

Periodicals & Films: *BLAST*, *The Little Review*, “Metropolis,” & “Modern Times”

Notes &c.

Objectives

1. To recognize early cinema’s and silent films’ conventions.
2. To demonstrate familiarity with the material production of modernist print culture in periodicals.
3. To demonstrate New Critical skills that are essential for poetry in relation to reading prose or filmic texts.
4. To describe the international nature of Modernism via its cultural products from Britain, the USA, and Germany at the same time.

Reading Assignment

Antliff, Alan. “Guernica: A Political Odyssey.” Ideas. Canadian Broadcast Corporation, 2007.

BLAST. 1 & 2 (1914–1915). Web. <https://modjournal.org/issue/bdr430555>

The Little Review. 1.1 to 9.2 (1914–1922). Web. <https://modjournal.org/journal/little-review>

Macfarlane, Alan. “Lecture – Karl Marx (1818–1883).” King’s College. University of Cambridge, Cambridge. November 2001. Web. <https://youtu.be/xoZp177HDJ8>

Metropolis. Dir. Fritz Lang. Perf. Alfred Abel, Brigitte Helm, Gustav Fröhlich, & Rudolf Klein-Rogge. Universum Film AG, 1927.

Modern Times. Dir. Charlie Chaplin. Perf. Charlie Chaplin, Paulette Goddard, & Henry Bergman. United Artists, 1936. Film.

Commentary

This **Unit** covers periodical materials and films in order to demonstrate

the international forms of Modernism. This shift also means a greater range of electronic resources are available, in particular due to copyright regulations in the USA, Canada, and Europe. With regard to the materials, we will access print content through the Modernist Journals Project hosted by Brown University and the University of Tulsa. **I strongly recommend** you watch the digitally restored films, if possible, rather than the easily available (and copyright-free) unrestored versions. Many inexpensive popular subscription services, such as Netflix, also make these films available – copyright on the original materials has expired **in Canada**, but newly restored versions may have fresh copyright claims. With [Chaplin](#) this relates to the quality of the materials (image quality), so the Criterion editions provide a cleaner viewing experience (most of these are also available for *free* through online streaming through your local public library). With *Metropolis*, however, it relates to *content* as well. The most recent restoration of the film in 2010 involved restoring much of the censored materials that were cut after its first screening in 1927 – this restoration recuperates nearly 30 minutes of material discovered in 2008 in Argentina (which arguably renews copyright on the restoration copy). For the periodicals, it is possible to read [BLAST](#) in its entirety, but the manifesto that opens the first issue is the most important. It is not possible to read the full print run of *The Little Review* in our timeframe, so you should instead familiarize yourself with the kind of materials it published, the familiar names, and the major works that were serialized in it (such as works by [James Joyce](#)). You may wish to compare the **witness of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in *The Egoist*** to our earlier readings as well.

Your readings and viewings for this Unit aim at developing your previous Units have focused. Take time here to become comfortable with watching a silent film and developing the kind of responses and patience this medium requires, which will be different from what is most familiar to you.

In many respects, the internationalism of our filmic and periodical readings in this Unit entails a return to the critical paradigms **we first reviewed in Unit 1**, and political and economic theories in particular. All of the materials in **Unit 5** respond to the industrialized nature of Modernism and the social difficulties this created, but they respond in very different ways. The English journal *BLAST* began the “[Vorticist](#)” movement, which was in many respects an English-language reaction to Italian [Futurism](#). Both Vorticism and Futurism adopted key critical concepts from the Leninist version of [Marxism](#), which is to say an anti-humanist notion of Marxism, which led both movements to support forms of [Fascism](#). The Italian Futurists supported

[Benito Mussolini](#) in the Second World War, as did [Ezra Pound](#) who was a central figure to Vorticism. [Wyndham Lewis](#), the other key figure in Vorticism and editor of *BLAST*, briefly supported [Adolf Hitler](#) and Nazism in 1931 before Hitler came to power in Germany, but Lewis denounced these views before WWII began after visiting Germany in 1937, followed by this renunciation of fascism in *The Hitler Cult* in 1939.

In contrast, both Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* and Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* critique the anti-humanist notions of Futurism as well as any form of Fascism. Chaplin's later film, *The Great Dictator*, is explicit in its critique of Fascism and Nazism, although Chaplin later acknowledged that he could not have made the satire had he known, at the time, the nature of the Nazi atrocities in Europe.

Lastly, *The Little Review* was created in the USA during the Chicago Renaissance, and it tied itself to a range of political movements, often those directly related to its growing editorship. Its most pressing political affiliations were with [First Wave Feminism](#) (and women's suffrage) and [antiauthoritarian forms of anarchism](#), although Pound was one of its most prominent contributors, and our later reading of [Hemingway's in our time: The 1924 Text](#) was first published in a shorter form at Pound's urging in *The Little Review* in 1923.

Notes &c.



[Picasso's "Guernica"](#)

The Macfarlane and Antliff lectures clarify the implications of some of these political paradigms: Marxism and anarchism. Both have wildly diverse popular meanings that differ significantly from the academic use of the terms. You should watch and listen to these first before moving on to the periodicals and journals – they will give you a context within which to understand the other materials. This means that after [our readings](#) in Joyce and [Eliot](#), which have emphasized aesthetic concerns over [political matters](#), we are returning to the contemporary context in which Modernist literature was developed. We are returning

to the politics, to the social, to the economic, and to the historical. We are less concerned now with the aesthetic and personal, though you may prefer to focus on the aesthetic nature of new art forms.

BLAST

The Italian Futurist and future Fascist supporter [Filippo Marinetti](#) first visited London in 1910 and lectured in public on his Futurist ambitions. This sparked the first English responses to Futurism, but they were not entirely supportive. Futurism advocated an anti-humanist view of technological progress, it exalted mechanization, and it developed a visual style that emphasized the mechanical rather than the organic. One of Futurism's most obvious legacies was the [Art Deco](#) movement, for which students in New Jersey could look to the Empire State Building, the Chrysler Building and Rockefeller Center, which are well-known examples of Art Deco architecture. Notably, Josep Maria Sert's mural "American Progress" that adorns the GE Center in Rockefeller Center is actually a replacement of [Diego Rivera's](#) "Man at the Crossroads," which included an image of [Vladimir Lenin](#).

Four years after Marinetti's visit to London, a group led by the painter and novelist Wyndham Lewis publicly rejected and mocked Marinetti when he was giving another reading in London. From this division, the English movement Vorticism was born. Its first publication was *BLAST* under Lewis's editorship, but it also included important work from Ezra Pound, [Ford Madox Ford](#), [Richard Aldington](#), and [Rebecca West](#). The first issue of *BLAST* began with a provocative series of manifestoes for Vorticism that declared its separateness from Futurism and listed a variety of objects and institutions to be either "blessed" or "blasted." The tenor, overall, was to bless those English people or materials that relate to the modern, industrialized world and to blast anything relating to humanism, folk culture, or institutionalized authority.

The second issue of *BLAST* adds work by T.S. Eliot, and it received much attention, but it was discontinued due to the [First World War](#). After the horrific experiences of mechanized warfare that many of the authors and artists in *BLAST* lived through in the Great War, a return to the type of work promoted by Vorticism was simply not possible.

The Little Review

Margaret Anderson founded *The Little Review* in 1914, the same year that Lewis founded *BLAST*, and it went on to promote works by writers and artists from nearly twenty different countries. Its initial perspective

its first several years of production was expressly anarchist, which reflected the mood in the United States at the time – the Industrial Workers of the World, a syndicalist union, was active, Emma Goldman and Randolph Bourne were actively publishing and organizing anti-conscription rallies during World War I, and the government's Palmer Raids from 1918–1921 only fueled the public interest. This gave *The Little Review* an automatic notoriety and drew attention to it among authors and artists across North American and Europe. Moreover, by virtue of being based in the USA, it was not impacted directly by the war in the same way that British periodicals were, like *BLAST* or *The Blue Review*. Ezra Pound became formally affiliated with *The Little Review* as its foreign editor in 1917, the same year the journal relocated from Chicago to Greenwich Village in New York. From this point forward, *The Little Review* became the most prominent publication of the *avant-garde* in English, challenged in this regard only by *The Dial*.

The journal's most famous inclusion is the serialized version of James Joyce's novel *Ulysses*, which eventually led to the first of the *Ulysses* lawsuits in the USA, and *The Little Review* lost (recall here the serial publication of Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in *The Egoist* as well). The Society for the Suppression of Vice sued Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap for publishing and distributing Joyce's novel, which the government considered pornographic, and both women were eventually fined after the trial. At the same time, the journal agitated in the USA for the right of women to vote, which was eventually granted in 1920.

As you review the various issues of the journal, try to consider how the format differs from the kind of experimental typography found in *BLAST* and what familiar names appear (Eliot, Pound, Joyce, Lewis, and so forth). You will also notice authors mentioned **in our Study Guide** appearing in the pages of *The Little Review*, such as [Gertrude Stein](#), the Futurist [Mina Loy](#), and [William Butler Yeats](#), the Irish poet and agitator for Irish independence from British colonial rule (which only occurred in 1922). Also, you should give attention to the perspective the journal generally puts forward in its editorials. This will give you a good idea of the outlook of the time period as well as the particular concerns of the artists active during World War I and the interbellum years.

Metropolis

Our modern generation often pays more attention to film than print materials, but film was still a relatively new medium for mass public consumption and distribution in the 1920s. *Metropolis* was the *Avatar* of its day, being both the most expensive film ever made (at the time) and

an enormous success internationally. Like *BLAST* and *The Little Review*, *Metropolis* is explicitly political and agitates for social change.

The combination of Art Deco architecture, Futurist imagery, and a plot based on class warfare and labor organization was stunning for contemporary audiences. It is also important to remember that the contemporary audience was, first and foremost, within the struggling [Weimar Republic](#) prior to the rise of Nazism. This was the period known for German [Expressionist](#) Cinema, such as the [cubist](#) *Das Cabinet Der Dr. Caligari* (1920), which means social critiques were widespread yet tightly constrained. For Fritz Lang, who directed the film (and went on to later direct 21 films for Hollywood, mainly in the *film noir* genre), these politics were contentious. He co-wrote the film with his wife, Thea von Harbou, but six years later they divorced, in part due to her increasing sympathies for the Nazis that had coincided with her and Lang's separation in 1931 (Lang's family heritage was Jewish, though he was a Catholic). Lang's 1933 film *Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse* was banned by the Nazis (he used phrases from Nazi speeches for dialogue of the criminal protagonist), and he fled Germany the same evening Joseph Goebbels summoned him to his office to explain the ban as well as his own deep admiration of *Metropolis*. Lang could never separate *Metropolis* from the revision it was given under Nazi ideology as well as his ex-wife's staunch support for Adolf Hitler and production of Nazi propaganda. Lang later considered the theme of the heart mediating between the head (planners) and the hands (the workers) to be simplistic, although he never repudiated its Marxist connotations, and his later films for Hollywood exalt working class values. Lang's own background was largely working class. Lang moved to California in 1936 and became a naturalized American citizen in 1939.

When it was first released, the revolutionary theme of *Metropolis* was considered far too radical to allow its distribution in an uncensored form. In Germany, it faced significant cuts to content, much of which damaged the flow of the narrative and eliminated some characters entirely. The same occurred when the film was released in the USA where it also faced significant censorship due to its "radical" content and social critique. It was considered too subversive and too Marxist, and the general worry was that at a time of significant labor unrest, it could perhaps incite workers to unionize or revolt. These cuts remained in every distribution of the film until largely uncut copies of the film were discovered in 2008 in Argentina as well as New Zealand and Australia. By relying on the Argentine copy with some substitutions from the New Zealand and Australian copies, the film was restored in 2010 with only 8 minutes of content lost due to degradation of the film. The legacy of this censorship has influenced critical reactions to the film

over the past 80 years, yet it has remained one of the most influential films of all time.

Modern Times

Charlie Chaplin shaped American cinema in a manner akin to Lang's influence on the German, although Chaplin's career slowed quickly after World War II. Chaplin was born and raised in Britain, where the film industry thrived until the Second World War, but he instead moved to America when he was twenty and began his career in Hollywood. *Modern Times* (1936) was the final film with Chaplin's widely beloved character "The Tramp," who combined slapstick comedy with a gritty social commentary that publicized the plight of immigrant and working-class communities. Notably, officials and institutions of power are, in Chaplin's films, bumbling and ineffective – this in combination with the Tramp's appeal to workers and immigrants reveals the subversive socialist politics that Chaplin supported. Hence, Chaplin's comedies appealed both to the public at large as well as to the *avant-garde* artists and authors writing in the pages of *BLAST* and *The Little Review*. In effect, it is high-brow and low-brow in one work.

In *Modern Times*, Chaplin critiques the working and social conditions people faced during the [Great Depression](#), which Chaplin regarded as a natural outcome of the capitalist mechanization of labor. In this respect, the alienated condition of the workers is akin to the "dead land" T.S. Eliot describes in *The Waste Land*. It is also kindred to, though less overtly revolutionary than, Lang's *Metropolis*. *Modern Times* was the first overtly political film for Chaplin, and its critique of industrialized capitalism both gained it sympathy among the film-going public and condemnation by the film industry and several political leaders. The film was also controversial for being mainly silent, even though the film industry had become predominantly "talkies" or sound films. It was Chaplin's final silent film (though it does contain some sound and talking), and his later works were all with sound recording.

Chaplin's support for the working class did not sit well with authority, and his labor sympathies were noticed by government. However, this did not create difficulties for him until after World War II. His later film *The Great Dictator* had an overtly sympathetic portrayal of Jewish communities, and its unflinching satire of Fascism led many critics to believe it would be banned. Chaplin was preparing it during the lead up to the Second World War, and with the British entrance to the war while Chaplin was editing the film, its distribution was ensured – this commercial influence on media should be considered when watching both *Modern Times* and *Metropolis*. That is, political and

economic influences on distribution and market access also directly impact both what films can be produced and whether or not they move from filming to production and to theatres. For *The Great Dictator*, which gives a more overtly political response to many of the same themes as we find in *Modern Times*, appeasement of the Axis powers had led many other nations to agree to ban the film prior to its release. The positive representation of Jews was controversial in both the USA and Britain at the time, but the critique of Fascism ensured its distribution and commercial success.

Chaplin's own politics were associated with Fabian Socialism, antiauthoritarian values, and a variety of democratic socialist groups and figures. In this, he was similar to the British novelist [George Orwell](#). The importance of these views to *Modern Times* stand out clearly. However, Orwell's socialist views were not accepted by the American authorities. In the late 1940s, as McCarthyism grew, Chaplin was accused of communist sympathies by J. Edgar Hoover, perhaps in part based on Chaplin's advocacy of a second front in the War in Europe to support the USA's Soviet allies. During a brief trip to England in 1952, Chaplin's American residency and ability to re-enter the country was revoked at Hoover's instructions. From this point forward, Chaplin resided primarily in Switzerland for another 25 years until his death. In fact, he was most closely aligned politically with authors such as H.G. Wells and [George Bernard Shaw](#) who were part of the Fabian Socialist movement, the same group behind the modern Labour Party in Britain (most recently led in government by Tony Blair and Gordon Brown). His radicalism, which led to his ejection from the USA, is now relatively common.

Questions for Self-Review

1. How do form and content relate to each other in *BLAST*?
2. How is Chaplin's comic Tramp character modernist? Is there a continuity with Joyce and Eliot?
3. Professor Antliff discusses Picasso's painting *Guernica* as modernist and cubist art but in a political context. Do similar ideas relate to *BLAST* or *Metropolis*?
4. How does *Modern Times* differ in form from *Metropolis*?
5. How do professors Antliff and Macfarlane change your vision of the politics of 1920s and 30s film and art magazines?

Works Cited & Supplemental Readings

- Ashford, Dave. "Blueprints for Babylon: Modernist Mapping of the London Underground 1913–1939." *Modernism/modernity* 17.4 (2010): 735–764.
- Cowan, Michael. "The Heart Machine: 'Rhythm' and Body in Weimar Film and Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*." *Modernism/modernity* 14.2 (2007): 225–248.
- Hanna, Julian. "Blasting after Blast: Wyndham Lewis's Late Manifestos." *Journal of Modern Literature* 31.1 (2007): 124–135.
- Huculak, Matthew J. "The Cyril J. Fox Fonds." *Fronts of Modernity: The 20th Century Collections at the University of Victoria Libraries*. Victoria: McPherson Library, 2016. 110–115. Web. <http://tinyurl.com/y9tcr54p>
- — —. "Making It New: The Collections of Ezra Pound." *Fronts of Modernity: The 20th Century Collections at the University of Victoria Libraries*. Victoria, BC: McPherson Library, 2016. 116–123. Web. <http://tinyurl.com/y9tcr54p>
- Kadlec, David. "Pound, Blast, & Syndicalism." *ELH* 60.4 (1993): 1015–1031.
- Lightweis-Goff, Jennie. "Sins of Commitment: Adorno, Chaplin and Mimesis." *Senses of Cinema: An Online Film Journal Devoted to the Serious and Eclectic Discussion of Cinema* 40 (2006): n.pag. Web. <http://tinyurl.com/y8xnfr7v>
- Maland, Charles J. "Modern Times (1936): The Depression, Technology, and the Tramp." Eds. Jeffrey Geiger & R.L. Rutsky. *Film Analysis: A Norton Reader*. New York: W.W. & Norton, 2005. 238–258.
- McKible, Adam. *The Space & Place of Modernism: The Little Magazine in New York*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Murphy, Richard. "Modernism and the Cinema: *Metropolis* and the Expressionist Aesthetic." *Comparative Critical Studies* 4.1 (2007): 105–120.
- Naundorf, Karen. "The *Metropolis* Mystery." *Sight and Sound* 18.9 (2008): 26–29.

Rainey, Lawrence, Christine Poggi, and Laura Wittman. Eds. *Futurism: An Anthology*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2009.

Scheide, Frank. Ed. *Chaplin: The Dictator & the Tramp*. London: British Film Institute, 2004.

Stewart, Garrett. "Modern Hard Times: Chaplin & the Cinema of Self-Reflection." *Critical Inquiry* 3.2 (1976): 295–314.

Stoicea, Gabriela. "Re-Producing the Class and Gender Divide: Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*." *Women in German Yearbook: Feminist Studies in German Literature and Culture* 22 (2006): 21–42.

Author: James Gifford
Editor: Lucie Kotesovska