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# *Leaving Home: Film, Migration, and the Urban Experience\**

Anton Kaes

“Our present age is one of exile.”  
— Julia Kristeva<sup>1</sup>

Like many others, Karsten Witte arrived in Berlin from elsewhere. As a consummately urban person, he liked mobility and was fond of transience and impermanence. Not surprisingly, he had a lifelong passion for “motion pictures,” as film, so aptly, used to be called. The following essay, which is dedicated to his memory, seeks to explore the nexus between spatial displacement, urban modernity, and the nature of film. I want to argue that Walther Ruttmann’s *Berlin: Symphony of a Big City* [*Berlin. Die Sinfonie der Großstadt*, 1927] constructs a text that makes this nexus readable. A semi-documentary of an ordinary day in Berlin, Ruttmann’s film constitutes an image of the big city which identifies the urban experience as an experience of dislocation that is both traumatic and exhilarating.

## *I. The Arrival*

Ruttmann’s Berlin film opens with an image of rippling water, shot from a high angle. The camera pans across the water, but no boundaries become visible. What fills the frame is an abstract image of water in

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\* I would like to thank Deniz Göktürk and David Bathrick for their comments on this essay.

1. Julia Kristeva, “A New Type of Intellectual: The Dissident,” *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia UP, 1986) 298.

motion, leaving it open as to whether the image denotes a lake, a river, or the medium of water as the source of all things, the primal form of undifferentiated matter. Associated with birth, fertility and the fountain of life, water in Western culture also symbolizes a primordial state of purity. On a meta-cinematic level, the image might allude to the fluid that is needed to start the photographic development process. The pattern of rippling water is continual; it imparts a feeling of timeless inertia. A series of abstract geometrical forms and shapes is then superimposed over photographed nature — a first reminder that film itself is a *construct* consisting of “abstracted” and manipulated representations of nature.

In these opening shots, Ruttmann boldly maps his early experimental work in abstract film onto the traditionally analogical representation of nature, distilling basic shapes out of the documentary material.<sup>2</sup> An abstract pattern mimics the ripples of the water, after which two simple geometric shapes, a circle and a parallelogram, diagonally slanted, are added in an ever more complex animation. Circles that turn and accelerate suggest the wheels or rotating turbines of a locomotive or, again meta-cinematically, the reels of a film projector. No single shape moves independently, every movement is interlinked with another, all producing a sense of constant motion and flux.

The superimposition of animation over nature in the first minute of the film foreshadows several of Ruttmann’s preoccupations: the oscillation between documentation and abstraction; a heightened awareness of the relationship between motion, speed, and increased complexity; and the recognition of human domination over nature. The initial shots also essentialize the experience of modernity in the move from rural tranquillity to metropolitan frenzy. Suddenly, as if to stop the introductory montage of abstract forms, a railway crossing bar swiftly falls, cutting diagonally across the image like the clapboard that marks the beginning of a new take. This painted abstract form precedes, with the exact

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2. Walther Ruttmann’s *Lichtspiel Opus I* was the first abstract or “absolute” film in Germany. Performed with music by Max Butting in 1921, it consisted of painted abstract shapes and geometrical forms (circles, lines, and squares) which moved across the frame, colliding with each other, morphing into different shapes, and animatedly “dancing” to the rhythm of the accompanying music. Herbert Jhering (in *Berliner Börsen-Courier* 1 May 1921) called the film “visible music, audible light.” Ruttmann experimented with form, color, light, and music in three more films (*Opus II-IV*, 1922-1924). Hanns Eisler wrote the music for *Opus III*. In *Berlin: Symphony of a Big City*, Ruttmann employs the formal structures of abstract film and musical composition to select, shape, and resignify the documentary material.

same movement, the photographed bar, thus underscoring from the start the subordination of documented life under formal principles. We are thus twice prepared for the train – once *in abstracto*, once *realiter* – as it comes into view from the left, shooting like a projectile across the frame. Photographed from a low angle to magnify its power as it roars by, the train may unconsciously refer to one of the foundational (and much disputed) claims of film history: In 1895, audiences allegedly panicked in terror when Lumière's train in *L'Arrivée du train* was thought to be racing towards them with physical impact. The actual reactions can no longer be established; there is no written evidence for shock and trauma. What is fascinating, however, is the myth itself which, according to Tom Gunning, demonstrates the overpowering illusion of movement in the early days of cinema.<sup>3</sup> The social imagination of the nineteenth century had already elevated the train into the prime symbol of the Industrial Revolution, a symbol of technological change, progress, and modern commerce, while simultaneously demonizing it as a monstrous beast that destroyed landscapes, communities, and humanist values. Decades before the movies, railway travel had altered and modernized perceptions of distance, time, and mobility.

Ruttmann's editing of the train ride from the outskirts to the city of Berlin is dizzying in its rapidity. He crosscuts from point-of-view shots at the front of the locomotive to close-ups of bumpers between the cars, from long-shots of the train to eye-level shots through the window of a train compartment. The countryside flits by at great speed. These views of the passing landscape are composed mostly of telephone wires and train tracks connoting communication and transportation, and linking the countryside with the urban center. The frenzied juxtaposition of shots with shifting perspectives and odd angles results in a disorienting series of images that are iconographically reminiscent of Futurism and Russian Constructivism. The very form of this assaultive montage is intended to produce in the viewer a shock-like reaction that confounds perception and destabilizes identity. Memories of spectacular train crashes and the neurasthenic illnesses associated with train travel in the nineteenth century were still alive in the 1920s. Ruttmann's introductory montage sequence tries to simulate the experience of traumatic displacement endured by train passengers.

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3. See Tom Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator," *Art & Text* 34 (Spring 1989): 31–45. See also Lynne Kirby, *Parallel Tracks: The Railroad and Silent Cinema* (Durham: Duke UP, 1997).

Trains epitomized the triumph of technology over nature. Indifferent to the terrain they are traversing, railway tracks were built to seek the shortest possible distance between two stops. “This loss of landscape,” writes Wolfgang Schivelbusch in his cultural history of the railway journey,

affected all the senses. Realizing Newton’s mechanics in the realm of transportation, the railroad created conditions that also ‘mechanized’ the traveler’s perceptions. According to Newton, ‘size, shape, quantity, and motion’ are the only qualities that can be objectively perceived in the physical world. Indeed, those became the only qualities that the railroad traveler was able to observe in the landscape he traveled through. Smells and sounds, not to mention the synesthetic perceptions that were part of travel in Goethe’s time simply disappeared.<sup>4</sup>

Most intense, though, was the impact of velocity on visual perception. Nature, things, people — condensed into abstract forms (dots, lines, stripes, and streaks) — disappeared the very moment they were perceived. As velocity increased, an ever-larger number of visual impressions had to be processed, producing a stimulus overload in the train traveler’s perception, and we might add, in the moviegoer’s perception as well. Indeed, the train traveler sitting in an immobile state, peering out of a window, has a structural affinity with the moviegoer looking at the screen. Neither controls the distance from the objects flying by, neither influences the sequence of what appears before one’s eyes. By showing the landscape through a window — fast-moving and transitory — Ruttmann’s film reflects on the conditions and practices of cinematic perception itself.

The pace slows: the tempo indicates a change of perspective and scale, highlighting the context of the represented image. The written sign, “Berlin 15km,” clearly readable as the train travels by, provides the name of the city (and the telos of the film), anchoring the montage that so far has presented separation, departure, travel, and transition in more general, almost allegorical terms. The sign shows the distance already traveled and likewise anticipates the train’s final destination.

The train crosses a bridge: the pattern of the iron girders transverses the pattern of the passing train, creating an abstract image reminiscent of light breaking through the sprockets of a projector. Once again the film alludes to the similarities between the experiences of sitting in a train compartment and sitting in a movie theater. The water beneath the

4. Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century*, trans. Anselm Hollo (Berkeley: U of California P, 1986) 55.

bridge at once recalls the establishing shot, while also recontextualizing and locating it “on the way to Berlin.”

Finally the train enters the huge and dark station as if penetrating the body of the city. Before the train is abandoned as visual object, we are given a peculiar image – pearls of sweat on a steam pump – that humanizes the machine. The film visualizes travel as physical labor and fuses the experience of fast motion with the medium’s innate capacity to represent movement. The arrival in the big city was a well-known trope in German modernist prose and poetry. A sonnet by the Expressionist poet Walther Rheiner, born in Cologne, gives the exact date of his arrival in the city of Berlin – July 28, 1914 – significantly, three days before the outbreak of World War I.

Arrival

(July 28, 1914)

The stifling station in the summer night  
bellows like an animal, and in the broad lobby  
a thousand people stand, all silent and dark  
and withdrawn, as if going to the battlefield.

And as the trains, with a surging din,  
penetrate the splendor of the sinister body,  
a black sun has awakened  
and hangs on the sky, near, as if it were falling.

And in me a dreadful coldness wells up,  
heavy and ponderous! — stretches its claws  
before the light like a bat; impels

the darkness anew toward the boundless rampart.  
And bursting, my heart pours out of its shaft,  
becomes roaringly large, becomes an avalanche ball.<sup>5</sup>

The nexus of technology, the fear of war, and the alienation felt by the poem’s persona is translated into nature and animal imagery — premodern and archaic. The train, anthropomorphized, bores into the station’s body; its black clouds of smoke darken the sun. No cognitive map, it

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5. Walther Rheiner, “Ankunft,” *Kokain: Lyrik. Prosa. Briefe*, trans. Sara Hall (Leipzig: Reclam, 1985) 16. Translation by Sara Hall.

seems, existed at the time which might have prepared the migrant for the experience of arrival in the big city at night. Rheiner's feverishly subjective commentary on the entry into the urban battlefield articulates an anxiety that the cool and objective style of Ruttmann's Berlin film generally represses in the wake of *Neue Sachlichkeit*. But moments of uneasiness and irritation still rupture the façade: The film shows several altercations and incidents of testiness and even physical aggression between Berliners. In a brief montage scene we see marching soldiers juxtaposed with cattle led to the slaughterhouse, thus literally marking the soldiers as "*Schlachtvieh*." Irrational forces that lurk below the surface are visualized in the film by a sudden and eerie rainstorm battering unsuspecting pedestrians, and by the frenetic roller-coaster ride that shows the utter helplessness of the passengers — a vertiginous sequence that ends with the depiction of a woman's breakdown: a (staged) suicidal jump from a bridge.

Arrival at the famous Anhalter train station in Berlin: Ruttmann's film may have conjured up in the viewers of 1927 vivid memories of their own arrival in the big city, disembarking from the train to enter a strange new world, feeling both anxious and exhilarated about the liberating but isolating anonymity; intrigued by the choices and opportunities, but fearful of failure; fascinated by the variety of lifestyles and scared by the challenges to one's already destabilized identity; excited by Berlin's seemingly boundless expanse but intimidated by its hectic pace and physical danger.<sup>6</sup> Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Big City* represents the migrant's urban experience as a contradictory one.

## **II. Migration and Modernity**

The opening sequence of Ruttmann's Berlin film dramatizes the dislocation of millions of people in the decades before and after the turn of the century, who left their homes to come to Berlin. The sequence reenacts their experience of departure, their disorienting transition from the country to the city, and their arrival in the metropolis. Berlin had doubled its size from two million inhabitants in 1910 to almost four million by the mid-1920s by incorporating its outlying areas and

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6. On the problematic German experience of urbanism and modernity, see, among many others, Eckhardt Köhn, *Straßenrausch* (Berlin: Arsenal, 1983); Peter Fritzsche, *Reading Berlin 1900* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1996); and, most recently, Joachim Radkau, *Das Zeitalter der Nervosität: Deutschland zwischen Bismarck und Hitler* (Munich: Hanser, 1998). See also Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg, eds., *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1994) 412-28.



absorbing huge waves of migration from distant rural areas as a result of industrialization and urbanization. Even by the mid-1920s, more than 50,000 people relocated to Berlin each year, swelling the numbers of unskilled workers looking for jobs and living in housing barracks [*Mietskasernen*] under substandard conditions. Few of them went back home. It is significant that the train that takes us to Berlin in the beginning of Ruttmann's film does not return at the end. It delivers us into the city not as travelers but as migrants.

Berlin was also a magnet for immigrants and exiles. In the early twenties, approximately 100,000 Russians (mainly refugees from the October revolution) came to live in Berlin. In 1927, 43,000 orthodox Jews from Eastern Europe [*Ostjuden*] eked out a living in the *Scheunenviertel*, a quarter near the center of the city and home for many who had escaped the most recent pogroms in Poland. The Jewish quarters where Yiddish and Hebrew were spoken had their own schools and synagogues as well as their own newspapers, theaters, and restaurants. Sizeable numbers of Scandinavian, Hungarian, Austrian, British, and American émigrés had also recently arrived in this youngest, most rapidly expanding, and most liberal of all European capitals. Most of the prominent filmmakers and cultural luminaries of Weimar Germany came to Berlin from elsewhere: Fritz Lang from Vienna, Murnau from the Ruhr District, Pabst from Bohemia, Slatan Dudow from Bulgaria, Béla Balázs from Hungary. Walther Ruttmann himself was born in Frankfurt, while both Carl Mayer, who wrote the script for the Berlin film, as well as Edmund Meisel, who composed its music, came from Vienna.

Berlin has always been a city of migrants from rural areas. Unlike Paris or London which were major metropolises long before industrialization and urbanization, Berlin became the capital of Germany only in 1871, at the height of the shift from a rural to a predominantly urban population. Even though Ernst Bloch does not mention migration, it might be seen as the historical subtext for his philosophical concept of *Ungleichzeitigkeit* [non-contemporaneity]. In 1932, Bloch wrote: "Not all people exist in the same Now. They do so only externally, through the fact that they can be seen today. But they are thereby not yet living at the same time with the others. They rather carry an earlier element with them; this interferes."<sup>7</sup> He alludes to the political dangers of this simultaneous, tension-ridden

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7. Ernst Bloch, "Non-Contemporaneity and the Obligation to Its Dialectics," *Heritage of Our Times*, trans. Neville and Stephen Plaice (Berkeley: U of California P, 1991) 97.



existence of the urban and the rural in Germany that seemed to have no parallel among other advanced industrialized nations.

The film's opening sequence, in short, visualizes the arrival of the migrant to the city; the scene's progression from water and organic nature to the fiery speed of the steam engine suggests both birth and separation and the undeniable experience of a primary loss. For the fateful transition from the countryside into the metropolis, the film finds images of a racing train, edited so as to heighten the dynamics and, at the same time, increase the disorientation. We see no passengers in the train, no human faces, only the gigantic impersonal machine that transports us, the viewers, into the city, recalling the sense of displacement which migrants and immigrants in the 1920s felt after deciding to leave behind their origins, their childhood, their sense of belonging, their community, their *Heimat*. Above all, migration produced destabilization, displacement, and disorientation with radical consequences for personal identity, social and cultural homogeneity, and the national narrative.

If Berlin in the 1920s was known as a city of migration, it was even more renowned for its "modernity." By 1927, Berlin was considered the paragon of urban living — both intriguing and terrifying in its tempo, diversity, and moral laxity. It was called the most American city in Europe. Dislocation and the dissatisfaction with the status quo, both characteristic of migrants and immigrants, stimulated innovation in culture and lifestyles and fostered ever-changing fashions and short-lived distractions. Berlin was continually criticized not only by reactionaries in the provinces but also by the urban intelligentsia for its superficiality and modernist pretensions. It was, of course, the cinema that seemed to represent and intensify what was most characteristic of the city: continuous mobility, rootlessness, nervousness, loss of concentration, and the resulting relativity and meaninglessness of traditional values. It was the cinema that most appealed to the restless city dwellers: "Under the pervasive influence of the cinema," wrote Wilhelm Stapel in the conservative periodical *Deutsches Volkstum* in 1919, "a totally new mental state is now evolving within the population. The kind of person who only 'thinks' in coarse generalizations, who allows himself endlessly to be dragged from impression to impression, who no longer even has the faculty of clear and considered judgment. . . . Cinema forms a new type of person that is both spiritually and morally inferior: the Homo Cinematicus."<sup>8</sup>

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8. Wilhelm Stapel, "Der Homo Cinematicus," *Deutsches Volkstum* Oct. 1919.

Weimar's Left was no less troubled by the increased commodification of human relations in the urban environment. Siegfried Kracauer took his cue from Karl Grune's film of 1923, *Die Straße* [*The Street*]:

The individuals of the big city streets have no sense of transcendence, they are only outer appearance, like the street itself, on which so much is going on without anything really happening. The swirl of the characters resembles the whirl of atoms: they do not meet, but rather bump up against each other, they drift apart without separating. Instead of living connected with things, they sink down to inanimate objects: to the level of automobiles, walls, neon lights, irrespective of time, flashing on and off. Instead of filling space, they follow their own path in the wasteland. Instead of communicating through language, they leave unsaid what might bring them together or pull them apart. Love is copulation, murder is accident, and tragedy never occurs. A wordless and soulless coexistence of directed automobiles and undirected desires. . .<sup>9</sup>

Kracauer's perceptive analysis of the all-pervasive instrumental rationality in modern city life elucidates the extent to which the urban landscape had radically reshaped the relationship of subjects to their surroundings. Similarly, Ruttmann's Berlin film illustrates the new interface between people and things by constant crosscutting. Ruttmann's editing style uses repetition and parallelism to suggest similarity and exchangeability among the most disparate objects: everything is swept up and whirled around in frenzied, machine-like circulation.

The most telling episode occurs in the late afternoon as the hectic pace of the city reaches a fever pitch. Built on contrast, the sequence begins slowly with shots of different classes of people at lunch, playing, strolling, watching, eating, and being impatient. The tempo slowly increases and reaches a crescendo that ends in a sudden suicide, an obviously performed dramatic scene within the documentary and thus especially significant. Single words, perhaps section headings from the newspaper that has just been distributed, literally rise from the page in special effect shots and jump at us: "Crisis," "Murder," "Stock Market," "Marriage," and "Money," which is repeated three times in progressively larger print. The madness of newspaper sensationalism undermines the structured representation of the urban environment and threatens to destroy the measured symphony. The uncontrollable fluctuations of the market are then visualized by a roller-coaster ride intercut

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9. rac (i.e., Siegfried Kracauer), "*Die Straße*," *Frankfurter Zeitung* 3 Feb. 1924.

with flashes of speeded-up inner-city traffic and vortex-like abstract shapes reminiscent of Duchamp's rotary glass plates installation. The film intimates that the unceasing hectic movement of everyday life inevitably produces crises and system overloads which cause short circuits. Following the harrowing roller-coaster ride (reproduced by a camera mounted on one of the wagons), the film quickly shifts to the jump of a desperate-looking woman from a bridge in an apparent suicide. We see the unidentified woman's frightened face and wide-open eyes through a series of dramatic close-ups shot in the tradition of Eisenstein's revolutionary cinema. The camera quickly cuts to a group of bystanders as they gawk at the water which has engulfed the woman — her jump a voluntary act to return to the womb, to stasis, to the beginning (also to the very beginning of the film). Instrumental rationality, the cornerstone of modernity and the film's organizing principle, is briefly threatened by this "irrational" act. But the breakdown does *not* happen at the end of the film, which would suggest a narrative cause and effect model. Instead, it is shown as a small incident (followed by a cut to a fashion show), immediately forgotten in the maelstrom of the city.

The film's deemphasis of antagonistic class structures occasioned much criticism. Unlike Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, which premiered only nine months earlier in January 1927, where a rigid class system is visualized by an exaggerated vertical separation between rulers and working class, the Berlin film all but ignores class antagonism.<sup>10</sup> There are, of course, still rich and poor city dwellers, but they live, as it were, in a symbiotic relationship, circulating goods and services within a money economy. (For example, in one scene a well-clad gentleman drops his cigarette butt and a beggar stoops to pick it up. In this manner, the film's editing dovetails one action into another.) "Money," said Georg Simmel in his famous 1903 essay on "The Metropolis and Mental Life," "becomes the frightful leveler — it hollows out the core of things, their peculiarities, their specific values, and their uniqueness and incomparability in a way which is beyond repair. They all float with the same specific gravity in the constantly moving

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10. See Siegfried Kracauer's critique of Ruttmann's film under the title "Wir schaffens," *Frankfurter Zeitung* 13 Nov. 1927. He claims that the film's "orgy" of speed, energy and work (Ludendorff's "*Wir schaffens*") [We'll make it] does not capture the "real" Berlin but is based on what some literati want Berlin to represent. He takes issue with Ruttmann's "surface approach" in *From Caligari to Hitler* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1947) 182-88.

stream of money.”<sup>11</sup> In Ruttman’s film, all things – inanimate objects as well as people – float equally “in the constantly moving stream of money,” leading to an endless circulation of signs and functions.

### III. Moving Pictures

In *Berlin: Symphony of a Big City*, the city no longer serves as a mere backdrop to some personal dramatic narrative; it is its own protagonist. A spectacle of movement and mobility, the film explores public life, the streets and places and people of the city; it constructs the experience of the outsider as both a participant and an observer. A film without dialogue and speech allows the buildings and streets and parks to speak in their own language. Since in silent film nobody speaks, everything speaks.

Ruttman’s camera structures the city in a way that allows an understanding of its complexity. In his study, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau writes: “The ordinary practitioners of the city live ‘down below,’ below the thresholds at which visibility begins . . . It is as though the practices organizing a bustling city were characterized by their blindness. The networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces: in relation to representations, it remains daily and indefinitely other.”<sup>12</sup> Being part of the hustle and bustle of the city eludes legibility. It is no coincidence that many of the shots in the Berlin film are taken from a high angle, suggesting a perspective that permits recognition of patterns and thus readability. The film oscillates between moments of confusion (the camera at eye level and in movement) and moments of control, totalization, and abstraction (achieved by overhead shots and parallel editing). The practice of filming the city thus attaches meaning and order to activities that at first sight seem random and opaque.

The city of Berlin is portrayed in Ruttman’s film as a network of functional relationships among perfect strangers hurriedly walking, negotiating their way across the street, trying to avoid bumping into each other. Where are these city-dwellers at home? Many of them had left behind their communities, often their families and friends. Predictably, many of the uprooted migrants tried to find a new sense of belonging by

11. Georg Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” in *On Individuality and Social Forms*, ed. Donald N. Levine (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1971) 330.

12. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: U of California P, 1984) 93.

joining political parties, clubs, and organizations [*Vereine*]; by frequenting mass demonstrations or sports events; and, I would like to suggest, by going to the movies. In the 1920s, Berlin alone had roughly 400 movie theaters, twenty of which had more than a thousand seats; several had over two thousand seats. A total of 60 million movie spectators were counted in Berlin already in 1918. Cinematic events (such as the opening of a new movie) constituted small but regular substitute communities which made the masses of migrants aware of thousands of others who were also seeking refuge from alienation, separation, and a sense of not belonging. Movies catered precisely to those who had left their ordinary geographical, political, social, and cultural milieus, and who sought confirmation in the urban lifestyle. They flocked to the movies, making them into imaginary homelands. It is a paradox that the movies themselves were only rarely “modernist,” disjointed, urban. Their daily fare of melodramas often nurtured the nostalgia for the phantasm of a lost community, for plenitude, for center and origin, and thus compensated for the experience of alienation, displacement, and disempowerment.

Ruttman’s Berlin film connects the experience of urban modernity to the experience of migration and dislocation. It presents the city as a new all-encompassing totality with many intersecting parts which — no matter how incongruent and conflicting — could be made to rhyme or contrast with each other on the editing table. Whether an activity made sense was less important for Ruttman than the fact that it “worked,” that it interdigitated with thousands of other small and possibly equally meaningless activities and processes. Ruttman himself has compared the city in his film to a “complicated machine that only works if the various parts, even the smallest, interact with the highest precision.”<sup>13</sup> The city as machine: this notion is reproduced in a film that mimics machine-like precision in its editing techniques. This technique allows the experience of urban disorientation, diversity, and difference to be exhibited and simultaneously erased in a celebration of structural affinities. A symphony, indeed, in which every instrument or voice counts — but only when subsumed as a part of a larger whole.

If displacement lies at the heart of modernity, then the migrant, the immigrant, and the exile are modernity’s quintessential figures. “To travel,” writes Iain Chambers,

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13. Walther Ruttmann, “Wie ich meinen Berlin-Film drehte,” *Lichtbild-Bühne* 8 Oct. 1927.

implies movement between fixed positions, a site of departure, a point of arrival, the knowledge of an itinerary. It also intimates an eventual return, a potential homecoming. Migrancy, on the contrary, involves a movement in which neither the points of departure nor those of arrival are immutable or certain. It calls for a dwelling in language, in histories, in identities that are constantly subject to mutation. Always in transit, the promise of a homecoming — completing the story, domesticating the detour — becomes an impossibility.<sup>14</sup>

Ruttman's Berlin film gives us glimpses of a nomadic life — a sense of a perpetual movement and uncertainty. Everything is in flux. No private sphere exists anywhere in this film; we cannot identify with any figure because only functions are depicted: pedestrians, drivers, policemen, shopkeepers, shoppers, employees, customers, beggars, *flâneurs*, performers, theater and movie-goers, gawkers, Blacks, orthodox Jews, veterans, soldiers, children, transients. The image of the city is shown as a web of intersecting worlds, languages, and identities. The primary image of the city alluded to again and again is that of the vortex, the frantically downward spiraling movement that visualizes the existential crisis of a life without foundation and finitude. Heidegger's magisterial work, *Sein und Zeit*, which appeared in 1927, the same year as Ruttman's Berlin film, partakes of this larger discourse of existential crisis. Heidegger's work abounds with images of falling, uprootedness, unsettledness, and *Geworfensein*. Ruttman's complex view of urban reality which oscillates between entropy and breakdown echoes Heidegger's anti-urbanism.

Richard Sennett has recently argued that cities are places of exile from the lost paradise.<sup>15</sup> It seems as if the migrant's original move from home into a state of unfixity and vagabondism must be perpetually repeated. To find rest and come to a stop is to die — just as moving pictures cannot be stopped: the heat of the projector lamp would burn up the celluloid. The Berlin film is built on movement, on a "total mobilization" (Ernst Jünger): everything and everybody is animated and energized, either by its own movement or by mobile camera or montage. Film has a structural affinity to this mode of itinerancy. It easily transgresses national borders and confounds traditional coordinates of space and time; its very

14. Iain Chambers, *Migrancy. Culture. Identity* (London/New York: Routledge, 1994) 50.

15. Richard Sennett, *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization* (New York: Norton, 1994).

constitution accords to an unsettled and unstable state of existence that has become the signature of our age. It may not be a coincidence that film was once projected (and on occasion still is) on canvas, the fabric from which nomads make their tents. The instability of canvas underscores film's elusive and intangible materiality, its innate nomadism.

I want to conclude with Salman Rushdie's analysis of *The Wizard of Oz*, which really is about "going home again." Rushdie argues that Dorothy's return to her home in Kansas is not at all a fitting conclusion to her fantastic dream. For Rushdie, her trip home is entirely negative, in fact, sheer hell. He prefers the version in which Dorothy decides to remain in the imagined world of Oz, a place not unlike the imagined world of cinema itself. Oz replaces Kansas and becomes her home. "The imagined world," comments Rushdie,

became the actual world, as it does for us all, because the truth is that once we have left our childhood places and started out to make up our lives, armed only with what we have and are, we understand that the real secret of the ruby slippers is not that 'there's no place like home', but rather that there is no longer any such place *as* home: except, of course, for the home we make, or the homes that are made for us, in Oz: which is anywhere, and everywhere, except the place from which we began.<sup>16</sup>

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16. Salman Rushdie, *The Wizard of Oz* (London: BFI, 1992) 57.