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(Part 1)

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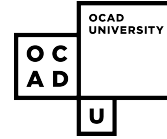
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What does “media define what really is” mean?
Considerations on affect in media theory & aesthetics (Part I)

Dimitris Ginosatis*

This essay outlines the general, conceptual framework of material presented in a series of five lectures delivered in the fall of 2015 at the facilities of the Athens School of Fine Arts’ annex in the village of Delphi, where faculty members and students –artists, theorists, programmers and technologists– from the Athens School of Fine Arts (Athens-Greece) and OCAD University (Toronto-Canada) formed an international workshop team for the purpose of experimenting and reflecting on the subject of “Affect & Emotion in Artistic Practice”.

Keywords: *media technologies, philosophy, aesthetics, perception, experience, technological modernism.*



“The most elemental process of modern times is the conquest of the world as images”.¹

Martin Heidegger

“Media define ‘what really is’; they are always already beyond aesthetics”.²

Friedrich Kittler

If we were to provide a general outline of our existing situation, as shaped in contemporary, technologically advanced societies, we need only consider a simple example: the passenger experience in a commercial jumbo jet during flight – a site where “media are more densely connected than in most places”.³

A macroscopic examination of the overall system dynamics inside the aircraft’s hull –i.e. the arrangement and organization of the conglomerate of human/machine interactive communication interfaces– may, indeed, prove quite revealing with regard to the material ground strata of our current state of *being-in-the-world*:

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At one end of the spectrum, the members of the flight deck-crew are connected to radar screens, diode displays, closed (that is, non-public) communication channels and a whole host of other electronic navigation and control instruments, in other words *media*. They are the *kybernetes*: a greek word [κυβερνήτης] meaning the *steersman, guide or governor*, from which comes the english word *cybernetics* – a term meaning the transdisciplinary science of control and regulation mechanisms in living and machine systems, to which the aero-astro-nautics sector owes a not insignificant part of its technological development.

These humans in the cockpit –whom one never sees, but only hears, as in the case of monotheistic deities, that *must* remain hidden and unknowable– are in control of the system and, at the same time, are controlled by other humans, the air traffic controllers, seated in airport towers, who are connected to a whole array of electronic monitoring instruments and are, in turn, controlled by strict protocols of air traffic safety standards, which are established by institutional bodies, controlled by laws and regulations, introduced and put into effect by (inter)national legislative committees, which, in turn, are controlled by...

Well, this could really go on and on, but I think the point has been more than made: everyone, in that circuitry, controls and is controlled by means of discursive networks and technical media. Their perception of the system’s complex, physical reality is mediated by phonetic alphabets (speech & writing), symbolic languages, electronic signals and sequences of binary digits. Their role is to interpret and assess data: their brains, actions and bodily functions are structurally coupled with technologies of control and communication and, in some way, an extension of them.

At the other end of the spectrum, the passengers are literally immersed in an artificial environment, a protective “multimedia embryonic sack”,⁴ in other words *media*. Their bodies are physiologically connected to a multifarious, user-friendly interface, whose aim is to regulate and suppress an always present, menacing, deadly reality, the “real background: noise, night and the cold of an unlivable outside”.⁵ Whereas “God” remains unknowable and hidden somewhere in the depths of the “Holy of the Holies”, that is, in the prohibited area of the cockpit, the travellers, pinned to their seats, are absolutely clueless about the inner workings of the system (which they inhabit) and, hence, are deprived of any kind of control over their *situation* for the length of the flight. Armed with a vague sense of hope combined with a life-preserving oblivion (a most useful, primal defense mechanism), the only thing they can have is *faith* – faith in the system’s ability to ultimately offer them the Promised Land(ing). They are the “believers”, in the literal sense of the word.

But, in reality, their hope and faith have only probability value: no matter how sophisticated and intelligent flying systems may be, when it comes to matters of life and death, everything is subject to Aristotle’s immortal, inescapable law of two-valued logic, which applies to (almost) everything and, in particular, to jumbo jet flights: the “worst may either occur” or (exclusive) “not occur”. Realistically put, the worst *may* not occur, but, be that as it may, it *can* still occur at any time – may the thought perish! And once it *has*

occurred, the stream of events, so far at least as our current scientific knowledge suggests, cannot go in reverse. That is the ultimate condition of our humanness, which nurtures our hopes as well as our mathematical probability theories: the inevitable irreversibility of processes or, quite simply, biocellular finitude.

Finally, between these two classes, that of the “supreme governors—men of God” and the other of the “governed believers”, intercedes a third, reconciling one, that of the cabin crew, which, in our allegorical reading, may be considered the equivalent of the “clergy—guardian angels”. Their program is, indeed, an angelic one: they are firmly devoted to taking care of the “believers”, carrying smiley, cheerful messages of optimism, love and affection; they soothe their pain and ease their discomfort; they are neither passengers nor steersmen, but humble inter-*media*-tes, offering the communicants bread and wine; loving and affectionate mother-figures, welcoming the flock in the warm, mechanical “womb”, assigning to each one a place in it before taking off, and escorting them out of it upon arrival.

In genuine Kittlerian lingo, the *situation* goes like this:

“In the jumbo jet, media are more densely connected than in most places. They remain separate, however, according to their technological standard, frequency, user allocation, and interface. The crew is connected to radar screens, diode displays, radio beacons, and nonpublic channels. The crew members have deserved their professional earphones. Their replacement by computers is only a question of time. But the passengers can benefit only from yesterday's technology and are entertained by a canned media mixture. With the exception of books, that ancient medium which needs so much light, all the entertainment techniques are represented. The passengers' ears are listlessly hooked up to one-way earphones, which are themselves hooked up to tape recorders and thereby to the record industry. Their eyes are glued to Hollywood movies, which in turn must be connected to the advertising budget of the airline industry – otherwise they would not so regularly begin with takeoffs and landings. Not to mention the technological medium of the food industry to which the mouths of the passengers are connected. A multi-media embryonic sack supplied through channels or navels that all serve the purpose of screening out the real background: noise, night, and the cold of an unlivable outside. Against that there is muzak, movies, and microwave cuisine.

The technological standard of today, and not only of the jumbo jet, can be described in terms of partially connected media systems. All can still be described in the terms McLuhan provided. According to him, the contents of one medium are always other media: film and radio constitute the content of television; record and tape the content of radio; silent movie and magnetic sound that of cinema; text, telephone, and telegram that of the semi-media monopoly of the postal service”.⁶

No matter how far-fetched the above example may seem at first reading, it still portrays very realistically a fundamental aspect of our existing, media-determined *situation*, “which – in spite or because of it– deserves a description”.⁷ For, since our lifeworld takes the form of such a densely woven network of interconnected technical media and communication channels, the traditional notion and the very nature of what we once called *reality* change radically. If it is true, as stated by Ludwig Wittgenstein in the first three propositions of his *Tractatus-Logico-Philosophicus*, that: “the world is everything that is the case”, “the world is the totality of facts...” and “the world is determined by the facts...”, then whatever is the

case or occurs in our present lifeworld is being shaped and determined by its image on the – cathode-ray tube, liquid crystal and, lately, retina display– monitor of the so-called *Personal Computer*. Henceforth, the totality of facts, that constitute our world, emerge from the graphic interfaces of our computer screens: the world *occurs* through the interplay of central processing units and data streams, in such a manner and to such an extent that its bringing-into-existence and sustenance –its very facticity– are always already linked to the presence of technical media.

But since the shape of our world is, henceforth, determined by monitor screens and their immersive interfaces, it follows that the very structural and functional nature of our *relating to* the world changes too. The latter is no longer *visual/optical*, but *haptic/tactile*. The fact that our relation to the world is no longer visual/optical, but haptic/tactile means that world-images do not dwell outside our sense perception system, but in extreme proximity to it; they reside in us –to quote a nice metaphor devised by media theorist, Norbert Bolz– as if they were our own. That is the reason why, after a certain point, one can no longer observe today’s computer generated images in a traditionally critical –i.e. distantiated– way: the spatio-temporal distance once separating *thought* and *being* or *subject of reflection* and *object of reflection*, making possible the act of contemplation (what we commonly call *theory*), is being to a large degree effaced. The traditional distinction between a receptive interiority (perception) and an objective exteriority (the world of representations), as two poles of a dialectical relation, gives way to a non-dialectical state of osmosis, in which sensory data and sense perception (being and thought) are dovetailed to each other within a single, integrated, densely woven, operational framework.

Traditional, classical-aesthetic notions of *contemplation* presuppose a separating distance – one that allows for the establishment of an external relation to things, thus enabling the act of observing, perceiving, knowing and experiencing. However, this distance goes far beyond its usual, *geochronological* signification (the space-timespan between two or more points) to acquire a more elusive one, which we might call *auratic-atmospheric*: it implies that everything in our world-system is bound to its specific presence in a *here and now*; that *everything-that-is-in-the-world* is intrinsically tied to a specific, irreducible space-time, rooted in its own proper, earthly ground, from which originates its real presence, uniqueness and authenticity. All those forces, that animate the contemplative state of mind, are unfolded under the vital effect of an *actio/affectio in distans*, which gives them their substance and breadth. In that sense, the term *auratic-atmospheric* refers to a specific psychological stance *towards* the world conjoined with a specific kind of being *in* –and *receiving*– the world; it designates a certain state of perceptual economy and sensibility, a mode of affecting and being affected. This *auratic-atmospheric* dimension of distance has been idyllically described by Walter Benjamin, in his famous essay on “The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility”:

“In even the most perfect reproduction, *one* thing is lacking: the here and now of the work of art - its unique existence in a particular place. It is this unique existence -and nothing else- that bears the mark of

the history to which the work has been subject. [...] The here and now of the original underlies the concept of its authenticity [...]. The authenticity of a thing is the quintessence of all that is transmissible in it from its origin on, ranging from its physical duration to the historical testimony relating to it. [...] And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object, the weight it derives from tradition. [...] One might focus these aspects of the artwork in the concept of the aura, and go on to say: what withers in the age of the technological reproducibility of the work of art is the latter's aura. This process is symptomatic; its significance extends far beyond the realm of art. *It might be stated as a general formula that the technology of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition. By replicating the work many times over, it substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence.* [...] What, then, is the aura? A strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be. To follow with the eye -while resting on a summer afternoon- a mountain range on the horizon or a branch that casts its shadow on the beholder is to breathe the aura of those mountains, of that branch. In the light of this description, we can readily grasp the social basis of the aura's present decay. It rests on two circumstances, both linked to the increasing emergence of the masses and the growing intensity of their movements. Namely: *the desire of the present-day masses to "get closer" to things, and their equally passionate concern for overcoming each thing's uniqueness by assimilating it as a reproduction.* Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at close range in an image, or, better, in a facsimile, a reproduction. [...] The stripping of the veil from the object, the destruction of the aura, is the signature of a perception whose 'sense for all that is the same in the world' has so increased that, by means of reproduction, it extracts sameness even from what is unique. [...] The uniqueness of the work of art is identical to its embeddedness in the context of tradition. [...] An ancient statue of Venus, for instance, existed in a traditional context for the Greeks (who made it an object of worship) that was different from the context in which it existed for medieval clerics (who viewed it as a sinister idol). But what was equally evident to both was its uniqueness - that is, its aura. [...] It is highly significant that the artwork's auratic mode of existence is never entirely severed from its ritual function. In other words: *the unique value of the 'authentic' work of art always has its basis in ritual*".⁸

Thus, following Benjamin's influential reading, traditional, classical-aesthetic, *auratic* distance is equivalent to opening up a space, that allows *whatever-is* to appear, to come into presence, to emanate from its proper field of being, in order to deliver itself to perception, that is, to be *re-presented*. The notion of *re-presentation*, then, necessarily presupposes a primary scene, in which *whatever-is* presents itself in its authentic uniqueness; an *origininary moment* that is prior to secondary schematization, depiction and expression.

The above conceptualization of *distance*, as related to being, thought and representation, is deeply woven into the fabric of a broader, discursive tradition -inaugurated by presocratic, Parmenidean doctrines of being/becoming and perpetuated by Platonic philosophy- that, for the last 2.500 years, has been constituting an important part of our western *operating* thought-system and which bears the name *metaphysics of presence*. In Derridian terms:

"The enterprise of returning 'strategically', ideally to an origin or to a 'priority' held to be simple, intact, normal, pure, standard, self-identical, in order then to think in terms of derivation, complication, deterioration, accident, etc.: all metaphysicians, from Plato to Rousseau, Descartes to Husserl, have proceeded in this way, conceiving good to be before evil, the positive before the negative, the pure before the impure, the simple before the complex, the essential before the accidental, the imitated before the imitation, etc. And this is not just *one* metaphysical gesture among others, it is *the* metaphysical exigency,

that which has been the most constant, most profound and most potent”.⁹

“We already have a foreboding that phonocentrism merges with the historical determination of the meaning of being in general as presence, with all the subdeterminations which depend on this general form and which organize within it their system and their historical sequence (presence of the thing to the sight as *eidōs*, presence as substance/essence/existence [ousia], temporal presence as point [stigma] of the now or of the moment [nun], the self-presence of the cogito, consciousness, subjectivity, the co-presence of the other and of the self, intersubjectivity as the intentional phenomenon of the ego, and so forth). Logocentrism would thus support the determination of the being of the entity as presence”.¹⁰

It’s worth noting, here, that Benjamin is not the first one to account for modern experience of space and time in psychological-perceptual terms. In his foundational 1903 essay on “The Metropolis and mental life”, the German sociologist, Georg Simmel, was already addressing the phenomenon of *modern metropolis* and its urgent rhythms, not as a physical, geographical space, but as a site of psychological processes – a psychical *locus* of affective states. The *metropolis* he attempts to account for –modelled on Berlin’s turn of the century urbanscape– does not exhibit any specific characteristics and features (facts, places, names etc.) that one could relate to. On the contrary, it is designated as a phenomenon of neurological order, associated with the perceptual economy of the metropolitan individuality. In Simmel’s eyes, the modern metropolis is but an abstraction: a groundless, unstable ontological condition, in which the human sensorium is subjected to a constant state of exception, violently disrupted by shock-effects in the form of discontinuous fluxes of ever-changing stimuli, impressions and events. As can be seen in the following excerpt from the aforementioned programmatic essay, the parallels between Simmel’s *shock experience* and Benjamin’s *disintegration of the aura* are more than obvious:

“The psychological foundation, upon which the metropolitan individuality is erected, is the intensification of emotional life due to the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli. Man is a creature whose existence is dependent on differences, i.e., his mind is stimulated by the difference between present impressions and those, which have preceded. Lasting impressions, the slightness in their differences, the habituated regularity of their course and contrasts between them, consume, so to speak, less mental energy than the rapid telescoping of changing images, pronounced differences within what is grasped at a single glance, and the unexpectedness of violent stimuli. To the extent that the metropolis creates these psychological conditions –with every crossing of the street, with the tempo and multiplicity of economic, occupational and social life– it creates in the sensory foundations of mental life, and in the degree of awareness necessitated by our organization as creatures dependent on differences, a deep contrast with the slower, more habitual, more smoothly flowing rhythm of the sensory-mental phase of small town and rural existence. Thereby the essentially intellectualistic character of the mental life of the metropolis becomes intelligible as over against that of the small town, which rests more on feelings and emotional relationships. These latter are rooted in the unconscious levels of the mind and develop most readily in the steady equilibrium of unbroken customs. The locus of reason, on the other hand, is in the lucid, conscious upper strata of the mind and it is the most adaptable of our inner forces. In order to adjust itself to the shifts and contradictions in events, it does not require the disturbances and inner upheavals, which are the only means whereby more conservative personalities are able to adapt themselves to the same rhythm of events. Thus the metropolitan type –which naturally takes on a thousand individual modifications– creates

a protective organ for itself against the profound disruption with which the fluctuations and discontinuities of the external milieu threaten it. Instead of reacting emotionally, the metropolitan type reacts primarily in a rational manner, thus creating a mental predominance through the intensification of consciousness, which in turn is caused by it. Thus the reaction of the metropolitan person to those events is moved to a sphere of mental activity, which is least sensitive and which is furthest removed from the depths of the personality".¹¹

There is a great deal that could, undoubtedly, be discussed at length on the above matters, but such an endeavor goes far beyond the scope of the present essay. I shall, therefore, confine myself to highlighting briefly some key nodal points.

Firstly, both Simmelian and Benjaminian socio-psychological accounts of modern experience share a, more or less, common sociocultural perspective: the treatment of modern technology as a means for affecting, manipulating and reshaping human sense perception and, by extension, traditional modes of being. Yet, their critique, as sketched out in their two short, foundational essays, does not give in to a polemic, denunciatory rhetoric against the supposedly negative forces unleashed at the dawn of technological modernism. To the contrary, they point to an emergent situation or an in process state of affairs that is, at the same time, constraining/repressive *and* liberating – a generator of yet unknown, *a priori* undecidable life forms. As Benjamin puts it elsewhere, it is important to not allow ourselves to be deterred by the size and radicalness of the transformations under way. But it is also of the utmost importance to not allow ourselves to harbour illusory hopes as to the nature of those transformations.

Secondly, what is most significant is that both Simmel's and Benjamin's theoretical demarche is articulated on the basis of a specific medium's nature and impact on sense perception: in Simmel's case it is the mediatechnology of metropolitan architecture; in Benjamin's, it is the mediatechnologies of photography and cinematography. What is at stake here? Why are those technologies given special weight and prominence? Moreover, is there some non-evident, yet existing link between the two?

Apart from being historically synchronous phenomena, modern metropolitan architecture and cinematography are, in essence, two closely interrelated, functional parts of a wider, complex apparatus or network (a "dispositif"), consisting of interwoven discursive and non discursive agencies and structures –institutional, architectural, regulatory, scientific, technological etc.– that determine not only what is experienced as real, but also what can even be considered potentially real. They prescribe patterns and models of sense perception, modes of feeling, thinking, knowing and being. In that sense, the modern construct of the metropolis is more than a mere architectural organization/arrangement of space. Similarly, cinematography is more than a mere ensemble of mechanical recording and reproduction techniques. Both are inscribed in a wider –historically determined– apparatus of capturing and dismantling, reshaping and controlling the individual/collective body, thus marking the emergence of a new model of perceptual economy. Prefiguring the advent of the absolute universal medium (the digital computer), metropolitan architecture and cinematography are formatting (or in-formation) technologies that make possible the

massive storing, processing and manipulation of data streams (time, movement, bodily functions, behaviors, perceptual patterns etc).

Let’s try to unpack this a bit:

Far from being simple aesthetic forms, modern metropolitan spaces and sequences of cinematic images share a common functional substrate: they constitute technologies for dissecting and restoring, disseminating and recovering, disassembling and reassembling, fragmenting and reuniting the mental components of sense perception, *according to a new law*. This *new law*, “that made it possible to combine multiple perspectives with a complex, multilayered temporality in order to capture the unique texture and rhythm of the modern metropolis”,¹² is the film editing technique of *montage*, which mirrors the very essence of modernist aesthetics.

The new sensorium, produced and established by modern industrial civilization, does not perceive space and time as a *unity*, but as intense *multiplicity* and discontinuous *repetition*. By *multiplicity* and *repetition* we mean that metropolitan space-time is not experienced formally, that is, in terms of intelligible, form-content relations, but in terms of non-intelligible, abruptly fluctuating intensities: wave fluxes of audiovisual stimuli or, in cinematic terms, shortcuts and image sequences.

It is no coincidence, after all, that poets –those acute observers with an eye for the subtlest, elusive analogies– had detected at a very early stage the strong, endogenous links between cinematic and urban metropolitan reality, the “direct relation”, in Raymond Williams’ words, “between the motion picture, especially in its development in cutting and montage, and the characteristic movement of an observer in the close and miscellaneous environment of the streets”.¹³ Except for Charles Baudelaire –whose notions of modernity, *flânerie*, immersed-in-the-crowd-experience, transitionality, kaleidoscopic consciousness, contingency et cetera have been so unsurpassably analyzed by Walter Benjamin¹⁴ and proclaimed eversince as *sine qua non* categories of our understanding of modernist aesthetics– a special mention should also be given to Ezra Pound. As Noel Stock, noted expert on the poet’s life and work, informs us, in a review of Jean Cocteau’s *Poésies 1917–1920*, published in the renowned American magazine *The Dial* of January 1921, Ezra Pound “claimed that Cocteau wrote a poetry that belonged to the city intellect and he went on to air a view which may have had some effect on Eliot when later that year he begun to write his long poem *The Waste Land*. ‘The life of the village is narrative’, Pound wrote, ‘[...] In the city, the visual impressions succeed each other, overlap, overcross, they are cinematographic’. One of the distinguishing marks of *The Waste Land* is the succession of scenes and impressions, crossing and overlapping”.¹⁵

In their documenting the paradoxical, fragmented labyrinth of modernity, all these urban anthropologist-investigators¹⁶ –from Baudelaire to Michel de Certeau, passing through Pound and Eliot, Engels, Simmel and Benjamin, Dadaists and Cubist painters (Picasso, Braque and Delaunay), Citroën and Moholy-Nagy, Cubist and Constructivist filmmakers (Ruttman and Vertov), Situationist *dérive*-ists– they all testified, in one way or another, to

the restructuring of sense perception as a battlefield of contingency “and in so doing identified it as both problem and possibility”¹⁷ – a twofold, ambiguous condition that “functions as a *pharmakon*, remedy as well as poison”.¹⁸

What, thus, underlies the *metropolis-cinema* nexus is, to stress it once again, an emergent, paradoxical state of ontological daze, in which passersby and cinemagoers are relentlessly barraged with onrushing fluxes of sensory stimuli: whoever is exposed to the sensory battlefield of the modern metropolis and cinema is no longer an *in-dividual* (*in-dividuum*, in latin), in the classical philosophical sense of the term, that is, something that *cannot be divided*, but a dismantled system, a *collage* of fragmented psychological mechanisms, reconstituted under a new law – or, according to Baudelairian terminology, “a kaleidoscope equipped with consciousness”.

It follows, then, that thinking cinema as a representational medium destined to simply capture and reproduce an external reality would be at least naive. For, when it comes to the study of technical media, one must always keep in mind Nietzsche’s caveat: “[T]he origin of the emergence of a thing and its ultimate usefulness, its practical application and incorporation into a system of ends, are *toto coelo* separate”.¹⁹ Cinema’s primary capacity is neither to document nor to entertain but, as demonstrated by pioneering specialist in applied psychology, Hugo Münsterberg, to objectivate on a technical level the very neurological operations of human sense perception mechanisms: the cinematic medium reveals the unconscious processes of the central, nervous system and renders them manageable.

Münsterberg’s pivotal argument, which summarizes his short, but innovative 1916 treatise on the psychology of film, is that, contrary to traditional forms of artistic representation –theatre, for example– which are subject to the conditions of an external reality (time, space and causality), in the case of cinema the viewer receives nothing from outside:

“Münsterberg’s demonstration that the new medium is completely independent aesthetically and need not imitate theater suggests that it assembles reality from psychological mechanisms. For the first time in the global history of art, a medium instantiates the neurological flow of data. Although the arts have processed the orders of the symbolic or the orders of things, film presents its spectators with their own processes of perception – and with a precision that is otherwise accessible only to experiment and thus neither to consciousness nor to language”.²⁰

Camera movement techniques –fade-out, close-up, dissolve et cetera– are, in essence, technical objectivations of otherwise non-reproducible, unconscious, psychological processes (attention, memory, imagination, emotion, perception of depth and movement), not to mention the rhythm of montage, which, as shown by eminent film theorist Béla Balázs, can reproduce the real speed of the unconscious process of association, the whole manifoldness of parallel currents with their endless interconnections. Long before Benjamin formulated his historical insight into cinema’s being “a true training ground” of modern perception through the “successive changes of scene and focus”, Münsterberg was

already defining the cinematic medium, in purely technical terms, as an analytical-anatomical tool that operates directly on the psychophysiology of human sense perception:

“What is then the difference between seeing motion in the photoplay and seeing it on the real stage? There on the stage where the actors move the eye really receives a continuous series. Each position goes over into the next without any interruption. The spectator receives everything from without and the whole movement which he sees is actually going on in the world of space without and accordingly in his eye. But if he faces the film world, the motion which he sees appears to be a true motion, and yet is created by his own mind. The afterimages of the successive pictures are not sufficient to produce a substitute for the continuous outer stimulation; the essential condition is rather the inner mental activity which unites the separate phases in the idea of connected action. Thus, we have reached the exact counterpart of our results when we analyzed the perception of depth. We see actual depth in the pictures, and yet we are every instant aware that it is not real depth and that the persons are not really plastic. It is only a suggestion of depth, a depth created by our own activity, but not actually seen, because essential conditions for the true perception of depth are lacking. Now we find that the movement too is perceived but that the eye does not receive the impressions of true movement. It is only a suggestion of movement, and the idea of motion is to a high degree the product of our own reaction. Depth and movement alike come to us in the moving picture world, not as hard facts but as a mixture of fact and symbol. They are present and yet they are not in the things. We invest the impressions with them. The theater has both depth and motion, without any subjective help; the screen has them and yet lacks them. We see things distant and moving, but we furnish to them more than we receive; we create the depth and the continuity through our mental mechanism”.²¹

The key issue at stake in the age of industrial modernism is *behavioural* management at mass as well as at individual level. And the metropolis-cinema nexus is no exception to this; it acquires the status of media technologies that serve as large-scale, experimental production –disassembly and reassembly– lines. For example: cinemagoers who get themselves immersed into the darkened (platonian) cave of a movie theatre and, pinned to their seats like jumbo jet passengers, stare lethargically at a shimmering screen, on which giant forms appear to move, contribute, according to media philosopher Vilém Flusser, to the technical implementation and solution of an old ontological problem, which found its utmost expression in Descartes’ philosophy: they unknowingly participate in their very assimilation as *thinking subjects (rei cogitandae)* to the *extended object (rei extensae)*. This process happens in the following way:

“To sit there, they stood in line and then were distributed in geometrically ordered seats. An arithmetic row has become a geometric structure. Geometrically distributed, the people arrange themselves to receive the program (to be programmed) comfortably. From thinking objects, they have become geometrically extended objects. The Cartesian problem concerning the assimilation of the thinking subject to the extended object has been resolved in the cinema. Now the forms on the screen begin to jump instead of glide. The receivers know what it means: the projector is not working properly. If the receivers were slaves in a Platonic hell, they would welcome this, for it would be a step toward their release from looking at shadows. Cinemagoers, however, turn their heads toward the projector in irritation. They have paid to be betrayed. A consensus exists between them and the screen serving the interests of betrayal, a contract arising from feedback between the screen and the viewer”.²²

One hundred and twenty-six years after the creation of the first motion picture (of a total duration of two seconds) by Louis Le Prince (*Roundhay Garden Scene*, 1888) and a hundred and twenty-one years after the first ever public film projection by the Lumière brothers at the Parisian *Salon Indien du Grand Café* on December 1895, we now are fully aware of the scale and unprecedented proportions this gigantic enterprise of geometrisation, prediction and control of bodies and behaviours has taken on. Thenceforth, the field in which the war is being waged is that of sense perception, i.e. the very channels of communication between audiovisual data fluxes and individual receivers. Supported by a strategic network of elaborate feedback loop mechanisms destined to make them fatter and better, images, in our age of post-industrial capitalism, “are intended”, more than ever before, “to serve as models for actions”:²³

“Receivers are not sponges that simply absorb. On the contrary, they must react. On the outside, they must act in accordance with the technical images they have received: buy soap, go on holiday, vote for a political party. However, for the interaction between image and person under discussion here, it is crucial that receivers also react to the received image on the inside. They must feed it. A feedback loop must appear between the image and the receiver, making the images fatter and fatter. The images have feedback channels that run in the opposite direction from the distribution channels and that inform the senders about receivers’ reactions, channels like market research, demography, and political elections. This feedback enables the images to change, to become better and better, and more like the receivers want them to be; that is, the images become more and more like the receivers want them to be so that the receivers can become more and more like the images want them to be. That is the interaction between image and person, in brief”.²⁴

It must be remarked, in passing, that words such as “state of exception”, “urgent rhythms”, “barraged”, “war”, “battlefield” and “strategic”, which keep cropping up time and again in our discussion as a kind of recurring leitmotiv, are not being used in a strictly metaphorical sense, as a means to emphasize the impact of early 20th century technological modernism on being, experience and reality. For, seen from a military-historical perspective, media technologies and war strategies have been going, in essence, hand in hand.

A cursory archeological review of visual media techniques of the last six centuries reveals that, before being developed for commercially profitable spectacles or artistic experimental practices and established as such, the former have been to a great extent, in origin, military.

[End of Part I]

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Martin Heidegger, *Holzwege*, Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1980, p. 92.
- ² Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone Film Typewriter*, Trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young & Michael Wutz, Stanford University Press, 1999, p. 3.
- ³ Friedrich Kittler, “Gramophone, film, typewriter”, in: *Friedrich A. Kittler Essays – Literature, media, information systems*, John Johnston (ed.), Routledge 1997, p. 32.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- ⁷ Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone Film Typewriter*, Trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young & Michael Wutz, Stanford University Press, 1999, p. xxxix.
- ⁸ Walter Benjamin, *The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility, and other writings on media*, Trans. Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, Howard Eiland, and Others, Ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008, pp. 19-55.
- ⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc*, Trans. Samuel Weber, Northwestern University Press, p. 93.
- ¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997, p. 12.
- ¹¹ Georg Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life”, in: *The Blackwell City Reader*, Ed. Gary Bridge & Sophie Watson, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002.
- ¹² James Donald, “The city, the cinema: Modern spaces”, in: *Visual culture*, ed. Chris Jenks, Routledge, 1995, p. 85.
- ¹³ Raymond Williams, *The country and the city*, Chatto & Windus, 1973, p. 242.
- ¹⁴ Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A lyric poet in the era of high capitalism*, Versus, 1973.
- ¹⁵ Noel Stock, *The life of Ezra Pound*, Routledge, 1970.
- ¹⁶ A term drawn from James Donald’s “The city, the cinema: Modern spaces”, in: *Visual culture*, ed. Chris Jenks, Routledge, 1995, p. 80.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 80.
- ¹⁸ A point made by Ross Chambers in: *Loiterature*, University of Nebraska Press, 1999, p. 293.
- ¹⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli & Mazzino Montinari, Berlin, 1988, Vol. 5, 313.
- ²⁰ Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone Film Typewriter*, Trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young & Michael Wutz, Stanford University Press, 1999, p. 161.
- ²¹ Hugo Münsterberg, *The photoplay – A psychological study*, D. Appleton & Company, 1916, pp. 70-71.
- ²² Vilém Flusser, *Into the universe of technical images*, Trans. Nancy Ann Roth, University of Minnesota Press, 2011, p. 54.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- ²⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 53-54.