitate the vast archive of moving pictures that the twentieth century has bequeathed to us. Small armies of artists and film-makers are consulting the catalogues of national cinemathèques or raiding the film museums for “fresh” pictures, that is, for hitherto untouched and unseen source material that can be used in found footage films and compilations, producing both poetic testimony of the wonders of the world caught on celluloid, and documenting the changing status of the visual in relation to both material objects and the immateriality of the image. These found footage films or installations often trace the gradual process, whereby images

have absorbed the materiality of both place and time, while objects take on the function of signs, or become mere props waiting for their definitive representation, or are left behind as silent witnesses to their transfiguration into image (see Wees).

As a consequence, the “visuality” of modernity has itself come under attack or is challenged from at least three sides. I shall leave aside the virulent debates and often highly tendentious arguments that have arisen within art history, in response to some art historians feeling that their venerable discipline has been highjacked by visual studies and needs to be rescued from culturalist generalisations and unwarranted comparisons between art and non-art practices, with renewed attention being given to detail, craft, uniqueness and materiality. More generally, the divide seems to involve a return to the “experiential-perceptual” dimension of the encounter between the viewer and the work of art (often going hand in hand with a revival of phenomenology as the privileged philosophical support), in contrast to emphasising meaning – whether philosophical or ideological. A new-found aesthetic value of “presence” is being promoted, which might seem to echo Walter Benjamin’s lament for the loss of aura, but it is now argued across a different philosophical pedigree, drawing on Heidegger, Hannah Arendt and Jean Luc Nancy. Its best-known advocate is, surprisingly enough, not an art historian or visual studies person, but a literary scholar, the German-American Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht.

Within film studies, on the other hand, proponents of a more classic notion of cinema have protested at the idea that the priority now given to vision and visuality (coming after the psychoanalytic paradigm of the look and the gaze), should also attribute such wide-ranging powers of agency to the faculty of sight, not warranted by any serious cognitive study of human perception. Cognitivism and the neuro-sciences suggest that much of our visual data is processed by regions in the brain, whose protocols and schemata are either inborn and “hard-wired,” or have evolved over millennia of human interaction with the environment and the visible world. Film scholars such as David Bordwell thus distrust any suggestion that the increase of visual stimuli since the late nineteenth century – and one of the core tenets of the “Modernity and visuality” paradigm – of which the cinema is both a product and an active contributor, should have led to a significant or measurable change in modes of perception and the human sensorium. If the general argument about human perception being conditioned and adaptable is not in doubt, scepticism arises when it is plotted across a relatively short time span, such as a decade or two (Bordwell 140-145).

Bordwell's objections to what he calls the "History of Vision" approach are well-argued, but only within the frame of reference he has set up for himself over the years. But his muscular language and vivid turns of phrase, such as his proven skill to brand his opponents with a catchy moniker (after "Grand Theory of Everything" and "SLAB Theory," it is now his turn to denounce the "Modernity Thesis"), along with the wealth of example and the degree of detail he can draw upon, make Bordwell a formidable combatant. He scores rhetorical points against his colleagues from the University of Chicago, notably Tom Gunning and Miriam Hansen, whose locutions – "the cinema of attractions," "vernacular modernism" – broadly subscribe to a Benjaminian version of modernity, which makes both "shock and trauma" (as a consequence of sensory overload), "attraction and magic" (popular, rather than high culture resistance to realism and narrative) and "mass-production of the senses" (the cinema as training motor-sensory responses) key elements of the cinema's cultural and cognitive impact in the twentieth century.¹⁰

While Bordwell sees only continuity in viewing habits and backs this up with closely argued analysis of industry practice within Hollywood, the other side requires much looser formulations and generalities in order to keep the tent big, while not wanting to forego the (Foucault-inspired) idea of a distinct episteme, of rupture and rapid change for the period in question: the early teens for Gunning, the 1920s and '30s for Hansen. Looking at broader social processes, such as demographics, and tracking how the cinema absorbed other arts, such as dance, or provided templates for the representation of all manner of staged events, they attributed to the cinema an emblematic role and a distinctive, transformative agency, precisely the one already noted and summarised under the heading of "modernity." Bordwell, by sticking to a more restricted notion of cinema as a "window on the world," rather than as the medium which brings the world so close that it enters into our minds and bodies, could afford to argue within classic art-historical premises (in the tradition of Rudolf Arnheim, Ernst Gombrich, Erwin Panofsky), a strategy which not only had the advantage of demonstrating a high degree of internal intellectual coherence across a vast body of works, authors and styles. He also projects a unified vision of cinema, across successive periods, changing technologies and competing national idioms, which conveys – in his hugely popular weblog – an optimistic and always enthusiastic view of cinema as *the art*

¹⁰ For the context of this debate and the meaning of the term "cinema of attractions," see Strauven, *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*.

of the twentieth century: self-confident, self-sustaining and self-sufficient as only a *classical* art can be – quite different from the “crisis thinking” and “criticality” models which characterise anyone operating with the terms “modernity” and “visuality” (Bordwell, “Observations” n.p.). Bordwell, despite calling himself a neo-formalist, is within the mainstream of art history, and, as far as the cinema is concerned, keeps the Renaissance *finestra aperta* as the default configuration firmly in place (hence his abiding interest in “staging in depth”), although he is perfectly capable to argue also within a “Modernist” paradigm, such as his demonstrations of “parametric” and “stereometric” film styles and film forms, which however he sees as “deviations” from the norm, rather than as either normative or symptomatic in their own right.

Scholars of early cinema are, almost by definition, committed to some version of a rupture model of historiography, and so the issue between Bordwell and Gunning, revolving around the likelihood that new technologies of vision, such as the motion picture camera, via close-ups and editing, can radically change or challenge our way of perceiving the physical world, including the way we experience our bodies in space, may seem a dispute between siblings. Behind this disagreement over “visuality,” however, one suspects a more fundamental disagreement that has traversed the humanities, the hermeneutic, the historical and the social sciences, between “culturalists” and “realists,” i.e. the contending positions in the debates which opposed those who consider human nature “constructed” and historically variable, and those who consider most relevant data determining human behaviour innate, genetic or “hard-wired.” In this respect, the “history of vision” debate is something like the local version of the so-called “science wars,” where similar arguments were being polemically aired between the constructionists (such as Bruno Latour) and those more confident that empirical knowledge even in the humanities and social sciences is impervious to cultural bias (Alan Sokal, Norman Levitt).

Yet the debate is also relevant from another perspective, which brings us back to the cinema and the visual. One notable change within film studies over the past two decades has been the quite astonishing attention being paid to sound, along with a new evaluation of its contribution to the cinematic experience as a bodily event and an embodied set of sensations. Usually attributed to technological sound improvements (Dolby, Surround Sound, THX, Sound Design) which are said to have upset many of the hierarchies of traditional cinema, including those between sound and image, the new emphasis on sound has actually cast a completely new light on the so-called silent period of the 1920s, revealing that from its inception, the cinema was rarely silent, and

especially as a cultural phenomenon with mass appeal, its history cannot be written without a much more thorough consideration of the parallel developments in recorded sound, whether one thinks of attempts at synchronisation, which go back to the 1900s, or at the parallel developments in radio and the gramophone industry, with which the cinema – and not only mainstream cinema but also avant-garde cinema – has been intertwined in a common trajectory. If the more recent technological innovations have prepared the ground for a completely transformed articulation of cinematic space in the age of mobile sound devices which is characterised by a new presence and intimacy, but also by a new materiality and plasticity of sound, then it has merely underscored the need to do more research into sound-spaces and sound-scapes in the earlier period. Scholars such as Rick Altman and his student James Lastra, but also the already mentioned Tom Gunning or Richard Abel, have dramatically changed our view of the sound experience of early cinema, and with it, *the soundscape of modernity*, the title of a study by Emily Thompson, who convincingly argues how much of our understanding of modernity is muted by not fully appreciating the presence of sound:

At some point in the early years of the 20th century, the urban public began to view the urban scene as “noise.” Horse hooves, cart wheels, street vendors, all contributed to the sense that the city was unhealthy in its level of noise pollution. In fact, certain New Yorkers sought to enact laws against sound. In 1906, Mrs. Isaac (Julia Barnett) Rice founded the Society for the Suppression of Unnecessary Noise in New York, although admitting herself that most noise was unavoidable. Today, when we overhear all manner of personal conversations shouted through cell phones at the grocery store, while the incessant beep of the check-out scanner forms an ostinato under the Muzak, we may find it difficult to sympathize with the efforts of Mrs. Isaac Rice. We may wonder what the fuss was about in 1927, when outraged New York audiences moaned loudly and waved handkerchiefs in surrender after a performance of American composer George Antheil’s *Ballet Mécanique* that featured real machines. (122)

But I want to end these remarks on a slightly different note, by pointing to yet another aspect of the debate within film studies about modernity and visuality. This would relocate the origins of modernity and visuality not in the urban scene or its picture palaces, nor in the sound-scapes either inside or surrounding the movie houses, but in the world of work and the place of machines, that is, in the modern factory. There, the demands on the body and the senses, through piece work and assembly lines, as well as through time and motion studies, would make the cinema the institution which mimetically reproduces the infernal pace and bodily exertion while also compensating the body and the senses, by

regenerating and replenishing the working men and women's labour power through laughter and distraction, through thrills and tears.

Among the many non-canonical films that are now being excavated from the archives, dating especially from the 1920s and '30s, one can find a surprising amount of material that deals with the adjustment and synchronisation of the human body and different kinds of machine, as well as with the particular conjuncture of hand and eye, vision, grasp and touch. Some of this material has given rise to one of the more sustained artistic investigations into the history of vision machines, considered under the aspect of hand/machine, eye/machine, and eye/hand coordination. I am referring to the films and installations of Harun Farocki, one of the most prominent and sought after installation artists of the present, whose found footage films constantly return to the drama of the human body and the senses, as they interact with the media technologies of vision and surveillance. Focusing on the sites of work and labour in modernity, Farocki's films argue that the history of the twentieth century can be divided into two parts, each part typified by the successive obsolescence of first the hand and then the eye. In the first half of the century the hand is replaced by the machine, which in turn is monitored by the eye. In the second half of the century, since the emergence of the computer, it is the eye that is itself replaced, because all the monitoring tasks are now performed by intelligent eyes: eyes that do not need vision in order to "see" (Farocki). This, however, has a most ironic consequence, when we think of the human body and its senses in relation to images. For it would seem that not only are movies once more fully invested in what used to be called "haptic" images, that is, images which try to elicit sensation of physical proximity and surface tactility; the hand itself is coming back as an organ of perception, now that the sense of touch is increasingly one of the chief ways we interact with images. Images viewed on a touch screens are objects to be pinched and stretched, in order to be acted upon, rather than representations to be looked at up close, observed from a distance, or interpreted as to their meaning.

If the eye/hand eye/machine conjunction, as well as their respective and successive "divisions of labour" at both the work place and the sites of play and leisure, are so important for Farocki, it is because he seems to have discovered in their peculiar asymmetry, but also their mutual interference, a somewhat different archaeology of modernity, now focused on the dialectic of art and labour in the twentieth century, cinema and the factory, explored along the gap that has opened up between hand and eye. He thus examines the pre-history, if you like, of the post-human condition, on the far side of either dystopic technological determinism, or the scenarios of empowerment that used to

go under the name of cyber-culture. Farocki asks the perhaps more self-interested, yet reflexively doubled question: how does this re-alignment of hand and eye position the filmmaker or installation artist as someone precisely working with his eyes and his hands: separating and joining, cutting and editing the physical movement of human beings and inanimate things, while laying bare the inner motion of thought and feeling, attentive to friction and resistance, to touch and to vision? A rag-picker in the Baudelaire-Benjamin sense, or a merely someone monitoring the images of yet another surveillance apparatus.

Farocki's contribution to the debate of modernity and visuality is that he seems to have identified a major shift in our culture and society towards what he calls operational images, that is, images which do not represent but which enact, command, control and effect actions, and thus have a very different status as images from how we usually understand them, especially in the context of art or the cinema, where images are meant to be looked at, or are objects of contemplation, disclosure and revelation. But one could also say that the history of images has now split into two broad strands: not as we usually think, i.e. to record and register on the one hand, and to represent and to project on the other, but either to lie or to act, that is, to be used for purposes of simulation and for purposes of action, to simulate as present something that is absent, or to carry out actions via a proxy or substitute which would be too complicated or too dangerous to carry out in person. And it is to these latter uses of images, rather than the former, that Farocki had dedicated much of his career and to which we may have to pay more attention in the future, especially if we want to understand our past as part of this future.

While I would therefore not wish to suggest that the "Modernity-Visuality" trope has come to the end of its useful life – how could I, in light of the many contributions in this volume, and also when considering the strategic desirability of promoting cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary work within the university? – I nonetheless think it may be time to start thinking seriously about revitalising its premises by expanding its parameters – perhaps even to the point where modernity or modernism was no longer seen (primarily) in terms of "visuality," and where the visuality we find most stimulating today was more properly located in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries than in the twentieth. But this might require an altogether different paradigm for both "visual culture" and "modernism."

References

- Augé, Marc. *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. London: Verso, 1995.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. *Liquid Modernity*. London: Polity, 2000.
- Berman, Marshall. *All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982.
- Black, Cyril. *The Dynamics of Modernization: A Study in Comparative History*. New York: Harper and Row, 1966.
- Bordwell, David. *On the History of Film Style*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998.
- . “Observations on Film Art.” <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/>, last accessed on 20 January 2011.
- Buchli, Victor. *The Material Culture Reader*. Oxford: Berg Publishing, 2002.
- Buergel, Roger, Georg Schillhammer, Ruth Noack, eds. *Documenta 12 Magazine no. 1-3 Reader*. Cologne: Taschen, 2007.
- www.documenta12.de/fileadmin/pdf/press_kit_02-21-06.pdf, last accessed on 20 January 2011.
- Castells, Manuel. *The Network Society*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996.
- Charney, Leo and Vanessa R. Schwartz, eds. *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*. Berkeley: California University Press, 1995.
- Clarke, David, ed. *The Cinematic City*. London: Routledge, 1997.
- Crary, Jonathan. *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1990.
- Farocki, Harun. “Controlling Observation.” In Thomas Elsaesser, ed. *Harun Farocki: Working on the Sight Lines*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004. 289-296.
- Fishman, Robert. *Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century: Ebenezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Le Corbusier*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1982.
- Foster, Hal. *Compulsive Beauty*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1993.
- Friedberg, Anne. *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.
- Gross, Paul R. and Norman Levitt. *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and Its Quarrels With Science*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994.
- Gumbrecht, Hans Ulrich. *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.
- Heidegger, Martin. “The Question Concerning Technology.” In David F. Krell, ed. *Basic Writings*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993. 283-318.

- Jay, Martin. *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.
- Krauss, Rosalind E. *The Optical Unconscious*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1994.
- Lavin, Maud. *Cut With the Kitchen Knife: The Weimar Photomontages of Hannah Hoch*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1993.
- Norris, Christopher. "Modernism." In Ted Honderich, ed. *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995. 583.
- Osborne, Peter, ed. *Walter Benjamin: Modernity*. London: Routledge, 2005.
- Rabinowitz, Lauren. "From Hale's Tours to Star Wars: Virtual Voyages and the Delirium of the Hyper-Real." *Iris* 25 (1998): 133-152.
- Russell, Catherine. "New Media and Film History: Walter Benjamin and the Awakening of Cinema." *Cinema Journal* 43.3 (2004): 81-85.
- Shiel, Mark and Tony Fitzmaurice, eds. *Cinema and the City: Film and Urban Societies in a Global Context*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2009.
- Sokal, Alain and Jean Bricmont. *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science*. London: Picador, 1998.
- Strauven, Wanda, ed. *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008.
- . *Marinetti e il cinema: tra attrazione e sperimentazione*. Udine: Campanotto, 2006.
- Taussig, Michael. *The Nervous System*. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Thompson, Emily. *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900-1933*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2004.
- Tschumi, Bernard. *Architecture and Disjunction*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996.
- Venturi, Robert, Steven Izenour and Denise Brown. *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1972.
- Webber, Andrew and Emma Wilson, eds. *Cities in transition: the moving image and the modern metropolis*. London: Wallflower, 2008.
- Wees, William C. *Recycled Images: The Art and Politics of Found Footage Films*. New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1993.