Walter Ruttmann's Janus-faced View of Modernity: The Ambivalence of Description in *Berlin. Die Sinfonie der Großstadt*

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While it may seem unremarkable that the same self-replicating dynamic of technology that is broadly responsible for shaping modernity also generates film as a byproduct, film has not overlooked this connection. Many early films presented not theatrical narratives, but technological innovations, which emerge as motors of modernity. Works such as the Lumière brothers' *L'arrivée du train* (1895) and shorts by another French film pioneer, Georges Méliès, focused on science, technology, and the speed of movement in a modern age.[1] Despite how its depiction of an oncoming train allegedly caused panic among cinema-goers, a film like *L'arrivée du train* can be viewed as an unambiguous record of technology and movement. In this film, it may well be that a train is simply a train. Yet what happens when a film that aims to depict the social and technological changes of modernity compromises this very ambition due to the way in which it carries out its depiction? In other words, what happens when a film's structuring device does the exact opposite of what its visual core claims to be doing? Viewers must come to terms with this question when confronting Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin. Die Sinfonie der Großstadt* (1927)—the first film to display a deep ambivalence *toward* modernity precisely through understanding itself as testament *to* modernity.

Viewers have commonly assessed Ruttmann's film as an aestheticization of the machine or a fetishized urban spectacle. Within this interpretive framework, *Berlin* is seen to whitewash social difficulties, provide a detached depiction of urban space, and falsify reality through its emphasis of unresolved visual contrasts. Some viewers have castigated the director for making a film with "little aggressive social comment."[2] A recent commentator locates in the film a "sense of detachment [that] characterizes the presentation of human beings and machines," and an "unshakable faith in movement and change as values in themselves."[3] The reception for the most part then condemns the film as a myopically optimistic and essentially conservative effort.

This reading of *Berlin* is not new; it dates from its earliest reviews. Writing in 1927, Siegfried Kracauer expressed his distress at the film, which for him merely described a fragmentary social veneer. Kracauer accused *Berlin* of being content, "die Kontraste ungelöst in sich einzuschlucken,"[4] instead of probing for unity and depth, instead of resolving the tension of its images. But what informs the position from which Kracauer's criticism is leveled? While Kracauer faulted the film for not achieving what the great Russian films accomplished—organizing images around a determined field of *human meaning*—his comment implied something different. Underlying Kracauer's dismissal of *Berlin* is the assumption that social fragmentation is a deceptive covering over a hidden totality of urban society, which he thought must in reality exist beneath any confusing surface appearance of that reality. The aim of film should be to capture such a totality, such a "Weltbild." The aesthetics of fragmentation is the cave, its unresolved, contrastive images the shadows. This view—that avant-garde aesthetics confines itself to a fragmented and subjective standpoint unable to represent the whole of a society—will be familiar to readers of Georg Lukács. For Lukács, only the consciousness of realist artists and their works can grasp a totality, which in times of crisis merely appears as fragmentation.[5] By depicting society as a whole through a realist aesthetic, an artwork should transcend the apparently splintered and confused surface-phenomena; by reflecting a posited objective totality, it comes to terms with a true representation of society. From this perspective—one Kracauer shares with Lukács—Ruttmann's film is too willing to permit unresolved visual contradictions without subordinating them to a settled, finally, realist narrative.

Viewers from the 1920s to the 1990s have thus focused on *Berlin*'s formal structure of montage, its combination of contrastive shots, and its thematic concern with the city's accelerated pace. In this way, critics could dismiss the film without seriously considering its potential for constructing or depicting a unique image of modernity, let alone for reflecting on social problems. Critics acknowledge that the film has some, at least, semi-documentary features, and that its formal dimensions are aesthetically innovative. Nevertheless, in an over-determined display of binary argumentation, they finally conclude that Ruttmann's film is a one-sided, uncritical celebration of a machine aesthetic.

Anton Kaes has recently begun a nuanced revision of the standard reading of *Berlin*.[6] By stressing migration in Ruttmann's film, he suggests that its formal elements of speed and associative images shape the confusion prevailing in a modern era of migrants. I endorse this emphasis on the constructive depiction of historical transitions in *Berlin*. The film is a cinematic monument to modernity and an aesthetic testimony to modernity's inevitability. Furthermore, I claim the film does reflect on social problems in terms of economic disparity and differences in buying power. To replicate the critical gesture of

a one-sided exoneration or denunciation of *Berlin* fails to take stock of the film's contradictions. Ruttmann's film, I contend, is above all deeply *ambivalent* about the processes and effects of modernization that form its subject and organize its structure.

This ambivalence can be appreciated by reviewing Ruttmann's goals with *Berlin*. Ruttmann, whose films until 1926 were abstract, wanted with *Berlin* to move away from "reine ornamentale Formen" and portray "die jedem bekannten Dinge unserer Umwelt."[7] The central artists in the film's making—Ruttmann, the cinematographer Karl Freund, and Carl Mayer, who is credited with the initial idea—all wanted to make a *pure* film. Condemning the subservience of film to theater and plot, they wanted to get to the heart of what was specifically filmic in the presentation of the city. Instead of depicting events according to a plot-based model of time, Ruttmann explicitly polemicized for an organization of time according to strict, abstract principles, which he described with musical metaphors: "Konsequente Durchführung der musikalisch-rhythmischen Forderungen des Films, denn Film ist rhythmische Organisation der Zeit."[8] For artists loosely associated with Neue Sachlichkeit and Bauhaus this primary distinction was operative: a theatrically staged idyll versus a depiction of reality organized through an abstract, that is, non-naturalized aesthetic. Only such an aesthetic, Ruttmann reasoned, could capture the tension and suspense of modern urban experience without sentimental theatricality. For him, the clash of oppositional, contrapuntal music could be used mimetically: musical structures of dissonance mime social contradictions. Nonetheless, the film's efforts at presenting temporal experience through the abstraction of the musical notation clashes with its natural dusk-to-dawn structure, and this clash is at the heart of its ambivalence.

Through montage and allegories of social transformation, *Berlin* aims to depict historical urban modernity; but central features of its structuring devices make a complete success of this aim impossible. On the one hand, *Berlin* metaphorically figures the historical transition from a pastoral, premodern age to one with characteristic features of modernity. The film's narrative grid of a "day-in-the-life" of a city, in which time is arbitrarily measured by the mechanical clock according to the work-a-day life of wage laborers, accomplishes a modernized organization of time and human activity. On the other hand, precisely this narrative device in the film, by stressing the way in which quotidian labor and commercial activity take place against the backdrop of and are organized by natural-biological (sunset to sundown; sleep, wakening, activity, exhaustion, return to sleep) temporal patterns, complicates its modern construction of society. Thus because this structure is dictated by dawn, daylight, midday, dusk, and night, it retains a strong element of the seemingly organic temporal rhythms that shape rural and provincial patterns. In contrast, the film *Metropolis*—which despite its futuristic genre is comparable with

Berlin in its visual concerns with modern mass labor—dispenses entirely with such natural temporal rhythms. In *Metropolis* work never stops, and while some workers retire after a day's labor, there is no general cyclical pause brought about by the end of natural light, which would offer time to return to a seemingly authentic and reconciled moment. *Berlin*'s "day-in-the-life" however knows how to rise and shine as well as to turn out the lights so as to find refuge from the modern at the end of a hard day's work. The motifs of a watery primal purity, which begin, punctuate, and conclude the film, contribute to the natural motifs that enclose the film's technological images.

However, the narrative structure, in which the city awakes, works, and sleeps according to natural cyclical patterns, does not completely pastoralize *Berlin*, though it does confuse and complicate its depiction. This structure protects the film's construction of the big city from a complete surrender to a nonnatural, contingent, modern society that it otherwise depicts with its Taylorized day-in-the-life pattern. Indeed, the film's structuring device of the organic sunrise-to-sunset rotation, which exists despite, not because, of its mechanical clock, reveals an anxiety accompanying the sense that modernity has overcome life's seemingly natural rhythms. It recuperates a nostalgia that the other dimensions of the film not only avoid, but undermine. In other words, Ruttmann's film documents—by organizing its images of modernity with visual metaphors of natural cyclical life—an anxiety about the modernity that lies at the center of its depiction. Ruttmann's *Berlin* then reveals two things: modernity and its discontent. This film that affirms modernity contains a powerfully protective gesture of nostalgia itself.

Before discussing Ruttmann's film, "modernity"—a term general enough to be potentially vacuous—must be briefly clarified. *Berlin*'s urban space appears as the result of a significant transition: from regulated and traditional structures to a social and experiential universe characterized by disorder, nonlinear complexity, and unpredictability. This break with the past is diverse as it is monumental. Society displays the effects of *complexity* when communication and action are diversified into numerous heterogeneous areas—e.g., economy, education, religion—in which no one area or complete perspective dominates. This also marks the shift from a society in which differences are hierarchically organized in terms of "kinds of persons"—their perceived inherent quality, determined castes or ranked groups—to one whose defining feature is *functional* differentiation in terms of the functional goals and problems of society. The social systems theorist Niklas Luhmann codifies this shift as one from a "stratified" society to a functionally differentiated one.[9] According to *Berlin*, this is modernity: a society organized around numerous, heterogeneous areas as opposed to one single system, complexity in social interaction and communication, time marked according to the mechanical and the punch-clock versus seasonal and biological clocks, differences among

people marked in terms of their functions as opposed to given hierarchies, and concomitant challenges to perception in the arena of big cities.

I. Wheels and Tracks

Berlin opens with shots of lightly rippling water followed by a series of dissolves, abstract designs, and cuts to railroad tracks. A speeding train then enters from the left side of the frame. Connoting a primal purity, the water introduces the visual theme of an undifferentiated natural source. When considered along with the film's concluding scenes of a dark, peaceful, reconciled Berlin covered in a sheet of rain water, these initial frames amount to the beginning of cyclical rhythms of human activity in harmony with nature in the face of the technologically dominated day to come. The metaphorical material of water further signifies the birth of the day as a natural moment, which contradicts, protects, and limits the film's visual work-a-day story. Later, in the afternoon sequence, the motif of water—in this case the whirlpool's violent swirl—returns to link water's primal element to human passion and lack of control. Here, as a contrastive backdrop to this beginning of a cyclical day, the train's disruption of the water's natural, primordial state metaphorically enacts a larger historical shift: humans are now perceived to live not according to archaic rhythms, in which the primary relation is to nature, but according to technology's pace.

Ruttmann's first extended sequence, which follows the water and abstract-dissolve images in a matter of minutes, establishes its construction of the big city. It metaphorically depicts a historical transition from a traditional rural community to the *polis* as the defining social unit of modernization. A sign tells the viewer that the train is on its way to the city from the countryside. Kaes's reading—that the train's interruption of the rippling water is a metaphor for human domination of nature—supports my claim that the object of the film's opening train sequence is not the city, but the transformative *process* toward modernization itself. The film quickly but gradually moves from scenes of the country, birds in flight, and extreme long shots of people fishing, to the outlying posts of urban space: heavy industry, factories, barges, and rail tracks. Evoking the camera frame itself, the train window marks the countryside as having already been denatured by the camera's technological gaze.[10] This establishing group of shots then is not a simplistic narrative gesture that portrays the average traveler entering the postcard city. Instead it displays or recites a cultural-historical passage from an era determined by rural priorities to a "rationalized" world. Considerations of means and ends now justify social actions and structures—a process Max Weber codified with his concept of "Entzauberung."[11] Ruttmann contrasts the initial images of landscape, hills, trees, and a river—all witnessed from the train—with shots of rail tracks, wheels, and the stark, industrial look of Berlin's immediate surroundings.

These contrastive shots foreground the opposition of the big city's terrain of economic and technological activity with the ritualistic, calm, traditional patterns prevailing on the land. To leave the countryside's comparative tranquility for a center of modern experience is to be transformed.

With these opening scenes, Ruttmann establishes the agenda for the two central visual motifs that organize his Berlin film: the wheel (or spiral), and the straight parallel lines (of tracks). The tracks collectively signal the inevitability of movement toward a goal. The wheel, in contrast, does double duty. It collaborates with the motif of the tracks to signify functionality and motion. Yet when the wheel appears as the spiral in *Berlin's* third, fourth, and fifth sections, it establishes a sense of social vertigo and crisis. On its own, in other words, the wheel or circle is the metaphorical material of cyclical movement itself. It is the film's privileged image for the natural patterns thought to govern traditional structures of life, what Weber called "den organischen Kreislauf des bäuerlichen Daseins."[12] The iron tracks, because they harness and direct this movement, use and domesticate motion. They interrupt natural, cyclical patterns, replacing them with the means-and-ends activity that they embody. In the film's early frames the wheels of the speeding passenger train *and* the tracks reinforce the teleological force of this allegorical route toward modernization and its attendant social transformations. Several shots show the passing countryside, cars, people, and boats through the frame of the train window. By constructing the exterior in this way, *Berlin* depicts the uncertainty of perception in the era of large-scale technology: the viewer is unsure about what is moving—the car in which she sits or the objects perceived?

In the next segment, the train enters Berlin on the dark cavernous tracks of Anhalter Bahnhof. Looking ahead to the film's conclusion, it is significant that *Berlin* does not end with a return to the countryside. There is no recourse to a life that rural social structures determine. The city's fragmented perception, speed, and internationalism, evident in the shots of blacks and Eastern European Jews, touch everything. From these initial frames, *Berlin* constructs modernity as an immanent space that is not to be transcended: it is to be described, affirmed, even critiqued from *within*, yet finally accepted; for there is no alternative. Accordingly, the numerous glimpses of telephone wires that Ruttmann edited into the film's allegorical path from countryside to city demonstrate how urban priorities conquer and colonize the land. They begin to erode the city/country distinction through pervasive networks of communication. Thus even before the train arrives at its destination, the city has already staked its claim to the village landscape; the wires are little more than the material proof of its virtual domination.

With the arrival of the train, *Berlin's* explicit compositional device comes into view. To organize his construction of the city, Ruttmann chose a dawn-to-dusk narrative pattern. Reminiscent of a day-in-the-life structure *à la* Joyce's *Ulysses*, the film presents five sections that the course of the natural

cycle loosely dictates: dawn, daylight, midday, dusk, and night. The city rises, curtains anthropomorphically opening like sleepy eyes, grows active as its inhabitants go to work, rests, and finally retires at the day's end. Unlike *Ulysses*, *Berlin* dispenses with nearly all conventional properties of a *fabula*-narrative. These typically include a scene, theatrical props, and characters progressing toward a conclusion. Instead, its story consists of the oscillation of light to darkness and activity to inactivity that the city as the film's character embodies. Furthermore, Ruttmann's film, despite its modern "day-in-the-life" structure, retains, in its placement of images of nature (cattle and fighting dogs), water motifs, and sunrise to sunset, a rural setting for life.

The film then displays both the metropolis (a metaphorical social space for the historical era of modernization) *and* the timeless circularity situated in the framing images of watery birth and the fall of night. In other words, *Berlin*, rather than conflating nature with society, pits the two against each other. This tension defines the relationship between the organic, cosmic dawn-to-dusk structure of *Berlin* and its shots of modern work-a-day time, urban space, and perceptual challenges. The source for this tension is the film's ambivalence about the modernity that it depicts. True, Ruttmann's peaceful-waking to peaceful-retiring device delimits its juxtaposed images of modern urban chaos. Nevertheless, such a structuring device does not eradicate the distinction that obtains between natural cycles and social modernity. *Berlin* is not an attempt to collapse the distinction between nature and society, between modernity and natural premodern rhythms. The film's opening and closing segments, its depiction of the city's velocity, crowds, technology, and society's functional dimensions make such a seamless merger of nature and society impossible.

While Ruttmann subtitled his film a "symphony," its intertitles do not refer to musical movements, but to "acts" (Akte), evoking more a drama or opera than a symphony. From recent copies of the film that have been recorded with new performances of the original musical notation, it is possible to note how this score undercut the film's visual metaphors for natural rhythm. The music opposed the formal to natural passage of time. The music supports both Ruttmann and the composer Edmund Meisel in their statements emphasizing the contrapuntal elements of the score, the dialectical feature of unresolved contrasts or differences. Most decisive of all, perhaps, is that the film's musical dimension evokes a mathematical, abstract, measuring of time, which contrasts with the rising and setting sun scenes complete with the metaphorical material of archaic water, but is consistent with the technological "day-in-the-life" organization of human labor according to the mechanical clock. Music bears no given relationship to time's organic passing. Abstract temporal markings contrast with supposed natural rhythms, which assume a determined, grounded relationship to cosmological structures. This contrast between the

two temporal models is consistent with attempts of 1920s avant-garde movements to move away from romantic and organic constructions of time.

II. Perception and the Crowd

Walter Benjamin wrote of the crowd in urban modernity: "Die Menge—kein Gegenstand ist befugter an die Literaten des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts herangetreten."[13] Benjamin's remark applies equally well to Ruttmann's early twentieth-century film. In *Berlin*, the crowd defines the social interaction of the big city's inhabitants in the modernized era. Once more, the film presents a visual progression as an allegory for a historical transition. Its initial segment depicted the entry into Berlin as an allegory for the shift from a rural-oriented to a metropolitan-oriented social economy; repeating this same gesture, the "morning" segment figures the historical emergence of the crowd. Suggesting a sleepy provincial setting, the initial street sequence (still in the first act) links shots of hushed, empty streets. By increments, the crowd begins to form. A worker leaves his house, after which an extreme long shot reveals two workers moving against the background of the otherwise lifeless street. Soon these workers are joined by a third; in the subsequent shots viewers see the growing crowds moving through the city. In the crowd's amorphous movements individual identities or narratives cannot emerge—the workers are already types. This establishing sequence figuratively enacts the rise of the crowd as; it sets the scene for the film's depiction of how the crowd has already historically resulted in the destruction of individuality.

As do many of the acts, *Berlin*'s morning section—devoted to shots of the crowd—employs montage to create associations and dissimilarities. One sequence contrasts low close-ups of swiftly walking blue- and white-collar workers with shots of cattle, expressively constructing a connection between urban crowds and docile, obedient livestock—another aspect, with the horse that collapses on the street, of the rural dimension that is dominated by technology. This association is echoed soon after, when the film makes several key juxtapositions. Workers file through the factory gates, overseen by a supervisor, and men herd cattle into the fenced yard of a slaughterhouse. Ruttmann then cuts to shots of workers and marching soldiers. Similar to the work of Sergei Eisenstein and John Heartfield, the use of montage allows Ruttmann to establish connections between different objects. In keeping with the logic of its day-in-the-life narrative, the film's temporal dimension is continuous. Dominating are spatial *dis*continuities. No spatial, narrative-driven connections link these specific contrastive shots; it is not evident whether the workers, soldiers, and animals are in the same area at all. In other words, despite the dawn-to-dusk pattern, the film *analytically* joins the images of workers, soldiers, and cattle. This sequence assumes a spectator who watches and thinks.

While it emphasizes formal and thematic similarities, it does so to cue the viewer to reflect negatively about a comparison of urban masses with cattle. There is no natural similarity between livestock and humans that the film merely evokes in a pastoral mode. Far from collapsing the distinction between animal and human, nature and society, the sequence assumes this very difference in order to show how economic and social relations effectively efface it; the sequence maintains that the metropolis of modernity can make crowds into functional equivalents of livestock. *Berlin* claims that the loss of rural-based individuality and the erosion of a grand narrative of humanistic progress is the current price to pay for social and technological modernization.

Thus while embracing the metropolis as an immanent space, one that bars any transcendence toward an archaic, premodern idyll, Ruttmann's film reflects on modernity's negative elements. The sequence depicting workers entering the factory is not the only critical moment. With the camera first capturing the aristocracy riding in the park, it then cuts to shots of blue-collar workers sweeping the streets, and servants who do the manual labor of looking after aristocratic estates: some circulate within spheres of leisure while others toil. Later, in the midday lunch act, one scene cuts between shots of wealthy diners in sumptuous rooms, blue-collar workers at lunch counters, and the very poor who scarcely eat at all. These two segments, which are from the morning and midday acts, are significant. On the whole the film constructs a society in which people are distinguished functionally instead of according to determined castes and hierarchical levels of privilege; nevertheless, these two segments acknowledge that modernity exhibits extreme contrasts in buying power and social welfare. In other words, despite this historical shift, society has not achieved grand ambitions of equality. Here we must remember the film's beginning and ending: remaining within the city as an allegorical space for modernity, *Berlin* does not advocate a transcendence of history, despite the problems that history occasions.

Ruttmann's film then celebrates the achievements of modernity *and* reflects on class and economic disparities, thus displaying a critical dimension. In other words, while modernity must be accepted as a contingent, yet now immanent description of society, there are (and perhaps always will be) elements in need of criticism and solutions. *Berlin* offers no solution; it critiques. Without trying to occupy a privileged observer position situated in a posited superhistorical utopian space, the film criticizes economic disparity from within its discourse of modernity.

Figuring so prominently in Ruttmann's film, the crowd is integral to the early twentieth-century discourse of modernization. In his reflections on Baudelaire, Benjamin identifies the crowd as the locus for the experience of modernity. For him, Baudelaire's poetry—conceiving itself as a registration of the decisive participation of the crowd in modernization's perceptual shifts—documented "den innigen Zusammenhang [. . .] zwischen der Figur

des Chocks und der Berührung mit den großstädtischen Menschen." [14] Simi-
larly, in his essay "Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben" (1903), the sociolo-
gist Georg Simmel depicts the crowd as the index where perception in society
undergoes its most radical transition:

> de[r] rasch[e] und ununterbrochene Wechsel äußerer und innerer Eindrücke
> [. . .] , die rasche Zusammendrängung wechselnder Bilder, der schroffe Abstand
> innerhalb dessen, was man mit einem Blick umfaßt, die Unerwartetheit sich auf-
> drängender Impressionen. [15]

For Simmel, all this is achieved "mit jedem Gang über die Straße, mit dem
Tempo und den Mannigfaltigkeiten des wirtschaftlichen, beruflichen, gesell-
schaftlichen Lebens." With its connection between urban masses, velocity,
and technology, *Berlin* situates itself amongst these theoretical descriptions
as a visual participant in the construction of modernity.

Like the observations of Simmel and Benjamin, the street scenes in Rutt-
mann's film record the assaults that the crowd, traffic, and their incessant speed
carry out on perception. The second act concludes with a sequence combining
female switchboard operators working at dizzying speed, close-ups of turning
typewriter keys, and fighting dogs. Among the final shots is a brief close-up
of the spinning spiral, filling the whole frame. The crowd, technology, and the
high velocity of movement are in a collective relationship. Ruttmann's non-
diegetic shot (one outside the film's narrative material) of the spiral follows the
juxtaposed images—working women, fighting dogs, and the typewriter keys'
disorienting whirl. This spiral functions to invest the documentary images
with the meaning of perceptual disorientation. The crowd and the speed of
modernization cause a constituent, profound uncertainty in perception that
disrupts clear subject-object distinctions: the viewer cannot be sure whether
the vertigo of the spiral belongs to the object perceived or to her own sense of
vision. This visual uncertainty, in which one no longer can trust one's own
eyes, Ruttmann claims, is a central perceptual mode of the big city.

III. Critical Media

Visually participating in the semiotic construction of modernity, Ruttmann's
camera obsessively attends to the speed and the technology of mass move-
ment. The tram-tracks and the vertical lines of crisscrossing trains direct the
rationalized movement of the city toward its functional goals of labor, capital,
and communication. Yet the film does not present movement and change as
values in themselves. Instead, its causative linkage between peoples' reactions
to oncoming stimuli and the pace of life—in which advertising's brevity and
speed characterize human interaction—describes society's here-and-now on
the screen. The pace of cars, busses, trams, and buggies forces pedestrians to
remain doubly on guard. In the third act, they cautiously inch into the street

and quickly dash to the other side. At the busiest hour the camera captures men's furtive glances as they rapidly turn their heads to remain on guard against the unexpected.

With the third act's last sequence, Ruttmann wants his viewers to perceive the modernity of perception. Suddenness and fragmentation characterize this perception. In a series of dissolves, Ruttmann superimposes canted shots of moving cars, trams, busses, turning wheels, a *Schupo* directing traffic, a car horn, and bewilderingly rapid hands gripping newspaper headlines. The complex sequence moves too fast for the viewer to focus on any specific image. The individual image is not important; rather the mode by which it is perceived is at issue. What remain are both the superimposition and the associative links between the various images. This superimposition, in which the screen shows several events simultaneously, figures *seeing* in the big city as a palimpsest, or a prism. Perspectives vie to inscribe themselves on the individual's perceptual field. By employing montage, dissolve, and the canted shot, Ruttmann draws attention to the filmic medium itself; he connects film with the images of urban modernity that this sequence splices together. In other terms, the sequence makes a transition from the rapid montage *structure* into the *theme* and image of the modern city: the city is montage.

Through the transference of structure into the meaning of the city, the viewer becomes aware that film, the most appropriate medium to recreate this prismatic perception, is not an innocent bystander. Film does more than simply record an external reality. As a technology that creates a popular culture, it is a contributing factor to the historical changes in seeing. In Ruttmann's figuration of modern perception, film and information from newspaper headlines replace narratives that would reestablish time-honored identities and posit a continuum of traditional experience. Ruttmann's link between the camera, newspaper, and the speed and suddenness of traffic foreshadows Benjamin's claim that such a nexus produces modernity:

> Der Apparat erteilte dem Augenblick sozusagen einen posthumen Chock. Haptischen Erfahrungen dieser Art traten optische an die Seite, wie der Inseratenteil einer Zeitung sie mit sich bringt, aber auch der Verkehr in der großen Stadt. Durch ihn zu bewegen, bedingt für den einzelnen eine Folge von Chocks von Kollisionenen. An den gefährlichen Kreuzungspunkten durchzucken ihn, gleich Stößen einer Batterie, Innervationen in rascher Folge. [. . .] Wenn Poes Passanten auch scheinbar grundlos Blicke nach allen Seiten werfen, so müssen die heutigen das tun, um sich über die Verkehrungsignale zu orientieren. So unterwarf die Technik das menschliche Sensorium einem Training komplexer Art.[16]

Likewise, in *Berlin* suddenness and the assault of stimuli on the psyche pose the greatest threat to the individual's survival and her sense of control.

Ruttmann's connection between velocity, technology, and the newspaper (as the modern source for stories) reaches a destructive climax in the fourth (afternoon) act. He begins with a shot of turning wheels, this time the cogs and

rolls of a press that produces the daily newspapers. Ruttmann then edits in scenes of newspaper distribution. A man buys a daily, and, as he opens it, the print blurs, and headlines explode, filling the entire frame with the words: "Krise," "Mord," "Börse," "Heirat," and "Geld," which jumps out six times, each time at an accelerated pace. The series culminates with a cut to roller-coaster tracks, a revolving door, whirling leaves, and the spinning spiral—the motif that this act, more than any other, privileges. All of it produces a distinct sense of vertigo and lack of control. Shots of old women begging are cross-cut with a jeweled necklace in a showcase. Ruttmann then cuts to a staged "suicide." A woman, her wide-open eyes giving her a deranged look, leans over the rail of a bridge, about to jump. Again, shots of the roller coaster, the swirling whirlpool of water beneath her, and the spiral are cross-cut with each other. A splash in the water and the crowd that gathers on top of the bridge conclude the series of shots. The same sequence, via the images of the whirl-pool, works against the city's denatured quality. Visually reciting the film's opening water-scene, this scene has the effect—through depicting water as its violent point—of neutralizing the depiction of urban social problems. At the film's most violent and confusing moment in *social* terms, a violent *natural* equivalent is required to naturalize and alleviate the social catastrophe of sui-cide. Thus what appears as *Berlin*'s violent social core becomes its most nat-ural and mitigated instant, as can be seen in the images of peaceful play that frame the city in the scenes following the suicide. The film's concluding scenes return to this watery motif in the streets wet with rain. These three water scenes, positioned as they are at the beginning, middle, and end, ac-complish, along with the film's dawn-to-dusk temporal dimension, *Berlin*'s or-ganic, cyclical pattern. Nevertheless, the metaphoric material of poverty jux-taposed with wealth, and the "money"-headlines in the larger media-series of shots, express an association between economic catastrophe and its potential result: suicide.[17] The spectator is cued to make connections between economic catastrophe, violence, and the overwhelming pace of urban perception in which the integrity of experience is about to dissolve.

　　　Here suicide reveals the big city to be a space of conflict. This conflict is between the ability of the subject to function and the forces that undermine its survival in the face of socioeconomic pressures. *Berlin* furthermore introduces an acute uncertainty about the causes of crisis, cultural vertigo, and suicide. The viewer does not know whether the communicative medium of the news-paper itself *causes* the crisis, or whether it merely *reports* it as an objective fact. As the medium threatens to become the message, the film claims that the distinction between causality and objective reportage becomes fluid. There would be, Ruttmann's film claims, no *Krise*—with its regulative force and broad psychological resonances—without the newspaper and this popular mode of writing to produce and disseminate it. The newspaper, literally driven by the wheels of technology (the printing press), is the crisis.

Ruttmann's film continues beyond suicide into its last (nighttime) act. Modern society, as the film depicts it, does not allow the crisis to become a privileged space from which to condemn or observe culture. *Berlin*'s final shot of a blinking light that punctuates darkness brings the film almost full circle to its dawn beginning. The wet streets at night echo the film's initial scenes of rippling water and the afternoon whirlpool sequence, reestablishing its primordial, natural circularity. This natural pattern contrasts sharply with the film's construction of modernity as the historical moment of urbanity, technology, prismatic perception, destabilized identities, functionality, and speed. While this natural structure visually correlates with the small-town or countryside tone (of the film's initial frames), with which the film's allegorical transition to modernity breaks, it is distinctly at odds with the non-natural city, its technology, independent women, internationalism (the blacks and Jews on the street), and the crowd-engendered anonymity.

To be sure, Ruttmann edited the material that he recorded of Berlin—this editing itself a protective gesture against a potential chaos of stimuli and images. Yet the construction of sequences, the editing of shots within the acts, on the one hand, and their structuration within the film's larger organic structure, on the other, function differently. The cyclical structure naturalizes the city; the experimental editing depicts the urban experience. Not only the water motifs of primordial purity, but above all, the organic rhythm of the dawn-to-dusk structure—despite how it frames the quintessentially modern wage labor day-in-the-life practices—accomplishes a natural, rural narrative structure in the face of the film's insights into urbanization's effects. The encasement within the dawn-to-dusk structure serves to protect, like a Freudian *Reizschutz*, the integrity of its inherently reconciliatory narrative from the possible trauma of modern perception.

Affirming, as Kracauer observed, "the contrasts, unresolved," *Berlin*'s edited conflicts of shots reflect the dynamics of technology and the unpredictability of modern society. Furthermore, these montages allow the stimulaic clashes and perceptual uncertainties, located in the motif of the spiral, to appear for the viewer; they make the viewer into a *site* that experiences perception as montage and uncertainty. Ruttmann's film is more than a document of the historical shift that took place in modes of perception; it is more than a record of the types of challenges that new stimuli posed in the early twentieth century. It is their visual, symbolic construction. Perhaps by the time of Ruttmann's film, cultural observers had come to feel that the amazement at this shift had subsided. A form of Simmel's "blasé attitude" (*Blasiertheit*), in which people become accustomed to the effects of modernization, had replaced amazement.[18] For viewers who may no longer have taken stock of these changes, Ruttmann's film—by combining montage with the images of the metropolis—has the effect of reconstructing this stimulaic onslaught and the uncertainty in subject-object relations. *Berlin* is the recreation of shock.

Were it to become a straightforward testimony to the way in which speed, chaos, mechanical time, labor, and perceptual uncertainty have replaced the values of the countryside, *Berlin* would have to erase these natural features. Were it to become a parodic, one-sided celebration of the city as an organic, natural space, it would have to eschew its reflection on the historical transition to modernity. Yet Ruttmann's film retains both its natural-circular characteristics *and* its technological, socio-historical dimensions. This tension expresses an intense ambivalence about modernity, an ambivalence that underlies the cultural consciousness of Weimar Republic society.

In the end, *Berlin* cannot resolve this tension. The film's final sequence, in which celebratory shots of bursting fireworks appropriate the aesthetic of Kitsch, takes place unambiguously within the city. The spinning firework wheels affirm the spiral as a motif of perceptual vertigo. *Berlin*'s last shot, a watchtower with its rotating spotlight, places the viewer in the position of both observer and observed, highlighting the perspectival character of vision. Unlike the later Nazi films that borrowed scenes from Ruttmann's film, there is no return to the countryside,[19] no allegorical journey toward a premodernity untainted by distinctly urban problems. In a self-congratulatory way, *Berlin* applauds the metropolis as an immanent space, immanent because each reflection—affirmative or critical—of modernity is also a reflection from and within modernity.

[1] Until about 1903 most films showed scenic places, wondrous accomplishments of modern science, or noteworthy events, although narrative film also entered the cinema from the beginning. The Lumières also made brief narrative and comical films besides their proto-documentaries. See Richard Abel, *The Ciné Goes to Town: French Cinema 1986–1914.* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1994).

[2] Jay Chapman, "Two Aspects of the City: Cavalcanti and Ruttmann," Jay Leyda, *The Documentary Tradition*, ed. Jay Leyda (New York: W.W. Norton, 1971) 42. Compare Jiri Kojala and Arnold Foster, "*Berlin, the Symphony of a City* as a Theme of Visual Rhythm," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 23. 2 (1965): 353–58.

[3] Sabine Hake, "Urban Spectacle in Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin, Symphonie of the Big City*," *Dancing on the Volcano: Essays on the Culture of the Weimar Republic*, ed. Thomas Kniesche and Stephen Brockmann (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1994), 129, 134. Hake reads the film in psychoanalytical terms, seeing *Berlin* as a manifestation of "voyeurism" and "scopophilia."

[4] Siegfried Kracauer, *Von Caligari zu Hitler: eine psychologische Geschichte des deutschen Films*, trans, Ruth Baumgarten und Karsten Witte (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979) 405. Kracauer's comments were originally published in 1927.

[5] Georg Lukács, "Es geht um den Realismus," *Probleme des Realismus* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1955) 211–239.

[6] Anton Kaes, "Leaving Home: Film, Migration, and the Urban Experience," *New German Critique* 74 (1998): 179–92.

[7] Ruttmann quoted in Jeanpaul Goergen, *Walter Ruttmann: Eine Dokumentation* (Berlin: Freunde der Deutschen Kinemathek, 1989) 25.

[8] Goergen, 79.

[9] See Niklas Luhmann, *Social Systems*, trans., John Bednarz (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995).

[10] This instance of the denaturation of a landscape is something that Walter Benjamin observes. Remarking on the loss of the "Hier und Jetzt," the way in which technical reproducibil-

ity depreciates the artwork's presence, he claims that this also occurs to cinematically depicted landscapes: "Wenn das auch keineswegs vom Kunstwerk allein gilt sondern entsprechend zum Beispiel von einer Landschaft, die im Film am Beschauer vorbeizieht," Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. II, 2, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989) 438.

[11] Max Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, ed. Johannes Winckelmann (Tübingen: Mohr, 1968) 578.

[12] Max Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1922) 558.

[13] Benjamin, VI, 2, 618.

[14] Benjamin, VI, 2, 618.

[15] Georg Simmel, "Die Großstadt und das Geistesleben," *Das Individuum und die Freiheit* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1993) 192/93.

[16] Benjamin, VI, 2, 630.

[17] The eyes of the woman resonate with Simmel's description of the way in which the speed and contradictoriness of shifting stimuli tear the nerves "so brutal hin und her, daß sie ihre letzte Kraftereserve hergeben und, in dem gleichen Milieu verbleibend, keine Zeit haben, eine neue zu sammeln." Simmel, 196.

[18] Simmel, 196.

[19] Ruttmann's later films for the Third Reich resolved this tension within the framework of explicit National Socialist interpretations. In *Blut und Boden* (1933), scenes from *Berlin* were spliced into a story of an ancient German farming family that falls on hard times and is divested of its farm and possessions and moves to Berlin. In *Berlin*, the "Geld" sequence displays the anxieties that persist in an urban setting without visually resolving them. *Blut und Boden* uses this very same footage to construct modernity and the big city as a space of decadence, economic ruin, and the potential threat that unchecked urbanity and racial downfall pose for the German people. The Nazi film also includes a journey to the big city, yet unlike *Berlin*, which remains in the city, *Blut und Boden* concludes with a return to idealized images of the country as the future home of Germans who will colonize the East. Some scholars see the contrast between Ruttmann's *Berlin*, on the one hand, and his work on *Blut und Boden* and touristic Nazi "city films," on the other, as absolute. From this perspective, the later film is a recrudescent return to a postcard-like narrative film, from which Ruttmann supposedly made a clean break in *Berlin*. Yet I have argued that Ruttmann's film never accomplished the clean break that some critics have asserted, but that the film's natural circularity preserved this element, amounting to a conflicted depiction. For a description of the later Nazi films, see Goergen, 140.