

University of Texas Press
Society for Cinema & Media Studies

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Source: *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Autumn, 1984), pp. 41-64

Published by: University of Texas Press on behalf of the Society for Cinema & Media Studies

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1225308>

Accessed: 27/01/2010 06:00

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Functions of Film: Léger's Cinema on Paper and on Cellulose, 1913-25

by Richard Brender

For the jaded late twentieth century moviegoer, the effusively maniacal paeans to the cinema written by the early Parisian avant-garde seem excessive. The stridently utopian tone of Guillaume Apollinaire, Ricciotto Canudo, Elie Faure, Blaise Cendrars, and Fernand Léger seem especially bewildering when we realize that the object of their affection is nothing more than Tom Mix shorts and Rio Jim serials, the adventures of archfiend Fantômas or Blanche White's bids for the hearts of the world.¹

This group of critics, all products of the prewar artistic scene, actually preceded the "first generation" of avant-garde filmmakers, the "impressionists" of the early twenties. While Canudo and Faure became partisans of these filmmakers, it seems doubtful that the impressionists' refined subjectivity, rather conventional plots and somewhat snobbish sense of their potential audience could have met the criteria of early Parisian film theory.

Ballet Mécanique, made in 1924 by the painter Fernand Léger, was better designed to meet the approval of these theorists. Although it is now a classic and enjoys an active and perennial life in freshman film courses, as well as having been the subject of Standish Lawder's deservedly famous *Cubist Cinema*, little light has been shed on the film-related writings of Léger between 1913 and 1925. These show how Léger conceived of film in social and political terms, as did his contemporaries. Specifically, this generation of theorists felt certain that the technical and scientific explosion of the twentieth century, of which the cinema was one result, had succeeded in creating a new humanity capable of fostering a more organic and less divisive form of social organization. Cinema became both an agent and a result of this transformation. It is precisely the degree to which Léger felt compelled to develop the new vision of humanity rather than to celebrate the already extant proletariat as embodiment of it that set him off from his associates. In order to understand the import of both *Ballet Mécanique* and Léger's writings we must first set out to examine this early milieu.

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I. Léger's Associates. Léger's friend, the novelist and poet Blaise Cendrars, was probably the most direct influence on the direction Léger's thought would take toward film. Cendrars began his lifelong friendship with the painter in 1913, when the two found themselves in the artistic circles of Apollinaire and Ricciotto Canudo. They collaborated on illustrated books before the war separated them. Their friendship resumed in 1916, reinforced by their similar wartime experiences and the fact that they both had received wounds.

Cendrars's first exposure to film occurred in 1917, when he acted as Gance's troubleshooter during the filming of *J'Accuse*.² By 1918, he was working with Gance on the latter's landmark, *La Roue*. Lawder credits him with editing the film's crucial first third, the part that was to play such an important role in Léger's *Ballet Mécanique* six years later.³ In 1921, Cendrars wrote his most important manifesto on film, "ABC du Cinéma."⁴ During this period, Léger was in close contact with him and they collaborated to produce the one act ballet *La Création du Monde* in 1923 for the Ballet Suédois.

Cendrars's work with Gance brought him together with two other figures who would be important in forging his ideas on film during this formative stage: Ricciotto Canudo and Elie Faure. As we have seen, Cendrars's acquaintance with Canudo predated the filming. In 1913, the latter edited the literary journal *Montjoie!* whose stated aspiration was to "Give the Elite a lead!" What it did succeed in doing was to introduce avant-garde artists of various media to one another. Through the magazine's activities and Canudo's *soirées*, Cendrars, Max Jacob, and Léger all met one another as well as Canudo. In 1911, Canudo wrote his first film article, "Le Manifeste des Sept Arts,"⁵ which served as a blueprint for his later activities organizing alternative support systems for the film avant-garde. The outbreak of war caused Cendrars and Canudo to collaborate on a letter urging all foreigners living in France to enlist in support of their host country. After military service, Canudo allied himself with Ozenfant's journal *L'Elan*, a move which connected him to the postwar purist movement which Léger would later support. Léger and Canudo maintained their ties as they contributed the sets and book respectively for the Ballet Suédois's *Skating Rink* in 1922. Cendrars's exposure to Canudo's thinking on film could not help but be reinforced by Cendrars's presence on the set of *La Roue* during its filming. Canudo's influence on French film culture was perhaps most profoundly felt when he set up the *Club des Amis du Septième Art* in 1922. Modeled after his film display at the Salon D'Automne of that year, C.A.S.A. was established by Canudo as a film space in order to create an alternative class of patrons and audience made up of artists. One of its members was art historian Elie Faure,⁶ an old friend and mentor of Canudo's.

Elie Faure was the critic who had the least to do directly with Léger and his circle, yet his influence was perhaps the most widely felt. His book *Les*

Constructeurs (1914) and his four volume *History of Art* (1909-21) had a substantial impact on French letters of the period. His rather old-fashioned anti-cubist taste in painting and his celebration of "école de Paris" painters would hardly endear him to the vanguard artists that surrounded Léger.⁷ Yet he had greater sympathy for progressive trends in French architecture.⁸ His correspondence shows that he was friendly with both Le Corbusier and Ozenfant. These two leaders of the purist movement eulogized him in the memorial issue of *Revue Europe* on his death in 1937.⁹

But Faure's contact with the avant-garde came most strikingly in the film criticism he did in the teens and twenties. His 1918 novel may have supplied the title for Gance's *La Roue* and his homage to Charlie Chaplin appeared in the purist *L'Esprit Nouveau*.¹⁰

What distinguishes the criticism of Faure, Canudo, and Cendrars from other avant-garde film theories of the day is its stress on the social role of film in transcending the old individualistic arts and in creating a new humanity governed by the collective spirit. This highly idealist synthesis of utopian socialism and industrial growth could be calculated to appeal to the socially engaged spirit of purism which *L'Esprit Nouveau* represented and which Léger was expressing in his work. Even when they were not written by Faure, *L'Esprit Nouveau's* articles on film were informed by a kindred sensibility.¹¹

But just as many of purism's members were allied with earlier movements, so was this first generation of film critics. Like their less political contemporaries Apollinaire, Jacob and Pierre Reverdy, these critics formed part of a pool from which small prewar art movements "that were never exclusive and were linked by innumerable personal ties. . .tending to share fundamental ideas about the 'new reality'" regularly drew their support.¹² The "left bank" group of cubists, which could count Léger, Robert Delaunay, Albert Gleizes, Jean Metzinger, and Henri La Fauconnier among its ranks, had always manifested a utopian socialist streak. The subject matter of their paintings was either allegorical or direct social criticism. As we will see, their communal experiment at the Abbaye de Créteil could serve as a foreshadowing of the social world view of these film critics.

Around 1912, Delaunay became more distant from his erstwhile colleagues and gradually came to form an offshoot movement known as "Orphism." Apollinaire and Léger followed, and Cendrars and Canudo cut their artistic teeth in this movement. Art historian John Golding characterizes Orphism as being essentially more literary than its predecessor (even though the painting it generated was far more abstract and concerned with "pure form").¹³ In the spring, 1914 issue of *Montjoie!*, Canudo proclaims the journal to be a mouthpiece of the Orphist (or "Cerebrist," as he calls it) movement, which he goes on to justify in effusively utopian terms.¹⁴ It is probably this period which contributed the wildly ecstatic tone to this body of criticism.

So by 1918, when purism is set in motion by Le Corbusier and Ozenfant,

many of its core members (for instance, Léger, Cendrars, Maurice Raynal, and Reverdy) not only had worked together in previous art movements but also had already established their socialist premises. The whole first generation of film theorists had already been conditioned to justify everything in political terms.

II. A New Medium for a New Humanity. Surfacing among the rush of ideas and images that compete for our attention in Cendrars's "ABC of the Cinema," is a tripartite division of the history of human consciousness, which is determined by the system of communication in use. The first worldwide revolution consists in the development of writing — the "means of retaining something, a testimony of the sacred initiation, autocratic, individual." Lasting from the Mesopotamians down to 1438, this phase witnessed the birth of painting as a necessary corollary. With the advent of printing, "[e]ducation becomes more democratic, and culture is refined," and the second worldwide revolution is ready to take shape. This new transformation of the world and human consciousness is both individualist, as "New States are formed based on the new principles of liberty and equality," and conducive to communalism as "all the peoples on earth come into contact."¹⁵

The newest era is ushered in by a third revolution initiated by "Daguerre, a Frenchman, who invents photography. Fifty years later, the cinema was to come. Renewal! Renewal! The eternal Revolution." Looking at the events of his day, Cendrars eagerly anticipates "a new synthesis of the human spirit, toward a new humanity and it seems that a new race of men will appear. Their language will be that of the cinema." The climax of the essay occurs when Cendrars elaborates on the changes which the cinema will bring about:

In the theaters. . .

The spectator who no longer sits quietly in his chair, who is ripped out of his calm, who is violated, who participates in the action, who recognizes himself on the screen among the convulsions of the crowd, who yells and who cries, who protests and who throws himself about.

In the world. . .

At the same time, in all the cities of the world, the crowd which exits from the movie houses, which spreads out in the streets like black blood, which like a powerful beast flexes its thousand tentacles and with a very slight effort crushes palaces, prisons.

In the heart. . .

Look at the new generation suddenly blossoming like flowers. Revolution. Youth of the world. Today.¹⁶

Although alarming, this rhetoric was hardly unique to Cendrars. Léger anticipated his friend's historical teleology by eight years in his first article, "The Origins of Painting and its Representational Value," though in this essay he sees painting as the liberating force, not cinema.¹⁷ Writing in Canudo's *Montjoie!*, Léger administers last rites to superfluous mimetic paint-

ing, which only took on its role of “instructing, educating and amusing the people” as a result of its actual function, i.e., providing literary values to architecture. Its *raison d'être* would now become “dynamic divisionism,” i.e., capturing “present day life, more fragmented and faster moving than life in previous eras” by the abstract means of “pure plastic contrast.” Ironically enough, Léger delegates new communication media such as movies, photographs, dime novels, and music hall shows, the very agents of this fragmentation of consciousness, to the role of mere sops for the homeless representation and sentimentality displaced by the newly liberated (“purified”) painting.

Léger's trivialization of the cinema was short-lived indeed. By the next year, the medium is given serious consideration as an art form. In his article “Contemporary Achievements in Painting,” the emphasis of his argument has shifted.¹⁸ New painting's break with the past is no longer viewed merely as a response to institutional changes in the role of art, but rather as a means to depicting the “new sensibility.” (“If pictorial expression has changed, it is because modern life has caused it.”) Visual language becomes full of “diminutives and abbreviations” reflecting an environment giving the new generation many times the amount of visual information given to older artists in the same amount of time. Using views from train, plane, and car windows as examples of new visual phenomena, Léger notes that the cinema is perfectly adapted to reproduce these: “The compression of the motion picture [editing?], its breaking up of forms [closeups and differing scales in succeeding shots?] are the result of all this.”¹⁹ An idealist artist like Léger can only hope to “catch the creative spirit of things” and become “a sensibility completely subject to the new state of things.” Speaking of a completely new art form - the spectacle - in 1924, Léger notes: “Speed is the law of the modern world. The eye must ‘be able to choose’ in a fraction of a second or it risks its existence, whether it be driving a car, in the street, or behind a scholar's microscope.”²⁰ Traditional media haven't a prayer of keeping up, and the artist's imperative is “invention at all costs.”

Much of Léger's vocabulary of “perpetual renewal,” “catching the creative spirit in its external manifestations” and “creative evolution” seems to be an elliptical shorthand alluding to concerns that a contemporary art audience would understand, so that he need not spell them out. Art historian Virginia Spate notes how the Orphist generation stressed the primacy of sensation as an agent for this new consciousness. Since anyone living now is inundated with so much sense data all at once, the Orphists felt people cannot help but be in contact with a larger segment of humanity and the universe than people of past generations were.²¹ How this perception translated itself into this group's utopian social vision is made explicit by its most speculative member, Elie Faure.

Born in 1873 and trained in medicine, Faure imbued his writing with late nineteenth century scientific and philosophical premises. For instance,

Faure accepted Lemarck's contention that socially created changes could effect the future development of the human species quite literally through heredity. This view of evolution meant that each generation influenced future generations by presenting them with a legacy of redefined humanity, by "successive evolutions, episodes, in effect, of a continuous evolution."²² Faure likens society to a cell where the function of each organelle is subservient to the whole. Similarly, the action of the individual "must necessarily be exercised with reference to its harmonious relations with the organism to which it belongs, in the midst of which he accomplishes the task that gives him his particular capacities. The individual is nothing but a function of this common organism. . ."²³ As opposed to Marxist models of revolution and in common with the "Social Romanticism" of, for example, Victor Hugo, Faure makes the heroic individual, rather than the masses, the agent of this evolutionary change.

Faure referred to this class of heroes as "*constructeurs*," a term whose sense is best captured by the English word "demiurge." For him, science and technology, by affecting a material change, necessitate a new social outlook. Scientists become the newest *constructeurs* who must insure that the results are benign. For Faure this meant enabling everyone "to render as is best possible the function to which his skills have destined him, seeing that everyone in it suffers or gains in a fashion proportionate to how he. . . performs his particular task."²⁴

We can see how this derives from the "elitist" and "essentially technocratic theory" of Saint-Simonian utopian socialism, where, as political scientist Michael Harrington describes it, "there was an analysis of the inefficiency and waste of capitalist society and an insistence on how much more productive socialism would be" rather than an emphasis on socialism as liberator of the working class.²⁵ Moreover, this sort of utopianism had a tradition in the French avant-garde. From 1906-8, various artists set up an arts and crafts commune that proved a significant vehicle for linking the radicalized symbolist generation of 1885 with the new utopianism of the prewar years. The members of this Abbaye de Créteil group, which included Albert Gleizes and Alexandre Mercereau,²⁶ sought to live in a precapitalist environment where they could be autonomous from market forces in publicizing their art. As a result, they set up exhibits of their own work and had a printing press on which they published their literature and graphics.

Their work itself tended toward the utopian and allegorical. One of its guests was Jules Romains whose poem *La Vie Unanime* was printed at the Abbaye in 1908. Daniel Robbins has labeled this social vision of *unanisme* to be the underlying theme of the group. As did Faure, Canudo, Cendrars, and Léger, Romains singled out science and technology to be the basic features feeding the new "collective sentiment" of modern life. This collectivity:

could be neither focused in one point of view nor established in any single representative type. The artist's task was to emphasize the dispersive elements of life. . .to show how individual personality is merged in the multiple life of the group. . .²⁷

By 1912, members of this group had found their way on to Canudo's *Montjoie!*²⁸ and the old doctrine of *unanisme* reappeared under the Orphist moniker of "simultanism."²⁹ The chief difference between the two movements occurs in how they realize their goal. For Gleizes, *unanisme* meant modern heroic iconography,³⁰ the elimination of a fixed vantage point, and the combination of near and far onto one plane. For the Orphists, on the other hand, the new order had to be realized in terms of the perception of form. Only by examining his or her own consciousness could the artist arrive at a transcription of modern life—mimetic conventions were out. Hence, Léger's emphasis on the purely plastic elements of contrast in his essay quoted earlier (and also in his abstract Contrast of Forms paintings of 1913-14).

Looking back at Cendrars's conclusion that "Everything changes. Movement. Manners and politics. A new civilization, a new humanity," we can see clearly how it is based on the Faure-type premise that:

Numbers have created a mathematical and abstract organism, useful devices which are directed to please the grossest of our senses and which are the most beautiful projections of the brain. Automatism. Psychism. New Commodities. Machines. And the machine recreates and displaces the sense of orientation and ultimately discovers the source of sensibility like the explorers. . .³¹

Cinema, the first medium itself to be a product of technology, will ultimately supplant older media and catalyze this new technological utopia into being. Much of this heroic imagery crops up in the avant-garde film of the twenties. For instance, Marcel L'Herbier's 1923 *L'Inhumaine* (a film for which Léger helped with the sets) has a scene where the cold, self-absorbed chanteuse Claire Lescot is made to sense her place in humanity when the hero, the inventor Einar Norsen, broadcasts her performances on a sort of proto-television screen. Now she can see her audience which is spread over the entire globe. This new humanistic outlook contrasts with Claire's intensely self-indulgent prior one that we are led to believe was the result of her social role as artist under the old bourgeois star system. This meshes neatly with the Orphist outlook on the role of the artist which will synthesize, as Canudo was to claim,

multiple human experiences with the divine spirit. And we have unified practical life and the life of the sentiments. We have married Science and Art. . .the application of the one to the other in order to capture and make permanent the rhythms of light. This is Cinema. . .

We're living in the first hours of the New Dance of the Muses around the new youth of Apollo. THE BEAT OF LIGHT AND DARK AROUND AN INCOMPARABLE BONFIRE: OUR MODERN SOUL.³²

III. From Manifesto to Movie: What the New Film Will Look Like.

In a 1925 interview, Cendrars speculates, "You might say that there is a movie alphabet and that at the present time we know only very few of its minor letters."³³ It is precisely how the theorists of this utopian arm of the film avant-garde sought to formulate a film praxis, and how they regarded the "formal" properties of the film medium that will concern us in this section. However, we must constantly bear in mind that for them every property of the medium was imbued with social meaning; so there were no "purely formal" elements. Each new letter was invented with a social end in mind. It was over how this was to be realized that Léger was forced to part company with his colleagues.

A. From Storytelling to "Collective Spectacle" The first steps to a new film language involved purging cinema of all those holdovers from stage drama that it had acquired in its commercial phase. In 1922, Léger protested that: "the cinema cannot fight the theater: the dramatic effect of a living person, speaking with emotion, cannot be equaled by its direct, silent projection in black and white on a screen." Yet, he was not prepared to repudiate the film's narrative element as such at this point; speaking of *La Roue*, he was impressed by how the "visual fragments collaborate closely with the actor and drama, reinforce them, sustain them, instead of dissipating their effect."³⁴

Later, however, it was Léger's repudiation of drama itself that lay at the root of his distaste for mainstream cinema. Citing gesture, declamation, and melodrama as the elements of the classic stage's "language," Léger protests "that on stage the human resemblance was a barrier to the lyric state, the state of astonishment." The only progressive element of the old stagecraft was the mask, "devised to make a break between the visual atmosphere of a room and that of the stage, to make the individual disappear in order to utilize human material, to create fiction on the stage. The human material appeared, but it had the same spectacle value as the object and the decor." He goes on to denigrate the "star artist" as an "obstacle to unity" because she or he subsumes any "plastic value" to the ends of audience empathy and identification.³⁵ People as psychologically coherent entities (i.e., traditional characters) would give way on screen to people as moving shapes, as mere physical presences.

Léger's criticism was not just negative; he sketched out a blueprint for a new genre of "object spectacle" to rise from the ashes of the discarded classic theater. The acrobat, whose role as a type of "moving scenery" would allow him to avail himself of "unexpected plastic qualities that will be able to come into play and animate the stage," becomes the key to the "new theater of the beautiful object": "I swear to you that the stage will not be empty for we are going to make the objects act."³⁶ More to the point (for our purposes), Léger proposes that the lessons of the spectacle be extended to cinema, "an

incredible invention fraught with plastic consequences that unfortunately are often blocked because of a completely wrong point of departure.” Concretely, Léger proposes filming “a story without subtitles, with nothing but the image” rather than one based on a novelistic scenerio.³⁷ We see that in the two years between the article on *La Roue* and the one on spectacle, Léger has made a complete break with narrative cinema (and stage drama). If we keep in mind that 1924 is the date of both the latter article and of *Ballet Mécanique*, it would seem as if the resemblances between Léger’s unrealized theater piece and the film are more than a coincidence. The praise for Gance’s use of machines as “actor-objects” and his earlier call for the end of cinema as “an art that has remained almost completely descriptive, sentimental and documentary” finds its concrete corollary on screen.³⁸

Léger’s notes that the popularity of the theater of his day, “this craving for distraction at any price, must arise from a need for reaction against the harshness and demands of modern life.” He goes on to note that the postwar period presented “a social plane that is not peace. . .another plateau where economic war leaves. . .no place to breathe. . .a state of war as lamentable as the first.”³⁹ Léger never elaborates on this, but his socially oriented view of theater’s popularity is in direct agreement with another contemporary dramaphobe—Elie Faure. It is to Faure that we must turn to appreciate this point fully. Likening “the love of the theater for the sake of the theater” to drug addiction, Faure concludes: “It seems certain to me that the morbid unanimity with which people love the theater indicates both the decomposition of society and of the theater.”⁴⁰

Faure’s anti-theater polemics have a definite point of origin in his vision of the historical basis of all art forms. Faure differentiated between works of art that reflected a “symphonic” or “ecumenical” social period, where the needs, hopes, and desires that animated the populace were more or less uniform, from more individualistically-oriented periods where the manufacture of artworks reflected the criticism of the preexistent social edifice by one man (the *constructeur*). Once this last period had played itself out, creating anarchy and anomie in its wake, we could again expect a renewal of more collective forms of expression.⁴¹

Architecture, for instance, is the collective art *par excellence*. Painting is so only to the degree to which it collaborates with architecture. Both require a group effort in executing the work and in planning it, and both serve a social function when finished. Faure sees the postwar years promising the creation of a new planned and collective society. Hence, his ideal theater would “possess a collective dramatic architecture such as will raise an entire crowd to the height of a unanimous, firmly constructed, stylized conception of fate and world.”⁴² This ideal theater, or “collective spectacle,” as Faure calls it, has varied from era to era in its details, its defining characteristic being that, “everyone assists at it, side by side in a given spot. . .so that all may see from

their places, whatever their social rank may be.” Its goal becomes that of “uniting all classes, all ages and, as a rule, the two sexes, in a unanimous communion exalting the rhythmic power that defines, in each one of them, the moral order.”⁴³

The two impediments making the collective spectacle’s realization in his day impossible were commercialism and individualism in acting, the latter, “degenerating so quickly till it loses all collective significance and the art is drawn in the erotic and bestial frenzy of the plays of the modern drawing room and public dance hall.” It is perpetuated by the individualist free market in which:

The drama has become a means of enriching the author, who sets himself the servile task of discovering and flattering. . .the latest weekly fashions of a public that is no longer stirred by any common feeling; it is a means of pushing forward the actor for whom the play is written and who subordinates it, on the one hand, to the manias of his spectators and, on the other, to his own success.⁴⁴

Like Léger, Faure seeks redemption in the clown, “the sole survivor of the plastic epic of the theater.” His complete control of his part, from conception to execution, “makes a unity, like a picture, a sonata, a poem.”⁴⁵ But beyond sending in the clowns, Faure looks to cinema to effect “the aesthetic and social transformation of man himself with a power which I consider to exceed the most extravagant predictions made for it.”⁴⁶ Unlike the individualist theater, with its single mediator (the identification figure of the star actor), the cinema provides three mediating mechanisms: the actor, the camera, and the “photographer” (here probably referring to the director).

Canudo elaborates on the ramifications of Faure’s argument. He speaks of the film actor as a “new human type. . .suckled at the breast of modern society.” Emotions, ideas, etc. are translated into completely cinematic “life-movements” that “present life more intimately than when we see it in the flesh.” He uses Sessue Hayakawa’s performance in *The Cheat* as an example of a “true state of collective suggestion” and likens it to mesmerism: “The man we will see on screen is no longer an individual, . . .but a synthesis of millions of individual facts in his image. . .dignified images of our admirably new civilization.” Canudo concludes by prophesying a day in which “the screen will reveal to us the infinite life in these ‘types’ as no other art is able to.” This becomes the characters’ function in the film.⁴⁷

B. Cineplastics. What Faure and Canudo would substitute for the prevalent analogy of film as theater is film as a synthesis of the rhythmic and the plastic arts. Defining “plastics” as “the art of expressing form in repose or in movement by all the means that man commands,” Faure goes on to argue that directors should substitute it for plot, which is now relegated to “hardly more than a pretext, serving to give a certain sequence, a certain probability

to the action.”⁴⁸ Enumerating the sources of plastic relations the medium was capable of exploiting, Faure mentions the actors’ “multiple and incessantly modified relationships with the surroundings, the landscape, the calm, the fury and the caprice of the elements, natural or artificial lighting, the prodigiously complex and shaded play of values, precipitate or retarded movements.”⁴⁹ Canudo concurs, and speculates on the day when “the moving image becomes its own end, new and powerful.”⁵⁰ There is a close corollary to Léger’s thinking on how plastic values ought to predominate the spectacle and cinema.

C. Cinematic Rhythm. What differentiates cinema radically from older plastic arts, according to Faure, is its “living rhythm and its repetition in time.” He sees “the interpenetration, the crossing and the association of movements and cadences, already giv[ing] us the impression that even the most mediocre films unroll in musical space.”⁵¹ Canudo considered music to be “the intuition and organization of the rhythms that govern all nature,”⁵² and hence universally and intuitively intelligible, as any collective art must be.

The concept of musical organization of editing is also crucial to Léger. Although little space is devoted to the issue in his writing, we can see it in *Ballet Mécanique*. Lawder writes that, unlike in the narrative feature film: “Time. . . is never geared to the narrative event. It is rather experienced through the medium of purely visual happening, long or short in duration, quick or slow in rhythm, and constantly intercut and interacting with other images and movement of corresponding and highly contrasting nature.”⁵³ In a note dated July 1924, we can see that Léger had a definite quasi-musical “score” in mind for *Ballet Mécanique*. He divided the film into seven sections (or “vertical parts” on his accompanying diagram) which were edited increasingly rapidly and with an ever greater number of shots in order to suggest a crescendo. Inserted within these blocks were “horizontal penetrations” which interrupted the rhythm of the section and introduced a dissonantly dissimilar object into it.⁵⁴ The precise “arithmetical law” of editing that Léger proposed in the notes never made it into the finished work, but Lawder does suggest a convincing “reading” of the other rhythmic claims in terms of the film.⁵⁵ Léger writes of wanting to break down, by means of “editing tone,” anything “imitating the movements of nature.”⁵⁶

Léger also catalogs the admirable variety of in-frame rhythm that Gance and Cendrars used in *La Roue*: “You will see moving images presented like a picture, centered on the screen with a judicious range in the balance of still and moving parts (the contrast of effects); a still figure on a machine that is moving, a modulated hand in contrast to a geometric mass, circular forms, abstract forms, the interplay of curves and straight lines (contrasts of lines), dazzling, wonderful, a moving geometry that astonishes you.”⁵⁷ We see in this how Léger invokes the concept of “contrast” in discussing *La Roue*. As we

have already mentioned, he exalted “pure plastic contrast” as the highest good in easel painting. “Plastic contrast” can be extended over time as well as within a static plane of canvas, becoming another feature of film form with the potential for use. Thus, the dissonant jump cut is the “life blood and binding force of *Ballet Mécanique*. . .creating patterns of continually exploding contrasts — in graphic design, movement, means of image formation, representational content and emotional overtones.”⁵⁸ If we remember that music was seen as materializing the intuited rhythms of the natural order, and that this natural order consisted of eternal conflict leading to a defining and redefining of the evolving human species, we could see that the pattern of contrasts, imposed through the editing, had a vaguely eschatological caste to it. The “eternal clash and birthpangs of the new order” might be said to materialize in *Ballet Mécanique*’s dissonant rhythms.

And yet by making this tenuous connection, we realize how Léger, although accepting the external manifestations of Faure, Canudo, and Cendrars’s film language, fails to make much use of their wider social justification for it. His denunciation of bourgeois stars as representing “individual-as-king” and theater as an opiate to mask the dislocating effects of anomic capitalism are all negative in nature. His films may not make use of the sort of bourgeois conventions of an outdated order, yet he fails to justify his rhythmic and plastic abstractions in his colleagues’ social terms. But it is with the next category — the object — that Léger’s role for cinema in the political order of things begins to connect with the actual properties of the film medium, and where he parts company with Faure and Canudo.

D. Léger: The “Actor Object” as Abstract Shape. Just as the conversion from psychologically-oriented individual characters to “human material” marked the conversion of theater to “object spectacle,” so the advent of “actor objects” and machines sounds the death knell for cinema as “an art that has until now remained almost completely descriptive, sentimental and documentary.”⁵⁹ Yet, Léger is exploiting values of the object that have nothing to do with either its innate function or its role in any sort of narrative, but rather its plastic (i.e., abstract) qualities, “the fact of recognizing a plastic event that is beautiful in itself without being obliged to look for what it represents.” He speaks of leading an audience to believe that the film he shows is of an odd planetary surface, before bringing them back to earth by pointing out that it is merely a closeup of a woman’s fingernail, and that its referent is of no importance at all. Having established this, Léger evolves his crucial argument for the nature of his non-narrative cinema as:

the painters’ and poets’ revenge. In an art such as this one, where the image must be everything and where it is sacrificed to a romantic anecdote, the avant-garde films had to defend themselves and prove that the arts of the imagination, relegated to being accessories, could, all alone, through their own

means, construct films without scenarios by treating the moving image as the leading character.⁶⁰

We see that, on a certain level, all the formal devices employed in *Ballet Mécanique* serve the end of taking “objects freed from all atmosphere [and putting] them in new relationships to each other”:

I thought that through film this neglected object would be able to assume its value as well. Beginning there I worked on this film, I took very ordinary objects that I transferred to the screen by giving them a very deliberate, very calculated mobility and rhythm. . . I used the close-up which is the only cinematographic invention. Fragments of objects were also useful; by isolating a thing you give it a personality. All this work led me to consider the event of objectivity as a very new contemporary value.⁶¹

An even cursory glance at *Ballet Mécanique* should convince us that the above would be the case. Editing can easily become a device to help “make us see everything that has been merely noticed.” Léger is particularly partial to the form cut, as when he cuts rapidly from the underside of a gelatin mold with a foreshortened spigot, to a gear with a black hole in the middle located at the same point in the frame as the spigot’s hole, to a parrot whose eye fills up and “becomes” the hole in the next frame (shots 100-4).⁶² Léger even uses more novel techniques, as when he intercuts an aerial view of a straw hat with a view of a narrow shoe so that the latter appears to be a side view of the former (shots 219-23).⁶³ Eyes, eggbeaters, and bits of machinery will appear abstract in close-up. Finally, Léger’s extensive use of prismatic decomposition of the object represents the most radical break with the literalness of the image. In each case, we should note carefully, the object is presented free of any narrative associations, unmediated by any fictive perceiver, and even stripped of its conventional uses. The cinematic means are all directed to having us read it as an abstract shape.

E. Impressionism: The Object as “Human and Living Expression.” The immediate cause of the birth of the actor-object was its cheapness, allowing Léger to be independent of the commercial producer for capital outlay.⁶⁴ Beyond that practical consideration, the cinema’s assimilation of the object was a hot topic in avant-garde film circles of the twenties, especially for the protosurrealist camp. It is only by comparing Léger’s justification for using objects with that of his contemporaries that we can see the full ramifications of his thought at this time. Aragon writes in 1918: “Before the advent of the cinematograph, hardly an artist had dared use the deceptive harmony of machines and the obsessive beauty of commercial slogans, posters, evocative capitals, everyday objects, all that sings of our life and not some artificial invention ignorant of corned beef and canned wax.”⁶⁵ Louis Delluc praises film the same year for “isolating explicitly the true poetry of modern life” which he goes on to define as “that which you glimpse on the street, in a face, in a sign, in a color, everywhere and incessantly.”⁶⁶

Delluc's criticism was refined and developed into the *raison d'être* for impressionism in the early 1920's by Jean Epstein. He initially postulates a sort of scenic sublime, whereby the camera places all objects outside human mediation, and we see them as entities independent of human existence for the first time. Yet, this matter is imbued with a spirituality that becomes rematerialized in the film. We see these ideas applied in Canudo's review of Victor Sjöström's 1921 film, *The Phantom Chariot*: "Cinema can allow itself, indeed must develop this extraordinary and poignant facility to *represent the non-verbal*. . . nature as a character. The subconscious revealed. The nonmaterial, or whatever you call it, evoked plastically and through movement. Here is the domain that no other art is able to attack and that music can only suggest. Cinema can and must represent this."⁶⁷

In the paragraph above, we see how the more pantheistic elements of nonmateriality merge into the also immaterial elements of the psychological "subconscious." Epstein also analogized the mystical with the psychological. His ideal is for "the photography of the illusions of the heart" or "cinematic telepathy." Using "some object which [we] hold onto for personal reasons" as the raw material of the new film style, Epstein elaborates:

To tell the truth, we are incapable of seeing these objects. What we see in them, through them, are the memories and emotions, the projects or the regrets which we have attached to these things for a more or less lengthy period of time. . . Now this is the cinematic mystery: an object such as this with its personal character, that is to say, an object situated in a dramatic action that also possesses a photographic character, reveals anew its moral character, its human and living expression, when reproduced cinematically. . . .⁶⁸

Thus, Canudo can speak of a "landscape character" in terms of both pathetic fallacy and embodiment of the hand of God, deriving both these ideas from Epstein. No matter how much either Faure or Canudo emphasized purely plastic or rhythmic features of the cinema, ultimately neither meant for these to replace narrative — rather they sought to use these to illuminate other aspects of the protagonists' mental life than purely behavioral cinema would permit.⁶⁹ In other words, they became impressionists. The formal features of "film language" had to be reinvented in order to evoke more closely the mediator's frame of mind.

For the impressionists then, the object became a conservative element of film language — it tended to be their device to redeem narrative cinema. While their use of objects only tangentially sought justification in modern life and in changing social circumstances, the ultimate cause of Léger's interest in the object could be traced to "the advent of the object that is thrust on us in all those shops that decorate the streets."⁷⁰ Léger made *Ballet Mécanique* the same year that he was very deeply involved in purist aesthetics. For purists, the manufactured object, with its evolution of design completely subordinate to efficiency and human need, served as the model for the

aesthetic. Art historian Christopher Green notes that Léger was working on still lifes for the first time now.⁷¹ Clearly, the gears, bottles, hats, pots, etc. could not but strike a responsive chord. Perhaps even more to the point was Léger's desire to use these in pursuit of purely abstract ends. Through his use of the form cut, Léger reduces these objects to their common geometric elements. In purist terminology, these correspond to "primary sensations. . .determined in all human beings by the simple play of forms and primary colors":

Primary sensations constitute the bases of the plastic language, . . . it is a fixed, formal, explicit, universal language determining subjective reactions of an individual order which permit the erection on these raw foundations of a sensitive work, rich in emotion. . . It does not seem necessary to expatiate at length on this elementary truth that anything of universal value is worth more than anything of merely individual value. It is a condemnation of 'individualistic' art to the benefit of 'universal' art.⁷²

In purist aesthetics, Léger has finally been able to solve the problem that stopped Canudo and Faure from putting the utopian aspects of their film theory into consistent practice: what does the filmmaker put before the camera? While they had to fall back on the narrative conventions of the declining individualist order, Léger was free to find subject matter that reflected the progressive aspects of modern life. By virtue of both form and treatment, *Ballet Mécanique's* objects are plastic and non-individualistic. Unlike his contemporaries, however, Léger does not base his social arguments on film language alone.

IV. From Cellulose to Screen: Film for Whom? In planning a social art, the artists must deal with the essential question of how their work is to be consumed once it leaves their studios. After they manipulate its formal elements to achieve a desired effect upon an audience, how do they go about finding an audience, and which classes in society do they want to be influenced by their work?

A. Canudo: Giving the Elite a Lead. Here, we see the widest gap between Léger and his inspirers. Canudo adopts Tolstoy's solution and writes: "At the top of all collective artistic realization, there is the conception of the lone man."⁷³ The "true problem on Cinema. . .consists of enriching the visual language to include everything desirable that this prodigious expansion could bring to crowds without debasing the standard of sensibility but, instead, raising it." Its "inherent duty of elevation is so strong among responsible individuals that we ask of today's Cinema to find noble and harmonious visions of all interior conflicts in order to become, as all good art must, what the poet calls 'the soul's doctor.'"⁷⁴

Who will save cinema from the commercial studio system? It is the studio which turns it into a "homogeneous form," one where:

production is the same throughout, distributed equally through all quarters, for every zone of intelligence and culture. The result is this lamentable profusion of serial-type films, which imposes on the public, or more properly speaking, on all the different publics, an implacable lowest common denominator as soon as they walk into the moviehouse.⁷⁵

On the one hand, the director must assume total control of all creative functions, and everyone else on the set must be subordinated to the director's will and creative vision, acting as craftsmen and technicians. On the other, Canudo appeals to "*les classes un peu cultivées*" to establish a true film culture, to "the people of taste who gravitate to the arts, to those indispensable snobs who facilitate exchange and initiative, who, aided by courageous and vanguard editors, must replace without delay that hoard of scribblers for the majority of cinema periodicals, which are more business bulletins than critical forums."⁷⁶

One title that Canudo uses in his essay is "The Rights of Intelligence." He cryptically notes that: "Intellectuals can rejoice at the movement which grows strong at the breast of commercial cinema. . . . Bad business eventually will force industry to renew and enoble its production and in so doing, to appeal to the supreme aspirations and to the supreme representation of all literate society: Art."⁷⁷ An implicit premise of this argument's elitism is that the present day masses are not yet ready to participate in the ideals of "mass society." Describing film as "a victim of the political and social chaos in which the whole world is floundering," Elie Faure wonders:

Is [the cinema] destined, as I would still like to think, in a rejuvenated society, to become the art of the mass, the center of a powerful communion in which the symphonic forms will be born in a tumult of passion and used with aesthetic ends capable of lifting the heart? Is it destined, if the customs of democratic society persist, to specialize like other forms of art, to furnish sentimental insanities for the appetite of the mob, is it destined to reveal its hidden harmonies only to the initiate? I hope not.⁷⁸

Faure ends up by declaring that cinema will only be worthy of its potential as mass art when it becomes "steeped completely in the needs of the people" rather than pandering to their mere "appetites." Since this largely precludes input from the same people who, after all, do not really know their needs, we can see the rationale for producing this ostensibly mass art in elitist circumstances.

And this is what the thrust of Canudo's criticism was aiming at. In 1922, as we recall, he founded the first film club, C.A.S.A. He used as the prototype the film installation at the 1922 Salon D'Automne, which he organized. Since it was the first film exhibition at a museum, it allowed for Canudo to use his imagination completely. It gained enormous influence, and the "Exposition de l'art dans le Cinéma Français" at the Musée Galliera in 1924 and the crucial "Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs" of the following year used the same format. By seeking to give film prestige, these shows exhibited

film as if they were paintings or sculpture. Lawder documents the Musée Galliera's exhibit. In it was paraphernalia used by *cinéasts* Epstein, Delluc, L'Herbier, and Gance — stills, costumes, props and set designs, film clips, manuscripts, and the like. Ironically, the only thing missing was the completed films; the whole was by no means given predominance over the sum of its parts.⁷⁹ While proclaiming how the cinema, by its mechanical nature, could offer universal salvation, these theorists reduced it into an older museum-type art through their display. With this exhibit serving as the model for C.A.S.A. and other film clubs of the twenties, we can well imagine how rarefied the atmosphere must have gotten at times, and we can appreciate Jacques Brunius's cynical description of the avant-garde audience as being made up of "snobs and windbags."⁸⁰

B. Léger: "The Public Is Better than We Think It Is." *Ballet Mécanique* was very much the product of this avant-garde support structure. It was financed entirely by Léger⁸¹ and was first shown at the Internationale Ausstellung neuer Theatertechnik, a Vienna cine-club.⁸² Although the ideology behind this system was undoubtedly elitist, Léger broke with it to advance a modicum of populism. Unlike Canudo or the generation of impressionists who followed in his footsteps and were even more skeptical of the crowd and its values than he,⁸³ Léger felt that the workers and peasants were the incarnation of the already new man. We might remember that while Canudo assured us that the masses did not know yet what they wanted, Cendrars ended his manifesto with the words, "Revolution. Youth of the world. *Today*." Léger's optimism about a new theater is based on his confidence that "the public is better than we think it is, but between the public and the director, there is often an important obstructive character—the producer or the impresario—who often misunderstands his public and warps everything."⁸⁴ He attempts to reconcile the aforementioned elite support system that created *Ballet Mécanique* with his populist ideals:

Naturally, the creators of these films have never intended to make them available to the public at large for commercial profit. All the same, there is a minority of people in the world who are for us; *it is more numerous than one might think*, and it prefers quality to quantity. [italics mine]⁸⁵

Léger's anti-bourgeois notions extend past the confines of blaming that class for narrative cinema; indeed Léger blames all art on it. He, more precisely, holds it responsible for "hierarchical prejudices in art," which cause us to perceive beauty in art and to be blind to it elsewhere in life. "The beautiful is everywhere; perhaps more in the arrangement of your saucepans on the white walls of your kitchen than in your eighteenth century living room or your official museum."⁸⁶ He then points to "the primary forms" of geometry as replacing the old forms in terms of beauty. The bourgeois' studious assimilation of codes of taste from another era makes them deliberately ignore the particularly modern "aesthetics of contrast":

Evolution notwithstanding, the average bourgeois has retained his ideas of tone on tone, the decorative concept. . . Contrast has always frightened peaceful and satisfied people; they eliminate it from their lives as much as possible, and as they are disagreeably started by the dissonances of some billboard or other, so their lives are organized to avoid all such uncouth contact. This milieu is the last one the artist should frequent; truth is shrouded and feared; all that remains is manners, from which an artist can seek in vain to learn something.⁸⁷

On the other hand, "the peasant resists these mollifications; he has retained a taste for violent contrasts in his costume, and a poster in his field does not upset him."⁸⁸ As artist, Léger takes working class taste into account, describing how he assembled "a group of workers and people in the neighborhood" in order to test their reactions to a scene in *Ballet Mécanique*. He then edited on the basis of these reactions.⁸⁹ So when he writes in a 1914 manifesto that the artist must display "a sensibility far in advance of the normal vision of the crowd," we tend to take his use of the word "vision" quite literally to mean translation of phenomena into plastic terms, rather than accord it the same significance as it holds to a Faure.⁹⁰

Yet, in addition to getting his inspiration from them, the modern artist also works directly to the advantage of the masses. Films like *Ballet Mécanique* and hypothetical spectacles would serve the purpose of making us "aware of our daily actions; concern for the beautiful fills three-quarters of everyday life." The last four pages of Léger's article on the spectacle deal with how to reform the material life of France. Rather than imposing a new sensibility on the people as would Faure and Canudo, Léger's goal becomes one of training the new humanity to transform its material life and thus rid itself of the "harshness and demands of modern life." It is finally the masses themselves who become their own *constructeurs*. Here we can see how Léger's views were closer to Marxist socialism than the romantic utopian type of planning favored by his friends Canudo and Faure. As spectacle narrows its gap with life, life will turn into a well-organized spectacle:

The visual world of a large modern city, that vast modern spectacle that I spoke of in the beginning, is badly orchestrated; in fact, not orchestrated at all. The intensity of the street shatters our nerves and drives us crazy.

Let's tackle the problem in all its scope. Let's organize the exterior spectacle.⁹¹

And it is exactly whom Léger hopes to include as part of this "us" that makes his theories unique in the context of the cubist/Orphist left. If we compare his sentiments with those of the purist group, whose influence he was most strongly under at the time, we can see how Léger managed to realize the aspirations of the utopian avant-garde while others were drawn into inconsistency.

Purism was the brainchild of Ozenfant and Le Corbusier.⁹² Its ideas were set forth as early as 1918, even though it only developed into a movement some two years later when the two started their journal *L'Esprit Nouveau*.

While its terminology may differ from its predecessors, many of its underlying ideas should by now have a familiar ring. For the purists, as for the Orphists, science and technology assume a leading role in the modern era. ("Modern life has with its machinery perfected our lives. The spirit itself, as a direct consequence, has developed its taste for perfect order.")⁹³ Again spirit is changed through sensation: the purist endeavor consists of trying to discover universal laws of proportion that underlie the perception of the aforementioned primary forms. These forms would involve a dovetailing of physical utility and sensory intelligibility inasmuch as both led in the direction of geometric simplification. For purism, this last fact took on an almost mystical significance, affirming the unity of everyone and everything.

Since, for the purists, the basis of these laws lay in the structure of the brain and senses, they could be discovered by the self-interrogation of the artist. Certain common items that have assumed fixed shapes over time in complete conformity to their use are accorded a state of grace (these would include cups, glasses, and bottles). Next come machines which, although they are not yet perfected, at least strive for an appearance molded by utility.⁹⁴ These primary forms are proliferated because of the demands of modern industrial civilization. They take over the landscape in the form of factories and airplanes and oil derricks, creating a sense of order and balance in their wake. So while both it and Orphism seek redemption in the sensations of modern life, the latter group stresses their dissonance and fragmentation, while the purists pick up on a kind of geometric harmony of industrial design.

For Faure and Canudo, artists play the role of flamboyant prophets, transmitting their enthusiasms for modern life to the anomic, fragmented mob corrupted by the bourgeois social order. Purism sought social planning through a concrete transformation of society's physical plant, i.e., its architecture and design.⁹⁵ In order to accomplish this end, the artist had to become a coolly rational efficiency expert, willing to collaborate with those progressive elements within government and industry.⁹⁶

Ballet Mécanique functions in both capacities. On the one hand, its lack of any psychologically coherent identification figure to mediate between maker and viewer, its dissonant rhythms, and its synthesis of different objects into a readily reducible "primary shape" make it into a paradigm of the "new humanity." On the other hand, its celebration of the technologically transformed environment encourages the transformation of the "exterior spectacle" along lines more acceptable to the purists. And yet Léger ultimately parts company with his colleagues by having his film mark the departure of the artist as a social leader. A new era of technically sophisticated folk art was inaugurated allowing everyone a hand in planning the new world.⁹⁷ *Ballet Mécanique* held up an optimistic mirror to mass culture, channeling back to the masses all the energy they generated. Only by showing them what they had accomplished could Léger turn them into agents of their destiny

responsible for creating a new society. Seen in these terms, *Ballet Mécanique* takes on the poignancy of a relic of a civilization that never was, or the blueprint for one that would never be.

Notes.

1. For a more general discussion of the period of 1907-24, see Richard Abel, "The Contribution of the French Literary Avant-Garde to Film Theory and Criticism (1907-24)," *Cinema Journal* 14, no. 3 (Spring 1975): 18-40; Standish Lawder, *The Cubist Cinema* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), 2-34; and David E. Shi, "Transatlantic Visions: The Impact of American Cinema Upon the French Avant-Garde, 1918-1924," *Journal of Popular Culture* 14, no. 4 (Spring 1981): 583-96.
2. Cendrars's account of his duties are quoted in Jay Bochner, *Blaise Cendrars: Discovery and Re-Creation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 63.
3. Lawder, *The Cubist Cinema*, 90, 97. See also Bochner, *Blaise Cendrars*, 250-1, n. 21.
4. Blaise Cendrars, "ABC du Cinéma," trans. Serge Gavronsky, *Film Culture*, no. 40 (Spring 1966): 19-20.
5. Ricciotto Canudo, "Le Manifeste des Sept Arts," in *L'usine des images* (Geneva: Off. Central d'édition, 1927), 3-8. (Translation mine.)
6. For a list of other prominent members, see Lawder, *The Cubist Cinema*, 200-1, n. 52.
7. "Cubism is only an artificial stylization of form, basing itself on a wrong understanding of [Cézanne] . . . Braque, Léger and Juan Gris remain painters in spite of it." Elie Faure, *The History of Art: Modern Art, IV*, trans. Walter Pach (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1924), 503. To illustrate the state of contemporary art in the American edition, Faure used plates of works by Derain, Dufy, Modigliani, Roualt, Dufresne, and neoclassical Picasso.
8. See Elie Faure, *The History of Art, V, The Spirit of Forms*, trans. Walter Pach (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1930), 103-4, n. 4. for an early endorsement of Le Corbusier. For a later view (1936) of his architecture see Faure, "La Ville Radieuse," *Oeuvres Complètes, III*, ed. Yves Lévy (Paris: J. J. Pauvert, 1964), 845-6.
9. *Revue Europe* (December 15, 1937).
10. Elie Faure, "Charlot," *L'Esprit Nouveau*, no. 6 (April 1921): 657-66. Reprinted in *The Art of Cineplastics*, trans. Walter Pach (Boston: Four Seas Company, 1923), 46-63. This book also contains the essay by Faure which gives the collection its title on 9-45.
11. Q.v., B. Tokine, "L'Esthétique du cinéma," *L'Esprit Nouveau*, no. 1 (October 1920): 84-89. More impressionist-oriented articles were printed in the columns of Epstein and Delluc which extended over the life of the magazine.
12. Virginia Spate, *Orphism: The Development of Non-Figurative Painting in Paris, 1910-14* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 9.
13. John Golding, *Cubism: A History and an Analysis, 1907-14*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 36.
14. *Ibid.*, 36.
15. Cendrars, "ABC du Cinema," 20.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Fernand Léger, *The Functions of Painting*, trans. Alexandra Anderson, ed. Edward Fry (New York: Viking Press, 1973), 3-10.
18. *Ibid.*, 11-19.
19. *Ibid.*, 11.
20. Fernand Léger, "The Spectacle: Light, Color, Moving Image, Object-Spectacle" in *Functions of Painting*, 35. This is a crucial point that distinguished Léger from the formalist-oriented critics of film that he so closely resembles otherwise. Both stressed

the importance of distancing objects so that we notice them as if for the first time. But while Léger singles out the instrumentalization of vision in the modern world (i.e., "the eye's ability to choose in a fraction of a second") as sensitizing vision, a formalist critic like Béla Balázs would point to visual distancing as a means of de-instrumentalizing the visual sense so that we notice the actual properties of things around us rather than "read" their mere "sign functions."

21. Spate, *Orphism*, 43-6.
22. Quoted in Paul Desagnes, *Elie Faure* (Paris: Editions universitaires, 1966), 45.
23. *Ibid.*, 33.
24. *Ibid.*, 65.
25. Michael Harrington, *Socialism* (New York: Bantam Books, 1972), 31 ff.
26. The other core members were Charles Vildrac, René Arcot, George Duhamel, Henri-Martin Barzun, and Lucien Linard.
27. Daniel Robbins, "From Symbolism to Cubism: The Abbaye of Creteil," *Art Journal* 23, no. 2 (Winter, 1963-64): 111-16. Quote appears on 114. See Spate, *Orphism*, 21.
28. Barzun, Mercereau, Allard.
29. Spate defines simultanism as "a sense of unity of all being and of the way in which individual separateness breaks down and is fused with the whole." *Orphism*, 20.
30. For an idea of what this subject matter consisted, see Golding, *Cubism*, 151-2.
31. Cendrars, "ABC du Cinema," 19. Faure, in a statement with which Cendrars probably would emphatically agree, claims that America has the only national cinema coming close to realizing the medium's potential because:
 "It is natural that when a new art appears in the world it should choose a new people which has had hitherto no really personal art. Especially when this new art is bound up, through the medium of human gesture, with the power, definiteness and firmness of action. Especially, too, when this new people is accustomed to introduce into every department of life an increasingly complicated mechanical system, one that more and more hastens to produce, associate and precipitate movements [Taylorism?]; and especially when this art cannot exist without the most accurate scientific apparatus of a kind that has behind it no traditions and is organized, as it were, physiologically, with the race that employs it." (*The Art of Cineplastics*, 33.)
32. Canudo, "Le Manifeste des Sept Arts," 7-8.
33. François and André Berge, "An Interview with Blaise Cendrars on the Cinema (1925)," trans. Serge Gavronsky, *Film Culture*, nos. 67-69 (1979): 227.
34. Fernand Léger, "A Critical Essay on the Plastic Quality of Abel Gance's Film *The Wheel*" in *Functions of Painting*, 21.
35. Léger, "The Spectacle," 38. Claire Lescot comes to mind at this point.
36. *Ibid.*, 40-41. Léger goes on to provide a scenario:
 "Let's take a stage with a minimum of depth. Keep to the vertical plane as much as possible: watch in hand, time the length of action (the mechanics of gesture, a spotlight or a sound). . . . The background scenery is moveable. . . . The human face can play its part, but its expressiveness is absolutely null in the spectacle stage. Heavily made up or masked, transformed, with set gestures it can contribute variety, but nothing more. Human material may be used in groups moving in a parallel or contrasting rhythm, on the condition that the general effect is in no way sacrificed to it."
37. *Ibid.*, 42-3.
38. Léger, "Abel Gance's Film *The Wheel*. . ." 21. It might be noted that Blaise Cendrars was entertaining the possibility of making a film "not dependent on an actor's talents" around the same time as Léger. He speaks of offering a producer "an exceptional actress, the most extraordinary star: the Moon!" Q.v., François and André Berge, "An Interview with Blaise Cendrars on the Cinema," 228.

39. Léger "The Spectacle," 37.
40. Faure, "The Art of Cineplastics," 11.
41. Desanges, *Elie Faure*, 83.
42. Faure, "The Art of Cineplastics," 13.
43. *Ibid.*, 15.
44. *Ibid.*, 17-18.
45. *Ibid.*, 19. It seems as if Henri Bergson may have supplied the origin of this veneration of the clown in his essay, "Laughter" (1900) in Wylie Sypher, ed., *Comedy* (New York: Vintage, 1956), 61-190. He argues that the "strictly clownish elements in the clown's art provide the purest example of the mechanical in humor" 98-9. Indeed some of Bergson's ideas provide a hidden thread underlying avant-garde film criticism of this generation. His emphasis on comedy's replacement of individual characters with types and on its social, rather than purely psychological, basis seems to inform the Orphists' enthusiasm for Chaplin, for instance.
46. Faure, "The Art of Cineplastics, 19-20.
47. Canudo, "Reflexions sur la septième art," *L'usine aux images*, 64-5. See also his discussion of the film actors as "*entité lumineuse*" and how they must develop an "acting style of light" (*jeux lumineux*) to express themselves "just like painters have managed to express their phantoms and dreams with color" 38. While the essay is undated, references to films in it would indicate that it was written between 1922 and Canudo's death in the winter of 1923.
48. Faure, "The Art of Cineplastics," 24. For an example of Faure's analysis of a film in terms of "tone relations" of value, see 25-6.
49. *Ibid.*, 27-8.
50. Canudo, "Reflexion sur la septième art," 35-6.
51. Faure, "The Art of Cineplastics," 25.
52. Canudo, "Manifeste de la septième art," 7. For further elaboration on the role of music in Canudo's aesthetics, see his first book, *Le Livre de L'Evolution. L'Homme (Psychologie musicale des civilisations)* (Paris: E. Sansot, 1907). For Orphist painting's musical aspirations, see Spate, *Orphism*, 34-5.
53. Lawder, *The Cubist Cinema*, 130-31.
54. Reprinted in Lawder, *The Cubist Cinema*, 131-32.
55. *Ibid.*, 134 ff.
56. Léger, "Abel Gance's Film *The Wheel* . . .," 21.
57. *Ibid.*, 22.
58. Lawder, *The Cubist Cinema*, 166-67.
59. Léger, "Abel Gance's Film *The Wheel* . . .," 20.
60. Léger, "*Ballet Mécanique*" (c. 1924) in *The Functions of Painting*, 48-9.
61. *Ibid.*, 50.
62. See shot analysis in Lawder, *The Cubist Cinema*, 250, illustrated on 221.
63. *Ibid.*, 258 (illustration, 245).
64. Léger, "The Spectacle," 43.
65. Louis Aragon, "Du Décor" *Le Film*, (September, 1918). Cited in Abel, "The Contribution of the French Literary Avant-Garde. . .," *Cinema Journal*, 27-28.
66. Delluc, cited *ibid.*
67. Canudo, "Reflexions sur la septième art," 48. This mysticism of light as representing spirituality has a history in symbolist, futurist, and Orphist thought. On this level, impressionism actually translates into filmic terms an aspect of the prewar avant-garde that Léger chooses to ignore.
68. Jean Epstein, "For a New Avant-Garde" (1924), trans. Stuart Liebman, in *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York:

- New York University Press, 1978), 29. This view derives ultimately from Bergson and was popular among the Futurists and Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia.
69. It is interesting to note that between theory and practice falls the shadow, especially in Faure. In his article on Chaplin, for example, we are treated to a very traditional, albeit windy and extended, series of meditations on the filmmaker. Nowhere do we find any analysis of plastic values, rhythms, etc. By endorsing a quasi-impressionist position in cases of actual criticism, Faure sacrifices any claim to the multiple mediatorship that was supposed to differentiate his criticism from traditional individualist concerns. Q.v., "The Art of Charlie Chaplin."
 70. Léger, "Ballet Mécanique," 50.
 71. "The object, isolated as a thing of beauty in its own right, is the subject of *Ballet Mécanique*, and there is no doubt that the experience of making the film led him to the still lives, but I think it is also significant that at this point his friendship with Ozenfant and Jeanneret deepened. He opened a school with Ozenfant. . . and within a year was a collaborator in the Pavillon de L'Esprit Nouveau at the huge 1925 Exposition des Arts Décoratifs." Christopher Green, "Léger and *L'Esprit Nouveau*, 1912-28" in *Léger and Purist Paris* (London: Tate Gallery, 1970), 62-3. Green cites as examples three works from 1924: *Le Syphon* (Collection of Mrs. Arthur Rosenberg, Chicago), *Nature Morte* (Gallerie Bayeler, Basle), and *Nature Morte* (Museum of Modern Art, NY).
 72. Le Corbusier and Amadée Ozenfant, "Purism," in *Modern Artists on Art: Ten Unabridged Essays*, Robert Herbert, trans. and ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1964), 61-2.
 73. Canudo, "Reflexions sur la septième art," 48.
 74. *Ibid.*, 44.
 75. *Ibid.*, 51.
 76. *Ibid.*, 47.
 77. *Ibid.*, 54. Another "right of intelligence" construes intelligence to include manners and, indirectly, wealth. Essentially Canudo complains of the lack of classiness in commercial theaters and their clientele.
 78. Faure, "The Art of Cineplastics," 20 n.
 79. Lawder, *The Cubist Cinema*, 99-101.
 80. Jacques Brunius, "Experimental Film in France" in *Experiment in the Film*, ed. Roger Manvell (London: Grey Walls Press, 1949), 76. See also Lawder, 184-90.
 81. See Léger's "*Ballet Mécanique*," 51.
 82. Lawder, *The Cubist Cinema*, 183.
 83. For example, see Germaine Dulac, "The Essence of Cinema: The New Idea" (1925) in P. Adams Sitney, *The Avant-Garde Film*, 36-42. Robert Lamberton: "These practitioners do not view the new art from the perspective of the crowd, and if they allow themselves to be drawn into making concessions to the taste of the public, in submitting to economic pressures, they feel they have committed treason," 37.
 84. Léger, "The Spectacle," 41.
 85. Léger, "*Ballet Mécanique*," 49.
 86. Léger, "The Machine Aesthetic, I" (1924) in *The Functions of Painting*, 62-63.
 87. Léger, "Contemporary Achievements in Painting," 13-14.
 88. *Ibid.*, 13.
 89. Léger, "Ballet Mécanique," 51.
 90. Léger, "Contemporary Achievements in Painting," 12. Of course, Léger could simply have changed his mind in the intervening years.
 91. Léger, "The Spectacle," 46.
 92. The history of purism is taken, for the most part, from Christopher Green, *Léger and the Avant-Garde* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 202-22.

93. Le Corbusier and Ozenfant, "Formation de l'optique moderne," *L'Esprit Nouveau*, no. 21 (1923), quoted in Green, *Léger and the Avant-Garde*, 57.
94. A third category of privileged visual entities was a sort of simplified artistic classicism in previous art which became "evidence provided by the past to prove the objective existence of laws underlying all art." Green, *Léger and the Avant-Garde*, 218.
95. Interestingly enough, Orphism developed into a movement deeply involved in the decorative arts in its final years. *Montjoie!* served as the nerve center for this. Yet it hardly had any utopian aspirations and shared Canudo's sense of social snobbery. (It is easy to imagine wearing one of Sonia Delaunay's gowns at a soirée given by Claire Lescot!) See Spate, *Orphism*, 47-59.
96. This collaboration of the artist with progressive elements of mainstream politics is a feature that distinguishes purism and other movements of the twenties (such as the Bauhaus in Germany, De Stijl in Holland, and the productivist phase of the Russian avant-garde) from the earlier utopian movements of twentieth century art. It is interesting to note how *L'Esprit Nouveau* has a political affairs column which analyzes party politics rather than getting involved in abstract social polemics. This new role of artist as reformer seems to be the result both of the assimilation of erstwhile fringe political parties and figures into the mainstream of politics and the tentative and partial assimilation of the artistic avant-garde into the mainstream of society. Brian Bruce Taylor offers an account of Le Corbusier's involvement in the politics of the French welfare state in *Le Corbusier at Pessac* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University, 1972). As for his roots in utopian socialist thought, see Peter Serenyi, "Le Corbusier, Fourier and the Monastery of Ema," *Art Bulletin* 49 (1967): 277-86.
97. Green recognizes Léger's reluctance to subscribe to purism's utopian goals but trivializes this by counting it as evidence of his naivete. Q.v., Green, *Léger and the Avant-Garde*, 275.