

The Wind in the Burlap Trees:  
Vachel Lindsay's Utopian Film  
Theory

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for the degree of PhD in Media and Communications

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## **Abstract**

This thesis argues that Vachel Lindsay's utopian film theory has new relevance today. In 1915 in his first book of film theory, *The Art of the Moving Picture*, Lindsay put forward a concept of film as an intermedial art form which could restore an imagistic consciousness and revive regional cultures. While out of step with the mechanised concept of film which dominated early 20<sup>th</sup> century film theory, his work can now be seen to anticipate the breakdown of medium essentialism, the ascent of the image in modern life, the amateurisation of media, and the rise of maker culture.

Lindsay's film theory is best understood within the context of his utopian vision of American modernity in which preindustrial sensibilities are sustained alongside urbanisation and industrialisation and this thesis draws heavily on his utopian writings. In approaching his film theory from this vantage point, the cultural eclecticism and strains of antimodernism which inform it are no longer problems to be overcome but, on the contrary, are revealed to be central to his concept of film as a hybrid, intermedial technology which can revive important elements of pre-modern life. Moreover, central to Lindsay's utopian social programme was the democratisation of culture and the localisation of artistic production and viewing his film theory in this context illuminates the relevance of his aesthetic theories to contemporary developments in digital technology and maker culture.

While interest in Lindsay has increased in recent years his work still exists on the margins of film theory. This thesis seeks to show not only the prescience of his ideas, but the various contributions he makes to key debates in aesthetic theory, including the relationship between text and image, the value of amateur aesthetics, and the politics of artifice. Too long neglected, Lindsay's work enriches the field of film theory by providing a unique vision of film's relationship to modernity, while also illuminating the utopian possibilities of the contemporary media landscape.

## Acknowledgements

This thesis is the product of countless readings, viewings, discussions and practical and emotional support which I try to acknowledge below.

Dr. Rachel Moore suggested I write my thesis on Vachel Lindsay, a suggestion which has led to places neither of us anticipated and for which I am very grateful. Her intellectual rigor and vast knowledge of film and aesthetics have been an incredible resource. Pasi Väliäho and Richard MacDonald both provided invaluable insights and encouragement, pushing me to take Lindsay seriously as an object of study. In 2003, while studying history at UCL, I took an undergraduate class by Dr Rebecca Spang, which was intellectually transformative. Dr Spang's intellect, imagination, passion and exceptional teaching have been both formative and inspirational.

Many thanks to the friendly and ever helpful archivists at the University of Virginia and to my managers and colleagues at Hackney CVS who have been ceaselessly supportive of this project despite it having almost no relevance to my work.

Margherita Musella has been an incredible intellectual companion since the day I met her in a corridor of the UCL history library. I thank her for constantly pushing me to define my ideas, even while lying on a rock in the blazing sunlight in the middle of the ocean. Sari Easton has been a source of ongoing emotional support and intellectual inspiration and I duly appreciate the hundreds of hours we have spent discussing Lindsay, composite films and the politics of hope. Thanks to Kate Mossman for her intellect, humour, empathy and cynicism which, in equal measure, have been crucial to the completion of this project.

Boz Bojkova provided pizza, tea and companionship while we studied together. I am truly grateful to Abla Kandalaf for keeping our joint venture *MyDylarama* going after I abandoned it in order to pursue this project. The parallel academic adventures of Elise Loiseau and Secorro Green have often given me the strength to continue. I look forward to reading their work. Thanks to Matt McAllister for sharing his love and knowledge of bizarre movies with me and to everyone at Monstructo Productions for letting me be part of a truly grassroots filmmaking escapade. Thanks to Nicky Green for expanding my aesthetic imagination.

Thank you to my readers for their time, interest and suggestions: Alice Haworth-Booth, Ryan Ormonde, David Michon, Kate Mossman, Margherita Mussella, Matt McAllister and Lauren Tobias.

I am very grateful to the Institute of Psychoanalysis and to Dr. K. who I cannot thank enough for re-structuring my consciousness in a way which enabled me to complete this PhD. Thank you to the Green family whose provision of tea, childcare, love, sleep and encouragement has been exceptional. Thank you to my parents who could imagine that it was a good idea for me to pursue an MA and a PhD after decades of refusing to do my homework and turning up late to exams. This is an act of imagination which should not be underestimated. It is thanks to their financial, emotional and practical generosity that I have completed this project and I am extremely grateful.

This project was made possible through the financial support of The Camden Trust and Goldsmiths Graduate School which I am very thankful for. Thanks also to Kim Lien-Ong for her help and patience with this document and to Frances Borzello for helping me find my way back to my initial research question when I was floundering. To my children I can only apologise.

Finally, thank you to Joe Green for being ceaselessly opinionated, pushing me to live up to his expectations and for spending two weeks in a motel in Charlottesville, Virginia without a car.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

The American troubadour poet Vachel Lindsay is a queer figure in the field of film theory. A nomad in his work as in his life, Lindsay wandered across the United States in the early decades of the twentieth century, trading his poems for food and board. His first book on film, *The Art of the Moving Picture* (1915), is often treated as a misfit in the landscape of early film theory.<sup>1</sup> An errant text, it appears in scattered references across the field of film studies: an unclaimed remnant of the wave of excavations that resurrected so many other early film theorists. While the works of Jean Epstein, Dziga Vertov, Hugo Munsterberg, Bela Balázs and, to a lesser extent, Ricotto Canudo have been incorporated into the canon of film theory, Lindsay's ideas on cinema have received considerably less attention. This thesis builds on Ann Massa's cultural biography of Lindsay, *Vachel Lindsay: Fieldworker for the American Dream*, published in 1970, to more fully explore the relationship between Lindsay's film theory and his wider social and aesthetic ideas.<sup>2</sup> Situating *The Art of the Moving Picture* within the context of Lindsay's other writings allows the more idiosyncratic elements of his film theory to come to the fore, such as his arguments regarding amateurisation, intermediality, artisanal making and the relationship between text and image, all of which have new relevance in late modernity. While scholars including Laura Marcus, Tom Gunning and Ron Sakolsky have taken Lindsay's ideas seriously enough to consider his work in relation to other aesthetic theorists, as yet there has been no sustained consideration of his work in relation to theorists including Theodor Adorno, Georg Lukács, André Bazin and Vilém Flusser. This thesis performs exactly this task, being built on the premise that Lindsay's eccentricities of thought do not necessitate his

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<sup>1</sup> Vachel Lindsay, *The Art of the Moving Picture* (Reprint. Charleston: Bibliobazaar, 2006). Unless stated otherwise citations refer to the Bibliobazaar 2006 edition of the 1922 version of *The Art of the Moving Picture*. Issues regarding the differences between the 1915 and 1922 version are discussed in the methodology chapter.

<sup>2</sup> Ann Massa, *Vachel Lindsay: Fieldworker for the American Dream* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970).

exclusion from some of the central debates in aesthetic theory, but, rather, enable him to add valuable new perspectives.

The title of this thesis is a reference to D.W. Griffith's famous lament at the end of his life that the beauty of the natural world could no longer be found in the cinema.<sup>3</sup> While Griffith prized film's ability to capture the contingencies of nature, *The Wind in the Burlap Trees* refers to Lindsay's vision of cinema as an art form which should embrace artifice, intermediality and the material experimentation often found in amateur practices. Four themes from Lindsay's film theory are explored in depth here: the ascendance of the image in western modernity; film's inherently intermedial character; the importance of amateur filmmaking, and the utopian power of making more broadly. In order to contextualise these arguments within Lindsay's wider utopian thought, the thesis draws on archival material including essays, magazine articles, travelogues and letters. This material is used in order to set out Lindsay's critique of cultural modernity and his highly original vision of a utopian American society. Lindsay's writings are full of arguments against the stagnant structures and conventions of civilised life that he believed had robbed the American nation of much of its dynamism. He concluded that the material comforts of modern life had come at a high price, dulling the senses and producing a nation filled with people with 'bog-ridden minds'.<sup>4</sup> He considered himself a nonconformist who defied social convention and had therefore retained some of the 'joys and powers' lost to his fellow Americans.<sup>5</sup>

Lindsay had a complex relationship to modernity that was by turns reactionary and utopian. His fear of America's social and cultural decline at times led him to adopt a pernicious primitivism, stemming from his desire to seek out other cultures and modes of perception which could act as an antidote to the ascendance of a mechanised, mercantile worldview. Yet Lindsay was not simply an antimodernist who dismissed both industrial modernity and artistic modernism. His

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<sup>3</sup> D.W. Griffith, quoted in Ezra Goodman, *The Fifty Year Decline and Fall of Hollywood* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1961), 9. Cited in Nico Baumbach, "Impure Cinema: Political Pedagogies in Film and Theory," (PhD Thesis, Duke University, 2009, 135. Baumbach cites the phrase of nature 'caught in the act' as originating with the French journalist Henri de Parville. [https://dukespace.lib.duke.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/10161/1621/D\\_Baumbach\\_Nicholas\\_a\\_200912.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://dukespace.lib.duke.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/10161/1621/D_Baumbach_Nicholas_a_200912.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)

<sup>4</sup> Vachel Lindsay, *Adventures While Preaching the Gospel of Beauty in Adventures, Rhymes and Designs* ed. Robert Fayre Sayer (New York: Eakins Press, 1968), 111.

<sup>5</sup> Lindsay, *Adventures*, 111.



writings on film make clear that he found cinematic potential in modernist poetry, pleading for Imagist photoplays, for example, as well as for films based on the illustrations of Aubrey Beardsley. In the 1922 edition of *The Art of the Moving Picture* he heaped praise upon German Expressionism's *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (Wiene, 1920).<sup>6</sup> Yet Lindsay also found much to admire in Victorian culture, commending Arthur Rackham and Willy Pogany and suggesting that Matthew Arnold's poem *The Forsaken Mermen* be adapted to film.<sup>7</sup> His work is full of praise for regionalism, medievalism, ornament, folk cultures, artisanal production and Victorian faerie aesthetics, ideas and movements not easily housed within the modernist artistic tradition.

Rather than emphasising his endorsement of artistic modernism and his eventual reconciliation with cultural modernity or, taking the opposite view, arguing for his fundamentally antimodern proclivities, this thesis tracks the changing nature of Lindsay's relationship to cultural modernity, noting a shift in his thinking from 1912 onward. After this point Lindsay's work is much more accommodating of many of the features of industrial life. His writings include reflections on the achievements of industrial technology such as the building of the Panama Canal, architectural developments including the new materials of glass, iron and steel and demographic changes, including the influx of new waves of immigrants to the United States. Rather than reducing industrial life to the familiar hallmarks of secularisation, urbanisation, mechanisation, and alienation, Lindsay put forward a syncretic vision of American modernity in which folk cultures, mysticism, traditional art forms and artisanal modes of production thrived alongside industrial technology. The folk traditions of America's rural communities, the diverse cultural heritages of American immigrants and the enormous potential of industrial technology are reconciled in his utopian society. He approached history and culture as rich sources of material from which to fashion an idealised syncretic culture mutually informed by Congolese rituals, European theology and Victorian faerie culture. This ahistorical approach lays Lindsay open to the attack that Georg Lukács levelled at the utopian thinker Ernst Bloch in

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Weine, *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (Germany: Decla-Bioscop, 1920).

<sup>7</sup> Matthew Arnold, "The Forsaken Mermen", *Poetry Foundation*.  
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43589/the-forsaken-merman>.

1938, charging him with treating history as ‘a great jumble sale’.<sup>8</sup> Whilst it is undeniable that Lindsay engages in decontextualised and ahistorical proclamations regarding different forms of human consciousness and social organization, his idealised mode of imagination is not one that creates a pastiche or parody of the past. Nor does he thoughtlessly appropriate different cultural traditions. Where he invokes other cultures, he does so in order to elicit diverse imaginative practices that he believed could genuinely enrich the nation.

In his impulse to invoke the ‘other’ as a counterpoint to the ills of modern life, Lindsay partakes in the primitivist attitudes that formed a part of European modernism as found in the work of Gauguin and Picasso, among others. His work includes romanticised, racialized stereotypes and highly essentialised views on gender and class – pernicious ideas which are difficult to reconcile with his vision of a radically multicultural society, especially given the propensity for fascist and nationalist movements to invoke racist stereotypes and romanticise folk cultures as a means of supporting white supremacy. In order to salvage the utopian energy of Lindsay’s radically inclusive society from the dangers of his Orientalist thinking, this thesis approaches this element of his work as a product of his historical and social milieu, as well as the result of his intellectual failure to consider the power relations implicit in his exoticising of other cultures. Lindsay supported Booker T. Washington’s version of racial equality (grounded in a version of the ‘separate but equal’ doctrine) and dedicated a trilogy of poems to him. In one sense his support for Washington is no surprise given how well Washington’s ideas align with Lindsay’s concept of America as a ‘composite’ society in which different cultures were valued, making their assimilation into a uniform culture undesirable. Lindsay wanted American society to be full of diverse customs and worldviews and, as Ann Massa argues, he thought of African Americans as ‘Africa in America’; a situation he wanted to preserve.<sup>9</sup> Lindsay believed himself to be fighting for cultural diversity, yet was unwilling or unable to see the de facto suffering and injustice at the heart of segregation, nor the de-humanising and imperialist logic that informed his racial essentialism.<sup>10</sup> In his poem ‘The Congo’, Lindsay describes the ‘basic

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<sup>8</sup> Georg Lukács, “Realism in the Balance” in Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Bertolt Brecht and George Lukács, *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 1980), 54. The essay was first published in *Das Wort* in 1938, then in *Probleme des Realismus*, Neuwied in 1971.

<sup>9</sup> Massa, *Fieldworker*, 166.

<sup>10</sup> Lindsay was far from alone in his racial essentialism which was a common avant-garde gesture, as evidenced in Richard Huelsenbeck’s *Memoirs of a Dada Drummer* (California: University of California Press, 1991). Modernist primitivism in the plastic arts is documented in Robert Goldwater’s book length

savagery' and 'irrepressible high spirits' of the 'negro' race, creating grotesque racial stereotypes of Congolese people, including the image of 'a thigh-bone beating on a tin-pan gong'.<sup>11</sup> Yet alongside this racist depiction is the dream of a black utopia; 'A negro fairy land...Where dreams come true'.<sup>12</sup>

'The Congo' evidences Lindsay's romantic racism as well as the racial ventriloquism which was part of the modernist tradition in the 1920s. That 'The Congo' and his 'Booker T. Washington Trilogy' should be 'denounced by the coloured people', as Lindsay complained in a letter to the civil rights activist Joel E. Spingarn, was difficult for him to comprehend.<sup>13</sup> A letter from Lindsay to Spingarn includes Lindsay complaining that *Crisis* (the journal for the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People, edited by W.E.B. Du Bois) had published his allegorical story about racism 'The Golden Faced People', yet attacked his other work. 'Mr Du Bois has been most courteous', Lindsay wrote, 'but I cannot understand his editorial attitude'.<sup>14</sup> Spingarn perfectly identified the problem with Lindsay's thinking, urging him to recognise the difference between 'a poet's pageantry and a people's despair'.<sup>15</sup> Lindsay's utopian ideas can indeed seem so far-fetched, his thinking so wilfully naïve that there is good reason to dismiss him. Yet this thesis treats Lindsay's utopian vision of modernity as a much needed stimulus to the social and aesthetic imagination.

The space between Lindsay's 'pageantry' and the actual oppression of the black population in the United States is also the space between art and society, utopia and reality; a topic which is deeply relevant to aesthetic theory. In 1964, the relationship between art and utopian thought was the subject of a discussion between Theodor Adorno and Ernst Bloch. For Adorno, it is art's materiality that enables it to reconcile an imagined world with the world that is; its

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study *Primitivism in Modern Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986). The modernist debt to Africa is poignantly treated in Arthur Jafa's *My Black Death* (Hudson: Moor's Head Press of BLACKNUSS, 2015) where he discusses instances from the plastic arts to music.

<sup>11</sup> Vachel Lindsay, "The Congo" in *The Congo and Other Poems*, (New York: Macmillan, 1914).

<sup>12</sup> Lindsay, "The Congo".

<sup>13</sup> Massa, *Fieldworker*, 168.

<sup>14</sup> Massa, *Fieldworker*, 169.

<sup>15</sup> Massa, *Fieldworker*, 169.

sensuous nature enables it to perform a reconciliation between form and idea. Art is allegorical and liminal, maintaining a distance from that which it represents or alludes to, it speaks the truth but it speaks in ‘fairy tales’; it is always in disguise.<sup>16</sup> The distance or disguise that Adorno recognises is also the difference between a utopian blueprint for society and what Ernst Bloch terms a concrete utopian impulse.<sup>17</sup> The concrete impulse is not a plan or a model; rather it directs us toward something that is missing from present reality. Bloch conceptualises daydreams, cultural artefacts and children’s play as concrete impulses which lie throughout history, directing us to unrealised possibilities; an approach that is in sympathy with Lindsay’s desire to utilise fantasy and artifice to help bring about an American utopia.<sup>18</sup> Lindsay celebrated the emancipatory qualities of fantasy and the ways it can transform the present. In his work fantasy opens up new possibilities, posing a genuine challenge to the inevitability of current reality. As this thesis will show, cinematic fantasies are assigned a powerful utopian energy in his film theory.

Reviving the imagination and creativity of the masses is a key part of Lindsay’s utopian programme and his commitment to eliciting new modes of perception is strongly felt within his first book of film theory. Lindsay had been publishing (and self-publishing) material on the theme of America’s utopian potential since 1909, and was in the midst of developing such ideas further when writing *The Art of the Moving Picture* in 1915. Reading the text within the context of his utopian writings, his focus on film’s capacity to revive folk cultures, restore artisanal practices, safeguard regional cultures and augment primal modes of apprehension gain a new coherence. Placing the text within the larger trajectory of his changing relationship to modernity also aids the understanding of these arguments.

It helps explain, for example, the difference between the utopian dynamism of *The Art of the Moving Picture* and the more restrained tone of his second text on film which he wrote in 1925,

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<sup>16</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, eds. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedman, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 126.

<sup>17</sup> Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope vol. One*, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986). The concept of a concrete utopia and the wishful images of it are explored throughout the Introduction.

<sup>18</sup> Douglas Kellner and Harry O’Hara, "Utopia and Marxism in Ernst Bloch," *New German Critique* 9, (1976), 16. doi:10.2307/487686.

*The Progress and Poetry of the Movies*.<sup>19</sup> Lindsay maintained his utopian impulses and a desire to preserve pre-industrial traditions throughout his lifetime and his utopianism is certainly still felt in *The Progress and Poetry of the Movies*, as well as in his writings from his time in Spokane, Washington from 1924-1929.<sup>20</sup> However, while still offering a utopian vision of film in many ways, the Apollonian dimension of Lindsay's work is more prominent in *The Progress and Poetry of the Movies*. Here Lindsay argues for films structured through logic, order and restraint. He advocated a cinematic aesthetic based in the 'mellowness' of the moon that could provide respite from the turmoil of urban life, whereas in 1915 he had argued for film to provide potent aesthetic experiences which could disrupt the apathetic sensibility of a deadened population.<sup>21</sup> It is significant that Lindsay wrote *The Art of the Moving Picture* in the most utopian phase of his life, enabling him to imagine the medium as an egalitarian art form that was at once new and old.

It is Lindsay's utopian film theory, as articulated in *The Art of the Moving Picture*, which is the central focus of this project. Following the three opening chapters (introduction, literature review and methodology), chapter four will set out Lindsay's changing relationship to cultural modernity in the period 1909-1915, arguing that, while his early writings are evidence of his antimodernist tendencies, he became more accommodating of modernity from 1912 onward. The chapter will contextualise Lindsay in relation to the wider antimodernist tradition in America, while also exploring the syncretic vision of modernity he later adopted, setting the scene for the themes explored subsequently.

Chapter five then focuses on the relationship between text and image in Lindsay's film theory and his concept of a primal, imagistic mode of perception. The chapter explores the theory of

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<sup>19</sup> Vachel Lindsay, *The Progress and Poetry of the Movies*, ed. and with an introduction by Myron Lounsbury (Lanham, Md: Scarecrow Press, 1995). Lindsay's unpublished manuscript *The Greatest Movies Now Running* was re-named *The Progress and Poetry of the Movies* by Myron Lounsbury in his edited version.

<sup>20</sup> Vachel Lindsay, *Troubadour in "The Wild Flower City": Collected Writings from The Spokesman-Review and Spokane Chronicle*, ed. and with an introduction by Shaun O'L. Higgins (Spokane: New Media Ventures, 1999). These later articles from *The Spokesman-Review* and the *Spokane Chronicle* include ruminations on the importance of beautiful towns, street pageants, sacred forests and artist's festivals, showing that in the mid-late 1920s Lindsay had not relinquished his hopes for a radical democratisation of art and a version of modernity in which nature was revered rather than plundered.

<sup>21</sup> Lindsay, *Progress and Poetry*, 189.

hieroglyphics put forth in *The Art of the Moving Picture* and uses D.W. Griffith's *The Avenging Conscience* (1914) to illustrate Lindsay's claims for cinema's hieroglyphic capacities.<sup>22</sup> Lindsay's utopian embrace of the image is then contrasted with more critical positions including the critique of the role of the image in mass culture put forth by Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

Chapter six argues that while Lindsay's intermedial approach to film was out of step with the concept of film put forward by other early film theorists such as Jean Epstein, Dziga Vertov and Walter Benjamin, which privileged its mechanisation, film's intermediality has new relevance today. The chapter finds an affinity between Lindsay's intermedial claims for film and the work of Michele Pierson, whose research into the history of practical effects supports Lindsay's arguments that cinema can be considered to enact a fusion of craft techniques and industrial technology. Max Reinhardt's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1935) is used as a case study of such a fusion of artisanship and capital.<sup>23</sup> Lindsay's work is then shown to be newly relevant with regard to the breakdown of medium essentialism in late modernity and the rise of a media landscape characterised by hybridity and remediation.

Chapter seven likewise argues for the new relevance of Lindsay's ideas regarding amateur filmmaking. The chapter begins by contextualising his ideas within the history of amateur filmmaking in early twentieth century America, with a particular focus on the work of the Amateur Cinema League. It then explores the ways in which Lindsay's ambitions for amateur filmmaking have been realised today given the mass accessibility of filmmaking enabled by digital technology. Lindsay's desire that film be used to challenge the standardisation of American culture is shown to anticipate the rise of community and alternative media practices such as the participatory video movement which seeks to enable communities from marginalised cultures to use video as a means of self-expression. The chapter then asserts the importance of Lindsay's vision of a vibrant culture of fictional community filmmaking, a vision which is shown to be relevant precisely because of its absence.

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<sup>22</sup> D.W. Griffith, *The Avenging Conscience* (Florida: Majestic Motion Picture Company, 1914).

<sup>23</sup> Max Reinhardt and William Dieterle, *Max Reinhardt's A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Los Angeles: Warner Bros, 1935).

The final theme explored in chapter eight is the role of making in Lindsay's film theory and the power of elaborate film sets to inspire the re-making of the world. The chapter sets out Lindsay's rejection of realism in favour of fantasy and contrasts Lindsay's embrace of elaborate film sets to their troubled status both within the film industry and the field of film theory. It traces the decline of the physical film set in the twentieth and twenty first centuries as well as the attacks on fantasy and stylisation made by theorists including Siegfried Kracauer, André Bazin and George Lukács. The chapter closes by considering Lindsay's utopian claims for the film set alongside the work of Ernst Bloch, arguing that elaborate sets should be viewed as a concrete utopian impulse. The new relevance of Lindsay's utopian claims for the power of creative making are then considered given their prescience in light of the resurgence of artisanal making.

Read today, in the context of the amateurisation of media and making, the breakdown of medium essentialism and an increasingly visual culture, Lindsay's once idiosyncratic ideas both speak to our current condition and prompt a recognition of the utopian possibilities that the contemporary media landscape presents.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Introduction

*The Wind in the Burlap Trees* argues that Vachel Lindsay's film theory is best understood when viewed within the context of his broader utopian programme, and that so doing reveals his relevance to contemporary media. This thesis performs a unique intervention by both contextualising Lindsay's film theory within his social writings and performing a sustained cross-illumination between his work and that of other aesthetic and media theorists. This endeavour brings Lindsay's ideas out of isolation and into conversation with classical film theorists including Jean Epstein, later aesthetic theorists of the Frankfurt School and theorists of digital culture such as Vilém Flusser. This literature review identifies four fields, to which this thesis adds a new perspective. Firstly, it adds to a body of work focused on Lindsay's life and work. Secondly, it disrupts the modernity thesis which positions film within an urban, hyperstimulated context, since Lindsay privileges film's ability to revive regional cultures. Thirdly, it introduces new ideas about film's relation to America; a significant contribution given that so much early film theory is Eurocentric. Finally, it introduces Lindsay's ideas into discourses on digital technology, most notably debates around the amateurisation of media.

### Vachel Lindsay

Lindsay is primarily known as an American "troubadour poet" who, in 1912, walked from New York to Ohio trading rhymes for bread. He was a key figure of the Chicago literary renaissance, along with Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Edgar Lee Masters and Carl Sandburg, and was admired by (and corresponded with) W.B. Yeats. Lindsay achieved great notoriety during his lifetime, touring the U.S. to sold out recital halls and performing his poems to Woodrow



Wilson's cabinet in 1915 in celebration of the opening of the Panama Canal. Novelist John Dos Passos recounted enjoying hearing Lindsay perform his poetry at a recital at Harvard; 'we went to kid, but we were very much impressed in spite of ourselves'.<sup>24</sup> In her cultural biography of Lindsay published in 1970, Ann Massa convincingly argues that the peak of Lindsay's career lasted from 1913-1920. Although in 1924 Harriet Monroe (founder and editor of the highly influential American poetry journal *Poetry*) noted that 'the obscure aspirant of ten years ago has probably become the best and most farthest known of all our American poets of this vocal decade', it is clear that even by this point Lindsay's popularity was beginning to decline.<sup>25</sup> His passion project, the utopian novel *The Golden Book of Springfield*, was published in 1920, but it was largely overlooked by critics and quickly went out of print.<sup>26</sup> Despite having studied art in two of America's great metropolitan centres, New York and Chicago, Lindsay had maintained a commitment to an agrarian folk-imagination and a love of village life which quickly cast him in an anachronistic light in the 1920s. Likewise, Lindsay's self-proclaimed 'Higher Vaudeville' poetry full of stomping, chanting and syncopation was soon eclipsed by the work of the high modernists of the 1920s such as T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound.<sup>27</sup>

By the end of his life Lindsay had become a much maligned figure, often regarded as unstable, insane and wilfully naïve (a *New York Times* critic described 'the very excited intensity of his sanity').<sup>28</sup> After his suicide in 1931 interest in, and respect for, Lindsay's work further diminished. Even Edgar Lee Masters, an admirer of Lindsay's who wrote a biography of him published in 1935, characterised him as having an 'inherent incapacity to reason and to think'.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> John Dos Passos, quoted in Stanley Kauffman, "Introduction" in Vachel Lindsay, *The Art of the Moving Picture*, (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), 51. Kindle.

<sup>25</sup> Harriet Monroe, quoted in Terry R. Hummer, "Laughed Off: Canon, Kharakter, and the Dismissal of Vachel Lindsay," *The Kenyon Review* 17, no. 2 (Spring, 1995): 61.

<sup>26</sup> Ron Sakolsky, "Utopia at Your Doorstep: Vachel Lindsay's Golden Book of Springfield." *Utopian Studies* 12, no. 2 (2001): 62.

<sup>27</sup> The various attacks on Lindsay made by poets such as Pound, Eliot and Hardwick (the latter having claimed that Lindsay's success as a poet left her 'dumbstruck') are recounted in Terry R. Hummer's article cited above.

**28** Quoted in Michael Hughes, *Beyond Holy Russia: The Life and Times of Stephen Graham*, (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2014), 186.

<sup>29</sup> Edgar Lee Masters, *Vachel Lindsay: A Poet in America* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1935), 262.

While much diminished, interest in his work endured into the sixties and he was embraced by Allen Ginsberg who called him a ‘weird hermetic magical angel’ and dedicated a stanza of *Kaddish* (1967) to him.<sup>30</sup> However, his esteemed place in American literature declined throughout the century and in 1980 Macmillan, the publisher of Lindsay’s individual and collected works, did not include him in their popular *Anthology of American Literature*, nor was he included in any of the 5,000 pages of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*.<sup>31</sup> By 1991 Lindsay had been dismissed by critic Elizabeth Hardwick as having ‘no more caution than a hobo hitching a ride’ (Hardwick was stunned that any of Lindsay’s work ever received critical attention).<sup>32</sup>

However, Lindsay’s exclusion from the canon has been criticised and scrutinised by scholars including Donald Wesling, John Chapman Ward and Terry R. Hummer and in a review of Lindsay’s collected letters (edited by Marc Chenetier and published in 1979) James Dickey pondered that the ‘half-talented, half-cracked’ Lindsay may have something to offer after all.<sup>33</sup> Lindsay has certainly not been totally forgotten – his home in Springfield Illinois currently houses the Vachel Lindsay Association, running educational programs and celebrating his life and work and, as mentioned above, a volume of his collected letters was published in 1979. Yet he is far from a national treasure. Once a giant in American literature, he has all but disappeared from the literary landscape.

Similarly to a diminished interest in his poetry, neither of Lindsay’s two books on film has attracted significant scholarly attention. *The Art of the Moving Picture* has never found a secure place within the canon of classical film theory and Lindsay continues to be a lesser known film theorist compared to Epstein, Eisenstein, Munsterberg and Vertov. Yet the book was a success

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<sup>30</sup> Allen Ginsberg, *Kaddish and Other Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1967). Ginsberg refers to Lindsay as a ‘weird, hermetic, magical angel’ in a discussion with a group of students published as part of the *Allen Ginsberg Project*, <https://allenginsberg.org/2014/10/expansive-poetics-121-vachel-lindsay/> (website)

<sup>31</sup> John Chapman Ward, "Vachel Lindsay Is ‘Lying Low,’” *College Literature* 12, No. 3 (Fall, 1985).

<sup>32</sup> Elizabeth Hardwick, “Wind From the Prairie”, *New York Review of Books*, September 26 1991, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1991/09/26/wind-from-the-prairie/>

<sup>33</sup> Donald Wesling, “What the Canon Excludes: Lindsay and American Bardic,” *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 21, no. 3 (Summer, 1982) and James Dickey, “The Geek of Poetry” December 23, 1979 *New York Times*, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/08/30/specials/dickey-lindsay.html>

in Lindsay's lifetime. A critic at the *New Republic* described it as a 'bold and brilliant theory' and Lindsay worked for a time as their first film reviewer.<sup>34</sup> The text also had practical appeal within the industry; following its publication Lindsay was contacted by D.W. Griffith and invited to attend the premiere of *Intolerance*. The success of *The Art of the Moving Picture* is further evidenced by the fact of its re-issue in a revised edition in 1922, though his second treatise on film, *The Greatest Movies Now Running*, written in the 1920s when his popularity was on the wane, was not published in his lifetime.<sup>35</sup> Although it is fair to say that *The Art of the Moving Picture* has not received the critical attention it deserves, its status as one of the first theoretical texts on film has warranted its inclusion in certain spheres of film theory and history, though in most instances references to the text are fleeting and its position is almost always a marginal one. Though not a comprehensive list, some examples of the ways in which scholars have taken up Lindsay's work are given below.

One of the most serious and comprehensive considerations of Lindsay's life and work appeared in 1970 in Ann Massa's cultural history *Vachel Lindsay: Fieldworker for the American Dream*. Massa's characterisation of Lindsay as concerned with the social function of art and with the future of America serves as the foundation of much of this thesis.<sup>36</sup> Massa notes the importance of folk culture in Lindsay's social imagination and explores his project to reconcile rural life with the machine age. She engages with his egalitarian vision of America and his hopes that the town, rather than the city, would dominate American society.<sup>37</sup> Massa's concept of Lindsay as offering a vision of twentieth century America which is neither modernist nor antimodern is central to the analysis of Lindsay's film theory set out here. Lindsay's ambivalence toward cultural modernity is evidenced throughout Massa's text, a tension which is strongly felt in his film theory and which runs counter to so much other writing on film in the early twentieth century. Massa argues that Lindsay's 'profound egalitarianism,' his commitment to creativity

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<sup>34</sup> Kauffman, 'Introduction', *Moving Picture*.

<sup>35</sup> Where Lindsay has been the subject of enquiry biographers such as Masters, fellow poet Carl Sandberg and, later Eleanor Ruggles, the focus is on his career as a poet and social reformer and his film theory is severely marginalised.

<sup>36</sup> Massa, *Fieldworker*, ix.

<sup>37</sup> Massa, *Fieldworker*, 4.

and his high regard for non-industrial life are central tenets of his utopian vision of America.<sup>38</sup>

While Massa's project explores Lindsay's life and work as a whole, this thesis uses these elements of his utopian vision as a framework through which to analyse his film theory. This thesis builds on Massa's work by venturing into theoretical territory that is beyond the scope of her cultural biography, engaging with aesthetic theorists of the Frankfurt School and beyond.

While Massa's work is by far the most comprehensive text on Lindsay, his film theory was included in a handful of essays and articles from the seventies onward. In 1970 critic Stanley Kauffmann wrote the introduction to a re-issue of *The Art of the Moving Picture*, noting how it had 'virtually disappeared'; however, amongst his praise for the text he calls Lindsay a fool and describes the book as 'foolish' (though he maintains there is value in foolishness).<sup>39</sup> In Myron Lounsbury's *Origins of American Film Criticism* from 1972, Lounsbury contextualises Lindsay in the emerging field of film criticism, but nonetheless leaves him in a theoretical silo in terms of his larger aesthetic ideas.<sup>40</sup> The following year saw the publication of Jeffrey Wolfe's *Vachel Lindsay: A Poet in America*, which argued for connections between Lindsay's aesthetic ideas and his religious convictions, but Wolfe does not attempt to enact a cross-illumination between Lindsay's work and later aesthetic thinkers. In a 1985 essay in *Cinema Journal* titled 'From Photoplays to Texts: Film Theory, Film Studies and the Future' Ana Lopez engages in an historiographical discussion of film theory and the need for a self-consciously strategic use of different theoretical positions. She uses Lindsay as an example of a classical theorist with an aesthetic (as opposed to textual) approach to film, yet, while using him to support her argument, she confidently states that while Lindsay was a 'visionary pioneer' in the field of film studies 'even his staunchest supporters admit, he was also undoubtedly a fool'.<sup>41</sup> In his article, 'Film Theory for the Digital World: Connecting the Masters to the New Digital Cinema' (1990), John Andrew Berton, Jr. considers Lindsay's suggestions that art forms such

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<sup>38</sup> Massa, *Fieldworker*, 69.

<sup>39</sup> Kauffmann, "Introduction", 46.

<sup>40</sup> Myron Lounsbury, *The Origins of American Film Criticism, 1909-1939* (New York: Arno Press, 1973).

<sup>41</sup> Ana Lopez, "From Photoplays to Texts: Film Theory, Film Studies, and the Future," *Cinema Journal* 24, Number 2, (Winter, 1985), 56.

as sculpture and painting should become fundamental to filmmaking; but, again, this reference is fleeting and Berton's focus is not on Lindsay's cinematic utopianism.<sup>42</sup>

In contrast to Lopez's patronising dismissal of Lindsay, Antonia Lant was one of the first scholars to seriously engage with Lindsay's theory of the filmic hieroglyph in her 1992 article on Orientalism and film 'The Curse of the Pharaoh or How Cinema Contracted Egyptomania'.<sup>43</sup> Lant's interest in Lindsay was one of the first indications of an uptake in the theoretical aspects of Lindsay's writing on film. Lindsay's cinephilia was also granted serious attention by Laurence Goldstein, who includes a chapter on him in *The American Poet at the Movies: A Critical History* (1995) though Goldstein's focus is on Lindsay's poetical odes to movies and their stars rather than his film theory.<sup>44</sup> In 1995 Myron Lounsbury edited and provided an introduction and commentary to *The Progress and Poetry of the Movies* (Lindsay's unpublished manuscript on film which Lindsay had intended to be titled "The Greatest Movies Now Running"). Lounsbury argued that, though unpublished and unfashionable, Lindsay's second text of film theory should be taken seriously. He noted that, since 1945, Lindsay had been disregarded as an anachronism, whilst acknowledging the 'sporadic acceptance' of *The Art of the Moving Picture* by film critics and scholars, including Kauffman and Wolfe as noted above. For Lounsbury the ascendance of Cultural Studies had initiated a period in which scholarly attention to marginalised figures and cultures was encouraged, and he characterised himself as operating within a milieu in which academics often went 'against the grain of prescribed judgement'.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, he argued, the time was right to grant Lindsay's unpublished work serious attention. Lounsbury's introduction and the biographical chapters that follow enable the reader to contextualise Lindsay's work within the last years of his career. However Lounsbury's analysis of Lindsay's aesthetic arguments is often over determined by an awareness of Lindsay's biography, namely his ongoing unpopularity at the time of writing *The*

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<sup>42</sup> John Andrew Berton, "Film Theory for the Digital World: Connecting the Masters to the New Digital Cinema." *Leonardo. Supplemental Issue 3* (1990). doi:10.2307/1557888.

<sup>43</sup> Antonia Lant, "The Curse of the Pharaoh: How Cinema Contracted Egyptomania," *October 59*, (Winter, 1992): 86-112.

<sup>44</sup> Laurence Goldstein, *The American Poet at the Movies: A Critical History*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995).

<sup>45</sup> Myron Lounsbury, "Introduction" in Vachel Lindsay, *The Progress and Poetry of the Movies*, ed. and with an introduction by Myron Lounsbury (Lanham, Md: Scarecrow Press, 1995), 6.

*Greatest Movies Now Running*. In writing the manuscript, Lounsbury argues, Lindsay was ‘an individual striving to refashion a role for himself in a changing world’ and attempting to negotiate ‘an unsympathetic nation and entertainment industry.’<sup>46</sup> This pathologising of Lindsay somewhat distracts from the aesthetic arguments made in the text. For example, Lounsbury argues that Lindsay’s praise for Douglas Fairbanks may well have been self-serving, a means of ingratiating himself to a Hollywood star whose cultural authority contrasted to his own unfashionable status.<sup>47</sup> Nonetheless, Lounsbury’s valuable introduction is one of the few attempts (alongside Massa’s text) to contextualise Lindsay’s film theory historically, relating his work to the Progressive Era. Lounsbury rightly articulates Lindsay’s regionalism and his aversion to the ‘jazz age’, while contemplating his endorsement of film. Lounsbury, however, does not undertake the cross-illumination of Lindsay’s work with other aesthetic theorists, which is the work of this thesis.

At the close of the twentieth century, Charles Kerr republished *The Golden Book of Springfield* and, in 2000, *The Art of the Moving Picture* was reissued as part of the *Modern Movies Library* series, edited by Martin Scorsese. Scorsese recognised the text as a ‘classic’ and argued for its relevance to discussions regarding the primacy of the image over text in Western modernity.<sup>48</sup> That same year, Rachel O. Moore’s *Savage Theory* undertook a serious investigation of Lindsay’s claims that film restores a hieroglyphic, pre-logical mode of thought.<sup>49</sup> Moore situates Lindsay in a tradition of film theorists who apprehend an affinity between film and sensuous perception which Lindsay conceptualises as ‘reptilian’; an affinity which this project expands in relation to the decidedly medieval and primitivist dimensions of Lindsay’s utopian thought. In 2001 it was not Lindsay’s film theory but his utopian ideals as expressed in his utopian novel *The Golden Book of Springfield* (1920) that were unearthed by Ron Sakolsky in his article ‘Utopia At Your Doorstep: Vachel Lindsay’s Golden Book of Springfield’. Here, Sakolsky performs the rare task of placing Lindsay’s utopianism in a wider context, considering his ideas in relation to Edward Bellamy’s utopian novels from the late nineteenth

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<sup>46</sup> Lounsbury, *Progress and Poetry*, 8.

<sup>47</sup> Lindsay, *Progress and Poetry*, 15.

<sup>48</sup> Martin Scorsese, *Moving Picture*, Kindle ed., 29.

<sup>49</sup> R.O. Moore, *Savage Theory: Cinema as Modern Magic*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press), 2000.

century. Sakolsky even finds an affinity between Lindsay and Ernst Bloch, describing their shared desire to reveal ‘what is concealed by that which exists’; an affinity which is also argued for in this thesis.<sup>50</sup> Sakolsky engages with Lindsay on his own terms, accepting his idiosyncrasies (for example describing the untamed prose of *The Golden Book of Springfield* as ‘a lucid dream’<sup>51</sup>), while also considering his work as part of a larger intellectual tradition. This approach is also adopted by this thesis, which builds on the fleeting reference to Bloch made by Sakolsky in order to show how Lindsay’s utopian claims for the film set gain new depth when considered in the light of Bloch’s theory of utopian impulses.

The renewed interest in Lindsay’s film theory, which was first taken up by Lant and Moore, was focused on his claims that film is a hieroglyphic medium, and it is this aspect of his film theory which has received the most attention. Lindsay’s hieroglyphic claims for film are referenced in Michael North’s 2005 book *Camera Works: Photography and the Twentieth Century World* in which North uses Lindsay’s claims that film is an pictorial language to explore the affinity between film, hieroglyphics and Imagist poetry.<sup>52</sup> Subsequent works on Lindsay, by scholars including Tom Gunning and Laura Marcus, also focus on his theory of hieroglyphics. In *The Tenth Muse: Writing about Cinema in the Modernist Period* (2007), Marcus recounts Lindsay’s identification of the relationship between film and hieroglyphics, beauty and modernity, arguing that there are “echoes” and “suggestions” of connections between Lindsay and Benjamin, Barthes and Virilio.<sup>53</sup> Marcus’s 2014 work *Dreams of Modernity: Psychoanalysis, Literature, Cinema* includes an in-depth analysis of Lindsay’s aesthetic theory in a chapter dedicated to Lindsay and Hugo Munsterberg.<sup>54</sup> Marcus performs a rare act of cross-illumination and serious engagement with Lindsay’s aesthetic thought, though with a different focus to that undertaken here, since she maps the relationship between hieroglyphics, advertising, attention and attraction in the hyperstimulations of urban modernity

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<sup>50</sup> Sakolsky, “*Utopia*,” 54.

<sup>51</sup> Sakolsky, “*Utopia*,” 61.

<sup>52</sup> Michael North, *Camera Works: Photography and the Twentieth Century World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>53</sup> Laura Marcus, *The Tenth Muse: Writing about Cinema in the modernist period* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>54</sup> Laura Marcus, *Dreams of Modernity: Psychoanalysis, Literature, Cinema* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

rather than exploring the oppositional relationship between film and urban life that is also present in *The Art of the Moving Picture*.

In *Elegy For Theory* (2014), D.N. Rodowick included Lindsay in a list of early twentieth century film theorists writing within an ‘aesthetic’ discourse which was concerned with the distinctive features of film, its social imperative and its relationship to other art forms, issues which certainly animate Lindsay’s writings. However, it is the early Italian film theorist Ricciotto Canudo, rather than Lindsay, whom Rodowick gives prominent attention to.<sup>55</sup> This is perhaps understandable, since the definitive characteristics of the aesthetic discourse which he identifies (the primacy of the manipulative abilities of cinema, its capacity to fragment and reconstitute space and time), while present in *The Art of The Moving Picture*, are not the areas in which Lindsay has most to offer.

Lindsay’s ideas on filmic hieroglyphics were again included in Tom Gunning’s 2015 essay on Lindsay.<sup>56</sup> Here, the focus is on Lindsay’s belief in the universality of images and their mass appeal, and he finds Lindsay’s hieroglyphic method, whereby filmic images convey meanings on objects, to be useful in its practical application, “Take almost any silent film and isolate the hieroglyphics and you will see the usefulness of Lindsay’s hieroglyphic method”.<sup>57</sup>

Jesse Schotter’s *Hieroglyphic Modernisms: Writing and New Media in the Twentieth Century* from 2017 also references Lindsay’s film theory in her exploration of the role of hieroglyphics in discourses around modernist writing.<sup>58</sup> Schotter notes how a misreading of hieroglyphs enabled their inclusion in debates around the relationship between text and image. Lindsay’s film theory is invoked by Schotter as an example of this misappropriation of the hieroglyph and the concept of film to operate as a universal language. While this thesis also explores Lindsay’s

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<sup>55</sup> D.N. Rodowick, *Elegy for Theory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014).

<sup>56</sup> Tom Gunning, “Vachel Lindsay: Theory of Movie Hieroglyphics,” in *Thinking in the Dark: Cinema, Theory, Practice*, eds. Richard Barton Palmer and Murray Pomerance (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2015).

<sup>57</sup> Gunning, “Vachel Lindsay: Theory of Movie Hieroglyphics,” 27.

<sup>58</sup> Jesse Schotter, *Hieroglyphic Modernisms: Writing and New Media in the Twentieth Century* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018).



hieroglyphic imagination, it expands the discussion around the relationship between text and image beyond the realm of early twentieth century modernism, reading Lindsay's theory of filmic hieroglyphics alongside the work of later theorists such as Theodor Adorno and Vilém Flusser.

Ryan Pierson's work on Lindsay demonstrates a desire to engage with the more idiosyncratic elements of his film theory. The 2018 book *The Image in Early Cinema: Form and Material* contains a chapter by Pierson titled 'Boredom and Visions in Vachel Lindsay's Film Theory' in which Pierson takes a wide view of Lindsay's work, noting the importance of his utopian doctrines in understanding his film theory and concluding that 'Lindsay is drawn to the movies as a modern art not by their being peculiarly urban but by their being peculiarly democratic'.<sup>59</sup> However, while Pierson mentions Deleuze and Bazin, arguing that Lindsay's desire for wonder and revelation through cinema in some sense prefigured these later theorists, these references are fleeting and he makes no sustained attempt to bring Lindsay's ideas into conversation with them. In 2019, Ryan Jay Friedman published a chapter on Lindsay in *The Movies As World Force* titled 'The Occult Elements of Motion and Light: Vachel Lindsay's Utopia of the Mirror Screen', looking at the influence of Gerald Stanley Lee's *Crowds: A Moving Picture of Democracy* (1913) on Lindsay's film theory. Friedman argues that Lindsay and Lee share a belief in the transformative impact of mass media images at both an individual and social level. Friedman grounds this relationship in Lindsay's theory of hieroglyphics, noting his belief in a correspondence between mundane phenomena and 'the highest imaginable suprasensible qualities'.<sup>60</sup> Yet despite his belief in transformation, Friedman conceptualises Lindsay as 'turning backward to the most well-worn icons of nationalist prestige and power'.<sup>61</sup> Friedman's work on Lindsay is notable for his interest in the ambiguities present in Lindsay's work and his willingness to find areas of common ground between Lindsay and theorists

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<sup>59</sup> Ryan Pierson, "Boredom and Visions in Vachel Lindsay's Film Theory" in *The Image in Early Cinema: Form and Material*, Scott Curtis Philippe Gauthier, Tom Gunning, and Joshua Yumibe, eds. (Bloomington, Indiana, USA: Indiana University Press, 2018), 260. Kindle.

<sup>60</sup> Ryan Jay Friedman "The Occult Elements of Motion and Light"; Vachel Lindsay's Utopia of the Mirror Screen" in *The Movies as a World Force: American Silent Cinema and the Utopian Imagination* (London: Rutgers University Press, 2019): 48. doi:10.2307/j.ctt22rbjgj.

<sup>61</sup> Friedman, "Mirror Screen", 48.

including Mary Ann Doane and Anne Frieburg. Friedman is attentive to Lindsay's spiritual and political ideas as well as his idiosyncratic techno utopianism, describing how, for Lindsay, 'emergent visual technologies become spiritual technologies'.<sup>62</sup> Friedman's analysis is focused on Lindsay's theory of the audience and its relationship to the 'mirror screen' in terms of the representation of the crowd and the nation. He approaches Lindsay's theories within the context of filmic spectatorship, a different lens than the approach adopted here and one which ultimately leads Friedman to dismiss Lindsay's utopian vision as 'fetishizing existing reality'.<sup>63</sup> Friedman's dismissal is based on his reading of *The Progress and Poetry of the Movies* as Lindsay forsaking existent material reality in favour of spiritual transformation, 'giving autonomy and priority to all things mental'.<sup>64</sup> This thesis however concentrates on *The Art of the Moving Picture* and his utopian writings, works which demonstrate Lindsay's commitment to changing the material conditions of daily American life.

Alongside recent scholarship on Lindsay's film theory there has also been renewed scholarly interest in Lindsay's poetry and its relationship to American modernity, as evidenced by articles such as Nick Mason-Browne's article 'Live Like The Sparrow': Vachel Lindsay's Whitman' (2015) and Julia E. Daniel's 'Wonderful thunder': Vachel Lindsay's traffic noise' (2016). In his comparison between Lindsay and Whitman, Mason-Browne describes them as two distinct, though related, versions of the 'mystical poet-hero', both disrupting the dominance of the 'genteel poetry' of the 1880s, seeking to democratise poetry and incorporate 'folkways', slang and the ordinary experiences of everyday life.<sup>65</sup> Both poets, he argues, were forward looking, wrestling with the emerging realities of American modernity. Similarly, Julia E. Daniel's article 'Wonderful thunder' uses Lindsay's poem 'The Santa Fe Trail' to explore his ambiguous relationship to the phenomenological assault of modernity, rightly noting that Lindsay's approach to industrial noise 'is not a simple pitting of the mechanic against the

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<sup>62</sup> Friedman, "Mirror Screen", 53.

<sup>63</sup> Friedman, "Mirror Screen", 63.

<sup>64</sup> Friedman, "Mirror Screen", 63.

<sup>65</sup> Nick Mason-Browne, "'Live like the Sparrow': Vachel Lindsay's Whitman," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 32 (2015), 111-130. <https://doi.org/10.13008/0737-0679.2151>

organic'.<sup>66</sup> This thesis also recognises Lindsay's complex relationship to industrial life, arguing that his ambiguous feelings toward industrialisation should be seen as a productive force which enabled him to develop a utopian vision of cultural modernity.

While the past decade has seen a relaxing of Lindsay's quarantine, this thesis undertakes the much needed task of enacting a serious and sustained engagement with the aesthetic ideas presented in *The Art of the Moving Picture*, bringing them into conversation with established aesthetic theorists and film theorists from throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This thesis also adopts an interdisciplinary approach that places Lindsay's film theory within the context of his antimodernist, utopian thought. While idiosyncratic and often passionately expressed, this thesis identifies many fruitful connections between Lindsay's ideas and central debates in film theory, media history and aesthetic theory more broadly.

### **The Emblem of Modernity? Disrupting the Modernity Thesis**

Film theory has been heavily informed by the 'modernity thesis' which situates film as the emblematic art form of modernity, an analysis which privileges its urban context and industrial character. This approach is evident in the writings of Classical film theorists such as Vertov, Eisenstein and Epstein as well as the key figures of the Frankfurt School. Subsequently, a substantial corpus of theoretical texts situate film as a contributing agent (or the corresponding cultural medium) to the formulation of an urban, disenchanted, fragmented subject, as can be found in the writings of scholars including Miriam Hansen, Tom Gunning, David Nye and Leo Charney. While valuable, the concept of cinema as an industrial art form irrevocably tied to the machine age has obscured its relationship to regional cultures, folk practices and artisanal modes of production. Engaging with Lindsay's work brings these hidden relationships to light.

Lindsay's film theory provides a strikingly different concept of film than that found in critical theory. While the leading figures of critical theory and the Frankfurt School are not a monolithic entity, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer all position the cinematic apparatus as having a symbiotic relationship to the phenomenological experience of urban modernity. Their writings on film include descriptions of the ways in which the Western subject is conditioned into a distinctly new, modern perceptual apparatus and a new subjectivity structured primarily through consumption. Benjamin conceptualises this as the

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<sup>66</sup> Julia E. Daniel "'Wonderful thunder': Vachel Lindsay's traffic noise", *Critical Quarterly*, 58 (2017): 85–98. doi: [10.1111/crig.12309](https://doi.org/10.1111/crig.12309).

‘training’ enforced on the human senses by technology, resulting in radical changes to the structure of human perception.<sup>67</sup> In this framework, the experience of cinematic spectatorship is part of the re-conditioning of the subject, while cinema itself is the cultural medium which most readily corresponds to the capitalist mode of production. Siegfried Kracauer’s *The Mass Ornament* (1927) is premised in the claim that cinema is well placed to reflect the alienated condition of the masses.<sup>68</sup> While the pursuit of an aesthetics of splendour and enchantment sits at the heart of Lindsay’s film theory, the fairy tale splendour which he writes about with such gaiety differs significantly to Kracauer’s mass ornament whose value lies in its relation to the repetition of the factory.<sup>69</sup> For Kracauer, the popular film should be captivating only in its ability to reflect the bare materiality of capitalist production and the fragmentation of the self, which the workers in the factory inhabit daily. As well as having an affinity with the modern experiences of fragmentation and alienation, in Adorno and Horkheimer’s mid-century work *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) cinema is also conceptualised as enabling a culture of perpetual consumption. Here the authors map cinema’s position within a culture industry which works to ensure the manufacture and maintenance of the modern consumer subject.<sup>70</sup> It is true that these various theories of cinema’s role within capitalist modernity are sometimes theorised in dialectical terms as harbouring within them revolutionary energies that would lead to the eventual overthrow of the capitalist system. However, a wholly oppositional relationship between the cinematic experience and the phenomenological experience of urban modernity, such as that implied by Lindsay, is not present in critical theory.

The idea that cinema is complicit in the restructuring of human perception and the creation of a fragmented, modern subject is likewise articulated by scholars influenced by the Frankfurt school, including Miriam Hansen, Tom Gunning and David Nye. The legacy of the Frankfurt school informs the essays collected in *Cinema and The Invention of Modern Life* (1996), **which are bound together by the central thesis implied in the book’s**

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<sup>67</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Some Motifs on Baudelaire,” in *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999), 71.

<sup>68</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995).

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<sup>70</sup> Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, (London: Verso Books, 1997), 127 and Theodor Adorno, “Transparencies on Film,” in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991).

title – that the relationship between cinema and modernity is both supplementary and symbiotic.<sup>71</sup> In this collection of essays, Ben Singer describes the relationship between urban modernity and early cinema in his chapter ‘Modernity, Hyperstimulus and the Rise of Popular Sensationalism’ (1996). Using Georg Simmel’s depiction of the city’s assault on the nervous system as set out in ‘The Metropolis and Mental Life’ (1903), Singer positions cinema as the ‘aesthetic counterpart’ to the shocks and stimulations of the urban experience.<sup>72</sup> Singer references the ‘dystopian alarmism’ produced in response to the modern urban environment, locating cinema as part of a circuit of constant shocks and stimulations, a drastically less empowering and enabling formulation than that presented by Lindsay.<sup>73</sup> The framing of the cinematic experience within a phenomenological language of shock and hyperstimulation is dependent upon a particular construction of the cinematic spectator, one who is imagined to exist in a state of numbed passivity, deadened by the overwhelming demands of modern, urban life.

While Lindsay imagines it is fairly easy for film to awaken and revive the lifeless modern subject and restore in them lively and dynamic modes of perception, Katherine Whissel’s *Picturing American Modernity: Traffic, Technology, and the Silent Cinema* (2008) conceptualises the modern subject as a static passenger or a frozen figure attending the assembly line.<sup>74</sup> Whissel describes the ways in which the modern subject is ‘held under’, oppressed and controlled by an industrial economic superstructure in which it is only ever occasionally and momentarily jolted awake.<sup>75</sup> These articulations combine to produce a map of modernity which positions cinema within the nexus of the frantic circuits of industrial production in which film either momentarily stimulates the senses of a deadened subject or further immunises them to the urban, industrial environment, depending on the theorist. In both

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<sup>71</sup> Leo Charney and Vanessa Schwartz eds., *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

<sup>72</sup> Ben Singer, “Modernity, Hyperstimulus and the Rise of Popular Sensationalism,” in *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, eds. Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 72.

<sup>73</sup> Singer, “Modernity, Hyperstimulus”, 73-88.

<sup>74</sup> Katherine Whissel, *Picturing American Modernity: Traffic, Technology, and the Silent Cinema* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 188-9.

<sup>75</sup> Whissel, *Picturing*, 219-129.

analyses, the modern spectator is left in a metaphorical state of paralysis, denied any agency to effect change or resist the flow of production and consumption into which they have been subsumed.

Lindsay does not approach cinema as an agent of rational demythologisation nor as a constituent mechanism within a Fordist, Taylorist mode of production. Neither does he understand the affective power of cinema as designed to momentarily relieve the modern subject, offering temporary respite which merely ensures their ultimate compliance; an argument made by Adorno and Horkheimer.<sup>76</sup> Rather, for Lindsay, film is the means by which powerful aesthetic experiences can be made available to the American public. It is not cinema's violent stimulation that Lindsay celebrates, but its capacity for inspiration and the dissemination of images of beauty, splendour and wonder. It should be noted that, despite the more accommodating view of modernity that Lindsay adopts from 1912 onward, the means by which Lindsay imagines cinema (and electrical modernity more broadly) to invoke awe and wonder is markedly different from David Nye's concept of the 'Technological Sublime' (1996) in which Nye argues that in the modern world the awe which was once generated from an encounter with nature is now evoked by magnificent but hollow technological spectacles.<sup>77</sup>

*The Art of the Moving Picture* and *The Greatest Movies Now Running* also go against the tradition of film theorists to apprehend cinema within a purely urban cultural and phenomenological milieu. Lindsay's argument in favour of developing regional cinematic cultures prompts a reconsideration of narratives such as those constructed by Ben Singer, who describes the cultural landscape of America in this period as organised through a uni-directional flow of culture, a cultural current that runs from an urban centre to the rural 'hinterlands' - positing the rural as both passive and passé.<sup>78</sup> This project also disrupts the framing of technological inventions as bound together through a schema of familial relations, as encapsulated in Katherine Whissel's description of cinema's 'structural affinity with other

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<sup>76</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 121.

<sup>77</sup> David Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1996).

<sup>78</sup> Ben Singer and Charlie Keil, eds., *American Cinema of the 1910s: Themes and Variations* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press), 2009.

technologies such as the telephone and the railway'.<sup>79</sup> Lindsay apprehends cinema as an invention which is distinct from, and often in tension with, other products of industrialisation. *The Art of The Moving Picture* posits the cinematic experience as contiguous with a specifically premodern visual mode of perception (a trace of which has been retained in the American population) rather than as midwife to a modern, urban, secular and fragmented mode of subjectivity. Lindsay agrees that cinema can alter the perceptual capacities of the American population, but he imagines it doing so for utopian, rather than dystopian, ends.

### **An American Medium**

This thesis explores Lindsay's claim that film is an inherently American medium and adds his voice to a group of (mainly French) theorists and filmmakers who posit a correlation between film and America. The idea that Americans are inherently well attuned to cinema is a key theme in Richard Abel's article 'American Film and the French Literary Avant-Garde' (1976), which traces the enthusiastic reception and influence of American cinema on French writers and poets.<sup>80</sup> The essay contains several French pronouncements on the Americanness of film, such as Philippe Soupault's exclamation in 1923 that 'The 'U.S.A.' cinema has thrown light on all the beauty of our time, all the mystery of mechanics.'<sup>81</sup> Truffaut, too, understood (and praised) Hollywood as 'the kingdom of mechanization'.<sup>82</sup> In 1955 Eric Rohmer, writing in *Cahiers du Cinema*, repeated this sentiment, arguing that America's status as the world's most 'materially developed country' enabled the American film industry to produce movies that embodied the discontents of the machine age.<sup>83</sup> Eisenstein also frames the correlation between America and the medium of film in economic terms. Writing in 1949 in the essay 'Dickens, Griffith, and the Film Today', Eisenstein describes 'the inseparable link between the cinema

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<sup>79</sup> Whissel, *Picturing*, 163.

<sup>80</sup> Richard Abel, "American Film and the French Literary Avant-Garde," *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 17, No. 1, (Winter, 1976).

<sup>81</sup> Abel, "American Film", 85.

<sup>82</sup> Francois Truffaut, "A Wonderful Certainty," in *Cahiers Du Cinema: 1950s: Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave vol.1*, ed. Jim Hillier (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), 108.

**83** Eric Rohmer, "Rediscovering America," in *Cahiers Du Cinema: 1950s: Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave vol.1*, ed. Jim Hillier (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), 2.

and the industrial production of America', later characterised as a specifically capitalist mode of production that 'finds its sharpest and most expressive reflection in the American cinema'.<sup>84</sup> However, he argues that it is the individualistic tendency of American capitalism and the mode of imagination it cultivates that prevents cinema from fully realising its potential. It is precisely the individualistic American mentality which Eisenstein believes forestalls the development of a collective imagination which would result in more radical and dynamic forms of montage, which is the visual correlate of a socialist consciousness.<sup>85</sup> Despite America's industrial prowess, Eisenstein subsequently asserts that American culture is still permeated by a 'small-town, agrarian' sensibility.<sup>86</sup> This small-town sensibility permeates Lindsay's work and this project draws heavily on Lindsay's utopian vision of rural America and its relationship to cinematic technology. Writing earlier in the century when America was yet to establish its global economic dominance, Lindsay's film theory turns these claims regarding industrialisation and mechanisation on their head by arguing that it is America's unspoilt landscape and its as yet unformed culture that grant it a privileged relationship to cinema.

Stan Brakhage also asserted an affinity between film and the U.S.A. in 1963, identifying a temporal resonance between the infancy of American society and the newness of film in his essay 'Metaphors on Vision', stating that neither had been 'discovered' yet.<sup>87</sup> Lindsay, however, phrases the temporal correlation between cinema and America in regional terms rather than national ones. He believed that the comparative 'newness' of California, in relation to the Eastern United States, enabled the Golden State to establish a relationship to cinema that was the corollary of New England's relationship to literature.<sup>88</sup> For him the newness of America, particularly the Western United States, signalled its proximity to 'primitive' cultures free from written language and more attuned to a visual mentality. Brakhage conceptualises the

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<sup>84</sup> Sergei Eisenstein, "Dickens, Griffith and the Film Today," in Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda (Florida: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1977), 196.

<sup>85</sup> Eisenstein, 'Dickens', 245.

<sup>86</sup> Eisenstein, 'Dickens', 196-7.

<sup>87</sup> Stan Brakhage, "Metaphors on Vision," in Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, eds., *Film Theory and Criticism*, Sixth edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 201. The newness of America is of course a myth, Brakhage's remarks make sense only in relation to the newness of America's European colonisation.

<sup>88</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 147.



infancy of film as the correlate of speaking ‘like an aborigine’ and, indeed, *The Art of The Moving Picture* is replete with references to the correspondence between visual culture and primitivism (expressed through an Orientalist schema). This thesis explores the associations drawn between an explicitly American pictorial medium and Lindsay’s Orientalist conception of an imagined human primitivism. Drawing on the work of Rachel Moore and Antonia Lant, it analyses Lindsay’s assertion that this primitive, cinematic, visual American imagination is set in opposition to a European typographic, or literary, sensibility. Rather than an affinity between the U.S.A. and film based in economics, Lindsay argues that it is the American proclivity to ‘dream and visualise’ that provides its affinity with the filmic imagination, a claim which could only be made by a theorist whose idea of American modernity was radically different to that of Epstein, Eisenstein and the French filmmakers of *Cahiers du Cinema*.

### **Intermediality**

This thesis argues that, in his embrace of intermedial filmmaking, Lindsay correctly anticipated the central role that artisanal techniques would play in the history of cinema. Furthermore, it seeks to prove that his lack of concern for disciplinary boundaries has new relevance today. Lindsay’s endorsement of intermediality is rare in the field of classical film theory, a field rife with assertions that cinema should purge itself of theatrical techniques. Such claims can be found in Louis Arragon’s essay ‘On Décor’ (1918), Louis Delluc’s ‘Beauty in the Cinema’ (1918) and Erwin Panofsky’s ‘Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures’ (1936), where Panofsky argues that Reinhardt’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1935) was ‘probably the most unfortunate major film ever produced’.<sup>89</sup> Siegfried Kracauer’s *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947) and *Theory of Film* (1960) likewise critique the use of theatrical techniques in film. Such attacks are not limited to the early decades of film theory, but form part of a theoretical tradition which is hostile to intermedial films; a tradition which has continued into the twenty first century. For example, in 1990 Sabine Hake argued that cinematic eclecticism merely

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<sup>89</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), ; Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological Study of German Film*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966); Louis Aragon, ‘On Décor’, in Richard Abel (ed.), *French Film Theory and Criticism 1907-1939: A History/Anthology* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993); Louis Delluc “Beauty in the Cinema”, in Richard Abel (ed.), *French Film Theory and Criticism, 1907-1939: A History/Anthology*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993); Erwin Panofsky, “Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures” in *Film: An Anthology*, ed. Daniel Talbot (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959).

amounts to ‘the dismantling of history into pleasant quotations and the transformations of the aesthetics of appropriation into the politics of spectacle’.<sup>90</sup> For theorist Thomas Elsaesser, the influence of artisanal techniques in film create not a utopian eclecticism, as they do for Lindsay, but a pastiche which, he argues, reveals Weimar cinema to be postmodern.<sup>91</sup> It is worth noting that Hake and Elsaesser both situate film production within the context of the rise of Nazism while Lindsay, writing before the advent of German Expressionism and the Nazification of the German film industry, was able to offer a different, more positive, concept of stylised films.

More affirmative theories of intermediality have emerged in recent years, though much contemporary scholarship on intermedial cinema often fails to engage with the intermedial film culture present in the silent era. In *Cinema Between Media* (2018) Jørgen Bruhn and Anne Gjelsvik recognise the intermedial eclecticism of early film culture, yet such a recognition does not prompt the inclusion of any silent films amongst their eight case studies.<sup>92</sup> Likewise, in *Cinema and Intermediality: The Passion for the In-Between* (2011), Ágnes Pethő celebrates film’s aesthetic diversity which she sees as enabled by its myriad influences and various techniques. But she is explicitly concerned with a narrowly defined concept of cinema which doesn’t extend to the work of Méliès et al, and she self-consciously excludes an analysis of early silent film.<sup>93</sup> Similarly, in *The Material Image: Art and the Real in Film* (2014), Brigitte Peucker focuses on the affective power of the filmic tableau as found in the work of Wim Wenders, Alfred Hitchcock and Michael Haneke, rather than the intermedial chaos of early cinema.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Sabine Hake, “Architectural Hi/stories: Fritz Lang and The Nibelungs,” *Wide Angle* 12, no. 3, (July 1990): 47.

<sup>91</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany’s Historical Imaginary*, (Oxon: Routledge, 2000), 42-43.

<sup>92</sup> Jørgen Bruhn and Anne Gjelsvik, *Cinema Between Media* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018).

<sup>93</sup> Ágnes Pethő, *Cinema and Intermediality: The Passion for the In-Between* (Newcastle Upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars, 2011).

<sup>94</sup> Brigitte Peucker, *Film and the Material Image: Art and the Real in Film* (Stanford: University of California Press, 2014).

As well as being an outlier in his embrace of intermediality, Lindsay's work directs our attention to the significance of the physical film set and the materiality of film production – an endeavour that is not frequently undertaken. Set design and other aspects of pro-filmic production have indeed received historical attention, such as Lotte Eisner's classic text *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt*; however, theoretical engagement with the film set is scarce.<sup>95</sup> Whereas theorists have taken up the ontological and epistemological implications of digital production, they have not sufficiently explored the significance of the materiality of the pro-filmic world which digital technology can now supersede. Bergfelder, Harris and Street's book *Film Architecture and the Transnational Imagination* (2007) attempts to rectify the neglected status of production design and bring it into contact with theoretical texts, noting that in the realm of classical film theory the film set is often viewed as 'uncinematic'.<sup>96</sup> Like Lindsay, the authors note that the visible film set discloses its presence as such and, rather than rendering itself invisible, prompts an atmosphere of self-reflexivity. In *Impure Cinema: Intermedial and Intercultural Approaches to Film* (2014), edited by Lucia Nagib and Anne Jersley, scholars address the issue of intermedial artifice in cinema and the book provides valuable re-readings of Bazin and his endorsement of 'impure' cinema.<sup>97</sup> The essays explore issues including literary adaptations, post-medium films and cinematic border crossing, in the context of Bazinian realism, showcasing an aesthetic hybridity that Lindsay's work foreshadows. In the essays collected in *Expressionist Film; New Perspectives* (2003), authors including Juergen Kasten and Norbert Grob explore various techniques of stylization, yet their focus is as much on post production as on pro-filmic materials.<sup>98</sup> The authors also confine their discussion to Expressionist films which are often the accepted reference point for any discussion of stylised film sets, but which are far from the only early films that present imaginative, fantastical material worlds, as this thesis demonstrates. Moreover, Lindsay's work is absent even from these discussions, despite the great deal of

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<sup>95</sup> Lotte Eisner, *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt* (London: Martin Secker & Warburg Ltd, 1973).

<sup>96</sup> Tim Bergfelder, Sue Harris and Sarah Street, *Film Architecture and the Transnational Imagination: Set Design in 1930s European Cinema* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007), 16.

<sup>97</sup> Lúcia Nagib and Anne Jerslev eds., *Impure Cinema: Intermedial and Intercultural Approaches to Film*, (London: IB Taurus, 2014).

<sup>98</sup> Dietrich Scheunemann ed., *Expressionist Film; New Perspectives* (Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 2003).

attention he affords the film set and his emphatic assertion that film is an architectural enterprise. Lindsay's claims regarding the relationship between fantastical film sets and utopian architecture add a new perspective to this field and introduce a new approach to filmmaking which privileges the manual elements of film production.

More aligned with the approach of this thesis is the discussion of cinematic intermediality undertaken in *Fantastic Voyages of the Cinematic Imagination: Georges Méliès's A Trip To The Moon* (2011). In this collection of essays, a variety of film scholars highlight the inadequacy of understanding Méliès's filmic practice as 'theatrical' and continue the legacy of the FIAF project which enacted a serious consideration of the aesthetic status of *A Trip to the Moon*.<sup>99</sup> Gunning et al recognise that, unlike the structured, static space of the proscenium arch, Méliès's films occur in an ambiguous, discontinuous space not governed by laws of perspective or proportionality.<sup>100</sup> In fact, distinct from both realist narrative cinema and theatre, *A Trip To The Moon* enacts a collision of practices far greater than anything theatre could achieve. This intermedial, disjointed aesthetic unsettles the critic or theorist who seeks to pin it down in relation to one art form or another. Although Gunning rejects Mitry's identification of Méliès' films as theatrical, he is nonetheless propelled by the impulse to identify whether theatre is 'host' or 'parasite' in Méliès' work. Despite enjoying the aesthetic ambiguity of *A Trip To The Moon*, Gunning doesn't dismantle the aesthetic framework that insists upon viewing the film in terms of a struggle between cinema and theatre. This binary opposition positions one art form as an uninvited pest feasting off the substantive body of the other, revealing a desire to preserve an imagined 'cinematic' purity which is not only juxtaposed to an imagined 'theatrical' aesthetic but set in vitriolic opposition to it.

This thesis builds on the work of Tom Gunning and Charles Musser, whose research has established the eclectic, intermedial character of early film culture and argues that Lindsay's work can be used to support their findings. The relevance of Lindsay's intermedial claims for film extend beyond the silent era and into the present day, given that special effects have always relied on a degree of artisanal labour and continue to do so. Michelle Pierson's study

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<sup>99</sup> Matthew Solomon ed. *Fantastic Voyages of the Cinematic Imagination: Georges Méliès's Trip to the Moon* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011).

<sup>100</sup> Tom Gunning, "Shooting Into Outer Space: Reframing Modern Vision," in *Fantastic Voyages of the Cinematic Imagination*, ed. Matthew Solomon (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011), 103.

*Special Effects: Still In Search of Wonder* (2002) evidences the formative role of practical effects in the history of film, including the role of handiwork and craft practices.<sup>101</sup> Pierson's work supports Lindsay's claims that film should have a close relationship to non-industrial arts and crafts practices by demonstrating the reliance of the film industry on skills such as painting and modelling. However, not only relevant with regard to early film culture and special effects, this thesis argues that Lindsay's intermedial imagination can be said to be newly relevant to the world of contemporary art and digital media. The field of fine art has witnessed the breakdown of medium essentialism, as theorised by Rosalind Krauss in her book "*A Voyage on the North Sea*": *Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (2000).<sup>102</sup> Today the dissolution of the borders between different mediums is now perhaps most strongly felt in the realm of digital media, which the critic Jörg Heiser describes in terms of 'super-hybridity'.<sup>103</sup> While not extending deeply into the realm of art theory and the history of multimedia and mixed media practices, this research argues for the prescience of Lindsay's intermedial imagination today.

### **Maker Culture and Amateur and Community Filmmaking**

This thesis understands 'making' to be a key theme in Lindsay's utopian thought, one which informs his ideas on filmmaking and the role of the arts and crafts therein. Making is considered by Lindsay to be powerful in several respects. In essays including 'Art and the Church' and 'The New Localism' he argues that individual making, especially when based in craft practices, can revive the modern individual and connect them to their own agency, while collective making engenders community and a vibrant civic imagination. Lindsay believed that regional and amateur making could act as a counterforce to the homogenisation of modern American culture. His film theory is likewise focused on the process of filmmaking, being concerned with the practices of commercial filmmakers as well as offering reflections on amateur techniques. Furthermore, implicit in Lindsay's film theory is his conviction in the redemptive power of an aesthetics of 'madness' which declares the constructed nature of the

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<sup>101</sup> Michele Pierson, *Special Effects: Still in Search of Wonder* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

<sup>102</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "*A Voyage on the North Sea*": *Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2000).

<sup>103</sup> Jörg Heiser, Ronald Jones, Nina Power, Seth Price, Sukhdev Sandhu and Hito Steyerl, "Analyse This", *Frieze*, 1 September 2010, <https://www.frieze.com/article/analyze>.

film set and, by association, the world. In order to argue for Lindsay's relevance it is necessary to consider which, if any, elements of his ideas about making survive today. In this vein, this thesis finds areas of connection between Lindsay's work and the rise of maker culture in late modernity in which a vast array of people engage in both digital and physical creative practices (including traditional crafts) and often do so with the support of online platforms that enable them to learn skills and techniques as well as sharing knowledge and ideas with others. This phenomenon is testament to the prescience of Lindsay's vision of modernity defined by a complementary relationship between industrial technology and artisanship. Lindsay does not use the term 'maker', but the term can be readily applied to his work in order to distil his ideas around the value of creative labour. In maker culture a maker is one who creates and makes (either digitally, manually or in a technologically enabled process of production) within a culture of sharing, playing and learning, rather than in a spirit of competition. Looking at Lindsay's work from the vantage point of contemporary maker culture reveals that he was indeed correct in his conviction that the rise of industrial technology would not inevitably result in the obliteration of craft practices. Creating links between Lindsay's ideas on amateur and community filmmaking and maker culture also pushes forward his concept of filmmaking which not only makes room for the utilisation of art and craft techniques but also celebrates experimentation and ingenuity.

Furthermore, the egalitarian principles often cited as underpinning maker culture stand as evidence that Lindsay's arguments in 'The New Localism' for a radically democratised culture of creativity should not be dismissed as naive and anachronistic but rather persist today, as can be found in the work of contemporary sociologist and media theorist David Gauntlett. In *Making is Connecting: the Social Meaning of Creativity from DIY and Knitting to YouTube and Web 2.0* (2011) Gauntlett argues for a 'direct path' from William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement, to the countercultural punk DIY movement and the internet and Web 2.0. This thesis argues for Lindsay's inclusion in such a list of thinkers who argue for the value of craft making and creativity. Gauntlett, like Lindsay before him, argues for the social and psychological importance of creativity both at an individual and collective level. He celebrates the replacement of a passive culture of consumption with a culture of 'making and doing'

which seeks ‘opportunities for creativity, social connections and personal growth’.<sup>104</sup> Where Lindsay argues for the value of regional cultures and local cultural associations, Gauntlett understands the urge to form community groups and associations of people who would otherwise not have known each other to be an ‘American capacity’ which can be found in the work of key American thinkers including Alexis de Toqueville.<sup>105</sup> Following Gauntlett, this thesis conceptualises maker culture as made up of both social networks formed around shared enthusiasms and the act of creative making, both of which are key components of Lindsay’s American utopia.

The values of creativity and inclusivity can also be found in the collected essays in Julia Walter-Herrmann and Corinne Büching ‘s edited collection *FabLab: Of Machines, Makers and Inventors* (2013) where multiple authors explore the democratisation of manufacturing technology enabled by FabLabs and the potential for inclusive and innovative approaches to production. Here FabLabs and maker culture more generally are understood to be founded in open sharing, creativity, learning and participation, though these values are complicated by the resources required to finance the technological infrastructure that FabLabs depend on. While maker culture may be founded in inclusivity and learning, the role of the amateur in digital making is complicated by barriers to accessing the technological requirements of participation. Yet even in this compromised digital space, Lindsay’s utopian vision resonates with contemporary arguments for the radically egalitarian potential of digital technology, as put forward by Lawrence Lessig in his concept of ‘free culture’ (2004).<sup>106</sup> Lessig argues for the democratisation of cultural archives, challenging the financial and legal barriers imposed by copyright laws. While there are clear areas of convergence between Lindsay and figures such as Lessig, debates over the degree to which copyright law and corporate media ownership are thwarting amateur creativity and experimentation are beyond the scope of this thesis. Nonetheless, Lindsay’s ideas regarding a civic world in which the barriers to accessing and participating in the arts have been removed can be seen to foreshadow Lessig’s fight to protect the creative possibilities opened up by digital technology.

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<sup>104</sup> David Gauntlett, *Making is Connecting: The social meaning of creativity, from DIY and knitting to YouTube and Web 2.0* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 11.

<sup>105</sup> Gauntlett, *Making*, 136.

<sup>106</sup> Lawrence Lessig, *Free Culture: The Nature and Future of Creativity* (London: Penguin, 2004).

This thesis uses Lindsay's work to add a utopian vision of amateur digital media practices to more sociological and economic approaches to digital technology as put forward in texts such as Dan Hunter's *Amateur Media: Social, Cultural and Legal Perspectives* (2013), Chris Well's *The Civic Organisation and the Digital Citizen: Communicating Engagement in a Networked Age* (2015) and *Being Digital Citizens* (2020) by Ebgin Fahri Isin and Evelyn Ruppert.<sup>107108v</sup> These texts consider the different ways in which Web 2.0 serves to disrupt and/or support existing power dynamics and cultural hierarchies. The arguments put forward here supplement this sociological approach to new media, showing how Lindsay's vision of the democratisation of the arts and creativity, as put forward in "The New Localism", have new relevance in the digital age. Lindsay's writings add an historically inflected vision of an egalitarian culture of creativity to scholarship on Web 2.0 and the ways in which it has expanded access to and participation in creative labour.

This research also interjects Lindsay's ideas on amateur making into the field of media studies. Not only does Lindsay's work provide the field with a utopian theory of amateur media, it emphasises the significance of fictional amateur filmmaking and community filmmaking. This is especially significant given the fact that in the fields of media studies and film theory, both theoretical and historical texts on amateur filmmaking overwhelmingly focus on nonfiction filmmaking (e.g. *The Routledge Companion to Alternative and Participatory Media, Video Cultures* (2015); *Media Technology and Everyday Creativity* (2009); *The Handbook of Participatory Video* (2012)).<sup>109</sup> Patricia Zimmermann's seminal text *Reel Families: A Social*

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<sup>107</sup> Dan Hunter, Ramon Lobato, Megan Richardson and Julian Thomas eds. *Amateur Media: Social, Cultural and Legal Perspectives* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), Chris Well's *The Civic Organisation and the Digital Citizen: Communicating Engagement in a Networked Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) and Ebgin Fahri Isin and Evelyn Ruppert. *Being Digital Citizens* second edn. (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2020).

<sup>108</sup> Dan Hunter, Ramon Lobato, Megan Richardson and Julian Thomas eds. *Amateur Media: Social, Cultural and Legal Perspectives* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), Chris Well's *The Civic Organisation and the Digital Citizen: Communicating Engagement in a Networked Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) and Ebgin Fahri Isin and Evelyn Ruppert. *Being Digital Citizens* second edn. (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2020).

<sup>109</sup> Chris Atton, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Alternative and Participatory Media, Video Cultures* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015); David Buckingham and Rebekah Willets eds., *Media Technology and Everyday Creativity* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); E.J. Milne, Claudia Mitchell and Naydene de Lang eds., *The Handbook of Participatory Video* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2012).



*History of Amateur Film* (1995) is likewise confined to domestic, non-fiction filmmaking.<sup>110</sup> The focus on nonfiction amateur filmmaking is further evidenced in the collected volume *Amateur Filmmaking: The Home Movie, the Archive, the Web* (2014).<sup>111</sup> In this volume the twenty three essays are concerned with home movies, nonfiction modes of self-expression and regional archives. Heather Norris Nicholson's *Amateur Film: Meaning and Practice 1927-77* (2012) is similarly focused on home movies and travelogues.<sup>112</sup> Lindsay's work challenges this limited concept of amateur film, arguing for the importance of a thriving culture of fictional community filmmaking. By engaging with his ambitious aesthetic imagination this thesis shows how Lindsay's work offers an historically situated vision of what amateur American filmmaking could become.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### Introduction

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<sup>110</sup> Patricia Zimmermann, *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

<sup>111</sup> Laura Rascaroli, Gwenda Young and Marry Monahan eds., *Amateur Filmmaking: The Home Movie, the Archive, the Web* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).

<sup>112</sup> Heather Norris Nicholson, *Amateur Film: Meaning and Practice c. 1927-77* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

The 1922, revised edition of *The Art of the Moving Picture* is the governing text of this thesis. Where reference is made to ideas that Lindsay had in 1915, this is because such ideas are present in the original 1915 edition. There is, in fact, almost no difference between the two texts aside from changes and additions to the introductory remarks. In the 1922 edition, Lindsay grapples more with the commercial aspect of film and this version includes the capitalised sentence ‘THE MOTION PICTURE ART IS A GREAT HIGH ART, NOT A PROCESS OF COMMERCIAL MANUFACTURE’.<sup>113</sup> In the revised introduction he is also more explicit in his agenda regarding film’s relationship to the fine arts, ideas which are relevant to the exploration of his intermedial imagination undertaken here. In using this later edition the thesis is able to include Lindsay’s comments on *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1920), which further adds to discussions on intermediality. The thesis approaches the text with great fidelity, using direct quotations wherever possible in order to direct the reader to Lindsay’s own articulations of his ideas. Given this approach the thesis follows Lindsay in his use of the term ‘America’ to refer to the United States of America rather than the North American continent.

Though the main themes of this thesis are drawn from *The Art of the Moving Picture* they are also contextualised within Lindsay’s broader utopian thought and then expanded upon as theoretical concerns in their own right. By engaging with the work of other aesthetic theorists, this thesis ends Lindsay’s quarantine and brings his work into contact with other thinkers who he has largely been isolated from – notably Jean Epstein, Georg Lukács, Theodor Adorno, Ernst Bloch and Vilém Flusser. This project shows that it is possible to enact a cross-illumination between Lindsay’s work and more rigorous theorists based within a critical tradition that Lindsay sits outside of. In order to accomplish this task Lindsay’s work must be taken seriously and engaged with on its own terms. However, while this thesis shows that it is possible to bring together works that adopt different conceptual frameworks and arise out of different genres and disciplines, it is imperative to recognise these differences. Where, for instance, this project recognises areas of commonality between *The Art of the Moving Picture* and Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*, it does not overlook the historical, cultural and conceptual differences of these texts. Moreover, different modes of textual analysis are, if not mutually exclusive, at the very least incongruous with one another. Each mode of enquiry and analysis is enabling and debilitating in its own way. To adopt a mode of reading which engages with the

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<sup>113</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 38.

minutiae of a text, identifying contradictions, internal contestations, the slips and pulls of similes and metaphors and which simultaneously intends to situate the text within a metanarrative of its historical location is impossible. Therefore, different modes of reading are employed at different points. This chapter will engage with three areas of methodological activity at work in this project. Firstly, it will address the identification and categorisation of the corpus of material to be analysed. Secondly, it will outline the order and arrangement of this material. Lastly, it will address historiographical debates on the relationship between text and context and explore Dominick LaCapra's concept of the 'dialogical imagination', which this project employs.

### **Identifying the Body**

There exists a body of material that is recognised in law as being the product of the author/artist 'Vachel Lindsay'. Whilst debates over the fragmented and pluralistic nature of the self problematise this simplistic attribution, it is not the intention of this chapter, nor of particular benefit to this project, to perform an extensive Lacanian deconstruction of, or Derridean inquest into, the relationship between text and author. With regard to this project the author is dead: literally and figuratively. Moreover, this project assumes that a plurality of 'Vachel Lindsays' may be reconstructed through an engagement with his writing, given that the contradictions and myriad preoccupations of his work cannot be neatly synthesised. Whilst Lindsay is a key figure of this project, references to him are acknowledged to be figurative rather than literal. Furthermore, the thematic concerns of this project, the methods and modes of reading it employs and the conditional agency of the scholar carrying it out, will enable only certain aspects of Vachel Lindsay to come to the fore.<sup>114</sup>

This thesis engages with a wide range of texts written by Lindsay including his prose, poetry, articles and letters, as well as Lindsay's unpublished manuscript from 1925, *The Greatest Movies Now Running*, a version of which was edited by Myron Lounsbury and published in 1995 with the title *The Progress and Poetry of the Movies*. This thesis does not treat all of

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<sup>114</sup> The task of giving an account of oneself in the sense of an authorial disclaimer seems somewhat duplicitous given not only the impossibility of doing so due to the plurality of the author, but an acceptance that the most powerful constitutive factors and subjective tendencies are those that the author is unable to recognise. If a truly comprehensive and infallible account of a project were possible deconstruction would be made almost futile. To provide an account of oneself which includes an acknowledgement of its gaps and blind spots is an empty gesture which, at best only reaffirms its impossibility and at worst offers a false assurance of self-reflexivity.

Lindsay's writings equally. Lindsay was the author of over ten books of poetry, numerous essays, a novel, newspaper and magazine articles and two books of film theory. He was a prolific letter writer and also produced illustrations to accompany his poetry. Enacting a close, creative and deconstructive reading of the entire corpus of Lindsay's work is not possible due to the time constraints placed on this project (and the American location of archival material), therefore prioritising certain texts is essential. Even without such constraints, using the entire corpus of material produced by Lindsay throughout his lifetime would not necessarily be advantageous, nor compatible with the design of this thesis. The breadth of material and the multiplicity of articulations contained therein would impede a focused analysis and would broaden exponentially the span of ideas that this project seeks to investigate. From this corpus of material therefore, key texts have been prioritised that engage with the main themes of this project. A more limited approach enables a more thorough analysis of Lindsay's ideas, greater precision in arranging the configurations of his theories and provides adequate room for playful contact amongst them.

This project is primarily focused on the 1922 edition of *The Art of the Moving Picture*. Chapter four, however, draws heavily on Lindsay's earlier works, including his essays, articles, poetry and his chronicle of his 1912 tramp from Illinois to New Mexico, as described in *Adventures While Preaching the Gospel of Beauty*. These texts prove fundamental to tracing the trajectory of Lindsay's relationship to modernity. Engaging with Lindsay's early writings allows this project to analyse Lindsay's utopian thought before he began writing about cinema in 1915. It also enables the inclusion of texts relating to key themes such as summaries of the lectures on race which Lindsay gave at Springfield YMCA after the 1908 race riots and which outline his concept of America as a 'composite' society. These lectures are significant given the thesis is concerned with Lindsay's ideas regarding primitivism and multiculturalism. This project also draws heavily on Lindsay's reflections on his 1912 walk from Springfield to New Mexico as recounted in the text *Adventures While Preaching The Gospel of Beauty*. The inclusion of these texts enables an exploration of Lindsay's changing ideas regarding industrialisation, namely the relationship between technology, rural localities and an imagined agrarian imagination, which are particularly illuminating to read in conjunction with his writings on film. This project enacts a cross-illumination between texts in which Lindsay makes no mention of film at all, with works that passionately express his cinematic utopianism, in order to contextualise his film theory within his broader utopian project. In order to do so, the thesis makes occasional

reference to Lindsay's 1920 novel *The Golden Book of Springfield*. However, this text is not a central part of this thesis, given that Lindsay's utopianism is primarily used to contextualise his aesthetic theories; namely, the utopian arguments for film put forward in *The Art of the Moving Picture*. Somewhat surprisingly, *The Golden Book of Springfield* does not include significant references to film. Therefore, while Lindsay's utopian novel is relevant to this thesis, it is not the central focus here.<sup>115</sup>

## **Index and Analysis**

This project will analyse a diverse collection of textual genres, as well as engaging with Lindsay's eclectic cultural and historical references, ranging from Egyptian hieroglyphics to the Californian gold rush. An example of the diversity and density of Lindsay's references can be found in a ten page chapter of *The Art of The Moving Picture*, in which Lindsay argues for a wholehearted endorsement of film and a realisation of its social and aesthetic potential. In these ten pages he makes (mostly fleeting) references to the following: the Bible, women's suffrage, Chinese theatre, cave-men, Pompeian mosaics, Giotto, Hebrew, the Coburn Players, Ezra Pound and Joan of Arc.<sup>116</sup> In order that such references are taken seriously without deflecting from the aim of this project, this thesis is focused around the central research question: "What is the role of film in Vachel Lindsay's utopian project?" In doing so, Lindsay's expansive aesthetic imagination is explored and interrogated but only in relation to this central question.

This thesis developed out of a rigorous application of the central research question to *The Art of The Moving Picture*. This reading, and subsequent re-readings, do not attempt to identify the 'essential contents' of this text. Rather, they enable the identification of four key themes relating to film's place in Lindsay's utopian vision of America: film's ability to revive an imagistic consciousness, the role of the arts and crafts in filmmaking, the potential for localised community filmmaking and the utopian power of making. These themes are not stable concepts but clusters of different ideas and theories present in *The Art of The Moving Picture*. The identification of these areas of enquiry served as the framework through which Lindsay's other

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<sup>115</sup> Vachel Lindsay, *The Golden Book of Springfield*, (New York: Macmillan, 1920).

<sup>116</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 148-157. Lindsay found spiritual, aesthetic and idealistic affinities between a wide range of art forms and historical periods. Future scholarship on his approach to cultural history may seek to consider his practice in relation to that of Aby Warburg, however this task falls outside the scope of this project.

works were read, most notably *The Progress and Poetry of the Movies*, his essay 'The New Localism' and *Adventures While Preaching the Gospel of Beauty*, which in turn illuminated other preoccupations within his work.

Rather than articulating Lindsay's grand theory of film, this project presents interrelated concepts and articulations regarding film's utopian potential. The various preoccupations and ideas presented by Lindsay in his prose and poetry are not neatly synthesised or collapsed into the arguments presented in *The Art of The Moving Picture*, which itself is not approached as a totalising theory. The contradictions and tensions within and between Lindsay's various works are not apprehended as 'problematic'. Rather, they are engaged with as a means to think about the different impulses his work expresses, including the influence of his cultural and historical context which is more explicit in certain of his writings than others. In order to guard against reading Lindsay purely through a twenty first century lens or in purely abstract, theoretical terms, broader social and cultural texts have been incorporated into this project. Firstly, various social and cultural histories of American anti-modernism are used in order to enable an overview of Lindsay's American context and situate his attack on modernity within a broader context. Secondly, in order to better grasp his concept of America, this thesis has engaged with texts from the field of American Studies which have enabled a greater understanding of some of the key themes and figures which Lindsay references (e.g. the significance of the frontier as well as the history of mythical American figures such as Johnny Appleseed). Finally, after having identified key themes within his film theory and contextualising him within an American social and cultural milieu, his aesthetic theories are read against key critical and theoretical texts on film. Had this process been reversed this project would contextualise Lindsay within the field of film theory, reading his work through the lens of European critical theory. Instead, this thesis attempts to engage with Lindsay on his own terms, adopting a similar approach to that undertaken by historian Carlo Ginzberg in his work *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*.<sup>117</sup> Ginzburg performs a micro history, which refuses to rationalise away the beliefs and customs of a group of northern Italians (the 'benandanti') who considered themselves to have supernatural powers. Instead of dismissing their ideas as delusional he treats their testimonies seriously, regularly

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<sup>117</sup> Carlo Ginzberg, *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).

quotes from his source material and engages with it on its own terms. Rather than dismissing Lindsay as an unstable, outlandish idealist, this project values *The Art of The Moving Picture*, not just as a curious historical document which can take us on a flight of fancy regarding lost cinematic possibilities, but as containing within it serious, credible and thought-provoking ideas about the utopian power of film that have continued relevance today.

Likewise, this project takes seriously assertions made by Lindsay that could be readily dismissed as fanciful or naive. It is the ideas he put forth, which go against the grain of the orthodoxies of film theory and that initially seem peculiar to the contemporary reader, which are granted attention here. This project does not include an analysis of every film referenced by Lindsay. Instead it focuses on those which best illuminate key ideas in his work, be they films which he explicitly references (for example *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* and *The Avenging Conscience*) or those which were made long after he died (e.g. *The Singing Ringing Tree*). This thesis analyses films referenced by Lindsay such as *The Avenging Conscience*, and these viewings are informed by his remarks on them. However this act is haunted by the inevitable failure to ‘see what Lindsay saw’. Nonetheless the films referenced throughout this thesis are largely used as illustrations of Lindsay’s ideas.

## **Historiography**

This project is situated between the impossibility of denying the self-referential and deferential nature of language and the necessity for this project to concede what Dominick LaCapra terms the “heuristic fiction” which facilitates a belief in the ability of a text to refer to an external extra-linguistic referent.<sup>118</sup> The fictional dimension of this position is brought about by recognition of the intertextuality of both text and context which has forced the dichotomy between that ‘inside’ the text and that ‘outside’ the text to collapse upon itself. Whilst it is possible to enact a reading of Lindsay’s work which concedes only the context of the reader and dismisses the context of the author as irretrievable, the geographical and historical location of Lindsay’s texts and the films he references are of great significance given that his antimodernist utopian thought and his concept of America are key themes in this project. However this project is predominantly an intertextual enquiry centred on the ideas and arguments presented in *The Art of the Moving Picture*, their relationship to Lindsay’s other

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<sup>118</sup> LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History*, 61.

writings and those of other aesthetic theorists. It does not attempt to ‘conjure a social system from a nutmeg grater’ as the historian Carolyn Steedman so aptly puts it.<sup>119</sup> Whilst attending to the importance of the specificities of Lindsay’s social context, this project does not aim to produce a mapping of relations that situates the social context as determining his aesthetic theories. Instead it adopts a mode of enquiry put forth by Peter Novick in his brilliantly titled essay ‘My Correct Views on Everything’, which is to read in a manner which is ‘fruitful - perhaps even ‘edifying’ - and which identifies ‘new ways of looking at things in the past, without aspiring to any higher office’.<sup>120</sup> Whilst it is crucial that this dynamic is acknowledged (albeit as a heuristic fiction) the relationship between text and context is not the primary structure through which this analysis is framed.

In seeking to address the issues posed by post-structuralist thought, the historian Tony Bennett acknowledges the inability of language to refer to any reality other than itself, yet attempts to prevent such an acknowledgement from birthing a wild relativism which would prohibit the falsity of any interpretation (though whether such a circumstance was ever proposed by even the staunchest advocate of post-structuralism is unlikely; even Derrida acknowledged the possibility of misreading).<sup>121</sup> Bennett identifies a historical process that imposes a system of evidential standards required for the production of ‘historical facts’.<sup>122</sup> The past is conceived of as ‘the product of particular protocols of investigation which characterise the discipline of history’.<sup>123</sup> This is the mode of historical analysis employed in this project. Even if the textuality of Lindsay’s extra textual location must inevitably be characterised as a ‘historical’ fact rather than having any claim to objectivity, an engagement with these historical facts restrains the degree to which the historical reconstruction enacted by this project is defined by the present in which it is undertaken. To read Lindsay with no prior knowledge of his historical

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<sup>119</sup> Carolyn Steedman, “Something She Called a Fever: Michelet, Derrida, and Dust.” *The American Historical Review* 106, No. 4 (Oct., 2001), 1165.

<sup>120</sup> Peter Novick, “My Correct Views on Everything,” *The American Historical Review* 96, No. 3 (Jun., 1991), 702.

<sup>121</sup> Derrida accused Terry Eagleton of ‘a massive failure to read and analyse’ in M. Sprinker, ed. *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida’s Spectres of Marx* (London: Verso, 1999), 263-4.

<sup>122</sup> T. Bennett, *Outside Literature* (London: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>123</sup> T. Bennett, *Outside Literature*, 55.



context would be to refuse to resist the tendency to read a text through one's own immediate temporal locality.

This project will employ LaCapra's dialogical imagination in order to resist the tendency to situate the reading subject as a transcendental signifier who seamlessly enables an interaction between various texts. LaCapra dismisses the epistemological stance of both the relativist and the objectivist as equally flawed. He argues that the objectivist operates under the assumption that the past sits in wait to be known in all its 'sheer reality' while the relativist simply turns this upside down and places him/herself in the position of 'transcendental signifier' that 'produces' or 'makes' meanings of the past.<sup>124</sup> He proposes a dialogical method of reading in which the reader is committed to maintaining an openness to an encounter with the unexpected, to the alterity present within the text. The mode of reading also operates within the limits of the possible meaningful linguistic interpretations of a text and the subsequent interpretations produced by virtue of locating it within a historical context. Both these conditions impose a finite limitation on the multiplicities of meaning that could be inferred and created. LaCapra's insistence on the dialogical character of the interaction between historian and text employs Freud's concept of transference and draws an analogy to the process of 'working through' rather than 'acting out' that characterises the therapeutic relationship. The historian may 'act out' through a denial of their own implication in the object of study and therefore enact a subsequent denial of the possibility (or inevitability) of transference between the historian and the text.

The cultivation of a dialogical imagination is an attempt to address the inevitability of one's implication in the act of performing a historical enquiry, in order to achieve a critical distance from the text that does not assume neutrality and transcendence.<sup>125</sup> LaCapra distinguishes between a process of exchange between text and historian and the reconstruction of that object, admitting that although this delineation is inherently problematic it is nevertheless productive. Projection is unavoidable, yet the desire to produce a meaningful analysis requires it be supplemented by a process of exchange, a reading that allows for an encounter with the

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<sup>124</sup> D. LaCapra, *History and Criticism*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1996), 137-38

<sup>125</sup> LaCapra, *History and Criticism*, 137.

unexpected.<sup>126</sup> In an attempt to disclose the interpretations at work here and to enable counter-readings, this project includes many quotations from the material engaged with. This is not only valuable from an historical standpoint, but the inclusion of direct quotations from *The Art of the Moving Picture* given the effervescence of Lindsay's writing, enriches the tone of the thesis.

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<sup>126</sup> D. LaCapra, *History and Reading: Tocqueville, Foucault, French Studies*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto: 2000), 64-67

## Chapter 4: Lindsay's syncretic vision of modernity

### Introduction

This chapter explores Lindsay's changing response to the cultural, social and material conditions of industrial modernity and identifies two distinct periods of thought in his work: an antimodern period that lasted until around 1912, followed by a more accommodating vision of modernity which he developed from 1912 onward. In this later stage Lindsay developed a syncretic vision of modernity where pre-industrial values and traditions were integrated into industrial life. In order to fully understand Lindsay's film theory, it is important to engage with the ideas he put forward in both these periods, since both his antimodernist worldview and his syncretic vision of modernity shaped his concept of cinema. His antimodern ideas informed his concept of film as an art form that could reignite a primitive, mystical mode of perception and revive regional cultures. His syncretic vision of modernity enabled him to develop an intermedial vision of film wherein the mechanised technology of cinema utilised premodern, non-industrial art forms and cultural practices. This chapter traces the development of Lindsay's changing attitudes toward modernity and positions him within various traditions including the American antimodernism of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the City Beautiful movement of the Progressive Era. In doing so it provides an historical and intellectual context for his ideas, whilst also situating his film theory within the wider canon of his work. In arguing for a continuity between Lindsay's film theory and his non cinematic writings this chapter paves the way for a deeper understanding of his vision of film as a diverse, inter-medial and localised art form as set out in the following chapters.

### Antimodern period: 1908-1912

In the writings he produced between 1908 and 1912, Lindsay adopted a stridently antimodern attitude. His essays and personal correspondence in this period offer various articulations of the pernicious effects of the rapid growth of industrialisation. His writings include arguments that modern life was based in a hyper rational and utilitarian worldview, which was turning Americans into machines. His 1909 essay, 'Art and the Church' contains a description of America as ruled by an industrial marketplace, driven by efficiency and utilitarian logic. Within this society the soul of the American subject had become 'an office building, his brain is like a

telephone switchboard, his nerves and veins are as the telegraph and the railroad'.<sup>127</sup> In this essay Lindsay also set out his belief that newly arrived immigrants to the country brought with them diverse cultural traditions and worldviews that had the potential to counteract the alienations of modernity, but that they were being swiftly Americanised as each one was transformed into 'a cold and brilliant machine'.<sup>128</sup> In 1912 Lindsay reflected on the implications of industrialisation and mechanisation for democracy, concluding that for the alienated urban labourer, the promise of American democracy was dead: 'the history of all ages is a tragedy with the climax now, to whom our democracy and our flag are but playthings of the hypocrite'.<sup>129</sup> The alienation caused by urban life is a central theme in his work in this period, and he often equated urbanisation with mechanisation and alienation. Although he had studied at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1901 and at the New York School of Art in 1905, Lindsay's utopian writings consistently criticise city life. In this early period Lindsay argues that not only is the city alienating in itself, but cities cause the denigration of rural communities as young people leave agrarian villages in favour of urban environments. As he noted in *Adventures While Preaching The Gospel of Beauty* (written in 1912 but published in 1914), Lindsay hoped that once the full force of the exploitative and alienating conditions of industrial labour were experienced, the workers who had left the farm for the factory would return home to their native villages, 'no longer dazzled and destroyed by the fires of the metropolis'.<sup>130</sup> He urged these alienated urban workers to abandon city life and 'turn to the soil, turn to the earth, your mother'.<sup>131</sup> Such a sentiment is an instance of the nostalgia that Richard Hofstadter's *The Age of Reform* characterises as a common one in American culture at this time.<sup>132</sup>

Lindsay himself repeatedly turned to nature in this early period. Like Thoreau, who famously lived in the woods at Walden Pond, Lindsay immersed himself in the natural world for long

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<sup>127</sup> Vachel Lindsay, "Art and the Church Part 1", *Christian-Evangelist*, May 13, 1909, [http://www.vachellindsay.org/EssaysandStories/art\\_and\\_the\\_church\\_1909\\_.pdf](http://www.vachellindsay.org/EssaysandStories/art_and_the_church_1909_.pdf), 1.

<sup>128</sup> Lindsay, 'Art and the Church', 3.

<sup>129</sup> Vachel Lindsay, *Adventures While Preaching the Gospel of Beauty* in *Adventures, Rhymes and Designs* ed. Robert Fayre Sayer (New York: Eakins Press, 1968), 208.

<sup>130</sup> Lindsay, *Adventures*, 213.

<sup>131</sup> Lindsay, *Adventures*, 207.

<sup>132</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to FDR*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1962), 76.

stretches in order to escape modern life, going on extended walks across the USA. These tramps, and Lindsay's impassioned accounts of them, are evidence that not only can Lindsay be characterised as an antimodernist in this period, but show that this position was neither a mere rhetorical gesture nor a flamboyant performance adopted for the benefit of his career. Between 1906 and 1912 Lindsay undertook several walks around the United States to spread his Gospel of Beauty, eschewing cars and trains and following his "Rules of the Road" (these rules were published in *The American Magazine* in 1912).<sup>133</sup> His desire to escape industrial life meant that he went so far as to forbid himself from walking along railway lines. Lindsay was particularly hostile to locomotives, and it was a hostility that he understood to be mutual: the tracks were a pathway for machinery, and resistant to his footsteps since their width was not in sympathy with his human gait. On his 1912 walk he vowed to travel alone without money or baggage; he either slept outside or was taken in by farmers who he repaid by undertaking farm work.<sup>134</sup> At one stage, he felt himself completely immersed in the natural world, and was exhausted by labouring on the land to the point of being unable to write:

The traveller at my stage is in a kind of farm hand condition of mind and blood. He feels himself so much part of the soil and the sun and the ploughed acres, he eats so hard and sleeps so hard, he has little more patience in trying to write than the husbandman himself.<sup>135</sup>

Despite the gruelling labour he undertook and the extreme conditions he imposed on himself, Lindsay was still enraptured by the natural world and maintained his romantic view of bountiful nature as his description of entering Kansas demonstrates:

I have crossed the mystic border. I have left Earth. I have entered Wonderland...I went over the border and encountered--what do you think? Wild strawberries! Lo, where the farmer had cut the weeds between the row and the fence, the gentle fruits revealed themselves, growing in the shadow between the still-standing weeds. They shine out in a red line that

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<sup>133</sup> Vachel Lindsay, "Rules of the Road," *The American Magazine*, May, 1912, [http://www.vachellindsay.org/EssaysandStories/rules\\_of\\_the\\_road\\_1912\\_.pdf](http://www.vachellindsay.org/EssaysandStories/rules_of_the_road_1912_.pdf).

<sup>134</sup> Lindsay, "Rules of the Road," 54-59.

<sup>135</sup> Lindsay, *Adventures*, 88.

stretches on and on, and a man has to resolve to stop eating several times. Just as he thinks he has conquered the desire the line gets dazzlingly red again. The berries grow at the end of a slender stalk, clustered six in a bunch. One gathers them in bouquets, as it were, and eats off the fruit like taffy off a stick.<sup>136</sup>

By self-imposing the conditions of solitude and poverty, Lindsay hoped not merely to escape capitalist modernity in search of respite, nor to ride its undercurrents in an act of anarchic re-appropriation. Rather, he was in search of a new mode of experience, a new sensibility that could give rise to a new social order. In 'Rules of the Road', he explained his rejection of cities, boxcars and railroads: 'He who would bring new moods to our time, and a new civilization, must not place himself where he will be overwhelmed by the contraptions of the old'.<sup>137</sup> This phrasing belies Lindsay's idiosyncratic conception of modernity, where escaping the 'old' means to relinquish machinery and embrace nature. By 1912, industrialisation was already passé to Lindsay. His was a search for new modes of perception, new modes of experience.

While certainly unusual, Lindsay's tramps were part of a trend that developed in late nineteenth and early twentieth century America. Tom Gunning describes Lindsay as having inaugurated a tradition of walking across the U.S. in search of a 'true' America, which runs onward from Lindsay to Guthrie, Kerouac and Hopper.<sup>138</sup> However this is to ascribe too much influence to Lindsay. This tradition has its roots back in the nineteenth century with figures such as Thoreau elevating the habit of walking in nature, while from the earliest days of colonisation the American landscape had played a formative role in the creation of an American national identity. In *Wilderness and the American Mind* the historian Roderick Nash argues that the wild grandeur of America was often invoked as an example of America's superiority and authenticity, in contrast to the effeminate artificiality of Europe.<sup>139</sup> Alongside its magnitude,

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<sup>136</sup> Lindsay, *Adventures*, 99.

<sup>137</sup> Lindsay, "Rules of the Road", 2.

<sup>138</sup> Tom Gunning, "Vachel Lindsay: Theory of Movie Hieroglyphics", in *Thinking in the Dark*, eds. Murray Pomerance and R. Barton Palmer, 19-30. (Ithaca, NY: Rutgers University Press, 2015). <https://doi.org/10.36019/9780813566306-004>

<sup>139</sup> Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (London: Yale University Press, 1973).

the landscape was also frequently conceptualised as offering redemption and national restoration. Classic nineteenth century American fables are replete with redemptive journeys into the depths of nature rooted in the conception of the country as an unspoilt wilderness. The historian Leo Marx cites *Huckleberry Finn*, *Moby Dick* and *Walden* as primary examples of this image of the country.<sup>140</sup>

Lindsay's practical and theoretical preoccupation with the American landscape is therefore far from original, and is more accurately conceptualised as a quintessentially American gesture. In the early 1900s, Lindsay was far from the only writer in search of parts of the country not yet enslaved by modern machinery, nor the only one who celebrated the Appalachian mountains or the Southwest for being unsullied by industrialisation.<sup>141</sup> The writer Frank Norris shared Lindsay's belief that the West offered modern Americans the possibility of authentic experience, while the argument that America was suffering from a loss of energy and vibrancy that could be revived through contact with nature is also found in the antimodern works of the poets Bliss Carman and Richard Hovey. Their book of poetry, *Songs from Vagabondia* (1897), combined medieval heroism and a love of military action with a celebration of the open road. The primacy of nature in Lindsay's concept of America was therefore part of a much larger tradition, a tradition Lindsay was well aware of.

Lindsay was conscious of the fact that his contemporaries were also seeking refuge from modernity in the wilds of America, though he was sometimes suspicious of their fealty. In 1913 David Grayson (the penname of 'muckraker' Ray Stannard Baker) published *The Friendly Road*, an account of his travels in Massachusetts that was reviewed by Lindsay in an article titled 'Ik Marvel Afoot' in *The Chicago Evening Post Friday Literary Review*. Lindsay took the opportunity to present himself as an intrepid traveller while dismissing Grayson as lacking gall and sentimentalising nature. In his 'Rules of the Road', Lindsay criticised another of his fellow travellers, W.H. Davies, for not adequately immersing himself in the wilderness.<sup>142</sup> Unlike Grayson and Davies who were merely playing at being vagabonds, Lindsay described himself

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<sup>140</sup> Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 15.

<sup>141</sup> Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 75.

<sup>142</sup> The review also includes the arch remark that Grayson was on the road for a mere three weeks, journeying round 'the tenderest part of rural Massachusetts', an implied contrast to Lindsay's lengthier and more gruelling travels – 'Ik Marvel Afoot', 2.

as an authentic tramp who was unafraid to travel without baggage and venture deeply into the natural world. Those who really wanted to rid themselves of the stifling comforts of modern life should 'leave the knapsack at home, and go out and BEG'.<sup>143</sup> According to Lindsay, travelling by rail as Davies did proved that he was not really interested in returning to nature and revealed him to be merely 'a box-car madman' who 'hates the green fields and running brooks'.<sup>144</sup> In contrast, Lindsay was proud of his ability to take on the grim realities of life on the road and longed for a fellow American to take off on foot and give an accurate account of his experiences:

He will tell how, in certain sections, it is almost a law of the road that a man must sleep in vermin one-third of the time. He will tell how he was driven out of the woodshed by red ants into the midnight rain...[and] when we return to report what has happened to us it is, after all, hard to remember what has happened, except a deep communion with our brother, the sun, our sisters, the stars, and the rain.<sup>145</sup>

Lindsay's responses to Grayson and Davies show that, while he was aware that his tramps were not unique, he was striving for an extreme encounter with nature. Lindsay's concept of nature was certainly romantic, but his experiences on these tramps were not merely pastoral. In his writings, nature often enables an encounter with the sublime, restoring an intensity of experience lost to the modern subject.

Lindsay's antimodernist critiques and his turn to nature were also founded in his hatred of the monolithic uniformity of industrialisation. He contrasted the homogeneity of modern American society to the diversity of the American landscape. He praised the fairy dell forests of New England, the prairies of the Midwest and the rugged, golden splendour of California. He was also inspired by the variety of regional customs and traditions that he encountered on his

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<sup>143</sup> Vachel Lindsay, "Ik Marvel Afoot", *Chicago Evening Post Friday Literary Review*, January 13, 1914, 3. [http://www.vachellindsay.org/EssaysandStories/ik\\_marvel\\_afoot\\_1914\\_.pdf](http://www.vachellindsay.org/EssaysandStories/ik_marvel_afoot_1914_.pdf)

<sup>144</sup> Lindsay, "Rules of the Road", 2.

<sup>145</sup> Lindsay, *Ik Marvel Afoot*, 3.



walks.<sup>146</sup> While on his 1912 tramp, Lindsay saw how agricultural and cultural practices varied across different regions of the country. He revered these local customs and felt that rural communities were able to maintain their individuality, in contrast to the urban metropolises where inhabitants were ‘clipped to a terrible uniformity by the sharp edges of life’.<sup>147</sup> He hoped that the diversity of the American landscape could be seized upon as a resource that could inspire distinctive regional cultures and act as a bulwark against standardisation and centralisation. The intensity and diversity of experience that Lindsay hoped the natural world could help revive was linked to his belief in an idealised mode of American agency that he believed had been a vital force throughout the history of the nation. This idealised mode of agency is present for Lindsay in the audacity of the pioneers, the struggle of the frontier as well as in the American Revolution and the civil war. He was highly perturbed by his belief that this American dynamism was now under threat. He felt himself to be witnessing the end of the utopian spirit of the pioneer and the audacity of the visionary founding fathers, sensibilities that were being replaced by a cynical, apathetic worldview and the utilitarianism of the marketplace. His lamentations on the deadened state of the American subject occur amidst his oft articulated reverence for a series of American icons that he defined by their individual genius, pioneer agency and affinity with the natural world.

Lindsay’s preoccupation with an idealised concept of America and its landscape is evidenced in his poetry, which often features America’s founding fathers, as well as its mountains, prairies and mythical figures. As well as serving celebratory ends, these poems enable Lindsay to illuminate the ills of modern American society. His poems include descriptions of mythical and historical Americans including Lincoln (1913), ‘Born where the ghosts of buffaloes still dream’, Pocahontas (1917), ‘through her blood the lightning ran’ and his 1929 ode to Johnny Appleseed, ‘Hawthorn and crab-thorn bent, rain-wet/And dropped their flowers in his night-black hair’, among others.<sup>148</sup> America’s diverse landscape is also a central motif. Lindsay

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<sup>146</sup> His passion for the wilderness continued into the 20s and in 1922 went on a long trip into the Rockies mountains with fellow poet Stephen Graham where they slept without tents. Letters from this trip were published in the *New York Evening Post*, though Lindsay didn’t publish a book on this trip himself.

<sup>147</sup> Lindsay, *Adventures*, 269.

<sup>148</sup> Vachel Lindsay, “Lincoln” in *General William Booth Enters into Heaven and Other Poems* (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1913); Vachel Lindsay, “In Praise of Johnny Appleseed” in *Johnny Appleseed and Other Poems* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1929); Vachel Lindsay, “Our

celebrated the plains of Kansas in 1915 ('Ho for Kansas, land that restores us/When houses choke us and great books bore us!'), embraced the golden light of California in 1920 ('There are ten gold suns in California/When all other lands have one') and revered the cornfields of Illinois ('The cornfields rise above mankind/Lifting white torches to the blue').<sup>149</sup> While his work celebrates an array of American heroes, it is Lincoln who most embodied this ideal Americanness. Lindsay's self-proclaimed greatest ambition, as expressed in his 1913 poem 'Lincoln', was to 'rouse the Lincoln' in his audience.<sup>150</sup> **Lincoln's significance lies in what Lindsay understood to be his capacity to reach beyond the given historical confines of his age. Lincoln is posited as a visionary, 'Born where the ghosts of buffaloes still dream', and an historical actor whose agency is fuelled by 'prairie-fire' – 'Fire that freed the slave'.**<sup>151</sup> Lindsay understood this symbiosis of dreaming and action to be quintessentially American. The historical agency of Lincoln and the pioneers who came before him was rooted in their close relationship to the natural world and their experience of manual labour such as log-splitting, harvesting, building and farming, which made them more attuned to the powers of their own agency. These experiences bestowed on them an understanding of their ability to effect change in the world and build a new society - a profound contrast to the piecemeal work of the modern urban labourer. This romantic mode of agency, which had been lost to modernity, can be found within his film theory, where Lindsay submits the hope that the potent aesthetic experiences disseminated by film will revive the American population, restoring their capacity to dream as well as reviving their ability to build a new world.

Lindsay was far from alone in looking to the past to find historical counterpoints to modern alienation. The historian Jackson Lears argues that turning to a romanticised past was a

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Mother Pocahontas" in *The Chinese Nightingale and Other Poems* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1917).

<sup>149</sup> Vachel Lindsay, "The Santa Fe Trail" in *The Congo and Other Poems* (New York: Macmillan, 1914); Vachel Lindsay, "The Golden Whales of California" in *The Golden Whales of California* (New York: Macmillan, 1920).

<sup>150</sup> Lindsay, "Lincoln".

<sup>151</sup> Lindsay, "Lincoln".

hallmark of American anti-modernism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Lears' work reveals that the era most popular with antimodernists was that of medieval Europe with its chivalrous culture and dramatic legends; therefore, Lindsay's focus on a mythic American past was uncommon, if not unique. Rather than Daniel Boone and Johnny Appleseed, it was the medieval knight who was most often invoked as an alternative social type to the feminised modern male.<sup>152</sup> Lindsay's antimodernism is also distinctive in its absence of militarism. The early twentieth century historians Brooks Adams and Henry Cabot-Lodge both shared Lindsay's concerns about the deadening effects of modernity and developed what John P. Mallan terms a "warrior critique" of business civilisation', a mode of antimodernism that celebrated militarism and brute strength.<sup>153</sup> In Lindsay's work, rather than idealisations of soldiers it is the American agrarian subject who is positioned as a utopian figure. Until approximately 1912, Lindsay believed that agrarian communities were the last vestige of the possibility of action, adventure and meaningful labour in the modern world. In *Adventures While Preaching the Gospel of Beauty* he conceptualised farmers as embedded in the enigmatic yet cohesive totality of the natural world. He believed that farmers existed within the depth and breadth of an ecological temporality that transcended the fragmented, ahistorical mechanised time of modernity: 'As of old, their thoughts and songs begin with the land and go directly back to the land. Their tap-roots are deep as those of the alfalfa'.<sup>154</sup> The roots of the alfalfa plant were known to be up to fifteen feet deep and able to access water from the subsoil, which ordinary plants could not reach.<sup>155</sup> Much like his idealised rural subject, the alfalfa plant was able to plunge the depths of the American landscape to access another reality.

For Lindsay agrarian labour had markedly different ontological and biological effects from the mechanised and piecemeal nature of industrial labour; farm work ensured contact with nature and in Lindsay's work nature is mind-altering in the most literal sense. In his Romantic conception of nature contact with the natural world could undermine the modern, rational worldview, enabling an encounter with another reality and provoking an alternate mode of

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<sup>152</sup> Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 107.

<sup>153</sup> John P. Mallan, "Roosevelt, Brooks Adams, and Lea: The Warrior Critique of the Business Civilization." *American Quarterly* 8, no. 3 (1956): 216-30. doi:10.2307/2710209.

<sup>154</sup> Lindsay, *Adventures*, 212.

<sup>155</sup> Wing, J.E., *Alfalfa Farming in America* (Chicago: Sanders, 1916), 78.

perception. In his poetry Lindsay swoons over the ‘sacred raisins’ of California and the ‘mystic apples’ of Johnny Appleseed and he locates the source of Abraham Lincoln’s historical agency as having been ‘gendered in the wilderness’.<sup>156</sup> Lindsay understood farm work to be rigorous and demanding, but he viewed it as fundamentally restorative; its physical intensity spawned an emotional intensity and a correspondingly dynamic mode of perception. Rather than military adventures, it was the experience of the natural world that Lindsay believed held the key to America’s future, and he was firm in his belief in the redemptive capacity of the physical strain of rural labour. In Kansas in 1912 he undertook work as a farmhand that he found exceptionally gruelling, yet satisfying: ‘I would like to be always, a sun blasted harvest hand. It was great, that harvesting. It almost killed me—but not quite’.<sup>157</sup>

Lindsay’s optimistic view of agrarian life led him to imagine a future renaissance of American villages. In two editions of his self-published *The Village Magazine* he contrasted the uniformity of the city to the uniqueness of village life.<sup>158</sup> Lindsay published 700 copies of the 1910 edition of *The Village Magazine*, which he distributed across central Illinois and Springfield. In this manuscript he described how the American village possessed nothing of the crude and soulless uniformity of American cities. In 1920 he published a second edition of the magazine, including an editorial titled ‘An Editorial For The Art Student Who Has Returned To The Village’. Villages, he argued, could develop ‘intense uniqueness’ while the rest of America spoke ‘one iron speech’.<sup>159</sup> In the poems and essays included in these magazines he argued for more beautiful, individual villages full of casual encounters and a sense of community. In contrast to urban uniformity and free from any deference to history, each village would have its own artistic customs and traditions:

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<sup>156</sup> Lindsay, “The Golden Whales of California”; Lindsay, “In Praise of Johnny Appleseed”; Lindsay, “Lincoln”.

<sup>157</sup> Lindsay to Sara Teasdale, Springfield, December 6, 1913, in *The Annotated Letters of Nicholas Vachel Lindsay to Sara Trevor Teasdale*, ed. Dennis Camp, The Vachel Lindsay Association, [website], [http://www.vachellindsay.org/LetterstoSara/intro\\_and\\_vl\\_letters\\_1\\_21.pdf](http://www.vachellindsay.org/LetterstoSara/intro_and_vl_letters_1_21.pdf), 26.

<sup>158</sup> Lindsay produced the first edition of his self-published *Village Magazine* in 1910. The magazine was then reprinted and expanded in 1920. Two further expanded editions were published in 1925.

<sup>159</sup> Vachel Lindsay, “An Editorial For The Art Student Who Has Returned To The Village” in *The Village Magazine*, 1910, [http://www.vachellindsay.org/Works/the\\_village\\_magazine\\_1910.pdf](http://www.vachellindsay.org/Works/the_village_magazine_1910.pdf)

The fourth of July session is nearer to a pageant. There is more laughter in the fields, less heartbreak in the dark. The village belles become sacred vestals. More good hats and dresses are seen, more flower gardens are planted. No man has read Shelley's hymn to intellectual beauty. No man has purchased a history of painting, a history of architecture.<sup>160</sup>

Each American village would be made famous for 'its pottery, its philosophy or its peacocks, its music or its swans, its golden roofs or its great union cathedral of all faiths'.<sup>161</sup> In his utopian imagination each corner of the United States would be filled with splendour, creativity and originality.

Lindsay's ultimate aim was to make the diversity that characterized the American landscape and its population the defining feature of American society: rather than a melting pot where different cultures assimilated, his was a vision of a truly composite society. He imagined America as a place where distinct ontologies, artistic practices and cultural traditions could co-exist and at times intertwine, while retaining their own history and integrity.

Lindsay's vision of a composite society grounded in universalism and equality stands in contrast to the actual race relations he witnessed around him. In August 1908 his home town of Springfield, Illinois experienced a series of race riots which garnered national attention, often cited as the event which prompted the founding of the National Association of the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP). Over two days of violence occurred as white mobs attacked African American communities across the city, destroying homes and businesses and leaving at least sixteen people dead. The violence was finally quelled by the arrival of the National Guard.<sup>162</sup> The riot began as a response to the arrest of two African American men accused of the rape and murder of a white woman, however analyses of the underlying social

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<sup>160</sup> Vachel Lindsay, "On Conversion", *The Village Magazine*, 1910, 2.  
[http://www.vachellindsay.org/Works/the\\_village\\_magazine\\_1910.pdf](http://www.vachellindsay.org/Works/the_village_magazine_1910.pdf)

<sup>161</sup> Massa, *Fieldworker*, 32.

<sup>162</sup> For more information on the Springfield race riot see the its Wikipedia entry which has over 400 footnotes, the majority of which are from contemporary newspapers [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Springfield\\_race\\_riot\\_of\\_1908](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Springfield_race_riot_of_1908). Roberta Senechal de la Roche's *In Lincoln's Shadow: The 1908 Race Riot in Springfield Illinois* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990) is an invaluable resource on the riots, providing a comprehensive analysis of the events which is both historical and sociological.

and economic causes that led Springfield in particular to be the site of widespread racial violence are contested.<sup>163</sup> The systematic oppression of Springfield's black population was not markedly different to that of other Midwestern towns and cities. Lindsay noted in a letter written two months after the riot that, despite Springfield having been home to Abraham Lincoln 'the negro is as heartedly hated here as anywhere by the general populace'.<sup>164</sup>

The riots pushed Lindsay to address the issue of race more explicitly and he delivered a series of lectures at the Springfield Y.M.C.A. on 'The Composite Citizenship of America and the Races That Are Making America' where he stated that American citizens must have 'a big heart for alien men'.<sup>165</sup> The ten lectures were organised around the 'inherent genius' of different cultural and national identities.<sup>166</sup> The content of these lectures are not easily ascertainable but outlines of the lectures produced as publicity material shed light on Lindsay's vision of an American utopia where Chinese proverbs, Italian frescoes and Celtic fires are co-existent and equally legitimate. Lindsay could not fathom why African-Americans, gifted in terms of 'sorrow songs, folk lore and oratory' are, in the United States, relegated to be 'professors of the whiskey broom' or why the artistic genius of Italian immigrants are relegated to the grocery trade. Dismayed with their current place in American society, Lindsay asks 'Will these people, the greatest painters of history, do nothing here but sell fruit?'.<sup>167</sup> He prompts his audience to reconsider the loss of cultural traditions that occurs as immigrants are assimilated into American capitalism and its attendant culture of consumption:

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<sup>163</sup> Senechal de la Roche, *Lincoln's Shadow*, 61.

<sup>164</sup> Vachel Lindsay to Richard Watson Gilder, Springfield Illinois, November 6 1908, in Vachel Lindsay, *Letters of Vachel Lindsay*, ed. Marc Chenetier (New York: Burt Franklin & Co., 1979), 28.

<sup>165</sup> Vachel Lindsay, "Lectures by N.V. Lindsay Before Young Men's Christian Association," *Illinois State Register*, August 15<sup>th</sup> 1908, Box 57, Nicholas Vachel Lindsay Collection, Accession #6259-w, Special Collections Dept., University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, Va.

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Rosemary Levy Zumwalt, *Wealth and Rebellion: Elsie Clews Parsons, Anthropologist and Folklorist* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 261. Lindsay was also one of the writers who argued against the 1922 Bursum Indian Bill which attempted to allow white settlers rights over Pueblo land, indicating that he was concerned with addressing the issue of the autonomy and rights of the indigenous population rather than just abstractly romanticising these communities.

<sup>167</sup> Lindsay, "Lectures".

Remember the Greek of whom you only ask of candy now, once gave the world a great art without asking, the Russian tailor who sews buttons on your coat once wrote the world's greatest book, the Irishman who helps to muddy local politics has in his heart the Celtic fires that fertilised the whole art and literature of Europe, the Chinaman who hands you your laundry with such an unseemly grin may be quoting within himself some Chinese proverb more august than anything you have said aloud in your whole life, dating back to the beginning of time. Why are not these men producing their greatest Springfield?<sup>168</sup>

A series of letters from Lindsay to the editor of *Century* magazine in the wake of the riots suggests he understood the racist violence as partly due to the disintegration of civil society.<sup>169</sup> Lindsay commented in a letter that the riots happened after the Y.M.C.A. had crumbled and politics had broken down.<sup>170</sup> Rather than economic reparations or political representation Lindsay believed that social cohesion could be achieved through a cultural renaissance, claiming that what was needed was 'a vision of a possible Springfield. We need better music, theatres, carnivals, customs'.<sup>171</sup>

In a subsequent letter later in the year, Lindsay noted that white working class residents in Springfield 'hate the negro because he is a rival in manual labour', showing some capacity to think in more structural terms. Yet, in the same letter, he also suggested that what the city really needed to ensure civic peace and prosperity was a 'medieval wall' to keep musicians, artists and architects from leaving.<sup>172</sup> While his ideas about social and economic relations within American capitalism are lacking any serious analysis, his utopian convictions enabled

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<sup>168</sup> Lindsay, "Lectures".

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*Century* was an influential literary magazine first published in 1881 of which Gilder served as editor 1881-1909. During this time Gilder published many esteemed American writers including Mark Twain and Walt Whitman. For more information see John Arthur, *Best Years of the "Century": Richard Watson Gilder, "Scribner's Monthly" and the "Century" Magazine, 1870-1909* (Illinois: Illinois University Press, 1981).

<sup>170</sup> Vachel Lindsay to Richard Watson Gilder, Springfield Illinois, October 4 1908, *Letters*, 26.

<sup>171</sup> Vachel Lindsay to Richard Watson Gilder, Springfield Illinois, October 4 1908, *Letters*, 27.

<sup>172</sup> Vachel Lindsay letter to Richard Watson Gilder, Springfield Illinois, November 1908, *Letters*, 33.

him to focus on the importance of a thriving culture and develop a unique vision of a truly multicultural American society. Lindsay encouraged Americans to engage with poetry, dance, proverbs and oral storytelling. He imagined that a town with a radically diverse cultural landscape would provide aesthetic experiences that could open Americans up to different ways of life including at its most extreme alternate temporalities and forms of knowledge that modern society was increasingly rejecting as illegitimate. Lindsay argued for openness to otherness and preferred the unverifiability of mysticism to what he saw as the certainty of positivism and empiricism. In contrast to the man in the laboratory who dares to know (*sapere aude!*), Lindsay's work foregrounds the limits and fallibility of secular reason, advocating an opening of the self to an encounter with the unverifiable and the unfathomable and rejecting the x-ray vision of the scientist as described in his poem 'The Horrid Voice of Science'.<sup>173</sup>

While Lindsay's work demonstrates his desire to bring about an American society founded in racial and cultural diversity, his poetry and essays are often based in racial stereotypes and an Orientalist worldview. In conceptualising different cultures and eras as providing exit routes by which to flee Western modernity he engages in a common operation in Orientalist thought that is characteristic of the modernist primitivism of the period. In Lindsay's poetry a 'black vernacular' is often utilised as a means of liberation from the standardised, legitimised language he despised – many of his poems include what Rachel Blau DuPlessis terms 'racialised syllables'.<sup>174</sup> His romantic racism is most famously evidenced in his poem, 'The Congo: A Study of the Negro Race' where whiteness is constitutive of order and civilisation, and the Congolese people are depicted as sexual, violent and menacing.<sup>175</sup> Lindsay's racial ventriloquism pervades other works including the Simon Legree section in his *Booker T Washington Trilogy*, written as a memorial to Washington, which opens with

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<sup>173</sup> Vachel Lindsay, "The Horrid Voice of Science." *Poetry* 14, no. 5 (1919): 260-61, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20572233>.

<sup>174</sup> Rachel Blau DuPlessis, "'HOO, HOO, HOO': Some Episodes in the Construction of Modern Whiteness." *American Literature* 67, no. 4 (1995): 667-700. doi:10.2307/2927891.

**175** Lindsay, "The Congo".



the instruction that it should be read ‘in your own variety of negro dialect’.<sup>176</sup> That primitivism was pervasive within modernism is well documented; as Michael North argues in *The Dialectic of Modernism*, primitivism was not an appendage to modernism but a crucial element.<sup>177</sup> The use of racialised language in Lindsay’s work, where syllables such as the use of ‘HOO’ in *The Congo* has been identified by Rachel DuPlessis as an attempt to signal the trope of Africa that ‘aggregates the diverse elements of a whole continent into one unhistorical mass and then absorbs African Americans into that bolus of material’.<sup>178</sup> Lindsay’s imitations of African and African-American cultures and dialects certainly turn the figures in his poems into racial stereotypes that can be mimicked by his white audiences, (such as the *Simon Legree* poem mentioned above). When considering such cultural appropriation and stereotyping it is crucial to be aware that this mimicry occurs alongside his positioning of the newly arrived immigrant as a utopian figure. It is no exaggeration to claim that Lindsay’s utopian programme can be defined by his continual attempts to highlight the value of a truly multicultural society and to challenge the idea that a community made up of different traditions and languages should be seen as a threat to white Anglo-Saxons. On the contrary, in Lindsay’s work all Americans would benefit from being part of a truly ‘composite’ society.

Lindsay maintained his commitment to diversity throughout his life, though his belief in the likelihood of an agrarian revival and a return to village life started to wane around 1912/13. His 1912 account of his tramp from Illinois to New Mexico, *Adventures While Preaching the Gospel of Beauty*, is full of hope that villages and regional cultures could triumph over modernity’s homogeneity. His conviction in this possibility was already weakening before this account was published, given that a far less optimistic view is presented in his 1912 essay ‘The New Localism’. This essay includes an acknowledgement that even the most remote rural hamlets were being enveloped by industrial life and he describes the country as

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<sup>176</sup> Vachel Lindsay, “The Booker T. Washington Trilogy” in *The Chinese Nightingale and Other Poems* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1917).

<sup>177</sup> Michael North, *The Dialectic of Modernism: Race, Language and Twentieth Century Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). Michael North conceptualises this as a mode of ‘racial ventriloquism’ in which the mimicry of the black vernacular provides white modernists with an ‘insurrectionary opposition’ to linguistic standardization.

<sup>178</sup> DuPlessis, ‘HOO, HOO, HOO’, 669.

‘face to face with centralisation’.<sup>179</sup> Having travelled twenty miles in a livery rig to the remote village of Liberty, Illinois Lindsay found it had the same features as he found in American cities: ‘the hamlet had the same books, magazines, Sunday-school lesson leaves, wall paper, window-curtains, carpets and the like that could be found on any English-speaking street in Chicago’.<sup>180</sup> The uniformity of styles and trends across architecture, music and art enabled by mass production and mass communication made American subjects imitators rather than pioneers, thus transforming villages and towns across the country into replicas of the urban centres that functioned as the nation’s arbiters of taste and fashion. Against the uniformity of skyscrapers and railways, Lindsay argued for individuality and a mode of modernity quite different to that of the jazz and machine age:

America is full of imitation men, buried in engraving houses, when the world needs their mural paintings, writing routine ragtime when the nation needs their choral song, building routine skyscrapers, when every crossroad cries for true magnificence.<sup>181</sup>

In the midst of his 1912 walk, the dominance of machinery in modern American became undeniable. While travelling through Kansas, Lindsay stayed at the home of two labourers who cleaned and maintained a steam engine in their barn. While staying with them he observed their subservience to the ‘sleep brute’:

Just like all the citizens of the twentieth century, petting and grooming machinery three times as smart as themselves. Such people should have engines take care of them, instead of taking care of engines. There stood the sleep brute in its stall, absorbing all, giving nothing, pumping its supplies only for its own caste; water to be fed to other engines.<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Vachel Lindsay, “The New Localism” in *Vision: A Quarterly Journal of Aesthetic Appreciation of Life* 4, April 1912. [http://www.vachellindsay.org/EssaysandStories/the\\_new\\_localism\\_1912.pdf](http://www.vachellindsay.org/EssaysandStories/the_new_localism_1912.pdf).

<sup>180</sup> Lindsay, ‘The New Localism’, 1.

<sup>181</sup> Lindsay, ‘Rules of the Road’, 7.

<sup>182</sup> Vachel Lindsay, *Adventures While Preaching the Gospel of Beauty* in R. F. Sayre (ed.), *Adventures, Rhymes and Designs*, (New York: Eakins, 1968), 69.

By 1912, even in the midst of his arguments for a return to rural life, Lindsay was forced to acknowledge that the rural masses were diminished and oppressed, unlikely to pose an adequate challenge either to the forces of modernity or to the elitist, corrupted politics of American democracy, despite his fervent hopes that they would. Lindsay's romanticised concept of rural subjectivity in this anti-modern period includes an implicit acknowledgement that while the existence of agrarian communities offered an alternative to the reification and mechanisation of urban life, their potential to challenge the tide of industrialisation was wavering and an agrarian revival was unlikely. By 1915, while writing about the capacity of film to reach and rejuvenate the rural working class in *The Art of the Moving Picture*, he lamented that the titular figure in Edwin Markham's poem 'The Man with the Hoe' had no 'spark in his brain'.<sup>183</sup> In 1915, the diminished agrarian communities he encountered, the dominance of machinery he was forced to recognise and the centralisation of culture in even the remotest of villages had made Lindsay start to doubt that America would turn its back on industrialisation or that American subjects would soon abandon the city for the village, even as he pleaded for them to do so. Faced with his conclusion that urbanisation and industrialisation were here to stay, Lindsay began to imagine a future for America in which the urban and the rural could co-exist.

### **Syncretic modernity: 1912 – 1931**

From 1912 onward, Lindsay's writings begin to present a more accommodating view of American modernity where the modern and the premodern are reconciled. This section will outline his syncretic vision of modernity, evidencing how he became enamoured of the industrial aesthetics of modern, urban centres, yet maintained a fidelity to folk cultures. This imagined fusion of folk culture, the natural world and industrial life will be explored with reference to Lindsay's utopian approach to modern architecture. While Lindsay's syncretic vision of modernity is highly idiosyncratic, his utopian industrial aesthetics have an affinity with other movements in the Progressive Era such as the City Beautiful movement. Lindsay's utopian architectural impulses will also be shown to relate to his utopian claims for cinema and its capacity to conjoin the material possibilities offered by industrial technology with the mystical and fantastical powers of the imagination.

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<sup>183</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 169.

By 1913, Lindsay had begun to embrace what he saw as the utopian potential of science and industrial technology, while remaining hostile to positivism, reification and rationality. Rather than rejecting machinery, Lindsay argued that it must become a 'slave' to the social good. In his 1913 poem 'On the Building of Springfield' he imagined the city as a place where:

every street be made a reverent aisle  
Where music grows, and beauty is unchained  
Let Science and Machinery and Trade  
Be slaves of her, and make her all in all.<sup>184</sup>

Lindsay's claim that science, machinery and trade should be treated as slaves put to work in the service of society was not unique in America's Progressive Era. However his originality lies in his conviction that American society could reconcile premodern and modern sensibilities and allow both to thrive. Lindsay came to believe that it was possible to embrace the benefits of industrial technology without sacrificing all that he valued about non-industrial life. His utopian vision of American modernity was expansive enough to hold together a myriad of different traditions, epistemologies and cultural practices, which allowed him to conceive of a society where mysticism, enchantment and magical thinking were afforded the same prestige as science, engineering and mathematics. This vision is rooted in Lindsay's understanding of the fundamental malleability of the United States, which he thought of as a nation that was always in flux. He believed that, unlike Europe, with its centuries old traditions and institutions, the United States could never acquire a static form. In Lindsay's mind, the United States was defined by its openness to change and diversity, creating a productively volatile state of affairs where different cultures, inventions, sensibilities and styles were continually coming into contact with one another.

The complimentary relationship between positivism and mysticism that Lindsay imagined could occur in modern America is potently expressed in his 1915 poem 'The Wedding of the Rose and the Lotus', written to celebrate the completion of the Panama Canal (and recited to President Wilson's cabinet). Here, the fusion of science and spirituality is described through an

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<sup>184</sup> Vachel Lindsay, "On The Building of Springfield" in Vachel Lindsay, *The Chinese Nightingale and Other Poems, The Chinese Nightingale and Other Poems* (New York, N.Y: The Macmillan Company, 1917).

Orientalist schema of the fusion of the utilitarian productivity of the West with the mystical East. The canal signified the meeting of the Pacific and the Atlantic, the rose of the West becoming one with the lotus of the East. In Lindsay's poem, the industrious rose is grown from British soil, it is 'a dart', 'deathless' and 'restless', 'forever building' - signifying a relentlessly productive sensibility whose denial of death suggests a lack of emotion and a denial of human temporality. In contrast, the lotus is allied to Egypt and India, offering slumber and Nirvana in place of the 'flush and fire of labour'. Yet for all the dramatic differences between these sensibilities, Lindsay imagined their imminent fusion.

The poem evidences two tendencies in Lindsay's thought, both of which inform his syncretic vision of American modernity. Firstly, it showcases his distinctly Orientalist worldview wherein Egypt and 'the East' are exalted as sources of spiritual and mystical visual practices that must be habitualised in America, a view which permeates his film theory. Secondly, it evidences his tendency to avoid the issue of incompatibility or exclusivity where convenient. Nowhere in his writings does Lindsay consider the inherent problems of reconciling different systems of knowledge, or whether it may in fact be impossible to separate the epistemological foundations of industrial modernity from its products. He rarely considered the cultural or historical context of different phenomena, and was happy to pluck different inventions, customs, and individuals from the history of the world to compile them into a utopian vision. In doing so he could be justifiably attacked for propagating racist stereotypes, as well as for having a flagrant disregard for context. Lounsbury describes this as Lindsay's 'habitual affection for linking the seemingly incompatible'.<sup>185</sup> This eclectic approach is shared by later modernist movements such as Breton's surrealism, the modernist project of bricolage, and the modernist primitivism of figures such as Freud, Eisenstein and Gauguin. Yet, Lindsay's utopian imagination was eclectic, expansive and highly original in its radical egalitarianism: his reverence for diversity fuelled his desire for a multicultural, transhistorical society. While his understanding of American capitalism was certainly naive, it enabled him to produce an idiosyncratic vision of society where unlikely and incompatible elements co-exist. In both *The Art of the Moving Picture* and his utopian novel *The Golden Book of Springfield* (1920) he imagined different ways for industrial developments to be used to the benefit of the masses, foremost being the potential of industrial architecture and cinematic technology to bring about

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<sup>185</sup> Myron Lounsbury, "Introduction", *Progress*, 12.

his utopian ideals (two enterprises that he argued were strongly connected as shall be demonstrated later). In this vision, industrial modernity was no longer a parade of commodities, rather the very same technologies that currently pushed products into the eyes of weary office workers were instead used to elevate their souls and enliven their environment. Given mechanisation was not going away, Lindsay began to imagine ways to use industrial technology to fuel a Romantic, mystical sensibility and propagate beauty, community and creativity. Rather than a crisis of action and human agency, his syncretic imagination produced a fanciful reworking of American modernity as possessing powerful utopian potential.

One of the earliest changes in Lindsay's approach to modernity appears in his prolonged discussion of 'The New Localism' in 1912. In this essay he set out a utopian vision no longer centred on a renaissance of agrarian life but on thriving American towns. On his 1912 tramp he imagined that perhaps 'Chicago could adopt a village ethos and become a little overgrown country town'.<sup>186</sup> At this point in his thinking Lindsay no longer hoped for a resurgence of agrarian communities yet nor did he embrace an American future where the nation was built around a few select 'machine cities'. Instead, Lindsay argued that the country should become a network of vibrant democratic municipalities. In subsequent essays and texts including *The Art of the Moving Picture* the essay *Springfield A Walled Town* (1922), his pamphlet *The Village Magazine* (1920) and *The Golden Book of Springfield* he developed a vision of a utopian town that was in many ways a fusion of the modern city and the pre-modern village. In her cultural biography of Lindsay, Ann Massa describes Lindsay's civic programme as based on the idea of a 'townscaped America' where communities are part urban and part rural.<sup>187</sup> The ideal American town would be as culturally and ethnically diverse as a city, but would have a strong regional identity, being home to myriad customs and artistic traditions, creating a rich local culture. The new techniques of modern architecture and urban planning would be utilised to create a town in which the built environment was integrated with the natural world.

Lindsay refused to place nature and technology in a binary opposition, but instead saw an affinity between the organic and the inorganic. This synergy is expressed in his 1914 poem

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<sup>186</sup> Vachel Lindsay, "On Conversion", *The Village Magazine*, 1910, [http://www.vachellindsay.org/Works/the\\_village\\_magazine\\_1910.pdf](http://www.vachellindsay.org/Works/the_village_magazine_1910.pdf)

<sup>187</sup> Massa, *Fieldworker*, 20.

‘Rhyme About An Electrical Advertising Sign’, which describes America’s faddish and luminous billboards becoming one with the celestial heavens;

The signs in the streets and the signs in the skies  
Shall make a new Zodia, guiding the wise,  
And Broadway make one with that marvellous stair  
That is climbed by the rainbow-clad spirits of prayer.<sup>188</sup>

Likewise, in his 1924 poem ‘Billboards and Galleons’ Lindsay described the inherent mysticism of electrical adverts, arguing that, however coarse they may appear at first glance they are in fact:

America’s glories flaming high  
festooned cartoons, an amazing mixture  
shabby, shoddy, perverse and twistical  
shamefully boastful  
slyly mystical.<sup>189</sup>

This belief in technology’s mystical elements and the future allegiance between the natural and the electrical is a powerful example of Lindsay’s desire to reconcile industrial and nonindustrial modes of life. Lindsay’s ode to the affective powers of electrical modernity foreshadows Benjamin’s famous endorsement of the fiery reflections of neon advertising signs as described in ‘This Space For Rent’.<sup>190</sup> Lindsay, of course, did not share Benjamin’s Marxism or his dialectical materialism. For Lindsay electrical signs offered phenomenological pleasures and spiritual inspiration, while Benjamin praised the advert’s affinity with the logic of consumption which sits at the heart of industrial modernity, it provided him with a ‘mercantile gaze into the heart of things’.<sup>191</sup> Nonetheless, while they approached electrical advertisements from wildly different conceptual frameworks, both Lindsay and Benjamin found redemptive features in

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<sup>188</sup> Vachel Lindsay, “Rhyme About an Electrical Advertising Sign” in *The Book of New York Verse*, eds. Hamilton Fish Armstrong (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1917).

<sup>189</sup> Vachel Lindsay, “Billboards and Galleons” in *The New Republic*, Sept 10, 1924.

<sup>190</sup> Walter Benjamin, “This Space For Rent” in *One Way Street And Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kinsley Shorter (London and New York: Verso, 2006), 89-90.

<sup>191</sup> Benjamin, “This Space For Rent”, 89.

them. In his commentary on Lindsay's second book on film, Myron Lounsbury also notes a resonance between Lindsay and Benjamin, describing them as united in their hope 'that the penchant for mechanical reproduction would prove responsive to the human need to know and understand.'<sup>192</sup> Lounsbury is critical of Lindsay's lionising of neon adverts, however, doubting whether it is possible to 'metamorphose a cigar ad into a panorama illuminating the regions primal grandeur'.<sup>193</sup> Lounsbury largely dismisses Lindsay's mystical awe of electrical illuminations, instead viewing his embrace of commercial culture as a sign of his underlying frustrations and futility. Faced with his growing irrelevance, Lounsbury argues, Lindsay 'searched the nation's commercial landscape for any sign of local vitality of symbolic implication'.<sup>194</sup> Lounsbury's doubts notwithstanding, Lindsay's interest in the tactile pull of the advertisement was shared by a host of other modernist thinkers including Kracauer, Epstein and Benjamin, all of whom found an affinity between these dizzying electrical signs and the phenomenological allure of cinema. In dismissing this element of Lindsay's work Lounsbury fails to take seriously the reconciliation between mysticism and secularism, the rural and the urban, the industrial and the nonindustrial that informs Lindsay's aesthetic vision, including his relationship to film. While once he had rejected the dazzling hyper stimulation of the metropolis, from 1912 onward Lindsay began to see past the profit driven motives of the blazing depictions of hats, soups and bottles of wine and envisage a new mode of industrial aesthetic experience, one not founded in consumerism or hyper stimulation. Electric billboards could be beautiful and mystical; festoons of electrical lights could "sway with the natural action of flowers in the wind."<sup>195</sup> Lindsay celebrated the capacity of industrial technology to create beautiful realities en masse and praised modern edifices such as the skyscraper, which he understood to be a 'peculiarly United States product'.<sup>196</sup> In the midst of an urban milieu he saw

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<sup>192</sup> Myron Lounsbury, "Introduction", *Progress*, 20.

<sup>193</sup> Myron Lounsbury, "Prospero's Classroom", *Progress*, 109.

<sup>194</sup> Myron Lounsbury, "Prospero's Classroom", *Progress*, 111.

<sup>195</sup> Lindsay, *Progress*, 186.

<sup>196</sup> Vachel Lindsay, "Lindsay finds United States Innocent About Its Best Arts", *Chicago Daily News*, 7 January 1928, box 57, folder 6259, Nicholas Vachel Lindsay Collection, Special Collections Department, University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, Va.



the possibility for an industrial world of beauty, spirituality and enchantment that was able to house trains, folk dancing, skyscrapers, contact with nature and mystical visions.

The dynamism of Lindsay's American utopia is felt in full force in *The Golden Book of Springfield* (set in the Springfield of 2018) which describes a city which is materially inspiring and socially exciting - permanently adorned with bunting, badges and insignia the city also had an annual calendar full of pageants and re-enactments.<sup>197</sup> In his futuristic Springfield of 2018 racial segregation prevails, but the African-American architect John Emis filled the ghetto with 'all new, beautiful, flamboyant, jungle houses....These houses are far richer than the towers and other buildings of the World's Fair'.<sup>198</sup> Massa brilliantly describes Lindsay's utopian Springfield as the result of 'a release of decorative civic energies'.<sup>199</sup> Ron Sakolsky likewise describes Lindsay's Springfield of 2018 as saturated 'with a Shamanistic aura and an everyday pageantry that might bubble up, ooze out or burst forth at any moment from the most mundane quarters of the city'.<sup>200</sup> Sakolsky describes a common impetus in Lindsay's writings in which even the smallest and most mundane artefact is imbued with mythical or mystical elements. Lindsay's poetry is likewise replete with invocations of the opulence of prosaic objects and creatures – from dancing potatoes with matchsticks for legs ('The Potatoes Dance') to the glories of Barnum's circus ('Every Soul Is A Circus') and the sound of crickets that play 'sharps and flats' on the kitchen floor ('Crickets On Strike').<sup>201</sup> As much as he references other cultures, eras and nations, it is the splendour, drama and mysticism of daily life in America that Lindsay wanted to make his fellow Americans aware of. This desire is succinctly expressed in his poem *Springfield Magical*, where he hears a whisper from the grass, telling him:

Romance, Romance – is here. No Hindu town

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<sup>197</sup> Lindsay, *Golden Book*, 142.

<sup>198</sup> Lindsay, *Golden Book*, 85.

<sup>199</sup> Massa. *Fieldworker*, 130.

<sup>200</sup> Ron Sakolsky, "Utopia at Your Doorstep: Vachel Lindsay's Golden Book of Springfield." *Utopian Studies* 12, no. 2 (2001): 61, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20718315>.

<sup>201</sup> Vachel Lindsay, "The Potatoes Dance" and "Crickets On Strike" in Vachel Lindsay, *The Collected Poems of Vachel Lindsay* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1925); Vachel Lindsay, "Every Soul Is A Circus" in Vachel Lindsay, *Every Soul Is A Circus* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1929).

Is quite so strange. No Citadel of Brass  
By Sinbad found, held half such love and hate;  
No picture-palace in a picture-book  
Such webs of Friendship, Beauty, Greed and Fate!<sup>202</sup>

The utopian town should be filled with splendour, beauty and fancy and Lindsay came to embrace modern architectural developments such as glass towers and skyscrapers as able to evoke these qualities. Massa describes Lindsay's hopes for an American architectural style which embodies the machine age but which is also beautiful and influenced more by Jefferson than Edison.<sup>203</sup> In *The Golden Book of Springfield*, Lindsay describes how the Springfield of the future is set out in the shape of a star. The city also has one hundred towers – ninety-three being neo-renaissance Italian style bell towers with seven 'sunset towers' with glass halls where residents gather to watch the sunset every evening: 'The glass and steel skyscrapers of Springfield 2018 ...reflecting and filtering light, they made the streets seem like carpets of dandelion and goldenrod'.<sup>204</sup> The buildings in Lindsay's Springfield are made to be illuminated by the sun and the moon, an architectural vision that corresponds to the approach of the Chicago School whose designs were often driven by what Meredith L. Clausen calls Frank Lloyd Wright's 'quest for light'.<sup>205</sup>

Lindsay imagined Springfield 2018 as a garden city, full of trees and parks where buildings are adorned with amaranth vines, bunting and banners and where even the slums are clustered cottages overflowing with violet petals.<sup>206</sup> Lindsay's plans to beautify American modernity has

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<sup>202</sup> Vachel Lindsay, 'Springfield Magical', Poemhunter [website], <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/springfield-magical/comments/>

<sup>203</sup> Massa, *Fieldworker*, 115.

<sup>204</sup> Massa, *Fieldworker*, 122-3.

<sup>205</sup> Meredith L. Clausen, "Frank Lloyd Wright, Vertical Space, and the Chicago School's Quest for Light." *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 44, no. 1 (1985): 66-74. doi:10.2307/990062. The Chicago school of architecture were a group of architects working in Chicago in the late nineteenth century who used new technologies such as steel frames as well as being notable for valuing natural light and ventilation. In Lindsay's film theory his states his desire for natural light and a taming of the garish electrical light, another incarnation of Lindsay's desire to reconcile a world of sunsets and candlelight with the advent of industrial modernity.

<sup>206</sup> Vachel Lindsay, *The Golden Book of Springfield*, (New York: Macmillan, 1920), 84.

a great deal in common with the American City Beautiful movement of the Progressive Era that included architects such as Wright and Louis Sullivan - both of whom are credited as having influenced the utopian architecture of *The Golden Book of Springfield*.<sup>207</sup> In the early twentieth century the City Beautiful movement approached the urban environment as a social organism that could be built in such a way as to propagate new ways of thinking, feeling and living through the dissemination of beauty such as ‘Stately plazas and systems of embellished boulevards, radial avenues and waterside promenades’.<sup>208</sup> It sought to include citizens alongside experts to design cities and ensure their beauty as well as their functionality, an approach that was later criticised by engineers and planners from the City Practical movement for being too amateurish and impractical.

For Lindsay, such thinking was far from impractical since he believed that mass production and the growth of heavy industry offered America the possibility to transform itself into a world of beauty and splendour. In the early twentieth century new building materials such as glass, iron and steel were replacing wood, brick and stone, allowing for more innovative and imaginative architectural enterprises. Following these developments an eclectic architectural tradition that fused different styles did indeed emerge in America. Arnold Lehman terms the continued interest in decoration and ornamentation in American architecture a ‘Neo-American beautilitarian style’ that was influenced by the Beaux Arts tradition which he contrasts with the industrial vocabulary of Austrian, Dutch and German designs.<sup>209</sup> According to Lehman, the most progressive New York skyscrapers of the 1920s and 30s brought antithetical styles together, in these buildings, ‘the stripped down utilitarianism of the Bauhaus merged with the intense interest in decoration of the French art deco’.<sup>210</sup> Lindsay’s architectural imagination pushes this syncretic architectural trend to a utopian extreme, but his ideas can be seen as very much of their time.

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<sup>207</sup> Vachel Lindsay, *The Golden Book of Springfield*, (New York: Macmillan, 1920), 173.

<sup>208</sup> Daniel M. Bluestone, "Detroit's City Beautiful and the Problem of Commerce." *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 47, no. 3 (1988): 245, doi:10.2307/990300.

<sup>209</sup> Arnold Lehman, "New York Skyscrapers: The Jazz Modern Neo-American Beautilitarian Style." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 29, no. 8 (1971): 363, doi:10.2307/3258517.

<sup>210</sup> Lehman, "Skyscrapers", 363.

In the early twentieth century American industrial technology had already set in motion the physical rebuilding of the world and in the introduction to the 1922 edition of *The Art of the Moving Picture* Lindsay argued that the perpetual rebuilding of the United States was drawn from ‘pure American instinct’. America was now filled with ‘handsome gasoline filling stations’ as well as ‘really gorgeous Ford garages’.<sup>211</sup> Lindsay was proud of these developments, though he recognised that for the time being they were based in consumerism and luxury: ‘Our Union depots and our magazine stands in the leading hotels, and our big Soda fountains are more and more attractive all the time’ (Figures 1 and 2 provide examples of the soda fountains and railway stations that Lindsay encountered with such enthusiasm).<sup>212</sup> In the midst of theorising about film, Lindsay swoons over the industrial heirs of what Walter Benjamin would later call the ‘dream-houses’ of the nineteenth century – the department stores and winter gardens made of iron and glass erected across Europe.<sup>213</sup> However, far from being used in the service of consumerism, Massa describes how, for Lindsay, the transparency of glass architecture could enable a more communal sensibility, noting his suggestion that glass should be used to make the exterior walls of restaurants.<sup>214</sup> In both *The Art of the Moving Picture* and *The Golden Book of Springfield* Lindsay praised the utopian promise of mechanical engineering to create a communal town filled with whimsy and fancy.

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<sup>211</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 23.

<sup>212</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 23.

<sup>213</sup> The concept of the ‘dream house’ and its relationship to luxury and consumption is reiterated throughout Benjamin’s unfinished Arcades Project, Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eilan and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass. And London: Harvard University Press, 2002).

<sup>214</sup> Massa. *Fieldworker*, 132.

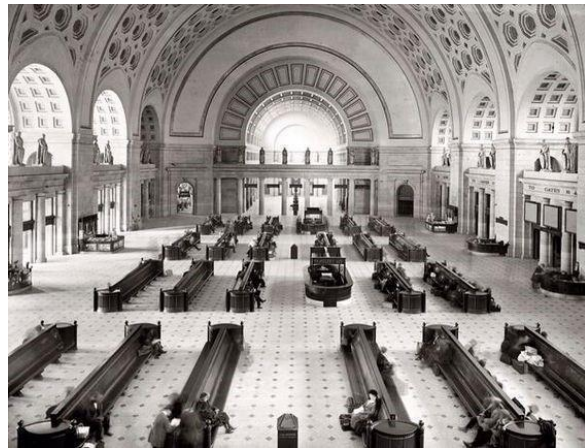


Figure 1: American Art Deco soda fountain.<sup>215</sup> Figure 2: Union station, Washington DC, 1920s.<sup>216</sup>

The American propensity for fantastical architecture was confirmed for Lindsay when the United States hosted a succession of World's Fairs that he believed should serve as the model for American life about which he wrote, 'after duly weighing all the world's fairs, let our architects set about making the whole of the United States into a permanent one'.<sup>217</sup> The impermanent materials used at these expositions were already being used as part of the Australian project to build a new world on Aboriginal land. In 1917 the American architect Walter Burley Griffin used plaster and stucco to build the civic edifices of Australian society. He apparently took offence at a comment made by fellow architect Bernard Maybeck who suggested that such materials were only suitable for building prototypes whose final forms would require the use of permanent materials. Griffin is purported to have informed Maybeck that 'plaster or stucco are hardly considered as temporary expedients [in Australia] for they are largely employed for buildings both commercial and governmental, already deemed to be permanent'.<sup>218</sup> Likewise, Lindsay didn't apprehend the landmarks of these World's Fairs as

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<sup>215</sup> "History of the Soda Fountain". Retro Planet. 8 July 2009. <https://blog.retroplanet.com/soda-fountain-history/>. Accessed 26/07/2021.

<sup>216</sup> Michael Beschloss (@beschlossDC), "Waiting at Union Station Washington DC, early 1920s." 2.30AM Dec 16 2013. <https://twitter.com/beschlossdc/status/412409420564291584>. Accessed 26/07/21.

<sup>217</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 159.

<sup>218</sup> W. B. Griffin, in Maybeck MSS., 'Canberra,' Documents Collection, College of Environmental Design, University of California, Berkeley, quoted in Brechlin, G. 'Destruction of the Fair', *Foundsf*, [website], [http://foundsf.org/index.php?title=Destruction\\_of\\_the\\_Fair](http://foundsf.org/index.php?title=Destruction_of_the_Fair),

simulacra or synecdoche (being either unaware or unconcerned that the buildings were made of plaster and stucco), rather, he delighted in the real architectural possibilities conveyed by such structures. An example of the extravagant and whimsical creations that Lindsay celebrated is the Tower of Jewels from the 1915 World's Fair in San Francisco which was the central building of the fair (Figure 3). The building was covered in cut glass jewels and illuminated at night.

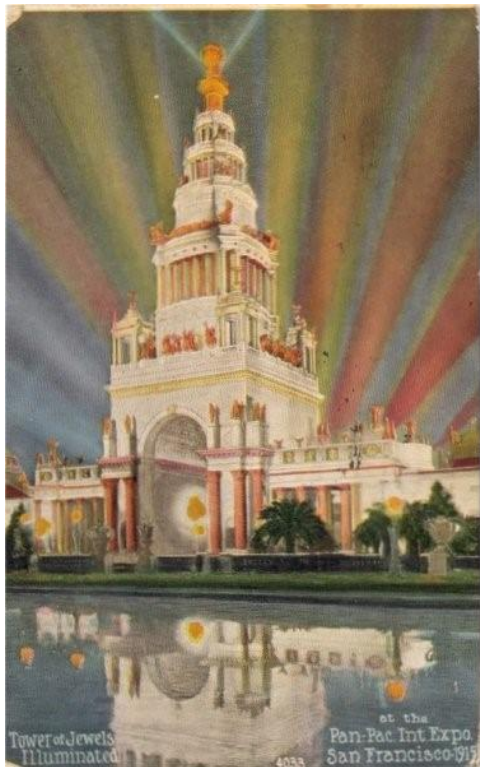


Figure 3: The *Tower of Jewels*, Illuminated, Pan Pacific International Exposition, San Francisco – 1915.<sup>219</sup>

In his praise for the marvellous constructions of the World's Fairs, it is clear that Lindsay saw utopian possibilities within the elitist fantasies and commodified luxuries produced by industrial technology. Like Benjamin, Lindsay sought to rescue the potential of industrial machinery, relocating it from the realm of private consumption and putting it to work in the service of the social. The intellectual historian Susan Buck-Morris summarises Benjamin's project as 'a materialist history that disenchants the industrial dream world of commodities, yet

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<sup>219</sup> "Tower of Jewels Illuminated at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition. Postcard by Mitchell. Courtesy Ron Plain." Panama-Pacific International Exposition 1915-2015. Website. April 10 2015. Accessed 26/07/2021. <https://ppie100.org/on-this-day-april-13/2015-05-13-towerofjewels-1/>

rescues the utopian desire that it engenders for the purpose of social transformation'.<sup>220</sup>

Benjamin refused to turn away from the utopian impulse which he saw glimmering beneath the luscious yet duplicitous spectacle of capitalist modernity. He recognised that the excavation and subsequent activation of this utopian promise depends upon the survival of an attachment to childhood fantasy, both to the dreams which have failed to be realised and the drives that propel us toward the spell of the commodity. Lindsay provides his own fantastical, childhood dreams in his vision of an American utopia filled with amaranth vines and pageantry, entirely rid of both the banal and the exploitative. While Buck-Morrs argues that Benjamin's political awakening demands a reinterpretation of the abandoned childhood dreams that did not come to pass, Lindsay's writings demand that his dream be brought to life without any such critical re-interpretation. Rather than the disenchantment of childhood fantasies, Lindsay wrote in favour of enchanted, animistic worlds full of beauty and splendour. In his work, the material environment is often approached as a work of art.

Lindsay's project to build a new public sphere is underpinned by his hope for a fusion of art and industrial technology, a fusion which is also found in Russian Constructivism. While Vladimir Tatlin conceptualised the artist as engineer, Lindsay held onto the hope that the engineer would operate as an artist. Indeed Lindsay's industrial utopia is an inversion of Rodchenko's statement of the founding principle of Constructivism. For the Constructivists, 'All new approaches to art arise from technology and engineering', while for Lindsay, all new approaches to technology and engineering must arise not only from art, but also the folk arts that are drawn from the rich cultural legacies of the United States.<sup>221</sup> Rodchenko's declaration that 'the craft of painting is striving to become more industrial' was uttered with regard to the attempt of art to adopt a scientific method, to align itself with engineering. Lindsay's utopian vision offers a different configuration of the desire for a synthesis between art and industry; for him the painterly world can now be realised through industrial technology. For Lindsay it is the industrial that must become painterly: the two dimensional painting or illustration can now take on three dimensional form. Lindsay's impassioned pleas for public beauty, for a socialist utopia of 'gorgeous' architecture, were articulated before the Soviet revolution enacted its own

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<sup>220</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, "The City as Dreamworld and Catastrophe." *October* 73 (1995): 7, doi:10.2307/779006.

**221** Buck-Morss, "Dreamworld and Catastrophe," 55.



‘production-fantasy’, a collective rebuilding of the nation that would result in the forced labour and death of so many millions of people.<sup>222</sup> Today the material incarnation of Lindsay’s failed dream could be seen as entombed in the fairy tale labyrinth of palatial architecture that houses the Moscow Metro (Figure 5); this is perhaps a buried testimony to Lindsay’s techno-utopian longing for a world wherein the public sphere becomes a work of art itself.



Figure 5. Taganskaya Metro Station, Moscow, Russia, 2015.<sup>223</sup>

Lindsay argued that the beauty of the built environment could awaken the senses of the American public and ignite their imaginations. In the introduction to *The Art of the Moving Picture* he explains that by proclaiming that America will become a permanent World's Fair he wanted to show how ‘she can be made so within the lives of men now living, if courageous architects have the campaign in hand’.<sup>224</sup> These arguments are not merely contained within *The Art of the Moving Picture*, but continue in his 1925 text *The Progress and Poetry of the Movies*

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<sup>222</sup> Buck-Morss, “*Dreamworld and Catastrophe*,” 19.

<sup>223</sup> David Burdeny, *Taganskaya Metro Station*. Pigment print. <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/david-burdeny-taganskaya-metro-station-moscow-russia-2>. Accessed 26/07/21.

<sup>224</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 179.



which includes a lengthy celebration of *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924) and its oriental cityscape. For all the ills that industrial modernity brought with it, its architecture contained the possibility of transforming the world into a site of radical material experimentation and play wherein the wildest fancies of the human imagination could now be realised. Lindsay's utopian vision of America modernity is not based in a linear understanding of history wherein one historical epoch or economic period supersedes another. Rather, he imagined the United States as a place where Western industrial inventions built upon and interacted with other eras, diverse cultural traditions and a range of art forms. Absent from his work is any idea of there being a radical break between the old and new.

The following chapters will illuminate the ways in which Lindsay's syncretic vision of modernity shaped his concept of film as an art form that is both mechanical and mystical, artisanal and industrial, local and international. Lindsay's utopia required both the physical rebuilding of the environment and the mental refurbishment of the modern American subject and film had the capacity to further this utopian programme in several ways. As the art form of the masses it could disseminate powerful aesthetic experiences that could awaken its audience and revive a mystical worldview. Given its capacity for material artifice, Lindsay argued that film could play a central role in shaping the direction of American architecture, showcasing the material possibilities of the built environment. A widespread culture of amateur filmmaking could also assist with the democratisation of culture and help to place creativity at the centre of daily life. In the closing passages of 'The Man with the Hoe' (some lines of which are cited by Lindsay in *The Art of the Moving Picture*), Edwin Markham looks pityingly on the ravaged figure of the farmer and questions where the innervating, emancipatory force of the future will emerge from:

How will you ever straighten up this shape;  
Touch it again with immortality;  
Give back the upward looking and the light;  
Rebuild in it the music and the dream;<sup>225</sup>

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<sup>225</sup> Edwin Markham, "The Man With The Hoe" in *The Man With The Hoe and Other Poems*, Edwin Markham with decorations by Howard Pyle (New York: Doubleday & McClure Co., 1900), 1.

Lindsay's reply is cinema.

## Chapter 5: The Ascent of the Image

### Introduction

Vachel Lindsay was primarily a writer by trade, yet in his film theory he explicitly champions the rise of the image in modern America and its capacity to challenge the dominance of a textual worldview. This chapter will set out Lindsay's utopian concept of a visual mode of perception as articulated in *The Art of the Moving Picture*. It will show how his embrace of the affective power of the cinematic image resonated with his contemporaries in the realm of classical film theory, while highlighting the idiosyncratic elements of his thought. Firstly, the chapter will explore his argument for a close relationship between vision and America as set out in his film theory and his critique of the dominance of text in European culture. It will then consider how Lindsay's ideas regarding the visual nature of cinema align with the work of another classical film theorist, Jean Epstein. Lindsay's argument that film can operate through a symbolic 'hieroglyphic' language will be explored, with a particular focus on the way in which it can reconfigure the sensual regime of the spectator, undoing the alienating effects of modern life. This rearranging of the perceptual schema of the modern American will, Lindsay argues, undermine their positivistic worldview and reignite their capacity for seeing as well as revealing to them the animism of the exterior world. These arguments are illustrated with reference to two sequences in Griffith's *The Avenging Conscience*, a film which Lindsay much admired and which he argued evidenced cinema's relationship to hieroglyphics and the occult.

The chapter closes by juxtaposing Lindsay's utopian claims for the image with more critical analyses of the function of the image in modernity. Firstly, by considering Lindsay's utopian arguments for a hieroglyphic imagination alongside the dystopian theory of the hieroglyphic image put forward by Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Secondly, by comparing his argument for the alignment of vision and magical thinking with Vilém Flusser's theories of the different perceptual regimes that underlie textual and imagistic modes of perception. In performing these cross illuminations, the chapter aims to show that Lindsay's work offers an historically situated account of the utopian potential of images to undermine a utilitarian worldview and enable a more fluid relationship between subject and object.

## The Ascent of the Image in American modernity

In 1915 Lindsay perceived American consciousness to be in the midst of a process of transformation. He believed that the ubiquity of films, advertisements and cartoons (in newspapers and magazines) had triggered the rebirth of a visual mentality. Lindsay saw modernity as both a threat and an opportunity. The ascendance of rationality denigrated the senses, but modern technology had created a world rich in symbols and imagery; thus, it simultaneously offered the opportunity for the ascendance of what Lindsay terms the ‘eye-imagination.’ In Lindsay’s thought the proliferation of images offered the chance for the restoration of a visual mode of perception that could undermine the stale, alienated condition of the modern subject. Lindsay frequently lamented the delegitimised status of literal vision seeing in modern America, and in 1912 complained that the American subject was becoming physically and spiritually blind. ‘People’, he wrote, ‘do not open their eyes enough neither their spiritual nor their physical eyes. They are not sensitive enough to loveliness either visible or by the pathway of visions’.<sup>226</sup> By 1915, just a few years later, however, Lindsay’s assessment changed when he recognised that modern Americans now had an increased tendency to ‘think in pictures’.<sup>227</sup> From this point onwards much of his work posits the culture of American modernity as structured through an increasingly pictorial episteme. In a letter from 1925, Lindsay described this perceptual transformation, explaining that he was still witnessing:

an enormous progress in pictorial psychology in all American life. Even in the last three years, we think in pictures... and that is about all the thinking we do or are in the prospect of doing for the next one hundred years.<sup>228</sup>

Lindsay’s concept of Americanness is indeed centred around its privileged relationship to the visual: he understood American modernity to be grounded in ‘that very aspect of visual life

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<sup>226</sup> Lindsay, *Adventures*, 76.

<sup>227</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 125.

<sup>228</sup> Vachel Lindsay to John Drinkwater, 16 February 1925, box 34, folder 6259, Nicholas Vachel Lindsay Collection, *Special Collections Depart.*, *University of Virginia Library*, Charlottesville, Va.

which Europe understands so little in America'.<sup>229</sup> The pictorial, symbolic mentality which he so admired is, he believed, situated 'far closer to the American mood' than the literate and textual worldview which he believed to be predominate in Europe. Unlike Europeans, Americans had an inherent tendency to dream and visualise. Lindsay claimed that an enigmatic mode of visual perception was more readily accessible to Americans because the wilderness of the 'new world' had allowed for the birth of a new subject no longer structured through the logic of the written word. His analysis of the historical trajectory of European society, by contrast, was of a movement away from a primitive, pictorial mentality, toward its replacement by a tightly structured, literate consciousness.

While he believed that America had yet to fully free itself of the influence of European culture, he believed the West coast of the U.S. to be relatively untouched by European influence. The dichotomy between the textual and the pictorial takes on a geographical dimension in Lindsay's juxtaposition of the perceptual schemas that dominated the Eastern and Western United States. While the East coast had produced a scholarly elite, in the West of the United States Lindsay was adamant that no such staid intellectualism would prevail. Lindsay was convinced that, in the golden hue of California, 'men will not be infatuated by the written and spoken word only, as in New England. Every art shall have the finest devotion'.<sup>230</sup> Entry into the over-sophisticated literary milieu of the East Coast had forced a surrendering of once powerful faculties which he believed the inhabitants of the Western United States had maintained. While Europeans wrote reasoned arguments, in the splendid light of California Americans had dreams and visions.

Cinema could play a crucial role in enabling all of America to become dreamers and visionaries by returning them to an imagined primitive state. As Rachel Moore attests in *Savage Theory: Cinema and Modern Magic*, Lindsay's America is both primitive and modern.<sup>231</sup> The new

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<sup>229</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 26. Lindsay incorrectly understands writing and rationality to be the sole province of a European sensibility. This Romantic Orientalism colours much of his work displaying his ignorance of Islamic mathematics or the role of scientific or rational enquiries in non-Western cultures (which he indeed exalts for their apparent irrationality).

<sup>230</sup> Lindsay, *Adventures*, 176. Lindsay argues that the literary soil of New England could never nurture the splendour of the photoplay (in a poem reminiscing on his passionate support for the 1896 presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan Lindsay depicts Bryan as a prairie avenger and a mountain lion, 'Smashing Plymouth Rock with his boulders from the West').

<sup>231</sup> Moore, *Savage Theory*, pp.48-62.

world was, in fact, a return to the old, a loop around the ‘spiral of history’.<sup>232</sup> In *The Art of the Moving Picture* he expressed the conviction that the ascent of pictorial representation had repositioned American society ‘far nearer to Egypt than to England’.<sup>233</sup> This sentiment is repeated in a note from 1924:

We are thinking in pictures rather than in words, lost in the worship of shadow – of light – and the magic of line – and in this are nearer to Egypt than to Abydos and Thebes than any cities of Europe (note to insert picture of unicorn).<sup>234</sup>

The photoplay, with its inherent capacity for pictorial representation held the promise of returning the American population to an earlier consciousness more amenable to mystical visions and indeterminate experiences. This capacity is conceptualised by Lindsay as an innate human quality, one which is undermined by a modern civilization based in rationality. While the ‘primitive’ state to which Lindsay repeatedly refers can be read as an ahistorical, universal mode of consciousness, the terms in which he describes it are decidedly Orientalist: ‘Man is an Egyptian first, before he is any other type of civilised being’.<sup>235</sup>

This schema is reiterated throughout *The Art of the Moving Picture*, wherein Lindsay repeatedly assumes an affinity between cinema and an imaginary Egyptian mode of visual perception, where he describes cinemas as caves:

Because ten million people daily enter into the cave, something akin to Egyptian wizardry, certain national rituals, will be born. By studying the matter of being an Egyptian priest for a little while, the author-producer may learn in the end how best to express and satisfy the spirit-hungers that

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<sup>232</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 118.

<sup>233</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 25.

<sup>234</sup> Vachel Lindsay, “Notes on Egypt and the U.S.A.” (no date), box 14, folder 6259, Nicholas Vachel Lindsay Collection, *Special Collections Depart., University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, Va.* NB: the ‘note to insert picture of a unicorn’ is part of the original note written by Lindsay.

<sup>235</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 164.

are peculiarly American. It is sometimes out of the oldest dream that the youngest vision is born.<sup>236</sup>

Lindsay's film theory is but one expression of the relationship that developed between moving image culture and the Orientalist conception of Egypt in the late nineteenth century, which was felt particularly strongly in European culture. In Antonia Lant's exploration of this 'Egyptomania' she excavates the parallels established between Egypt and cinema. She identifies the associations made between the deathliness of the projected image and the practice of mummification, as well as the pictorial language of cinema as a hieroglyphic alphabet, associations which are physically manifested in the Egyptian facades of many early twentieth century cinemas, or as Lindsay describes them, the 'caves'.<sup>237</sup> Lindsay sought to harness what he understood to be the capacity of cinematic images to revive a visual mode of thinking which had been compromised by the internalization of language – he rejoiced in the capacity of film to 'bring back the primitive in a big rich way'.<sup>238</sup> Lindsay celebrated the capacity of cinema to allow Americans to return to the 'cave' and re-connect with their repressed, primitive consciousness. The light and movement of the photoplay could, he believed, 'cause the beholder to do a little reptilian thinking'.<sup>239</sup>

Lindsay believed that by returning to this archaic sensibility, the deadened modern subject could be brought back to life. His celebration of a return to a 'reptilian' state contrasts to the critique of the culture industry developed by Adorno and Horkheimer in their mid-century work *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in which mythological, archaic regression is viewed as anything but emancipatory. Rather than the passive reception of illusory images pumped out by the culture industry, they argue instead for a rigorous reading of their secret coding and inscription. Lindsay, writing earlier in the century, had no such critique of mass culture and maintained a strict demarcation between reading and watching movies. Given the utopian potential that he ascribed to cinema in relation to both its social function as an egalitarian art form not predicated on literacy and its perceptual repercussions, the presence of textual intertitles on screen was a

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<sup>236</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 167.

<sup>237</sup> Lant, "The Curse of the Pharaoh".

<sup>238</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 168.

<sup>239</sup> R.O. Moore, *Savage Theory: Cinema as Modern Magic*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000).

pressing concern for Lindsay. In *The Progress and Poetry of the Movies* he objected to the inclusion of written words on the screen. Rather than a complementary relationship between images and written titles, the presence of language initiated a struggle for the attention of the spectator who was caught between text and image, forms whose cognitive demands and ontological structures he believed to be in fundamental conflict. The spectator shifted between the two modes of textual and pictorial perception as intertitles alternated with images. The insertion of titles into the photoplay was an invasion of an alien, textual form into a pictorial world. By the 1920s Lindsay had witnessed ‘big money’ pouring into the film industry by investors who did not grasp the visual nature of film, leading to movies in which ‘half the film mileage was printed conversation’.<sup>240</sup> Lindsay was adamant that ‘the fewer the words printed onscreen the better, and the ideal motion picture has none at all’.<sup>241</sup> The words on screen obstructed the development of a relationship between the audience and the image, they forestalled the ability of the spectator to engage in a purely pictorial mode of perception.

This position is in direct contrast to Adorno’s theory of the use of textual intertitles on screen as interpreted by Miriam Hansen (though it should be noted that Adorno developed these ideas after the introduction of sound which casts the intertitles of the silent era in a new light). Adorno argued that switching between written titles and images in fact safeguarded the image from being subsumed into a textual code – each domain remained separate and distinct. The spectator moved between the two modes of textual and pictorial perception as intertitles alternated with images; their separation demarcated the distinct terrain of each and maintained the border between them. Rather than a written code lurking within the image, the written title marked a particular textual moment on screen that operated with a different structure to the images that surrounded it. The development of sound fused the two together and the image was then subsumed into the linear structures of linguistic codes. For Adorno, the talkie resulted in text being ‘expelled from film as an alien presence (fremdkorper)’; however, this was an ersatz expulsion that only served ‘to transform the images themselves into the writing which they in turn absorbed’.<sup>242</sup> The absence of intertitles gave the impression that the image was now free

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<sup>240</sup> Lindsay, *The Progress and Poetry of the Movies*, 220.

<sup>241</sup> Lindsay, *The Progress and Poetry of the Movies*, 220.

<sup>242</sup> Adorno, quoted in Miriam Hansen, “Mass Culture as Hieroglyphic Writing: Adorno, Derrida, Kracauer”, *New German Critique*, no. 56 (Spring-Summer, 1992), 55.

from textual interpretation, when in fact ideologically charged textual codes now dominated the medium, though without being seen. Miriam Hansen characterises this attack as the charge that the work of mass culture is the work of ‘disguising script as pure image, as natural, humanised presence’.<sup>243</sup>

Where later in the century the development of the culture industry and the institutionalisation of mass culture led Adorno to develop a deep rooted scepticism about the purity of the image in mass culture, Lindsay had earlier celebrated the image as the universal language of the masses. He lamented the development of an alphabetic mode of representation which he conceptualised as moving away from a system of communication and expression which relied upon a capacity equitably distributed through all of society (vision) to the privileging of a textual regime founded on the acquisition of literacy. The primacy of the image as a universal form of expression is taken by Lindsay to imply its simplicity or transparency and the mass, cross-cultural appeal of cinema. This claim is also made by Béla Balázs who argued that the gestural basis of silent film could bring together diverse audiences. This idea is also found in the work of twentieth century theorist Vilém Flusser who asserts that pictures require no education or training in order to be understood (a claim which will be returned to later).<sup>244</sup>

For Lindsay, the universality of the image meant that cinema was an inherently egalitarian force, at one with his idealised concept of America as a nation founded on the promise of equality. While an elitist European literary culture had stripped the American upper classes of the dynamism of visual perception, Lindsay argued that the modern, illiterate ‘slum-dweller’ had more successfully retained the capacity for picture-thinking than their over-educated counterparts. This conception of film explained the appeal of cinema to working-class Americans and immigrant communities and in Lindsay’s work the cave of the cinema is imagined as an egalitarian public sphere, accessible to anyone regardless of their native language. It offered immigrants, farm labourers, the urban working-class and the stifled middle classes a place to be awakened and revived.

Lindsay desired a mainstream culture of photoplays of splendour which would be embraced by the masses since ‘for the first time in history’ there was ‘a common interest on a tremendous

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<sup>243</sup> Hansen, “Mass Culture”, 50.

<sup>244</sup> Moore, *Savage Theory*, 63.



scale in an art form'.<sup>245</sup> Lindsay heralds film as the birth of an art form that is far from elitist yet which reaches after the same emotional, psychological and phenomenological effects wrought by revered works of art. The accessibility of images did not stem from their simplicity; in fact the image in Lindsay's work is complex and highly evocative. Alongside his claims for the universality and intelligibility of images, Lindsay describes images as difficult to grasp. He situates the pictorial as forever in excess of definition: always becoming, never fixed. The illusive character of the image corresponds with the essentially evasive, enigmatic nature of American language that Lindsay argues is emphatically an oral, not textual, language:

The United States [sic] language is spoken not written... Certainly is it not Latinised, it is not dictionarised. It does not sound as it could be spelled, our special queerness is the deeply instinctive taboo of all Latin forms and structures.<sup>246</sup>

Just as Lindsay argues that the language of the United States cannot be written, so too the image defies inscription and definition. For Lindsay, written language is a tool of reason and categorization. Vision, by contrast, is unstable and ephemeral; it is not concerned with capturing or categorizing what it apprehends. Lindsay contrasts his conception of imagistic perception to the logical process of reading. The differences between the two are evident in the different environments in which reading and cinematic spectatorship occur. Lindsay explains that the rational, semiotic enterprise of reading is done in the 'direct noon sunlight', whereas the 'seductive ritual' of the entombment of the cinema audience renders their rational faculties vulnerable to the play of light. In the cinema, he writes, 'all things emerge from the twilight and sink back into the twilight at last'.<sup>247</sup> The dark enclosure of the cinema offered the American public, from the poorest to the most affluent, a space in which they could readily transgress the confines of the familiar world. Lindsay likens the cinema to the half-lit space of a candlelit church: 'Here the poorest can pay and enter from the glaring afternoon into the twilight of an

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<sup>245</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 139.

<sup>246</sup> Vachel Lindsay, "Why Don't you Talk United States", unpublished manuscript, Nicholas Vachel Lindsay Collection, box 18, folder 6259, *Special Collections Department, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Va.*

<sup>247</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 49.

Ali Baba's cave'.<sup>248</sup> The cinematic image he imagines here is not high-definition, sharp and ultra-mimetic, but evasive, fantastical and enigmatic, provoking a mode of comprehension that is uncertain. This mode of perception is one in which consciousness does not attempt to give definition or order to the phenomenal world, rather it operates in accordance with its flux and flow, maintaining an openness to alterity, variation and perpetual transformation.

## **Hieroglyphics**

Lindsay may have railed against alphabetic language as a stultifying force operating against such flux and flow, but he was far more positive about the capacity of symbolic languages to rouse the passions and restore an indeterminate mode of apprehension. He believed that film could communicate via a hieroglyphic mode of expression which he assumed to be universal. Lindsay had no formal training in hieroglyphics or Egyptian culture and made no such claim for himself. Indeed, one of the fundamental attractions of hieroglyphics was what Lindsay believed to be their immediate intelligibility, they were a 'universal alphabet' that required no training to interpret. He believed that the creation of images in the mind's eye, in dreams and in consciousness as well as the earliest cave paintings, attested to this universality.

For Lindsay, the two meanings are conjoined by virtue of the fact that they are assumed to already exist in close relation to each other in the mind of the beholder. In his list of hieroglyphs, Lindsay includes the example of a sieve, giving its primary, realistic or 'obvious meaning' – 'A sieve placed on the kitchen-table, close-up, suggests domesticity, hired girl humours, broad farce'.<sup>249</sup> Lindsay then describes its secondary meaning as indicating the fate of mankind in the hands of the Gods: 'the sieve has its place in higher symbolism. It has been recorded by many a sage and singer that the Almighty Powers sift men like wheat'.<sup>250</sup> Another example is that of a throne, which Lindsay argues will be immediately understood by a photoplay audience as a symbol of royalty. Subsequently, if the right cinematic devices are employed, its higher symbolism as a 'throne of Woden' (a Germanic God) will also be easily

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<sup>248</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 163.

<sup>249</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 120.

<sup>250</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 120.

communicated.<sup>251</sup> Lindsay advises photoplay directors to ensure that the spirit meaning is closely related to their ‘way of thinking about the primary form’, precluding any anxiety over the tenacity of this initial association.<sup>252</sup> Like Maya Deren’s vertical moments and Epstein’s assertion of the inherently fleeting nature of photogenie, the spirit meaning of the hieroglyphic should be brought forth only episodically. Lindsay imagines it to be ‘a dark jewel in a gold ring’.<sup>253</sup> For Gunning it is easy to see why Lindsay believed Griffith to be ‘the ideal filmmaker’ due to his use of the close-up to emphasise literal points as well as allegorical meanings.<sup>254</sup> In order to maintain their aesthetic-mystical power, most hieroglyphs should only reveal their primary, obvious symbolic meaning: ‘in a play based on twenty hieroglyphics, nineteen of them should be the black realistic sign with obvious meanings, and only one of them white and inexplicably strange’.<sup>255</sup> The initial symbolism must be obvious and tied to the narrative, acting as the diegetic anchor for the abstract meaning, though this ‘obvious’, ‘realistic’ meaning of the hieroglyph is actually highly subjective and always figurative, never fully literal in the way he assumes text can be – the realistic image of a sieve signifies farce and domesticity, the ‘literal’ meaning of an image of a duck is safety, since ‘nothing very terrible can happen with a duck in the foreground’.<sup>256</sup> Such associations are, of course, far from objective. While Lindsay’s assumptions about associations and meanings may appear eccentric, their significance lies in the fact that he was approaching film visually, in terms of what the image does, rather than what it says. Lindsay conceptualised the close-up hieroglyphic gesture, for example, foreshadowing the copious study of its attributes in film studies.

Although he rails against cinematic adaptations of literature in favour of original photoplays, Lindsay cites *The Avenging Conscience* (adapted from Poe’s *The Telltale Heart*) as one of the films that most successfully adopt what he terms a ‘hieroglyphic’ technique. With *The*

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<sup>251</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 119.

<sup>252</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 119.

<sup>253</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 96.

<sup>254</sup> Tom Gunning, ‘Vachel Lindsay: Theory of Movie Hieroglyphics’, in Murray Pomerance and R. Barton Palmer eds., *Thinking in the Dark: Cinema, Theory, Practice* (eds.), (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2015) and Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 96.

<sup>255</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 123.

<sup>256</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 120.

*Avenging Conscience* Lindsay particularly praises Griffith's talent at 'investing trifles with significance' in order to convey the 'haunted mind' of the protagonist, who is a nephew wracked with guilt about a love affair forbidden by his uncle.<sup>257</sup> The film's hieroglyphic sequence par excellence occurs within the nephew's dream sequence in which he believes he has murdered his uncle, and is subsequently visited by a detective. Seated opposite one another at a table adjacent to the fireplace, the nephew is interrogated and, under the scrutiny of the detective's gaze, he becomes agonised and tormented, confronted by his 'avenging conscience'. As they sit face to face, beside the chimney where the uncle's corpse has been hidden, medium shots of their conversation are interspersed with close-ups of the detective's pencil rhythmically tapping against the table, an owl hooting outside the window, the clock pendulum swinging back and forth and the detective's shoe tapping against the floor (as shown in figure 6). Intertitles instruct the audience to interpret these phenomena as reminiscent of 'the beating of the dead man's heart'. The face of the nephew, returned to throughout the sequence, is the locus of the powerful culmination of these symbolic affects. In Lindsay's reading, the detective's eye, enlarged and isolated on screen and surrounded by shadow, becomes the Eye of Horus; the close up of a spider's web symbolises cruelty; and the tapping of the pencil is reminiscent of the dead uncle's heart. In this scene, Griffith has realised the profound symbolic capacity of film through his use of montage, and the close-up. On such evidence, Lindsay urges other directors to turn away from literary and dramatic traditions in order to harness the visual power of the medium. While the sequence serves a symbolic, narrative function (and Tom Gunning cites Griffith's use of 'metaphoric cutting' here as influential, particularly on Murnau's *Nosferatu*), for Lindsay the consequence of these techniques goes beyond developments in storytelling; they have serious perceptual implications.<sup>258</sup> He argues for a 'hieroglyphic' film practice based in symbolism and mysticism that restores a capacity for vision-seeing and an embrace of the indeterminate.

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<sup>257</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 96.

<sup>258</sup> Tom Gunning, "To Scan a Ghost: The Ontology of Mediated Vision", *Grey Room* no. 26 (Winter, 2007), *footnote 1*

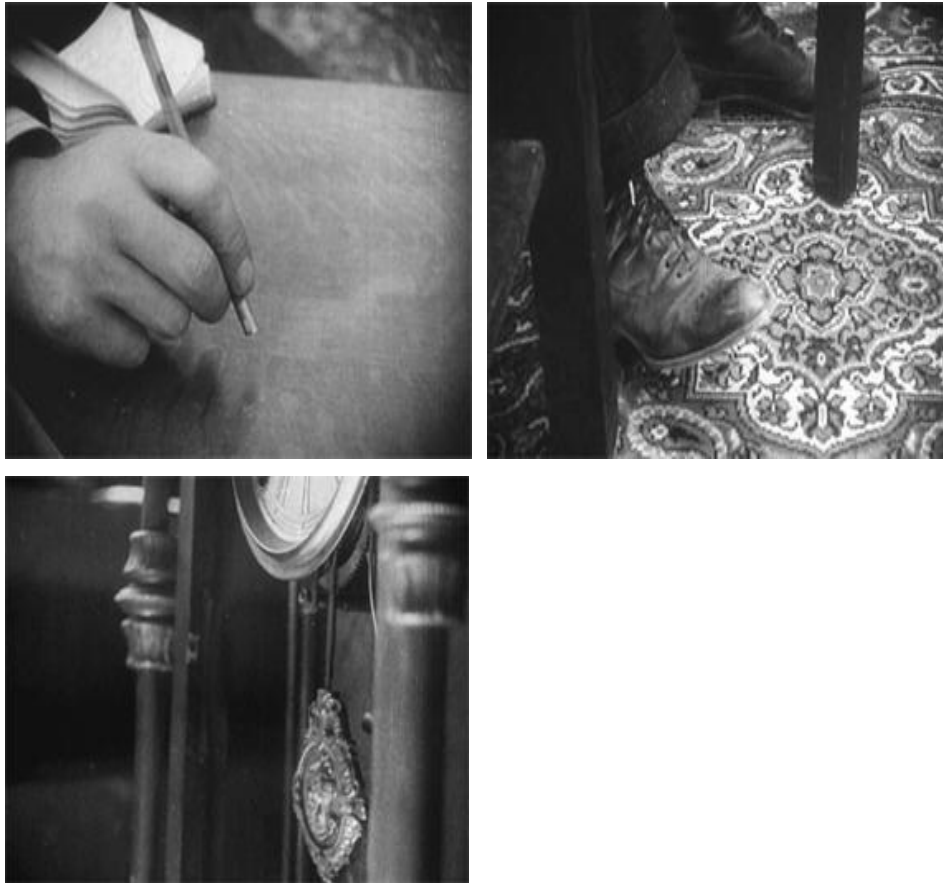


Figure 6: The ‘hieroglyphic sequence’: the detective’s hand tapping a pencil; his foot tapping floor; the swinging pendulum of a clock, in *The Avenging Conscience* (D. W. Griffith, 1914).

The objects on screen in *The Avenging Conscience*’s hieroglyphic sequence serve an obvious symbolic and narrative function while also being highly emotive. The increasing intensity of their affective power illustrates the increasing psychological pressure wrought on the nephew’s conscience. In close-up, his face writhes, and his limbs strain under the assault of the tapping pencil and the detective’s foot, which sound to him as ‘the dead man’s beating heart’. Yet we can also ascribe secondary meanings to these images. The pencil, for example, can inscribe guilt, the gaze of the owl, the all-seeing eye of the state or the super-ego. Lindsay’s characterization of these images as ‘obvious’, ‘literal’ and ‘realistic’ obscures the fact that he is always assigning symbolic and figurative meanings to them, even as he attempts to contrast these initial associations with their secondary ‘mystical’ and ‘spiritual’ symbolic meanings. Lindsay’s argument implies that all filmic images are affective or symbolic, they are never

simply literal information. It is their ambiguity and illusiveness that underlies their appeal for him.

The ontological instability of the image enables it to produce something more overwrought than language. This is a reading of the image which is in stark contrast to Adorno's concept of the mass cultural hieroglyph which operates as a homogenizing, stultifying force. While in Lindsay's work the hieroglyph disrupts the ontological hierarchies established through a textual mode of perception by providing a multiplicity of meanings, in Adorno's work the apparent variety of cultural hieroglyphs churned out by the culture industry is a facade, their variation merely a disguise that conceals their interminable sameness. According to Miriam Hansen, Adorno conceptualised the hieroglyph as a mask for the 'behavioural script' spewed out by the photoplay apparatus; a powerful tool of ideology that conceals the mechanisms of its instructive inscription.<sup>259</sup> Within the culture industry, images are hieroglyphs that disguise uniformity as variation, whereas in Lindsay's work the hieroglyphic mentality escapes the confines of the present and transcends homogeneity. The hieroglyphic photoplay produces a rupture of the spatio-temporal coordinates of the diegetic world, disclosing another reality through its 'higher symbolism'. Lindsay's work implies that such sequences could eventually condition the American public to find mystical, epic and mythological dimensions within their daily lives.

### **Occult visions and animistic worlds**

Lindsay's originality as a film theorist, and his idiosyncratic concept of cinema's relationship to modernity, come to the fore in his claims regarding the affective force of film. He believed that the dark enclaves of the cinema could offer a visual entryway into another world, promoting a mystical sensibility lost to the modern subject. He was delighted by film's preeminent ability to elicit contact with an imagined spiritual realm, noting 'How much more quickly than on the stage the borderline of All Saint's Day and Hallowe'en can be crossed'.<sup>260</sup> Lindsay lamented the lack of literal vision-seeing in America, arguing that this loss of visual experience was to the nation's detriment:

People who do not see visions and dream dreams in the good Old  
Testament sense have no right to leadership in America. I would prefer

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<sup>259</sup> Miriam Hansen, 'Mass Culture', 48.

<sup>260</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 49.

photoplays filled with such visions and oracles to the state papers written by "practical men." As it is, we are ruled indirectly by photoplays owned and controlled by men who should be in the shoe-string and hook-and-eye trade. Apparently their digestions are good, they are in excellent health, and they keep out of jail.<sup>261</sup>

Bored by (and dismissive of) commercial films based in realism, Lindsay argued for film to revive the irrational, mystical capacities of the American population. Lindsay hoped that filmmakers would produce visual spectacles which could revive this mode of experience. He described the aesthetics of these films (both diabolical and benevolent) as a cinema of 'splendour'. A gothic example of such a visual spectacle is found in *The Avenging Conscience*, where the film moves into what Lindsay terms a 'higher demoniacal plane'.<sup>262</sup> This shift in tone occurs in the middle of the dream sequence described above, in which the nephew is questioned by a detective. Wracked with guilt and straining under immense psychological pressure, his face begins contorting with intense curiosity, beguiled by something he has seen or sensed. His eyes are gripped by a vision that the audience cannot see. Slowly craning his neck, he maniacally peers upwards to his left. Lindsay provides a rapt description:

Now the play takes a higher demoniacal plane reminiscent of Poe's Bells. The boy opens the door. He peers into the darkness. There he sees them. They are the nearest to the sinister Poe quality of any illustrations I recall that attempt it. 'They are neither man nor woman, they are neither brute nor human; they are ghouls.'<sup>263</sup>

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<sup>261</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 26.

<sup>262</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 96.

<sup>263</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 96.



Figure 6: Ghoulish spectres in *The Avenging Conscience* (D W Griffith, 1914).

In this sequence Griffith depicts an occult realm cast in shadow and smoke in which four masked beasts crouch in a row, ghoulish and wild (Figure 6). Their human limbs are visible beneath the masks and animal skin that adorn them. As the smoke blows waywardly across the screen the horned figure of Pan rises up, clasping his flute. This scene is but one instance of several visions in the film; however, other vision sequences are more firmly embedded in the narrative and their diegetic coordinates are less startling. In the hieroglyphic montage explored previously, the owl, pencil and foot depicted the psychological pressure mounting upon the moral conscience of the nephew. The mundane and familiar were transformed into a magnified spectacle, but one based in narrative and with a clear allegorical function. The nephew's response to this sensorial assault was clear – he was anguished, straining to maintain his composure. Equally startled and beguiled, this prolonged vision of the ghouls prompts an ambiguous reaction that is mirrored in their spatial ambiguity, their placelessness within the scene. At first it appears that the vision is occurring before the nephew in the middle of the living room; whilst sitting in his chair he becomes entranced, able to see what we cannot, with his maniacal gaze cast just over our shoulder, peering beyond the audience. It is clear that he is perturbed and entranced by something. Then, staying seated, he begins to look upwards, enthralled and overpowered by what he is witnessing. The next shot is of an intertitle stating 'They are neither man nor woman; brute nor human; they are ghouls!' This description is followed by a shot of the masked ghouls in a dark passageway, crouched in the middle distance,



partially obscured by the smoke which billows in front of the camera. The figures remain at a distance from the camera. Their masked faces, the smoke and their refusal to look directly at the camera creates an evasive, enigmatic atmosphere. In the next shot the nephew is suddenly overcome by curiosity, he stands up and walks over to the front door to peer through the keyhole. Now, in place of a flowered path, he sees the ghouls in their darkened passageway.

This scene is jarring to the contemporary spectator and that Lindsay was so taken with it illustrates just how different his sense of cinema was both from his peers and the historical development of what is now understood to be ‘cinematic’. Firstly, the scene is illogical in its depiction of time and space. The location of the nephew’s vision is unclear – is this occult world hidden behind the door or does it exist within the living room? Did the nephew see the ghouls before he looked through the keyhole or was his agitation merely a sensation of the proximity of an occult world – the anticipation of their presence? Moreover, was the nephew more terrified or intrigued by them? It isn’t clear what we have witnessed the nephew witnessing. Did we see the ghouls before he did? Staring through the keyhole the nephew then stands upright, opens the door and beckons the ghouls toward him. Suddenly in the passageway a fifth figure appears, a foreman who whips the ghoulish creatures forward toward the camera until suddenly only the Pan figure remains, writhing and contorting in the smoke.



Figure 7: A witch from the ghoulish sequence in *The Avenging Conscience* (D W Griffith, 1914).

In the next shot of this occult world Pan has vanished, fleetingly replaced by a demonic witch (Figure 7) wearing a tutu, a snake wrapped around her arm, her body partially obscured by sparks of fireworks set off in the foreground. In these balletic compositions, the use of costume, smoke, masks and props are commended by Lindsay as the use of ‘wizard trappings’ which powerfully convey a phantasmic other world. Today such a scene appears amateur in its wayward composition, illogical in its ambiguous spatial setting, and theatrical in its use of costumes, particularly the animal masks. Yet to Lindsay such a ghoulish spectacle is to be celebrated and built upon, illuminating the affective power of film.



Figure 9: A vision of Christ in *The Avenging Conscience* (D W Griffith, 1914).

In contrast to these placeless, ambiguous ghouls, the film’s previous depictions of visions of Christ and Moses are assimilated into the established spatial framework of its diegetic world and can be understood within a western tradition of Biblical depictions. When he is visited by these holy spectres, the nephew sits cowering on the floor of the living room, with the divine

figures floating in ascendance above him (Figure 8). Likewise, when the ghost of the uncle emerges from the chimney in which his corpse was buried in a previous scene, the vision maintains a logical location in keeping with the narrative. These three figures are also presented in archetypal forms – the ghost of the uncle is a translucent figure, played by the same actor, while Moses and Christ are dressed in archetypal Biblical costumes. By contrast the spatial ambiguity of the ghouls and the use of masks, stylised costumes and a pagan aesthetic posit this sequence as quite outside the stable spatial coordinates as well as the prevailing aesthetic milieu of the rest of the film. However, while the location of the occult world shown in the nephew's visions is ambiguous, it is clear that the nephew is able to enter into a state of mind in which he can access this other reality. It is precisely this psychic movement from a seemingly mundane daily life-world into another realm that Lindsay believed the affective power of film could enable. As well as elevating and animating the material world around them, film could incite an awareness of a mystical, spiritual domain that Americans had become divorced from, inspiring them to leave the cold light of rationality and enter into an opaque and unknowable, mystical world.

As well as reviving an occult worldview, film could disrupt the alienated and apathetic sensibility rife in modern America by revealing a hidden animistic world. Lindsay praises film's ability to destabilise its spectator by revealing the vitality of the material world, a claim also made by Jean Epstein, who responds to the cinema with a similarly intense, if somewhat more ferocious, sense of pleasure. Both Lindsay and Epstein proclaim that the close-up is able to temporarily eviscerate (or at least subdue) the agency of the spectator. As Epstein asserts in his essay 'On Magnification', when faced with the gigantic images on screen the spectator is suddenly stripped of judgement, rights and reason. 'I haven't the right to think of anything but this telephone', he writes, and further, 'I have neither the right nor the ability to be distracted'.<sup>264</sup> Like Lindsay, Epstein finds a sympathy between the experience of magnification and that of possession and consumption. Pressed ever closer to this gigantic human face, he states 'It's not even true that there is air between us; I consume it. It is in me like a sacrament'.<sup>265</sup> Rather than the sensation of consumption or mastery, Lindsay believed film

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<sup>264</sup> Jean Epstein, "On Magnification" in 'Magnification and Other Writings', trans. Stuart Liebman, *October* No.3 (Spring, 1977), 13.

<sup>265</sup> Jean Epstein, "On Magnification", 13.

undermined the authority of the spectator, believing that it is in fact the image that consumes us. In Lindsay's work, the affective force of the close-up repositions the spectator so that they are possessed by the dynamism of the external world. This analysis is also in opposition to Benjamin's claim that the close-up corresponds to the modern subject's desire to bring things closer in order to 'get hold' of objects; for Lindsay it is the spectator who is got hold of, beholden to the liveliness of the object world.

Lindsay believed the photoplay could undermine the industrial and scientific ontology governing the United States precisely because it forces a confrontation with what Benjamin terms 'an immense and unexpected field of action'.<sup>266</sup> This field of action is more easily registered by children who, unlike adults, have not sacrificed what Lindsay calls the 'joys and powers' of uncorrupted sight, a corruption which, as stated earlier, partially occurs through the interiorisation of language.<sup>267</sup> As Moore asserts, Epstein's animosity toward language is also grounded in his accusation that it conceals another nature, a more dynamic reality: 'We say 'red', 'sweet', 'soprano',...when really there are only velocities, movements, vibrations'.<sup>268</sup> A world in motion has been obscured through naming and classification – processes of reification to which the metal brain of the camera was, for Epstein, immune. Instead of adhering to the laws of grammar, syntax and nomenclature, the camera could disrupt the imposed semiotic order and reveal a secret reality, hidden beneath the world's apparent uniformity. Moore characterises this as 'the power of form over a world which simply 'is''.<sup>269</sup> It is the re-enchantment of the prosaic, material world that Lindsay argues for in his film theory, an argument founded in his recognition that it is things, not people, that come alive on the screen:

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<sup>266</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age Of Mechanical Reproduction" in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans/ Harry Zohn edited and with an introduction by Hannah Arendt (London: Pimlico, 1999), 229.

<sup>267</sup> Lindsay, *Adventures*, 111.

<sup>268</sup> Jean Epstein, "The Senses" in 'Bonjour *Cinéma*, 13.

<sup>269</sup> R.O. Moore, 'A Different Nature', in *Jean Epstein: Critical Essays and New Translations* eds. Sarah Keller and Jason Paul (Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 183.

it is a quality, not a defect, of the photoplays that while the actors tend to become types and hieroglyphics and dolls, on the other hand, dolls and hieroglyphics and mechanisms tend to become human.<sup>270</sup>

Cinema elevates and animates objects, investing them with a vitality equal to, if not greater than, that of the human figure projected onto the screen. Cinema is possessed of mystical and magical aesthetic techniques that Lindsay argues can impart ‘personality’ to furniture.<sup>271</sup> The enchantment of the exterior world is conceptualised by Lindsay with frequent reference to fairy tales, but in 1922 he lamented the fact that powerful fairy tale films were rare, despite being ‘inherent in the genius of the motion picture’.<sup>272</sup> This invocation of the fairy tale is not simply a plea for crass special effects that enable objects to move on screen. Lindsay criticised the 1907 film *Moving Day* for animating objects without casting the necessary aesthetic-mystical spell, complaining that the film is, ‘too crassly material’, and lacks ‘the touch of the creative imagination’.<sup>273</sup> Lindsay sought something far more powerful, citing Poe and Hawthorne as he searches for a cinema of transfiguration, of ‘stranger castles and more dazzling chairs’.<sup>274</sup> Lindsay understands the liveliness of objects through what he terms ‘film magic’. While Marxist theorists labour to break the phantasmagoric necromancy of commodity fetishism (a spell which, despite Marx’s recourse to supernatural terminology, is not a manifestation of witchcraft but alienation), Lindsay tried to increase the wizardry of cinema. Lindsay’s anti-positivist desire to decentre the human subject is more akin with Deleuze’s concept of the close-up than that of early film theorist Béla Balázs. In *Theory of Film: Character and Growth of a New Art*, Balázs praised the poetic affectivity of the close-up to transform the modern perception of time and space. For him, the close-up reveals the face of objects, but these ‘faces’ are merely the manifestations of our projections rather than qualities of the objects themselves, ‘the objects are merely our own selves’.<sup>275</sup> Lindsay alludes

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<sup>270</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 99.

<sup>271</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 47.

<sup>272</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 20.

<sup>284</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 92.

<sup>273</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 47.

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<sup>275</sup> Bela Balázs, *Theory of the Film: Character and Growth of a New Art*, trans. Edith Bone (New York:

to something more vitalistic in film's ability to re-enchant the world. He wants film to reconnect the human subject with the energies and sensory pleasures hidden within the external world that have been rendered imperceptible, rather than merely confronting them with themselves. Like Deleuze, he believed cinema could play a crucial role in this restructuring of human perception.

As well as directing our attention to that which had been rendered insignificant under the utilitarian logic of capitalism, cinematic imagery could also explode the myth of stable forms. Cinema reveals the animate reality surrounding us, forcing open the sensorial realm of the previously alienated spectator. In Lindsay's film theory insentient objects are recast as dramatic actors with lively and sensuous forms. Lindsay argues that cinema should 'make the non-human object the hero indeed'.<sup>276</sup> In describing an action movie featuring a train Lindsay noted that the engine itself was more captivating than the human actors. The steam-engine 'took on more personality in the end than private or general on either side, alive or dead'.<sup>277</sup> As Doane notes, in silent film objects and actors achieve a parity through their mutual muteness which compounds the blurring of the subject-object distinction enacted by the close-up.<sup>278</sup> While the actor triumphs in the theatre, Lindsay asserts that in the movie business it is the production of the entire *mise-en-scène* that is key. It equalises people and things such that 'The performers and the dumb objects are on equal terms'.<sup>279</sup> For Deleuze, the cinematic technique of the close-up reveals the face of an object, but this is a different face to that in Balázs's work. Deleuze's face is not that of an individual, neither is it a sign signifying a social role nor a site of intersubjective communication; it is a face stripped of these aspects. Deleuze conceptualises the face as a surface that can display an intensity of minute movement at the same time as presenting a 'reflective surface' – the face being exactly this combination of sensibility and legibility. The process by which cinema reveals the myriad faces in the world (faceification) is

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Dover, 1970).

<sup>276</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 47-48.

<sup>277</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 36-37.

<sup>278</sup> Mary Ann Doane, "The Close-Up: Scale and Detail in the Cinema." *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 14, no. 3 (2003): 89-111. [muse.jhu.edu/article/50602](https://muse.jhu.edu/article/50602).

<sup>279</sup> These 'paint buckets' are the myriad of techniques available to the creative photoplay genius which enable the unique capacities of the medium to be realised, including its animistic potency.

not a process of codification. Lindsay and Deleuze agree that the affective force of an object is not a semiotic code to be read. Rather, Deleuze states that the close up should be apprehended as ‘the vertical gateway to an almost irrecoverable depth behind the image, an expression of something inaccessible’.<sup>280</sup> The camera eye reveals the human eye as a particular perceptual apparatus which cannot adequately register the myriad optical phenomena of the exterior world. In revealing a realm of vitality and motion that the human senses cannot register on their own, film enacts a de-centring of the human subject. The human spectator can no longer unproblematically claim to occupy a stable site of knowledge and perception. The habituation of the human senses and their reductive configuration in Western modernity is laid bare as the camera reveals forms and motions which are imperceptible to the human eye. In opposition to the anthropocentric worldview he believed to be dominating modernity, in 1925 Lindsay pleads for directors to foreground the capacity of film to render visible the motion and vitality of the object world:

Let the hieroglyphics indeed march and sing, and let those human beings who have thought they have enslaved them for so long, subordinate themselves for a little while and then cast their eyes about, and discern the actual natural rhythm of all things that seem inanimate, from the rope to the flying carpet.<sup>281</sup>

The external world merely appears inanimate, but the photoplay can expose its intensity and dynamism, once it resists the impulse for ‘realism’. Lindsay’s critique of realism and his endorsement of cinema’s reorientation of human perception are also articulated by Eisenstein who was himself aware of the danger of cinema propagating a ‘correct’ mode of perception:

The representation of objects in the actual (absolute) proportions proper to them is, of course, merely a tribute to orthodox formal logic. A subordination to an inviolable order of things . . . Absolute realism is by

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<sup>280</sup> Doane, “Close-Up”, 97. It should be noted that when Doane critiques the theoretical preoccupation with the ability of the close up to remove its object from its narrative context she mentions Deleuze, Epstein and Eisenstein but not Lindsay – another example of his marginalisation.

<sup>281</sup> Lindsay, *Progress and Poetry of the Movies*, 178.

no means the correct form of perception. It is simply the function of a certain form of social structure.<sup>282</sup>

Lindsay celebrates the re-positioning of the human subject who could now be made subordinate to the lives of the objects around them. In its cinematically mediated confrontation with the apathetic modern spectator, the material world asserts its vibrant presence. For Lindsay, this is not only enjoyable and exciting, but positions cinema as an ally in the fight against scientific empiricism. Lindsay railed against the ontological security and self-satisfied arrogance of the empiricist and the positivist in his poem *The Horrid Voice of Science*:

There's machinery in the butterfly;  
There's a mainspring to the bee;  
There's hydraulics to a daisy,  
And contraptions to a tree.  
"If we could see the birdie  
That makes the chirping sound  
With x-ray, scientific eyes,  
We could see the wheels go round.

And I hope all men  
Who think like this  
Will soon lie  
Underground.<sup>283</sup>

This poem reveals that Lindsay conceptualised science through an 18<sup>th</sup> century paradigm, as a project which sought to identify the totality of causal laws underlying the material universe, the strings and pulleys that make the world go round. Of course, it would be the task of Deleuze to produce a film theory that engages with the ramifications of twentieth century physics.

### **Magical Thinking and Mimesis**

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<sup>282</sup> Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form*, (Florida: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1977), 35.

<sup>283</sup> Lindsay, "Horrid Voice of Science."



Along with revealing the animism of the exterior world, Lindsay imagined that cinema could enact a further challenge to anthropocentrism by reviving a mimetic practice that encouraged a more fluid relationship between the human subject and its environment. Lindsay hoped that film could revive a folk-imagination by creating movies based in myths and legends where animals and objects come alive and in which human actors were free to take on different forms:

There are fables where the rocks and the mountains speak. ...To properly illustrate the quarrel of the Mountain and the Squirrel, the steep height should quiver and heave and then give forth its personality in the figure of a vague smoky giant, capable of human argument, but with oak-roots in his hair, and Bun, perhaps, become a jester in squirrel's dress...Or it may be our subject matter is a tall Dutch clock. Father Time himself might emerge therefrom. Or supposing it is a chapel, in a knight's adventure. An angel should step from the carving by the door: a design that is half angel, half flower.<sup>284</sup>

Though almost inadvertently, Lindsay here posits a highly original understanding of how mimetic practices can undo the reification of the modern subject. He imagines that the imitation of nature could lead to a reinvigoration of lost powers and energies; the reified human subject mimics the dynamic, spontaneous movements of animals, flowers, trees etc. and in so doing is brought back to life, de-reified and revived.

Lindsay's work implies that cinema can provoke a playful mode of mimesis that can revive the modern subject and that it can do so due to its distinctly non-linguistic character. The relationship between non-linguistic art forms and mimesis is a key theme in the work of Theodor Adorno and there are surprising correspondences between his mimetic theories and Lindsay's. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Adorno and Horkheimer map three eras of mimesis – archaic, magical and industrial – which configured the relationship between humans and their environment. In an article on the films of Tarkovsky, Simon Mussell sets out the different mimetic relationships identified in their work. In the archaic form of adaptive mimesis, humans replicated the deadness of inert nature in order to survive. In the later magical era, figures such as shamans and magicians adopted a mimetic relationship to nature which attempted to co-opt

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<sup>284</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 91.

the internal logic of nature that exerted some influence over it without achieving total mastery. In the industrial world, a domineering form of mimesis prevails, founded in knowledge and information that enables control over nature. In the bourgeois era of industrialization, earlier forms of mimetic relationships are rejected as regressive, and are fervently prohibited ('outlawed').<sup>285</sup>

However, in *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno argues that non-linguistic works of art can revive premodern forms of mimesis, and thereby undermine the objectification and the authority of the modern subject. Here the redemptive potential of a pictorial work of art is based precisely in its ability to criticise rationality 'without withdrawing from it; art is not something pre-rational or irrational'.<sup>286</sup> Such artworks are set in opposition to the images endlessly replicated by the culture industry – they possess a rationality provided by the unity of their form that enables an intercommunication of their various parts. Shierry Weber Nicholson argues that for Adorno aesthetic experience can generate a new mimetic relationship; mimesis is both 'the activity of assimilating the self to the other' and 'the activity of the creation, the work of art, with objectivity'.<sup>287</sup> In Lindsay's work, nonlinguistic aesthetic experiences are conceptualised as opening up the self, reigniting contact with creative desires and unleashing a new sensorial regime. Despite their many differences, Adorno and Lindsay therefore share a belief in the utopian function of non-linguistic forms of art to enable new relationships between subject and object and prompt a different kind of mimetic response to one operating through domination.

Lindsay's work assumes an affinity between a visual mode of perception and a magical worldview. This assumption is also found in the work of Vilém Flusser who attempts to theorise the place of the image in late modernity, exploring the different perceptual regimes elicited by texts and images. Like Lindsay, Flusser believed that pictures are immediately intelligible and do not require any kind of training or education in order to be understood. Both theorists imply that an imagistic consciousness is a given condition of human perception, whilst a textual consciousness is achieved through a self-conscious process, positing a fundamental distinction between the two perceptual regimes. Furthermore, as much as Lindsay talks about

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<sup>285</sup> Simon Mussell, 'Mimesis Reconsidered: Adorno and Tarkovsky *contra* Habermas', *Film-Philosophy*, Volume 17, Issue 1, 2013.

<sup>286</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, quoted in Mussell, 219.

<sup>287</sup> Shierry Weber Nicholson, quoted in Mussell, 217.

symbols and layers of meaning within an image, neither theorist conceptualises images as being read. Flusser distinguishes between the synchronic mode of the reception of an image and the diachronic task of receiving meaning from a text. In his essay 'Line and Surface', he outlines the historical and epistemological status of the two modes of being – the conceptual thought of a linear text and the imagistic thought of a surface mode of perception.<sup>288</sup> For Flusser, the horizontal 'surface' of the image has an affinity with a magical consciousness in which phenomena are interconnected through horizontal relationships. These magical, horizontal relationships are mutual rather than causal – Flusser gives the example of the sunrise signifying a cock crowing and a cock crowing signifying sunrise. In contrast the abstract (rational) linearity of text is aligned with a scientific consciousness based in a non-mutual linear causality (the cock's crow is caused by the sunrise, but the sunrise is not caused by the cock's crow).<sup>289</sup> However, complicating the romanticised account of pre-modern cultures as found in Lindsay's work, Flusser conceptualises non-textual cultures as lacking historical progress. He is explicit in his argument that a textual, causal mode of apprehension is the necessary foundation for a historical consciousness. History progressed as images were made subservient to linear writing and stripped of their magical elements. He assumes that abstract, conceptual thought structured through language and linear causation is the prerequisite for the emergence of scientific enquiry. In this analysis, history and scientific progress are identical; Flusser's historical consciousness is a scientific consciousness, whereas Lindsay inhabits precisely the opposite worldview. For Lindsay scientific progress (founded in positivism and rationality) resulted in a capitalist world structured through reductive, utilitarian logic that rendered real change and transformation impossible; the triumph of science meant the end of history. In his work it is the resurgence of a magical, mythical worldview that will render society amenable to transformation, thus restoring historical change.

Thus, the inability to act historically is located in different eras for Flusser and Lindsay. For Lindsay early twentieth century modernity brought an end to history through the triumph of science and the authority of written language which inflicted a standardised scientific predictability on the world, while for Flusser the proliferation of images in late capitalism has created an increasingly surface driven reality, supplanting a historical way of being in the world

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<sup>288</sup> Vilém Flusser, *Writings*, ed. A. Strohl, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

<sup>289</sup> Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (London: Reaktion Books, 1983), 9.

with the immediacy of the image. Flusser looks back to the prehistoric images that existed before the written word, and aligns them with magic. This is where, in their privileging of the anti-positivism of the image, Flusser and Lindsay share common ground. While Flusser insists that today we need to understand images as both symptoms of reality and objects of an artist's intention, Lindsay sides with the image and all of its imprecision. Lindsay celebrated the proliferation of images in American modernity, believing that Americans had a strong visual sense which could operate against the increasing rationalisation of modern life. While he argued for a hieroglyphic film practice which was intensely emotive and symbolic, Lindsay did not conceptualise the image as a code to be read. This idea of the image as offering something different to language resonates with the film theory of both Epstein and Balázs who were excited by film's ability to undermine a textual worldview and instead reveal a more dynamic reality which language obscured. Adorno and Horkheimer too, recognised the image as having emancipatory potential and lamented its codification. Where they put forward a dystopian theory of the image in relation to the rise of mass culture, Flusser confronted the proliferation of technologically reproduced, commodified images in late modernity, yet Lindsay's concept of the image reminds us of its utopian potential.

Lindsay makes bold claims regarding the implications of the affective power of film on the American population. While he does not put forward a coherent theory of the subject it is clear he believed that cinema had the capacity to re-structure the perceptual regime of its audience. For Lindsay the invention of cinema brought with it the opportunity to undo the reifying effects of language and re-aquaint the American people with the vibrant reality that words had obscured. By virtue of its visual nature and mass appeal film could revive the senses of the American population. Literate Americans, too used to operating through their rational 'word-imaginings' would be forced to stop thinking and start feeling, while the 'sons and daughters of the slums' would be able to access powerful aesthetic experiences. The American population would be able to register the dynamism of the material world, becoming enamoured with that which they had dismissed as mundane. This new register of perception would re-connect them to the mystical, spiritual experiences that had been delegitimised in modern society. Moreover, the boundaries of the self would be weakened and a more playful mode of mimesis could be enabled. In restoring this porous, primitive sensibility film offered a powerful attack on the staid rationality which Lindsay believed was dominating America in the wake of rapid

industrialisation and urbanisation, making the medium a powerful ally in his utopian programme.

## **Chapter 6: Intermediality**

### **Introduction**

In the first decades of filmmaking, theorists and filmmakers alike attempted to grasp the ‘essence’ of the new medium of cinema. This included considering it in relation to other art forms as a means of understanding what cinema wasn’t as much as what it was. For modernist filmmakers including Vertov, Epstein and Eisenstein, the filmic apparatus was first and foremost a piece of mechanical technology, so their films and theories emphasised the technological capacities which made it unique. Lindsay’s argument that film must be allowed to benefit from the rich artistic traditions that came before it (such as illustration and painting as well as craft practices such as puppetry), stands in stark contrast to their approach. This chapter will show that, while out of step theoretically, Lindsay correctly identified cinema’s intermedial character. Moreover, his arguments regarding the need for close relationships between different art forms can be said to be prescient with regard to both the development of cinema over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and the contemporary situation in which the boundaries between media have broken down. When looked at in the context of today’s hybrid media landscape of multimedia platforms, transmedial storytelling and the heterogeneity of contemporary artistic practices, the doctrine of medium essentialism is shown to have lost its theoretical and practical force, while Lindsay’s intermedial imagination now seems apposite.

This chapter will begin with a description of Lindsay's intermedial vision of film as set out in *The Art of the Moving Picture*. It will go on to show that while his embrace of intermediality is at odds with canonical film theory of the time, Lindsay was prescient in his belief that film would benefit from maintaining a close relationship to other art forms. Rather than a medium defined by its industrial base, this chapter draws on Michele Pierson's work which understands cinema as enacting a unique fusion of 'artisanship and capital'.<sup>290</sup> Pierson's arguments regarding the practical effects often used in science fiction and horror cinema support Lindsay's vision of film as an amalgamation of industrial and non-industrial practices which this thesis likewise conceptualises as a 'craft-industrial fusion'. Max Reinhardt's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1935) is used as a case study to illuminate not only the practices which make up this mode of filmmaking but as evidence of a distinctly cinematic craft aesthetic. Finally, the chapter uses Lindsay's work to consider the changing nature of intermedial cinema, arguing that the anarchic intermedial energies of the silent era have been tamed in favour of a more stable, cohesive mode of intermediality. This taming of cinematic intermediality is shown to be coupled with the rise of a general commensurability between media. Lindsay's intermedial imagination and his rejection of medium essentialism, while less relevant for much of the twentieth century, is shown to speak to today's post medium condition.

### **Lindsay's Intermedial Imagination**

As this thesis has shown, Vachel Lindsay was possessed of a syncretic imagination which, in his search for a utopian future, fused different (and sometimes conflicting) elements. This syncretism informed his assessment of the aesthetic possibilities of film and his embrace of filmic intermediality is grounded in his conviction that the aesthetics of cinema need not be governed by the mechanical axioms that underpin cinematic technology. Lindsay's intermedial film theory runs contrary to the medium essentialism so prominent amongst his European peers. His assertion that film had an affinity with art and craft practices was out of fashion at the time and remains rare today. Lindsay also rejected the related, though distinct, tendency to align film with industrial modes of production. Modernist filmmakers such as Epstein and Eisenstein were vocal in their celebration of the end of the clumsy, inconstant

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<sup>290</sup> Michele Pierson, *Special Effects: Still in Search of Wonder* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) 104. doi:10.7312/pier12562.

labour of the human body and its replacement by the hyper efficiency and regularity of a mechanical means of representation. In *Bonjour Cinema* Epstein lauded the ‘metal brain’ of the film camera, while Eisenstein described ‘montage thinking’ in decidedly mechanical terms as operating via ‘mathematic faultlessly performing instrument-machine’.<sup>291</sup> Vertov was likewise enamoured with the mechanical precision of filmmaking and for him it was precisely cinema’s industrial nature that made the medium so exciting. He saw film as capable of a non-human mode of perception, a ‘kino-eye’ freed from the limitations of the human body. For Vertov, film’s mechanical prowess illuminated the deficiencies of human labour: when confronted with the power of the machine, man’s vulnerabilities only seem more contemptible: ‘The machine makes us ashamed of man’s inability to control himself’.<sup>292</sup> While medium specificity and the privileging of film’s technical nature are distinct, they often occur together, as both are underpinned by an impulse to define and control the new medium by identifying its proper use. Lindsay likewise wrote about film in order to influence its future direction and both of his texts have a polemical tone. His film theory is certainly as emphatic as Epstein and Eisenstein’s writing on cinema, though his concept of film differs drastically. In opposition to the celebrations of mechanisation found in their work, in 1925, in *The Progress and Poetry of the Movies*, Lindsay lamented that even the best movies still have ‘a suggestion of the factory’.<sup>293</sup>

Lindsay was disappointed in what he saw as Hollywood’s lack of aesthetic ambition and the shortcomings of its current products, even as the film industry was blind to them. In *The Art of the Moving Picture* he made this clear, writing: ‘The producers do not realize the mass effect of the output of the business. It appears to many as a sea of unharnessed photography: sloppy conceptions set forth with sharp edges and irrelevant realism’.<sup>294</sup> This quote illuminates Lindsay’s desire for stylisation over an ‘unharnessed’ photographic realism. Lindsay’s writings on cinema evidence his dismissal of films that had been produced with seemingly little intervention in terms of set design, lighting and composition. Rather than approaching film in

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<sup>291</sup> Sergei Eisenstein, *Writings 1922-34 Selected Works Vol. 1*, ed. and trans. Richard Taylor (London: BFI Publishing, 1988), 122.

<sup>292</sup> Dziga Vertov, *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, edited and with an introduction by Annette Michelson, trans. Kevin O’Brien (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1984), 7.

<sup>293</sup> Lindsay, *Progress*, 165.

<sup>294</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 136.

relation to photography which was often conceptualised as being able to document the world “as it is”, Lindsay encouraged his readers to think of film in relation to more self-consciously artificial art forms such as painting, illustration and sculpture. Far from embracing cinematic realism, in the 1922 edition of *The Art of the Moving Picture* Lindsay lamented the lack of films based in a Victorian faerie aesthetic. He criticised filmmakers for their inability to recreate the sublime and beguiling mysteries of Arthur Rackham et al, asking ‘Why are our managers so mechanical? Why do they flatten out at the moment the fancy of the tiniest reader of fairy tales begins to be alive?’<sup>295</sup> In order to counteract a mechanised, realist aesthetic, Lindsay spends sizeable portions of *The Art of the Moving Picture* considering the ways in which cinema could benefit from the traditions of painting, sculpture and illustration as well as architecture and the symbolism of Chinese theatre. As well as fighting against photorealism he was also keen to rid the film industry of the misguided assumption that the traditions and techniques of vaudeville held the key to its future. Instead he sought to redirect attention toward other art forms, propagating the idea that ‘the people with the proper training to take the higher photoplays in hand are not veteran managers of vaudeville circuits, but rather painters, sculptors, and architects, preferably those who are in the flush of their first reputation in these crafts’.<sup>296</sup>

*The Art of the Moving Picture* provides multiple examples of paintings, illustrations and sculptures that could showcase different approaches to space, composition and lighting that might be applied to filmmaking and Lindsay also uses the text to direct filmmakers to enchanted and non-realist works of art. In the chapter ‘Furniture, Trappings, and Inventions in Motion’, he sets out the significance of set design and props in the creation of animistic worlds, urging prospective filmmakers to ‘spend a deal of energy on the photoplay successors of the puppet-plays’.<sup>297</sup> The chapter “Painting-in-motion” offers Manet’s portrait, *The Girl with The*

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<sup>295</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 72.

<sup>296</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 99. This craft-industrial eclecticism came to fruition in the German film industry of the Weimar era whose films often belie the influence of painting, drawing and architecture. This can be seen in the intermedial talents of set designers and art directors including Paul Leni, Hans Poelzig, Walter Reimann and Robert Herlth. While Lindsay imagined film to inspire a collective, American mode of world-building, even in the 1910s Hollywood was operating through a hierarchical, assembly line mode of production. Rather, it was the German film industry that embraced the collective element of world-building, enabling collaboration between set designer, director, screenwriter etc.

<sup>297</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 42.



*Parrot* as a lesson in both warmth and restraint: ‘It is a perpetual sermon to those that would thresh around to no avail, be they orators, melodramatists, or makers of photoplays with an alleged heart-interest’.<sup>298</sup> Other paintings, such as Charles Webster Hawthorne’s *The Trousseau* (which depicts a bride to be with two handmaids sewing and altering her garments), are given as examples of the effective use of lighting: ‘Such an illumination as this, on faces so innocently eloquent, is the light that should shine on the countenance of the photoplay actress who really desires greatness in the field of the Intimate Motion Picture’.<sup>299</sup> For guidance in composition, Lindsay believed filmmakers should look to painting, and offered Whistler and Japanese artists as examples of work that shows ‘a kaleidoscope suddenly arrested and transfixed at the moment of most exquisite relations in the pieces of glass’.<sup>300</sup> Far from sensing a chasm between mechanised and non-mechanised art forms, Lindsay saw painting as offering a wealth of inspiration to filmmakers.

More unusual than directing filmmakers to painting for instruction in composition is Lindsay’s belief in the relevance of illustration to cinema. The invocation of illustration is a bold move by Lindsay, one not found frequently in film theory, though it is not clear he thought of it as such. He refers filmmakers to the work of illustrators such as Aubrey Beardsley, Arthur Rackham, Willy Pogany and Edmund Du Lac, arguing that their work should be used to expand the aesthetic horizon of film beyond the confined space of verisimilitude. Later in the text Lindsay offers another, far more literal way for illustration to be utilised by filmmakers, suggesting that Boutet de Monvel’s illustrations from his children’s book telling the story of Joan of Arc could be used as a backdrop.<sup>301</sup> It is surprising, then, that Lindsay does not mention animated films, the genre that realises his idea of films as drawings-in-motion. His film theory stays firmly in the field of live action with no explanation for this omission.

Lindsay provided his readers with a glimpse of the fantastical, stylised possibilities that he imagined lay before the film industry with reference to toys, paintings, illustration and pottery: ‘Imagist photoplays would be Japanese prints taking on life, animated Japanese paintings,

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<sup>298</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 35.

<sup>299</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 84.

<sup>300</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 85.

<sup>301</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 105.

Pompeian mosaics in kaleidoscopic but logical succession, Beardsley drawings made into actors and scenery, Greek vase-paintings in motion'.<sup>302</sup> This list shows just how audacious and experimental Lindsay's filmic imagination was. While historically he is situated closer to the modernist avant-garde era, this list can be thought of as anticipating the painterly avant-garde of Stan Brakhage, who would emerge decades later. Lindsay's aesthetic audacity is also in evidence in his suggestion that filmmakers utilise the techniques of Chinese theatre (where a red flag is used to symbolise the sun), masks and found objects in the staging of a film. Furthermore, the miniature, pasteboard world of Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1920) pushed Lindsay to consider the possibility of using hand drawn sets and everyday objects to stage fantastical diegetic worlds, remarking that 'It shows how masterpieces can be made, with the second-hand furniture of any attic'.<sup>303</sup> In the 1922 edition of *The Art of the Moving Picture* it is *Caligari* which is singled out for its innovative and suggestive style where Lindsay argues that it should be studied in art schools. Several passages in the second edition of the text express his frustration that the industry had not been swayed by his arguments in favour of a cinema of 'fairy splendour'. However *Caligari* stands out as an indication that a more aesthetically audacious future for cinema was still possible:

They speak of the scenery as grotesque, strained, and experimental, and the plot as sinister. But this does not get to the root of the matter. There is rather the implication in most of the criticisms and praises that the scenery is abstract. Quite the contrary is the case. Indoors looks like indoors. Streets are always streets, roofs are always roofs. The actors do not move about in a kind of crazy geometry as I was led to believe. The scenery is oppressive, but sane, and the obsession is for the most part expressed in the acting and plot. The fair looks like a fair and the library looks like a library. There is nothing experimental about any of the setting, nothing unconsidered or strained or over-considered. It seems experimental because it is thrown into contrast with extreme commercial formulas in the regular line of the "movie trade." But compare *The Cabinet of Dr.*

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<sup>302</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 155.

<sup>303</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 20

Caligari with a book of Rackham or Du Lac or Dürer, or Rembrandt's etchings, and Dr. Caligari is more realistic.<sup>304</sup>

While the film fell short of his aesthetic vision, Lindsay was certainly impressed by *Caligari*, both as a work in its own right, and as a film which could inaugurate a movement of similar films. That its expressionist aesthetic should still be viewed by him as too 'realistic' intimates how intrepid and ambitious his intermedial cinematic imagination was.

### **Film and Pro Filmic Theatricality**

Lindsay's suggestion that filmmakers should create films inspired by drawings and fill them with second-hand furniture runs counter to the impetus of early film theorists and critics to identify the 'pure' essence of cinema and sever its ties to other mediums. The urge to purge film of the influence of other art forms is nowhere more explicit than in the hostility that critics and theorists have directed toward film's associations with theatre, and all that is deemed 'theatrical'. The battle to save cinema from its near fatal theatrical disease has a long and complex history, fought by figures such as Louis Delluc, Erwin Panofsky, Victor Scholvisky, Hugo Munsterberg and Louis Aragon. Aragon's hostility to theatrical films was particularly vitriolic. He hoped to rid cinema of 'the old, impure, poisonous alloy that links it to a theatre whose indomitable enemy it is'.<sup>305</sup> Whether or not this project is believed to have been a worthwhile pursuit, the desire to police the border between film and theatre has resulted in a range of techniques and styles being discredited as 'theatrical'. This tendency is present in the work of revered film historians including Jean Mitry, Lewis Jacobs and George Sadoul who adopt a teleological analysis of film based on what Tom Gunning calls the 'cinematic assumption'.<sup>306</sup> This approach is founded on the belief that prior to World War One, the true essence of cinema had not yet been identified, and the medium was in a primitive state, infested with theatricality.<sup>307</sup>

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<sup>304</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 19.

<sup>305</sup> Louis Aragon, "On Décor", in *French Film Theory and Criticism 1907-1939: A History/Anthology*, ed. Richard Abel (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), 168.

<sup>306</sup> Tom Gunning, "Now You See It, Now You Don't: The Temporality of the Cinema of Attractions", *The Velvet Light Trap*, 32 (Fall 1993), 71.

<sup>307</sup> Tom Gunning, "Now You See It Now You Don't", 71.

One of the most famous instances of cinematic heterogeneity being identified with theatre is found in critical responses to the work of Méliès, who used a mélange of techniques – painted mattes, cardboard props, special and practical effects, a discontinuous editing style and a lack of consistent spatial geometry – to create fantastical, nonsensical diegetic worlds. For most of the twentieth century, theoretical and critical responses to Méliès' work did not regard his films to be truly 'cinematic'. Siegfried Kracauer's response to Méliès provides a clear example of the way his films are identified with the stage. In *Theory of Film*, Kracauer acknowledged Méliès' influence on cinema, noting that he played 'an enormous role' in the development of the medium and admitting that his 'cinematic illusion... went far beyond theatrical make believe'. Yet he concludes that 'notwithstanding his film sense however, Méliès remained the theatre director'.<sup>308</sup> In this analysis, Méliès is conceptualised as a childlike figure playing with the medium, creating a papier-mâché universe inspired by stage traditions and not fully apprehending film's true identity. This is a stance also espoused by Jean Mitry, who aligned Méliès' work to the filmed theatre productions of Film D'Art: 'most filmmakers... follow Méliès' formula and the path opened up by the Film D'Art'.<sup>309</sup> Tom Gunning disputes the idea that Méliès' work can be understood in terms of theatre, instead describing *A Trip to the Moon* (1902) as 'an intermedial palimpsest'.<sup>310</sup> He rightly identifies Méliès' cinematic trickery as based in superimposition and substitution. Thus, deploying these cinematic techniques the films are distinguished from vaudeville magic circuits or theatre. Méliès' films rely on practices specific to cinema, and this mischaracterisation of his oeuvre as 'theatrical' highlights

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<sup>308</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), 33.

<sup>309</sup> Jean Mitry, *Histoire du cinéma: Art e industrie, vol. 1* (Paris: Editions Universitaires, 1967), 400, quoted in Andre Gaudreault, "Theatricality, Narrativity and Trickality: Reevaluating the Cinema of Georges Méliès" in *Fantastic Voyages of the Cinematic Imagination: Georges Méliès's Trip to the Moon*, ed. Matthew Solomon (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 32.

<sup>310</sup> George Méliès, *A Trip to the Moon* (France: Star Film Company, 1902), Youtube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZNAHcMMOHE8>; Tom Gunning, 'Shooting into Outer Space: Reframing Modern Vision', in *Fantastic Voyages of the Cinematic Imagination: Georges Méliès's Trip to the Moon*, ed. Matthew Solomon (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 100.

the fact that the term is often used inaccurately, operating as an imprecise shorthand which substitutes for a more precise lexicon which could adequately describe his work.

In addition to rejecting what they deem to be ‘theatrical’ practices, classical film theorists have often shown a hostility toward the use of artisanal or craft techniques in film, preferring to celebrate cinema’s mechanical technical capacities. For these critics, the use of arts and craft practices in film can be conceptualised as an anachronistic assault on cinema, and their responses can be seen as attempts to preserve the integrity of the medium. Critical and theoretical hostility towards films that adopt a crafted aesthetic can also be understood in gendered and racialised terms, as a reaction to the invasion of pre-modern, feminised or ‘primitive’ practices into a sophisticated, modern, industrial art form. In the realm of aesthetics, critics and theorists have frequently elevated a ‘raw’, ‘bare’ and ‘unadorned’ aesthetic above ornament, artifice and theatricality. In her work *Reading in Detail*, Naomi Schor provides an historical analysis of a hierarchy of values that, from Plato to Hegel (and more recently in the work of Adolf Loos and Karl Scheffler), has elevated ‘natural beauty over ornamental artifice’, wherein embellishment is aligned with femininity.<sup>311</sup> In Schor’s analysis, this embellishment is considered duplicitous such that the adorned, adulterated, feminised image is to be viewed with suspicion if not contempt. Schor’s analyses of the ways that aesthetics are gendered can also be applied to film theory and its elevation of ‘purely’ cinematic technological modes of representation over craft or theatrical practices more heavily based in artifice. Many film theorists have, indeed, bestowed the lofty status of the ‘cinematic’ upon a ‘bare’ masculine style grounded in technological mastery. In her work on ‘pretty’ images, Rosalind Galt identifies a powerful trope in film criticism in which the cinematic is frequently conceptualised as an unadulterated style while the use of elaborate costumes, ornamental sets and fantastical scenery are either degraded or not worthy of critical or theoretical attention.<sup>312</sup> In contrast, the male auteurs of the French New Wave, whose work is based in the technological manipulations of post-production are often exalted as possessing a supreme affinity with the cinematic. This devaluation of the material world in front of the camera and the elevation of the technological manipulations that cinema is capable of is found in the work of Christian Metz, who dismisses

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<sup>311</sup> Moreover, underlying this set of values is a gendered hierarchy in which the irrational, sensuous female subject is confined to the particularities and domestic details of the material world while the reasoned male subject is granted the power of transcendence, able to flee the limitations of material reality to access a conceptual, abstract realm.

<sup>312</sup> Galt, *Pretty*.

what he calls the ‘profilmic trucages’ which occur in front of the camera, deriding them as ‘ruses essentially analogous to those of conjurers’.<sup>313</sup> These are tricks that have occurred before filming begins – for example the use of miniatures or, in Metz’s example, the substitution of an actor for a stunt double. For Metz, such profilmic manipulations are not really cinematic. This is true no matter how great a role they play in the history of cinema, he argues, stating that ‘the specific codes of cinema play a minor role here, even though films resort to them frequently’.<sup>314</sup> The hostility toward profilmic ‘theatricality’ as expressed by numerous Euro-American theorists and critics, including Metz, can be seen as part of a tradition in Western aesthetics which devalues craft practices, aligning them with female, domestic labour or exoticizing them as ‘authentic’ ethnic cultural practices which are excluded from the privileged category of ‘art’. Lindsay’s assertion is that film should be inspired by art forms including illustration, Chinese theatre and puppetry and he conceptualises cinema as contiguous with the history of the arts and crafts, denying any presumed chiasmus between mechanised art forms and pre-industrial ones such as can be found in the work of Walter Benjamin. Lindsay did not argue against montage or editing, indeed he celebrated film’s capacity for creating tableaux and close-ups, as the previous chapter made clear. While he certainly embraced cinema’s technological capacities, he conceptualised them as compatible with other practices. Thus his work sets him apart from theorists who argue for film to free itself from the shackles of theatre, painting and puppetry.

### **Filmmaking as a craft-industrial fusion**

Film theory’s over emphasis on film’s technological nature, and its capacity for photorealism, obscures the rich array of influences, techniques and skills that have shaped the history of cinema. Cinema can, instead, be characterised as a medium based in an amalgamation of craft and industry. Indeed the industry has been reliant on a mixture of practical and technological skills from its very first years into the present day. The creation of cinematic worlds has necessitated the development of specialist knowledge and techniques, including the production and deployment of painted mattes, miniatures, makeup, hand drawn animation, stop motion

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<sup>313</sup> The French word ‘trucage’ usually translates as trick photography in the singular and special effects in the plural.

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Christian Metz and Françoise Meltzer, "'Trucage" and the Film." *Critical Inquiry* 3, no. 4 (1977): 661. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343055>.

puppetry and animatronics – skills which could legitimately be characterised in terms of craftsmanship. Fields such as illustration, painting and puppetry have not only been influential on filmmakers, they have been an integral part of some of the most aesthetically ambitious and exciting films in the medium’s history, though their contribution is often overlooked.

The history of cinema is replete with films which utilise puppetry and painting, proving many of Lindsay’s arguments regarding film’s intermedial character to be correct. Firstly, Lindsay’s hope that cinema would create ‘the photoplay successors of the puppet-plays’ was indeed realised.<sup>315</sup> Beginning with the Russian puppeteer Ladislav Starewicz, who used stop motion to animate dead insects, cinematic puppetry is even now a fairly mainstream practice. The delicate silhouettes of Lotte Reiniger’s fairy stories, the Czech legends of Jiri Trnka and Alexandr Putshko’s stop motion Lilliputians provide early to mid-century examples of puppetry on film.<sup>316</sup> Not confined to European legends and Soviet folktales, Hollywood developed its own rather more grotesque brand of puppetry with the rubbery dragons, giant crustaceans and atomic beasts of the “creature feature” films of the mid-century and later. This monstrous repertoire relied on the artisanal skills of puppet makers and puppeteers. Moreover, puppet films have continued to be popular even amid a highly digitised visual culture with Jim Henson’s puppet workshop having recently spawned several television shows and movies. The 2010s, for example, saw revivals of both the muppet film franchise (James Bobin, *The Muppets*, 2011) and a TV series inspired by the now cult film *The Dark Crystal* (Louis Leterrier, 2019). Secondly, Lindsay’s argument that film should literally use works of illustration to create filmic backdrops was, of course, realised in the industry’s use of painted mattes, a practice that was common in the silent era but continues into the present day, even alongside the use of CGI. Far from showing the deficiencies of human labour, as Vertov may have supposed, painted mattes have made a significant contribution to the aesthetic history of film. Painted scenery – on glass sheets, hanging fabric and canvas - has been used to create some of the most striking landscapes in the history of cinema, including the Mediterranean setting of *The Red Shoes* (Michael Powell, Emeric Pressburger, 1948), which is alternately

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<sup>315</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 42.

<sup>316</sup> See, for example Lotte Reiniger, *The Fairy Tale Films* (Germany: 1922- 1961:UK: Bfi, 2008) DVD; Jiri Trnka, *The Puppet Films of Jiri Trnka*, (USA: Image Entertainment, 2006) VHS; Alexandr Putshko, *The New Gulliver* (Moscow: Mosfilm Studi, 1935) Youtube. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CkW8v\\_qbQbI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CkW8v_qbQbI)

picturesque and diabolical, Antonia's enigmatic Greek island home in *Tales of Hoffman* (Michael Powell, Emeric Pressburger, 1951) and the misty, heather covered moors of *Brigadoon* (Vincente Minnelli, 1954).<sup>317</sup> A photograph from 1938 of The Sersen Department at Fox (Figure 9) showing artists painting mattes for *The Rains Came* (1938) and *Hollywood Cavalcade* (1939) makes visible the handiwork involved in filmic production.<sup>318</sup>



Figure 9: The Sersen special effects department at Fox Studios.

While the history of cinema abounds with ambitious and accomplished intermedial films, Michele Pierson's investigation into the history and aesthetics of special effects highlights the fact that the artisanal skills and techniques that they are based in are often not conceptualised as part of the real work of filmmaking. Pierson argues, instead, that the technical know-how and material ingenuity of special effects artists, such as Ray Harryhausen, must be considered a legitimate part of the history of cinema. While there has been much theoretical interest in post-production based special effects, practical effects have received far less attention and are often

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<sup>317</sup> Vincente Minelli, *Brigadoon*, (Los Angeles: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1947). Amazon. <https://www.amazon.com/Brigadoon-Gene-Kelly/dp/B006PFC2FA>

<sup>318</sup> NZ Pete, "Fred Sersen burns Chicago and floods Ranchipur – the effects shots from IN OLD CHICAGO and THE RAINS CAME," *Matte Shot - a tribute to Golden Era special fx* (blog), Tuesday, 28 December 2010, <http://nzpetesmatteshot.blogspot.com/2010/>



misguidedly conceptualised as related to ‘stagecraft’, despite the fact that they occur with, and through, the cinematic apparatus. Pierson’s *Special Effects: Still In Search of Wonder* reclaims these techniques in the name of the cinematic, asserting that creature makeup, travelling mattes, models etc. are developed specifically for cinema and must be seen as part of the cinematic tradition.<sup>319</sup> Pierson cites the use of models as an example of a pro-filmic technique made explicitly for cinema that could never be used on stage, given that their use is reliant on cinema’s ability to manipulate the audience’s perception of scale. An example of the use of both models and puppetry is found in the 1925 film *The Lost World*.<sup>320</sup> In a blog post ruminating on the 2016 restoration of this puppet filled adventure film, Kristen Thompson notes the labour and ingenuity involved in creating miniature landscapes and life-like dinosaurs. She describes how the dinosaur puppets were made by placing rubber and foam over metal skeletons with balloons inside them that could inflate and deflate to simulate breathing.<sup>321</sup> An image from a ‘deleted scene’ included in *The Lost World* DVD provides a glimpse of the scale of the endeavour (Figure 10).<sup>322</sup> This image of a human surrounded by a miniature Jurassic landscape filled with puppets is just as much an image of a person engrossed in the work of filmmaking as those of Vertov adjusting lenses and arranging camera angles in *Man With a Movie Camera* (Vertov, 1929).

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<sup>319</sup> Pierson, *Wonder*, 103.

<sup>320</sup> Harry O. Hoyt, *The Lost World* (United States: First National Pictures, 1925).

<sup>321</sup> Kristen Thompson, “THE LOST WORLD refund, piece by piece,” *Observations on Film Art* (blog), October 2, 2017, <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2017/10/02/the-lost-world-refund-piece-by-piece/>

<sup>322</sup> Thompson, “THE LOST WORLD”.



Figure 10: A miniature prehistoric landscape from *The Lost World* (United States: First National Pictures, 1925).

While theorists such as Metz are blind to such techniques, Pierson points out that fans of special effects who have paid attention to this mode of filmmaking often exceed film theorists in their understanding of the ways in which these techniques are created specifically for cinematic use. Pierson goes on to identify the bringing together of craft and capital as uniquely cinematic, describing film as made up of ‘a mix of culture and industry—artisanship and capital—that doesn’t exist anywhere else’.<sup>323</sup> This ‘mix’ of artisanal or craft practices with cutting edge industrial technology remains part of the process of filmmaking today. While the fields of special and practical effects have, of course, been significantly impacted by the advent of digital technology, there isn’t a stark chiasmus between film’s technological base and the artisanal techniques which came before it. Filmmaking is still often a mixture of practical and special effects, which Pierson terms a ‘blended technology’ approach.<sup>324</sup> While the handiwork of matte painting can now be done digitally - enabling elements to be added and removed far more quickly than when painted on canvas or glass - the artisanal work of set building can still

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<sup>323</sup> Pierson, *Wonder*, 104.

<sup>324</sup> Pierson, *Wonder*, 132.

at times have the upper hand in terms of efficiency. Pierson cites the creation of an image of the rescue ship in *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997) which was hand painted on a matte in a week rather than rendered as a 3D model on a computer that would have taken far longer. More recently, the 2015 film *Tale of Tales* included the use of CGI alongside puppetry, requiring a puppeteer to ‘lubricate and climb into the backside of a massive flea’.<sup>325</sup> The 2016 reboot of *Ghostbusters* (Feig, 2016) also included a mix of practical and digital effects. To create one of the ghosts, a costume filled with LED lights was used to create a real ‘glow’ so that the shadows and refractions were accurate, as well as providing the actors with a tangible figure to respond to:

What we had on-set was, an actress performing with LEDs in the costume that would create a glow on the environment and that glow went directly into the movie. We had an awesome eyeline for the *Ghostbusters* girls, they knew exactly where to look. They had a glowing, hovering lady in front of them...Rather than spending tons and tons of money in post, and we do spend a lot of money in post, this gives us a leg up so to speak, so we don’t have to add lighting in to the environment, it’s all there. So that scene [with Gertrude], when you look at it, and it feels right when she reveals herself to the girls. When you look around the rest of the scene, the frame, you see all these light kicks and reflections. It’s all what we shot. It’s probably one of the most practical, glowing ghosts you’ll ever see on film.<sup>326</sup>

Pierson’s work demonstrates that the tradition of blending the digital and the material has created such commensurability between the two that it is now often impossible to tell them apart. She cites an interview for *Cinefex* with the special makeup artist Dick Smith who notes that industry professionals (including those granting awards) cannot always differentiate between digital effects and makeup effects, claiming that ‘a couple of times in recent years

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Dominic Preston, “Is there still a place in Hollywood for puppets and practical effects?”, *Little White Lies*, 16 June 2016, <https://lwlies.com/articles/tales-of-tales-puppets-practical-effects/>

<sup>326</sup> Linda Romanello, “The VFX of Ghostbusters”, *Computer Graphics World*, September 6 2016, <https://www.cgw.com/Press-Center/In-Focus/2016/The-VFX-of-Ghostbusters.aspx>

where a film has won for make-up effects when, in fact, voters were probably swayed by some showy puppet or CG work'.<sup>327</sup> These filmic combinations of handiwork, industrial technology and digitised post-production techniques reveal that filmmaking is not, as Benjamin imagined, best understood as a mechanised medium in which actors and objects are organised solely around the logic of the machine. The work of gutting and wiring crabs, manipulating giant animatronic fleas or painting fantastical vistas, as Lindsay understood so early in film's history, are all part of the creation of the 'magic' of cinema.

### **Max Reinhardt's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1936) – A case study in intermedial filmmaking**

Rather than aligning intermedial films with theatre and denying them critical attention, Lindsay's work prompts us to consider the fusion of practical know-how, craft skills and cinematic technology as creating a form of cinema which should be taken seriously. Max Reinhardt's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1936) is the epitome of Lindsay's proposed cinema of fairy splendour, enacting what Pierson terms cinema's mixing of artisanship and capital.<sup>328</sup> Moreover, in Benjamin's 'Work of Art' essay it is exactly the fantastical materiality of Max Reinhardt's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that he claims exemplifies the reactionary and anachronistic impulses of critics and theorists who want to force cinema to adopt an enchanted Victorian faerie aesthetic. Benjamin criticises Franz Werfel's praise of Reinhardt's enchanted Shakespearean escapade, arguing that such films only serve to perpetuate the myth that mechanically reproduced works of art share the same ontological status as the fine arts, as objects endowed with an aura. Benjamin argues that elaborate fairy tale films such as this continue the outdated project of the worship of 'art' and arouse the desire for a return to magical thinking:

Commenting on Max Reinhardt's film version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Werfel states that undoubtedly it was the sterile copying of the exterior world with its streets, interiors, railroad stations, restaurants, motorcars, and beaches which until now had obstructed the elevation of

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<sup>327</sup> Pierson, *Wonder*, 134.

<sup>328</sup> Max Reinhardt and William Dieterle, *Max Reinhardt's A Midsummer Night's Dream* (United States: Henry Blanke, 1935). Amazon. [https://www.amazon.co.uk/William-Shakespeares-Midsummer-Nights-Dream/dp/B00FYH67R4/ref=tmm\\_aiv\\_swatch\\_0?\\_encoding=UTF8&qid=&sr=](https://www.amazon.co.uk/William-Shakespeares-Midsummer-Nights-Dream/dp/B00FYH67R4/ref=tmm_aiv_swatch_0?_encoding=UTF8&qid=&sr=)

the film to the realm of art. “The film has not yet realised its true meaning, its real possibilities ... these consist in its unique faculty to express by natural means and with incomparable persuasiveness all that is fairylike, marvellous, supernatural.”<sup>329</sup>

The crafty, and crafted, aesthetic of Reinhardt’s forest was celebrated by Werfel as an example of how film can be elevated to the sphere of art, creating its own mode of cinematic beauty and whimsy. The film uses a range of craft techniques and cinematic tricks in the creation of an enchanted live action world, as the fairy forest abounds with real leaves attached to trees made of burlap and dipped in plaster of Paris. Scenes were shot across two sound stages that opened onto an outdoor extension on the Warner Bros lot, while the vale of the forest floor was carpeted in real moss that had to be watered daily.<sup>330</sup> In an article entitled ‘Midsummer Dream, Midwinter Nightmare’, which critiques Reinhardt’s ‘demented’ production, film historian Scott MacQueen cites an account of the set given by a visiting reporter:

[The set] overflows from the stage into the outdoors ... it is possible to shoot scenes on this landscaped slope from inside the stage, giving the general feeling from behind the camera that one is looking at all outdoors .<sup>331</sup>

However the first day’s rushes revealed a lack of sufficient lighting - the screen was completely dark.<sup>332</sup> The so-called ‘dark aesthetic’ of the dailies resulted in Hal Mohr taking over photography for the film. Mohr subsequently thinned the trees, painted them and covered them in high-gloss shellac so that they glistened, before placing a sheet of cobweb over the entire set:

every tree, every bush, every rock was covered with cobwebs. And then on top of that, hundreds of pounds of glass and mica particles were blown over the set onto the cobweb material while it was still soft, before it

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<sup>329</sup> W. Benjamin, “The Work of Art”, 221.

<sup>330</sup> Scott MacQueen, "Midsummer Dream, Midwinter Nightmare: Max Reinhardt and Shakespeare versus the Warner Bros." *The Moving Image: The Journal of the Association of Moving Image Archivists* 9, no. 2 (2009): 60. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41164591>

<sup>331</sup> MacQueen, “Midsummer Dream”, 46.

<sup>332</sup> MacQueen, “Midsummer Dream”, 60.

became set. Well the result was that the entire set became a fairy-like thing you would never have seen in nature, or would never see on the stage.<sup>333</sup>

Natural objects were filmed through Vaseline-coated filters and the camera was often placed behind wooden frames with pieces of nylon stretched across them which was embedded with small metallic sequins (with small holes burnt out by cigarettes for areas which needed to be filmed in focus). Such a trick is impossible to imagine in theatre; it is a purely cinematic effect, which has a correlate in the avant-garde practice of defacing the camera lens, as in the work of Stan Brakhage. Rather than elevating the metal brain of the camera, the filmmakers sought to undermine its piercing mechanical gaze (what Lindsay terms ‘the uncanny scientific quality of the camera's work’) and replace it with a smudged, yet sparkling, mode of vision.<sup>334</sup> In his fantastical forest Reinhardt created an augmented reality, possessed of both verisimilitude and fantasy, photorealism and artisanal artifice as can be seen in a shot of the changeling standing in the midst of a forest which is palpably organic and yet overtly curated (Figure 11) . In doing so he fused the mechanised technology of film with the practical effects of handiwork, creating an aesthetic manifestation of Lindsay’s desire to reconcile the modern and the premodern.

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<sup>333</sup> G.C. Pratt, quoted in, MacQueen, *Midsummer Dream, Midwinter Nightmare*, 62.

<sup>334</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 131.



Figure 11: The enchanted forest of *Max Reinhardt's A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Max Reinhardt, 1935)

This 'fairy-like thing', as MacQueen describes Reinhardt's enchanted forest, is found in neither nature nor in theatre; it can be realised only in cinema, through an intermedial mode of filmmaking which combines practical effects with mechanical reproduction. Whilst Reinhardt's fairy world is a consummate example of intermedial filmmaking, we need not look far to find contemporary examples of this flamboyant mixed media approach. Films such as *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006), *The Science of Sleep* (2006) and more recently *Mary Poppins Returns* (2018) provide evidence that stylised filmmaking based in material artifice and practical effects remains a standard practice.<sup>335</sup>

### **Intermedial cinema – from anarchy to stability**

Although often overlooked in the field of film theory, intermedial filmmaking is a cinematic tradition with its own history, having undergone significant changes in techniques and styles since the early twentieth century. Looking at a selection of intermedial films produced across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries reveals the ways in which the anarchy of cinema's early intermedial pageantry was tamed over time by the imperative for narrative and continuity.

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<sup>335</sup> Guillermo del Toro, *Pan's Labyrinth* (Spain and Mexico: Guillermo del Toro, 2006) Michel Gondry, *The Science of Sleep* (France and Italy: France 3 Cinema, 2006); Rob Marshall *Mary Poppins Returns* (U.S.A.: Rob Marshall, 2018).

In this section examples from early cinema, including the work of Ferdinand Zecca and Segundo Chomón, will be used as examples of an anarchic mode of intermedial filmmaking that existed in the first decades of filmmaking. Moving through the twentieth century into the present day, Tourneur's *The Bluebird*, Karel Zeman's *Invention for Destruction*, Disney's *Mary Poppins* and the work of Wes Anderson will be used to illuminate the trajectory of intermedial filmmaking in which the jarring juxtapositions of early cinema came to be replaced by a more stable and homogenous form of intermediality.<sup>336</sup>

The most dramatic examples of intermedial filmmaking are found in the early twentieth century. This mixed media approach in fact mirrors the eclecticism of the film culture of the period. The work of André Gaudreault and Tom Gunning has demonstrated that early twentieth century film culture was highly eclectic in both its mode of exhibition and its content.<sup>337</sup> The vaudeville programmes, of which new moving image technologies were a part, put them in close proximity with other art forms and visual displays including magic tricks, prestidigitation and ventriloquism when their exhibition was frequently combined with live narration. The hybridity of their exhibition was mirrored in the content of early magic lantern shows where slides combined static and moving images. In this period early filmmakers not only frequently mixed different styles and mediums together, they were not compelled to fuse them into a seamless whole. The early films of Ferdinand Zecca, for example, convey a formal irregularity in their combinations of photorealist exterior footage, puppets, painted backgrounds and pantomime costumes. In Zecca's *Life and Passion of Christ* (1903), Mary and Joseph flee their plywood house amid the painted landscape of Bethlehem to emerge in a pastoral scene of live action location footage. In a later scene, Christ appears standing on water, which crashes about below his feet while a motionless painted matte hangs behind him depicting a desert landscape. A truly shocking composite moment occurs in J. Searle Dawley's *Rescued from an Eagle's Nest* (1908) when a real baby is seized by a puppet eagle clutching it in its claws as it flies past

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<sup>336</sup> Maurice Tourneur, *The Bluebird* (U.S.A.: Famous Players – Lasky, 1918); Karel Zeman, *Invention for Destruction* (Czechoslovakia: Zdeněk Novák, 1958); Robert Stevenson, *Mary Poppins* (Los Angeles, Walt Disney Productions, 1964).

<sup>337</sup> André Gaudreault, *Film and Attraction: From Kinematography to Cinema* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2011); Tom Gunning "The Cinema of Attraction[s]: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde." in *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed. Strauven Wanda (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt46n09s.27>.



the painted landscape. The raw distress of the baby combined with the clunky indifference of the eagle puppet compounds the bizarre sensation of two opposing schemas brought together.

Another example of the anarchic style of early intermedial film is Méliès' *The Merry Frolics of Satan* (1906) in which Satan's painted cardboard carriage is manned by a human driver and pulled across the heavens by a skeletal horse with a contorted puppet head.<sup>338</sup> Instead of a unified, painted vista, the skyline is partitioned into sections in which various orbs, stars and deities are sprinkled across its parallel planes. This partitioning of space is enhanced by the different forms (puppets, actors, drawings etc.) that protrude from different areas. Pasteboard shooting stars are flung across the foreground, close to the camera, obscuring our view of the carriage as it travels across a background of revolving planets and painted moons and stars, some of which come to life as human actors protrude from their lunar shells. As the carriage hurtles forward, its driver plucks a three-dimensional star from the night sky, an astrological object amenable to his grasp, unlike the painted stars and moons passing in front of and behind him. The driver then tips his hat to a woman adorned in Grecian robes, a muse-like figure that passes close to the camera, holding a star aloft. In this multi-planar skyscape various stylistic species jostle against one another, held together in the single yet multidimensional space of the frame. Another forceful display of the unrestrained intermediality of early filmmaking is Segundo Chomón's *The Panicky Picnic* (1909), where the viewer is subjected to a fast paced assault of aesthetic mayhem as they are faced with incessant, abrupt and uneven transitions between styles.<sup>339</sup> The opening of the film swiftly moves from a photorealist scene to a painted landscape. While the film begins with an exterior shot of a horse drawn carriage leaving the grounds of a grand house, in the next scene this photorealism has been forsaken for a painted backdrop. The differences in media are compounded by the differences in their representation of space. While the horses seem to fit the exterior location, in the artificial woodland scene the contrast between the girth and stature of the horses and the meagre, constrained space of the painted woodland scene is dramatic (Figures 12 and 13).

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<sup>338</sup> Georges Méliès, *The Merry Frolics of Satan* (France: Georges Méliès', 1906).

<sup>339</sup> Segundo de Chomón, *A Panicky Picnic* (France: Segundo de Chomón, 1909).



Figure 12: Location footage in *The Panicky Picnic* (Segundo de Chomón, 1909).



Figure 13: Interior forest scene in *The Panicky Picnic* (Segundo de Chomón, 1909).

The forest scene is relatively short lived as the picnic turns into a grotesque parade of infested food, yet the real climax occurs when the couple returns home and the film becomes

increasingly anarchic and fantastical. In the scenes inside their house, claymation, animation, stop motion, shadow theatre, puppetry and live action are thrown together. A plethora of stylistic transformations occur – in an instant shadow puppets are replaced by live actors and ethereal apparitions shown swirling in the fireplace swiftly take on material form and invade the room. *The Panicky Picnic* may be an extreme example of the melange of techniques found in early intermedial films, yet as the films of Méliès, Zecca and Chomón show, in the 1910s such juxtapositions of styles and forms of representation were not uncommon. Puppets, painted backdrops and live action nestle against each other, creating a jarring intermedial aesthetic.

Over the course of the twentieth century such capricious transitions between styles and media became more regulated. In 1918, Maurice Tourneur's *The Bluebird* showed how the disjointed intermedial aesthetic of the kind found in the films of Zecca, Chomón etc. could be stabilised in order to create a more cohesive whole. The world of *The Bluebird* is composed of contrasting scenes of fantastical architecture, shadow theatre and location footage (Figures 14 and 15). Through these meandering juxtapositions Tourneur creates a lyrical, intermedial patchwork where no one style or form is granted legitimacy over the others. Alongside live action footage Tourneur uses techniques borrowed from shadow theatre, such as the scene of the children flying over a skyline silhouette. Though full of aesthetic shifts, the world of *The Bluebird* is more coherent than the composite movies mentioned above. Its lyrical pacing means that the stylistic juxtapositions aren't so jarring and the fairy-tale narrative provides justification for the breaking of aesthetic rules. Nonetheless, the discrete styles and forms are bound together rather than blended together, each possessed of their own autonomy, bringing to life Lindsay's vision of a filmmaking practice that draws on the rich and diverse history of art and craft.



Figure 14: Photorealism in *The Bluebird* (Maurice Tourneur, 1918)



Figure 15: Shadow theatre in *The Bluebird* (Maurice Tourneur, 1918).

The tradition of creating fairly stable intermedial worlds was further advanced by the work of the mid-century Czech filmmaker Karel Zeman who created stylised assemblages of illustration, animation and live action footage. Such an assortment of mediums makes up the hybrid world of *Invention for Destruction* (1958). Here Zeman produces disconcerting aquatic collages in his underwater scenes by combining ‘raw’ objects of nature with puppetry, painting and animation. This is a distinctly non- hierarchical space, no form seems more ‘authentic’ or durable than the other. Waves of water undulate across painted backdrops as shoals of real fish swim haphazardly across the screen, followed by their animated counterparts. Multiple forms co-exist in the same world with their differences intact. In these playful moments the spectator witnesses a convergence not only of the real and the imaginary, but of static illustration, the

mobile animated image and the camera's capacity for photorealist representations of the natural world. Zeman's films are full of action and adventure, but their plots remain lacklustre compared to the visual spectacle that surrounds them.

The emphasis on plot and character in Walt Disney's *Mary Poppins* (1964) is an example of how these elements frame and tame the film's intermedial frivolity. Director Robert Stevenson created a fantastical world possessed of an intermedial incongruity in its use of painted backdrops, puppetry and animation combined with live action. In a partially animated sequence which begins just outside their local park, Mary, Burt and the two children (Jane and Michael) jump into a chalk drawing and are transported to a cartoon world in which the human characters retain their live action form. The juxtaposition of their human bodies against the cartoon landscape creates a composite aesthetic which is further enriched by the three-dimensional objects that populate the animated world and which magically gain sentience. *Mary Poppins* includes many muddled and muddling interactions between live action forms and animated figures. Human actors and cartoon characters relate to each other naturally, their formal differences unremarked upon, posing no dilemma for either party. Their parity is reinforced by the fact that the tangible, material world is vulnerable to the manipulations of animated characters – a real bouquet of flowers is presented to Mary Poppins by a cartoon journalist. The difference between the cartoon animals, puppets and human actors is palpable but not hierarchical and the combination of animation, three-dimensional set pieces, human actors and puppets creates a multi-layered aesthetic reminiscent of the work of Méliès and similarly devoid of consistency or logic. Yet the film's animism and multiformalism is housed within established conventions of genre and structure. While objects run wild and cartoon animals sing with live action humans, the plot follows a conventional structure, suggesting that this intermedial escapade was, in fact, merely a daydream.

Another example of the means by which film can house multiple styles whilst still creating a unified semblance which absorbs the contrast between different media is *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (1988). Here the diegetic world is established as a compound of animation and live action from the outset and narrative logic and aesthetic consistency wrap the different parts of the fictional world together.<sup>340</sup> The discrepancies between animation and live action are an

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<sup>340</sup> Robert Zemeckis and Richard Williams, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (United States: Touchstone Pictures, Amblin Entertainment and Silver Screen Partners, 1988).

integral part of the narrative so that their differences can be foregrounded and exploited for comic effect. The film also follows a consistent set of aesthetic rules. Unlike early films such as Chomón's intermedial spectacle *The Panicky Picnic*, there is nothing arbitrary about which parts of the film are animated and which are live action, the different elements are consistent; the cartoon characters remain cartoons throughout the film, the live action humans remain live action. There is a moment where the film loses its unity however, in a truly imaginative, liminal composite moment at the end of the film. Christopher Lloyd's character is revealed to be a cartoon in disguise, so that after he is run over by a bulldozer he staggers about in flattened plasticine form, fills himself with gas and expands like a latex balloon, then stands upright as a human-cartoon hybrid. However, even this twist is justified by narrative logic and unfolds in an orderly fashion, surprising the audience but without undermining the totality of the film. Children's films often house a multiplicity of styles or forms while still maintaining their cohesiveness such as *The Muppet Movie* (1979), *Labyrinth* (1986) and *The Never Ending Story*. (1984).<sup>341</sup> In these examples the diegetic world exists as an orderly compound that is organised in such a way that the differences in art forms and styles are contained and stabilised. This compound approach to intermediality can serve an allegorical function as in *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) where Guillermo Del Toro depicts a surreal fairy-tale underworld of labyrinths and grotesque creatures to serve as an allegory of the irrational brutality of Franco's Spain. In all these examples the stylistic or formal variations are bound together either by aesthetic continuity or narrative logic. Such intermedial shifts do not threaten the sense of the film as a totality, they do not display the jarring aesthetic juxtapositions found in *The Panicky Picnic* or *The Merry Frolics of Satan*.

The later films of Wes Anderson further exemplify the taming of early intermedial impulses in pursuit of an aesthetics of commensurability. Anderson's films are known for their intermedial aesthetic and frequently showcase illustration, mattes and models. Yet these different mediums are presented within a highly regulated environment, a far cry from the anarchic energies of intermedial filmmaking in the silent era. The intermedial aesthetic of films such as *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012) and *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014) are pristinely orchestrated and, despite their intermediality, the aesthetic unity of these diegetic worlds is profound; models, miniatures

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<sup>341</sup> James Frawley, *The Muppet Movie* (U.K. and U.S.A.: Henson Associates and ICT Films, 1979); Jim Henson, *Labyrinth* (U.K. and U.S.A.: Eric Rattray, 1986) and *The Never Ending Story* (West Germany and U.S.A.: Neue Constantin Film, Bavaria Film, Producers Sales Organisation, 1984).

and live action exteriors are held together in a stable whole.<sup>342</sup> Anderson employs techniques including compositional centring, symmetry and cohesive colour palettes in order that every frame is in harmony with itself and the totality of the film. The increased precision of Anderson's films is startling, the ramshackle style of *Bottle Rocket* (1996) and *Rushmore* (1998) have been forsaken in favour of a sleek, controlled and totalising aesthetic.<sup>343</sup> David Nordstrom makes a convincing argument that Anderson's work increasingly adopts elements of fascist aesthetics (though he makes it clear that in making this argument he is not calling Anderson a fascist). In an article titled 'The Life Fascistic' Nordstrom describes the regressive aesthetics of *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*, drawing on Sontag's definition of fascist aesthetics which display a utopian physical perfection.<sup>344</sup> Nordstrom critiques the film's militarised control and commodity fetishism, revealing the dark side of Lindsay's argument for the vitality of objects on screen. In Anderson's films objects are indeed elevated and people become things, just as Lindsay surmised, but rather than an animated, enchanted and lively universe, Anderson displays a 'morbid love' of objects; 'objects are exalted into fascinating characters and characters are reduced to boring objects. Again we encounter a propensity of fascist aesthetics: The turning of people into things'.<sup>345</sup> Observing the orderly diegetic worlds of these films the contrast between Anderson and composite filmmakers such as Zecca, Méliès and Tourneur is clear. Anderson's films also contrast with the more stable aesthetic of Zeman's films. Zeman's intermedial assemblages are more cohesive than the anarchy of Zecca et al, yet they still contain the possibility for surprise, they elicit an atmosphere of instability and play. In contrast, Anderson's display an aesthetics of assimilation rather than one of risk and playfulness. While the intermedial films of the silent era are often characterised by a sense of incommensurability, Anderson's films exude an aesthetics of profound consistency; models, mattes and live action are made to blend together seamlessly. The bumpy synergy of Méliès' work has been superseded by Anderson's frictionless convergence, the culmination of a

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<sup>342</sup> Wes Anderson, *Moonrise Kingdom* (U.S.A.: American Imperial Pictures and Indian Paintbrush, 2012); Wes Anderson, *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (U.S.A. and Germany: Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2014).

<sup>343</sup> Wes Anderson, *Bottle Rocket* (U.S.A. Columbia Pictures, 1996), Wes Anderson, *Rushmore* (U.S.A.: Touchstone, 1998).

<sup>344</sup> Wes Anderson, *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* (U.S.A.: Touchstone, 2004).

<sup>345</sup> David Nordstrom, "The Life Fascistic: Fascist Aesthetics in the Films of Wes Anderson", The High Hat [http://www.thehighhat.com/Nitrate/006/Life\\_Nordstrom.html](http://www.thehighhat.com/Nitrate/006/Life_Nordstrom.html). (no publication date given).

tendency in film history to erase the differences between different art forms and techniques in order to create a world where nothing is at odds.

### **Lindsay's intermediality and the 'post-medium condition'**

Viewed today, Lindsay's argument in support of a porous relationship between film and other art forms, which once seemed so anachronistic, now appears prescient, and it is modernist claims regarding medium specificity that appear dated. While the wild intermediality of early filmmaking was tamed over the course of the twentieth century a different mode of intermedial anarchy has arisen in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The 1960s saw the birth of a 'post-medium condition' in the field of art, a condition first theorised by Rosalind Krauss in her essay *A Voyage on the North Sea*.<sup>346</sup> For Krauss, the decline of medium specificity was, ironically, prompted by the extreme formalism of a Greenbergian high modernism which pushed painting to its physical limit, thus reducing the concept of an artistic medium to the status of an 'unworked physical support'.<sup>347</sup> This redefinition of what a medium is led to the dissolution of the boundaries between different forms as well as the conventions that had comprised their discrete histories. The bare materialism of this post-medium condition is rejected by Krauss for whom a medium is never merely a technical support. Krauss sees each medium as shaped by the generations that came before it; a medium is not a given material utensil, but a product of the artistic workings and re-workings that have occurred over history. Over the course of the past fifty years artistic mediums have broken free from the constraints of any such inheritance as well from the strictures of formal categorisation.

Rather than segregation and distinction, it is the combination of disciplines and techniques that defines the contemporary moment. This shift can be seen in the mixed media practices that came to prominence in the 1960s with the work of such figures as Andy Warhol and Jean Tinguely, which called into question the strict demarcations between different formal

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<sup>346</sup> While Lindsay's intermedial imagination has a new relevance today it is important to note that his argument was produced within a drastically different moment in the history of media to the one we find ourselves in today. Lindsay's encounter with cinema occurred before the conventions of American narrative cinema were firmly established and his work is arguably best thought of in terms of a "pre-medium" rather than "post-medium" condition.

<sup>347</sup> Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea*.



traditions. Likewise, the multimedia practices of more contemporary artists such as Bruce Nauman, Bill Viola and Susan Hiller continue this tradition, using the affordances of digital technology to combine time based media with live performance and visual effects. The critic Jörg Heiser describes this trend as the rise of “super-hybridity.”<sup>348</sup> Emerging out of the discipline of post-colonial studies, the term hybridity (when used to describe an artistic trend) refers to a situation in which the borders between disciplines have broken down amidst the rampant eclecticism of the digital era. The digitised, globalised condition of the contemporary world has intensified the circulation of different cultural forms and our access to them, to a point which renders medium specificity null and void. The internet has massively accelerated contact between cultures, forms and artistic practices, revealing the current moment to be one of hybridity, bricolage, and intertextuality. Today texts, images and sounds move freely across digital platforms and devices whilst being constantly modified and re-contextualised. Media theorists Grusin and Bolter argue that this re-appropriation of techniques and forms is in fact inherent in the definition of a medium: “A medium is that which remediates. It is that which appropriates the techniques, forms, and social significance of other media and attempts to rival or refashion them in the name of the real.”<sup>349</sup> This concept of a medium prevails today as the ‘affordances’ of different media (a term which itself has migrated across disciplines, originating in the field of art and design) are always being redefined.

Yet while digital technology can bring together things which were considered fundamentally different and disparate, it is premised on an underlying digital commensurability as much as it is in the capacity for greater proximity between different forms and practices. Lindsay’s work serves as a much needed reminder to look beyond a purely digital tinkering in order to embrace outmoded and unfashionable artistic practices alongside newer developments. He approached film as a medium which could only be made more dynamic were it permitted to become truly intermedial and produced a theory of film that refused to police the boundaries between film and other, older art forms. Lindsay himself embodied this intermedial approach; he was, after all, a poet writing about film. His expansive aesthetic imagination no longer seems naïve or anachronistic, instead his work speaks to the eclecticism of the present moment in its

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<sup>348</sup> Jörg Heiser, Ronald Jones, Nina Power, Seth Price, Sukhdev Sandhu and Hito Steyerl, “Analyse This”, *Frieze*, 1 September 2010, <https://www.frieze.com/article/analyze>

<sup>349</sup> Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2000), 65.

suggestion of the possibility of digital, craft and industrial practices developing alongside each other, responding to and shaping one another in a spirit of aesthetic reciprocity rather than conquest. This playful mode of making which is material as well as digital is the subject of the following chapter.

## **Chapter 7: Community Filmmaking and the Importance of the Imagination**

### **Introduction**

When read in the context of his broader utopian programme, Lindsay's arguments for a widespread culture of amateur fictional filmmaking exemplify the value he placed on creativity and the right of all Americans to exercise their imaginations. Lindsay's commitment to the imagination is most fully expressed in his 1912 essay 'The New Localism', though *The Art of the Moving Picture* also emphasises the need to revive the imagination of the masses. This chapter will explore the role of creativity in Lindsay's utopian thought and trace these ideas within his film theory, looking closely at Lindsay's vision of a culture of fictional community filmmaking. The work of Charles Tepperman and Patricia Zimmermann, among others, are used to demonstrate how the radical potential of American local and amateur filmmaking was, counter to Lindsay's hopes, increasingly standardised and professionalised over the twentieth century and largely confined to nonfiction genres. The second section of the chapter considers Lindsay's ideas regarding community filmmaking in the context of the present day, arguing that his emphasis on the imaginative capacities of the masses gains relevance in a contemporary moment in which technological innovations have expanded the field of amateur media production. It argues that Lindsay's utopian media aspirations can be seen to foreshadow alternative media practices such as participatory video which utilise audiovisual technology to enable the self-representation of marginalised cultures.

### **Democratising creativity – Lindsay's "New Localism"**

In a series of essays written between 1909 and 1925 (including 'Art and the Church' (1909), 'The New Localism' (1912) and 'Springfield: A Walled Town' (1921)), Lindsay set out a utopian vision of small town life in America. In this imaginary future, the country was no longer dominated by giant metropolitan centres, but was instead made up of a plethora of small, radically democratic towns and villages. Fundamental to this utopian vision is Lindsay's profound commitment to the democratisation of creative activity and the right of ordinary Americans engage in artistic practices, a situation described by Ann Massa as born out of 'the

correlation of creativity and everyday life'.<sup>350</sup> He conceived of the imagination in relation to the public good and argued that the tastes, values and customs of ordinary citizens should inform the political, social and cultural direction of the nation. For too long, Lindsay argued, 'high' culture had excluded the American public. The myriad of folk cultures and traditions that comprised the nation had been dismissed and the development of an American artistic milieu had been stifled under the custodianship of cultural institutions which were governed by elitist European values:

Aesthetically speaking, we are a mob on the prairie, and a despotism in cultured circles. The creative power represented by the Art Institute, Chicago, or the "International Studio," or the Cathedral of St. John, Morningside Heights, or the Metropolitan Museum, is fertilizing and helpful within a certain pale, but is European.<sup>351</sup>

Lindsay was disdainful of the fact that even the American avant-garde had succumbed to the influence of Europe: 'The taste of the most radical, America-worshipping painters in New York is European.'<sup>352</sup> Lindsay believed that American democracy was in a corrupt, stale state, and in *The Art of the Moving Picture* he concluded that its ills were caused precisely by this lack of folk-imagination:

Our democratic dream has been a middle-class aspiration built on a bog of toil-soddened minds. The piles beneath the castle of our near-democratic arts were rotting for lack of folk-imagination.<sup>353</sup>

By democratising art and creativity Lindsay hoped to unleash the talents and traditions of the 'mob' of the prairie in order to create a dynamic American culture. Doing so would not just revive American art, it would rejuvenate civic life.

In his essays, as well as in personal correspondence, Lindsay outlined a vision of civic life centred on the revitalisation of the imagination. In a letter to the poet Louis Untermeyer in 1917

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<sup>350</sup> Massa, *Fieldworker*, 41.

<sup>351</sup> Lindsay, "New Localism", 5.

<sup>352</sup> Lindsay, "New Localism", 5.

<sup>353</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 69.

Lindsay described how his utopian project was not premised on ‘an ethical or argumentative basis’ nor was it founded in educating the populace in the scientific principles of architecture or infrastructure. Rather his utopian nation was based in strengthening and expanding the imaginative capacities of the general population. ‘If a high imagination be once accepted as the first requisite in citizenship’, he argued, ‘and be made the main fact of citizenship, the rest will follow’.<sup>354</sup> His commitment to the imagination is further evidenced in this statement:

I hold that men may be transformed by their imaginations... I think this city could be transformed, not by being a bit better or more pious but simply by dreaming, as fervently as one hundred poets you and I know.<sup>355</sup>

In ‘The New Localism’ Lindsay argued for a programme which he called ‘the Democratic Fine Arts’, wherein the masses, unmoved by elitist European values, are positioned as the engine of a new American aesthetic regime. American culture would no longer belong solely to the educated classes for whom art and beauty had become abstract ideals, instead taste and creative labour would belong to everyone. Positioning creativity at the centre of municipal life would end the homogeneity of modern culture, enabling local people would be able to build a vibrant local artistic traditions and shared customs:

Every little place will soon have its special calendar of out-door festivals. The Country High-School, here and there, will produce not only its rhymer, but its poet, its orchestra of real composers, its own succession of sages, painters, Sibyls, its corn-field song, its festival insignia.<sup>356</sup>

While the U.S. had imported a classical cultural hierarchy from Europe, Lindsay was optimistic that the aesthetic disposition of the American village was ‘as yet unformed’.<sup>357</sup> While the residents of the towns and villages that made up the majority of America had been dismissed by the upper classes, Lindsay believed that the very fact that they had not been initiated into the

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<sup>354</sup> Vachel Lindsay to Louis Untermeyer, December 21 1917, Vachel Lindsay, *Letters of Vachel Lindsay*, ed. March Chenetier with a foreword by Nicholas Cave Lindsay (New York: Burt Franklin & Co, 1979, 158.

<sup>355</sup> Lindsay to Louis Untermeyer, December 21 1917, *Letters*, 158.

<sup>356</sup> Lindsay, “The New Localism”, 4.

<sup>357</sup> Lindsay, “New Localism”, 5.

world of art and culture would enable an original and diverse cultural discourse to blossom which was forever in flux, guided by the changing lives and tastes of the mass population. This situation was, for Lindsay, inherently American. Writing about the necessity for unique American art forms in his 'New Localism' essay, he stated that just as the American constitution was continually revised and amended, so Lindsay's constitution of American art would be made, and continually remade:

It will be a summary of experience. The Constitution of American Art will come into existence from a thousand waves of local opinion about what is beautiful. It will, of course, be unwritten... We will have no more expatriated Sargeants and Whistlers elected for our kings by Europe. We will choose our own. Our Art Constitution will go on struggling with every problem of Aesthetics, with reference to the groping, hesitating tastes of the common man, just as our government perpetually struggles with the questions of justice and freedom as applied to the common man. Our political constitution never ceases to grow, and our art constitution will not cease to grow.<sup>358</sup>

Lindsay's imagined constitution of American art reveals that Lindsay believed that in a truly democratic society, culture is continually changing and aesthetic standards would be continually in dispute, given they would be rooted in the needs and desires of an ever changing population. It is this dynamic concept of American mass culture that he situates in opposition to European high culture.

In order to realise this vision, American culture must unleash the untapped traditions and tastes found in towns and villages across the nation: 'There ought to be Art war-cries, truisms, paradoxes, epigrams, flying about among the people, American enough to be shouted from the stump, to color the caucus'.<sup>359</sup> In Lindsay's project to democratise American art, the tastes of the masses would gain new legitimacy and their own artistic talents would also be valued and encouraged. Lindsay demanded that Americans be free to realise their latent creative drives

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<sup>358</sup> Lindsay, "New Localism", 6.

<sup>359</sup> Lindsay, "New localism," 7.

which could liberate them from the mechanised conformity of modern life. Lindsay associated creativity with autonomy and improvisation, which he saw as essential elements of human expression. He admired politicians who could speak off the cuff, praising Lincoln, for example, as someone who ‘improvised and chanted/Threw away his speech, and told tales out of school’.<sup>360</sup> The capacity for spontaneity, improvisation and ingenuity were anathema to what he saw as the ‘clockwork splendour’ of modernity as it was currently practiced in America. In order to create a new society which existed as a blend of original and diverse aesthetic forms, all people should be free to become painters, architects, novelists etc.

Lindsay displays great faith in the imaginative capacities of ordinary people and is excited at the possibility of unleashing the dormant talents of the nation. This commitment to a truly democratised culture is found in arguments made by his peers including the dramatist Percy MacKaye and the Southern politician Robert Love Taylor, both of whom are referenced in Lindsay’s work. Love Taylor served as the governor of Tennessee (1887-1891) and was later elected as a senator (1907-1912). A populist figure, Taylor was known to play his fiddle on the campaign trail where he would encourage the audience to dance. Taylor encouraged a revival of what Ann Massa terms ‘the domestic arts’, by which he meant customs such as barn dances, amateur dramatics, candy pulling and live music.<sup>361</sup> In his poem ‘Preface to Bob Taylor’s Birthday’, Lindsay described Taylor as ‘the livest and greatest new prophet in America’.<sup>362</sup> Lindsay found a kinship with Taylor given his desire to transform Tennesseans into ‘artists, poets, musicians, architects...statesmen, prophets, saints and sibyls’.<sup>363</sup> The ideals of Lindsay’s ‘New Localism’ are also found in the work of Percy MacKaye, who Lindsay references in *The Golden Book of Springfield* as influential on one of the town’s foremost citizens. MacKaye argued for new creative traditions based on an Athenian model of civic engagement with the

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<sup>360</sup> Vachel Lindsay, “Babylon, Babylon, Babylon The Great” in *The Collected Poems of Vachel Lindsay* (New York: Macmillan, 1925), 399.

<sup>361</sup> Massa, *Fieldworker*, 103.

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Vachel Lindsay, “Preface to Bob Taylor’s Birthday” quoted in Tyler Hoffman, *American Poetry in Performance: From Walt Whitman to Hip Hop* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 79.

<sup>363</sup> Massa, *Fieldworker*, 103.

arts, which would become ‘temples of the communal imagination’.<sup>364</sup> However in the 1915 *The Art of the Moving Picture* Lindsay displays a less optimistic vision of the future of America than that which he had put forth in 1912. He laments that within the alienated conditions of modern America ordinary people were unable to dream or create, describing the modern subject as lacking a ‘spark’ in his brain.<sup>365</sup> Despite adopting a more cautious tone when writing about the future of American society, *The Art of the Moving Picture* is still fuelled by a utopian energy, and Lindsay held onto the hope that filmmaking could play a powerful role in reviving the imaginative energies of the nation.

### **Fictional Community Filmmaking in *The Art of the Moving Picture***

In the first edition of *The Art of the Moving Picture*, published in 1915 (three years after his ‘New Localism’ essay), Lindsay’s commitment to creating an egalitarian cultural milieu is still strongly felt. Just as he argued for local people to become painters, architects and poets in ‘The New Localism’, in this first book of film theory he imagines that amateur filmmaking can become a dynamic force in civic life. Lindsay had an ambitious vision for amateur and community filmmaking. Rather than an individual or familial pursuit focused on domestic life, he encouraged the development of local amateur filmmaking enterprises which would create films which were ‘written, acted, filmed, and made a real part of the community life’.<sup>366</sup> These groups could draw on talent from high schools and local amateur dramatic societies:

The plays could be acted by the group who, season after season, have secured the opera house for the annual amateur show. Other dramatic ability could be found in the high-schools. There is enough talent in any place to make an artistic revolution, if once that region is aflame with a common vision.

There are two important components to Lindsay’s vision of American amateur moviemaking. Firstly, as well as being a communal activity it is a highly localised one which helps consolidate regional identities and works against a homogeneous national culture. Lindsay

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<sup>364</sup> Percy Mackaye, *Community Drama: Its Motive and Method of Neighborliness* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1917), 12-13.

<sup>365</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 169.

<sup>366</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 155.



suggests that amateur groups could create films based on local events and well known figures. He imagines filmmakers could mirror the approach taken by the poet Edgar Lee Masters' in his *Spoon River Anthology* which immortalised and mythologised life in a small Midwestern town, about which he wrote, 'Edgar Lee Masters looked about him and discovered the village graveyard, and made it as wonderful as Noah's Ark'.<sup>367</sup> In his poetry, Lindsay himself had revealed everyday America to be teeming with mythological weight and enchanted forces, believing that 'there are triumphs every day under the drab monotony of an apparently defeated town: conquests worthy of the waving of sun-banners'.<sup>368</sup> Likewise, Lindsay believed every place had its own idiosyncrasies, cliques, histories and dramas which could serve as the basis for fictionalised depictions of local life, suggesting a film on these local topics that could be titled *Seven Old Families, and Why They Went To Smash*. Every town, he argued, had subjects worthy of attention:

It has its Ministerial Association, its boys' secret society, its red-eyed political gang, its grubby Justice of the Peace court, its free school for the teaching of Hebrew, its snobbish chapel, its fire-engine house, its milliner's shop. All these could be made visible in photoplays as flies are preserved in amber.<sup>369</sup>

Secondly, despite this reference to 'preservation', Lindsay's vision of amateur filmmaking is fictional and often fantastical. Rather than local filmmakers documenting local life, they should dramatize it. Edgar Lee Masters did not look at the Midwest with a view to objectivity, instead he made the village 'wonderful'. Likewise, Lindsay imagines an aesthetically ambitious mode of filmmaking that could be based in the daily deeds of townspeople, but that was at the same time dramatic and where, 'photographic realism is splendidly put to rout'.<sup>370</sup> Lindsay had been disappointed by the locally made film *The Mine Owner's Daughter* which had been shot in Springfield, and starred townspeople (including a debutante and the son of a Governor), and was funded by the local commercial association. Lindsay described it as 'at best a mediocre

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<sup>367</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 154.

<sup>368</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 154.

<sup>369</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 154.

<sup>370</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 154.

photoplay'.<sup>371</sup> Instead he hoped that one day local films would be far more ambitious and outlandish. For example, he outlines his idea for a mystical, supernatural film in which a wonderous star descends on Springfield from the heavens:

The clouds form round it in the approximation of a circle. Now there becomes visible a group of heads and shoulders of presences that are looking down through the ring of clouds, watching the star, like giant children that peep down a well. The jewel descends by four sparkling chains, so far away they look to be dewy threads of silk. As the bright mystery grows larger it appears to be approaching the treeless hill of Washington Park, a hill that is surrounded by many wooded ridges.<sup>372</sup>

Here Lindsay is not only suggesting that local filmmaking groups produce films based on local events, but is making the far more audacious demand that they should create their own filmic spectacles, taking inspiration from the grandeur of contemporary cinematic triumphs:

The producer, while not employing armies, should use many actors and the tale be told with the same power with which the productions of *Judith of Bethulia* and *The Battle Hymn of the Republic* were evolved.<sup>373</sup>

These enterprises could be funded by 'local coteries representing their particular region'.<sup>374</sup> However, while he hoped for spectacular films which would benefit from local investment, Lindsay was aware that large budgets and the Hollywood techniques they make possible may not be readily available to small, amateur organisations. His expansive aesthetic imagination enabled him to propose that these local groups could utilise the techniques of Chinese theatre such as he had witnessed on stage at the Illinois Country Club. He suggests that these 'primitive representational methods' be utilised by amateur filmmakers. Lindsay had seen the play *The Yellow Jacket* performed by the Coburn Players (an acting troupe founded by the

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<sup>371</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 106.

<sup>372</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 106.

<sup>373</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 106.

<sup>374</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 153.

actor Charles Coburn who specialised in Shakespearean productions) in which the set was created through the use of symbolism:

Let the enthusiast study this westernized Chinese play for primitive representative methods. It can be found in book form, a most readable work. It is by G.C. Hazelton, Jr., and J.H. Benrimo. The resemblance between the stage property and the thing represented is fairly close. The moving flags on each side of the actor suggest the actual color and progress of the chariot, and abstractly suggest its magnificence. The red sack used for a bloody head has at least the color and size of one. The dressed-up block of wood used for a child is the length of an infant of the age described and wears the general costume thereof. The farmer's hoe, though exaggerated, is still an agricultural implement...The two flags used for a chariot, the bamboo poles for oars, the red sack for a decapitated head, etc., were all convincing, through a direct resemblance as well as the passionate acting. They suggest a possible type of hieroglyphics to be developed by the leader of the local group.<sup>375</sup>

This passage, with its suggestion that mundane objects be used to create the diegetic world, is reminiscent of Lindsay's description of *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* in the introduction of the 1922 edition of *The Art of the Moving Picture* where he argued that *Caligari* is a more useful film for aspiring filmmakers than Griffith's *Intolerance* since it shows a more accessible method of world building:

Griffith is, in *Intolerance*, the ungrammatical Byron of the films, but certainly as magnificent as Byron, and since he is the first of his kind I, for one, am willing to name him with Marlowe...But for technical study for Art Schools, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* is more profitable. It shows how masterpieces can be made, with the second-hand furniture of any attic.<sup>376</sup>

In his endorsement of the use of symbolic techniques found in Chinese theatre, his praise for the 'second-hand furniture' and handmade style of the sets of *Caligari*, Lindsay advocates a

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<sup>375</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 153.

<sup>376</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 20.

rare form of filmmaking in which everyday objects and pasteboard sets full of what he terms ‘drawing-in-motion’ are used to build fantastical worlds and tell dramatic tales. Yet although Lindsay advocates the use of second hand furniture and inanimate objects, his aesthetic ambitions for amateur filmmaking organisations were high, and he believed that such groups could develop innovative artistic techniques to make highly esteemed films:

The spirit that made the Irish Players, all so racy of the soil, can also move the company of local photoplayers in Topeka, or Indianapolis, or Denver. Then let them speak for their town, not only in great occasional enterprises, but steadily, in little fancies, genre pictures, developing a technique that will finally make magnificence possible.<sup>377</sup>

Here Lindsay encapsulates his hopes that his vision for an American cultural landscape made up of diverse, regional and local cultures, revealing that the utopian ideals of ‘The New Localism’ still held significance for him in 1915. These values shaped his understanding of the potential of amateur filmmaking to become a significant cultural force which could challenge the standardised nature of mass culture. Rather than approaching amateur film as an individual pursuit through which to enter into the realm of Hollywood filmmaking or as a means of capturing domestic life through the production of home movies, Lindsay grasped hold of amateur film as a collective, public enterprise through which Americans could unleash their imaginative powers.

### **American Amateur Filmmaking in the Early Twentieth Century**

While in 1922 Lindsay hoped for the flourishing of an egalitarian and highly imaginative culture of local American filmmaking, early twentieth century amateur filmmaking failed to live up to many of his aspirations. Firstly, Lindsay’s egalitarian hopes for amateur film were thwarted given the prohibitive cost of filmic production. Lindsay was arguing for a mass movement of amateur filmmaking in 1915, at a time when such an enterprise was far too expensive for the mass public to engage with and when amateur filmmaking was relegated to the upper classes. It wasn’t until the invention of 16mm reversal film in 1923 that the cost of amateur filmmaking (and the flammability of acetate-based film) was dramatically reduced, and even then it remained an elitist hobby, far from the egalitarian playground that he

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<sup>377</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 153.

envisioned. Nonetheless Lindsay's work preempted the formation of community filmmaking groups. To the contemporary reader, Lindsay's suggestion that amateur filmmaking should replicate the model of local amateur dramatic societies initially appears misjudged and anachronistic, but by the 1920s he was far from alone in this vision. In *The Art of the Moving Picture* Lindsay suggested that filmmaking collectives along the lines of the dramatic group The Irish Players could be set up and there is good evidence that these kinds of community filmmaking groups were indeed formed in the early decades of the twentieth century such as The Rochester Community Players, which evolved from a local theatre club.<sup>378</sup> As local filmmaking groups of this kind proliferated across the country, an Amateur Cinema League (ACL) was established in America in 1926, organised by the inventor and entrepreneur Henry Percy Maxim. Rather than setting up local film groups, it sought to support Americans to establish local movie clubs which then affiliated with the League.

However the suggestion that the model of amateur dramatics could serve as a model for amateur filmmaking misses a significant difference between the art forms – the high cost involved in the production of films.<sup>379</sup> Lindsay's suggestion as put forth in *The Art of the Moving Picture* that such local endeavours be funded by 'local coteries' is underdeveloped, and it's not clear how feasible this would have been, especially given the costs of filmmaking in 1915. In 1921 the critic Robert Allerton Parker noted that cost was still the main issue facing the Little Cinema movement, commenting that, for such an enterprise 'the expense would be enormous and the profits small'.<sup>380</sup> A partial list of members of the Rochester Players confirms their middle class provenance (a local businessman, a physician and a lawyer's wife).<sup>381</sup> However The Little Screen Players of Boston appear to have adopted a more egalitarian stance as described in an article from a 1927 edition of *Amateur Movie Makers* which is written in terms which could have been borrowed from Lindsay's 'The New Localism':

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<sup>378</sup> The Irish Players were a professional drama group affiliated with the Abbey Theatre in Dublin and had toured the United States in 1911-12. For more information on their world tour see Nicholas Grene and Chris Morash eds., *Irish Theatre on Tour* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2005).

<sup>379</sup> Charles Tepperman, *Amateur Cinema 1923-1960: The Rise of North American Movie Making* (California: University of California Press, 2015), 21.

<sup>380</sup> Robert Allerton Parker, quoted in Tepperman, *Amateur Cinema*, 23.

<sup>381</sup> Dwight Swanson, "Inventing Amateur Film: Marion Norris Gleason, Eastman Kodak and the Rochester Scene, 1921-1932." *Film History* 15, no. 2 (2003): 129. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3815505>.

it is possible to pick the average man and woman, the stenographer, school teacher, clerk, civil engineer and shopkeeper. The members of the Little Screen Players are ordinary folk whose time is not their own. If the moving pictures have so far been called the most democratic of the arts, they might also develop, in the future, as the most communal of the arts.<sup>382</sup>

Despite such hopes, most amateur enterprises were far from egalitarian, falling short of Lindsay's multicultural vision of America. In his 1908 YMCA lectures on 'The Composite Citizenship of America and the Races That Are Making America' as well as in 'The New Localism' and *The Golden Book of Springfield*, Lindsay imagines a society in which people from all different nations, ethnic and cultural backgrounds are creative actors in America. However Tepperman's research into membership of the ACL has found that, while African Americans were not banned from membership from the league, there is limited evidence of their participation.<sup>383</sup> Tepperman paints a picture of amateur filmmaking as a white, affluent pastime. This view has been complicated by recent research undertaken by archivist Jasmyn R. Castro, which has evidenced that African Americans were making home movies from the 1920s onwards. Black amateur filmmakers in the 1920s and 30s included the Baptist minister Soloman Sir Jones and the sleeping car train porter Ernest Bean.<sup>384</sup> The newly created African American home movie archive suggests a more diverse culture of amateur filmmaking outside of white dominated structures such as the ACL. However the fact that the league was predominantly white shows that Lindsay's vision of multicultural communal filmmaking did not immediately come to pass.

Secondly, in terms of regionalism, it is true that locally based filmmaking such as the production of Springfield's *The Mine Owner's Daughter* were a common practice in early cinematic culture. These films were made in rural areas and small towns by 'itinerant

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<sup>382</sup> Mina Brownstein, "Cinema Democracy", *Amateur Movie Making*, July 1927, quoted in Tepperman, 39.

<sup>383</sup> Tepperman, *Amateur Cinema*, 37.

<sup>384</sup> Castro created the African American Home Movie Archive to support research in this area and help to develop a more nuanced understanding of the African American community. The site is an aggregate of African American home movie collections from the early 1920s through the mid-1980s. <https://www.aahma.org/black-home-movie-index>

producers', they starred local residents and were exhibited at small town theatres.<sup>385</sup> In *Main Street Movies: The History of Local Film in the United States* (2018), Martin L. Johnson explores these local narrative films, terming them 'home talent movies' and arguing that they should be considered an alternative practice of moviemaking that can be understood as a response to the rise of the mass media. Just as Lindsay argued in *The Art of the Moving Picture*, Johnson asserts that the home talent film helped to solidify regional and local identities, creating geographically rooted films which counteracted the 'nationalisation of everyday life'.<sup>386</sup> Yet this localised form of filmmaking was already becoming standardised by the 1920s. Rather than creating unique films in different towns and villages, the itinerant producers circulating the nation began to remake the same scenario again and again, robbing this practice of its regional character. An example of this turn from originality to repetition is found in the career of Charles Tinsely, an amateur filmmaker from Corning, Iowa who had produced many original films in the mid-1910s but who subsequently spent two decades travelling through the Midwest continually remaking the same movie again and again.<sup>387</sup> Johnson's study concludes that regional cinema was unable to hold its own against an increasingly commercialised and institutionalised network of filmmaking, distribution and exhibition. While other regional cultural practices such as folk music persisted in the face of mass culture, Johnson's work points to the ultimate failure of a highly localised, idiosyncratic mode of filmmaking in the early twentieth century. This initial failure of film as a local or regional cultural form puts paid to Lindsay's hope that film could operate as a form of local cultural expression in the early twentieth century.

Thirdly, Lindsay's hopes for an aesthetically ambitious culture of amateur film did not come to pass. Lindsay had argued that amateur film should illuminate the aesthetic possibilities of the medium and inspire the film industry to be more daring and imaginative in its products. Such a relationship between amateur practices and a professional industry had already been successfully achieved by the 'Little Theatre' movement which had 'transformed' American theatre in the early twentieth century. According to Tepperman the movement 'emerged from a

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<sup>385</sup> Martin L. Johnson, *Main Street Movies: The History of Local Film in the United States* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2018), 86.

<sup>386</sup> Johnson, *Main Street Movies*, 79.

<sup>387</sup> Johnson, *Main Street Movies*, 77.

desire to develop a theatre that explored creative and aesthetic possibilities that had been ignored by the commercial theatre'.<sup>388</sup> Leading figures in American amateur cinema hoped to replicate this relationship, notably Roy Winton, Managing Director of the ACL, who believed that the film industry depended on the amateur to develop new filmmaking practices. He described the significance of amateur filmmaking to the film industry in an article in *Amateur Movie Makers* in 1926:

the art of cinema, failing a disciplining patronage, must look to its amateurs who are both artists and patrons.... the amateur brings the understanding of the artist without the artist's urge of bread-winning; he brings the detachment of the patron without the patron's power of direct discipline. From the amateur photoplay maker can come a broad standard for this art, a standard not necessarily 'high brow' and not inevitably purile, but a standard brought into being, as all worthwhile standards are, by a non-professional, on the one hand, and on the other, something more than a casual interest in the thing being evaluated.<sup>389</sup>

Two years later, in 1928, Winton continued his pleas for a more audacious approach to amateur film, issuing 'a direct appeal to League members to undertake filming that will be artistically significant'.<sup>390</sup> While less utopian in its mission than Lindsay's aesthetic project (and less emphatic in its communications), the ACL had expressed a similar commitment to encouraging originality in amateur film and its first stated objective was to 'Increase the pleasure of making home motion pictures by aiding amateurs to originate and produce their own plays'.<sup>391</sup> Likewise Lindsay's writing on amateur filmmaking is impelled by the importance of fictional filmmaking. He is at his most original and evocative in his descriptions of how amateur filmmakers could create fictional and even fantastical worlds both in their plots and in their techniques such as by using the tools of Chinese theatre as described earlier. Years before

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<sup>388</sup> Tepperman, *Amateur Cinema*, 27.

<sup>389</sup> Roy Winton, quoted in Charles Tepperman, *Amateur Cinema*, 26.

<sup>390</sup> Tepperman, *Amateur Cinema*, 193.

<sup>391</sup> *Amateur Movie Makers*, December 1926, Reprinted in Alan D. Kattelle, "The Amateur Cinema League and Its Films." *Film History* 15, no. 2 (2003): 238.



Winton appealed to the public for greater aesthetic ambition, Lindsay has already provided an outline for a local film in which a luminous star from the heavens descends into the town of Springfield, Illinois. This suggestion demonstrates that Lindsay possessed an ambitious vision of local filmmaking that did not seek to imitate the rules and formulas of mainstream filmmaking nor limit itself to the sphere of the home movie or documentary.

Tepperman's research into the amateur films listed as available for exchange in *Amateur Movie Makers* as well as those that were submitted to and nominated for the ten best films of the year, shows that early on in its development amateur filmmaking was largely focused on nonfiction genres including documentaries, scenic shorts and travelogues.<sup>392</sup> The privileging of nonfiction as the primary realm of amateur cinema was in evidence in the magazine's first issue that included a list of eight notable films available for exchange, of which only one was a fictional "photoplay".<sup>393</sup> Between 1946-1950 Tepperman has shown that the ACL's ten best lists were dominated by what he terms "record" films as opposed to "story" films at an average ratio of 83% to 17%. In 1946, reflecting on the work of the league, Winton concluded that amateur filmmaking was far less centred around the creation of fictional films (photoplays) than the production of nonfiction movies, 'It soon became clear that personal films were not, for the most part, to be photoplays'.<sup>394</sup> In its focus on home movies, American amateur filmmaking departed from Lindsay's vision of a tradition of fantastical, even celestial, community filmmaking and became increasingly confined to the private domains of travelogues and domestic life.

While publications such as those by the ACL spared the American amateur filmmaker the demands of originality and aesthetic innovation, they imposed on them the demands of technical professionalism and perfection. Despite their comparative rarity, one of the most widely seen amateur films of the 1920s was a fictional film made by the Rochester Players titled *Fly Low Jack and the Game* (1927).<sup>395</sup> The film was used as publicity material for Kodak's amateur filmmaking line and promoted widely through national road show tours,

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<sup>392</sup> Tepperman, *Amateur Cinema*, 40 and 190-191.

<sup>393</sup> Kattelle, "The Amateur Cinema League" and Its Films," 241.

<sup>394</sup> Tepperman, *Amateur Cinema*, 269.

<sup>395</sup> *Fly Low Jack and the Game* (Marion Gleason, 1927), cited in Tepperman, 39.

staffed by Kodak employees. Yet even as companies such as Kodak promoted amateur fiction films, evidence suggests that they did not expect the public to engage in the kind of fantastical world building or aesthetic experimentation that Lindsay had anticipated. Far from encouraging individual styles and creative freedom, Eastman Kodak published an accompanying book on how *Fly Low Jack and the Game* was made including cost saving tips, meant to highlight the lack of equipment required to create such a film. Rather than using the kinds of innovative staging techniques suggested by Lindsay, the booklet attempted to convey to the public that the film was far from arduous to produce, advertising the fact that ‘no sets were built’ and ‘no make-up was used’.<sup>396</sup>

The Amateur Cinema League also began publishing instructive manuals, beginning in 1932 with *Making Better Movies*, a text which went through three editions before being replaced by *The ACL Movie Book: A Guide to Making Better Films* in 1940.<sup>397</sup> In order to further lessen the strain on the amateur imagination, adverts for booklets of ready-made plots were listed in the pages of *Amateur Movie Maker*. The provision of such plots suggests that the magazine was founded on the assumption that for the layperson, the creative act of conjuring a plot was likely an arduous task. Such an assumption goes against Lindsay’s desire to unleash the creative impulse in all Americans. Far from an aesthetic realm free from the constraints of industrial production and institutional dogmas, Patricia Zimmermann’s work on amateur American filmmaking in the 1920s and 30s reveals how this marginal practice was ‘colonised’ by Hollywood norms and had its radical potential dramatically curtailed. Zimmermann’s research shows how the public discourse on amateur filmmaking framed the pastime as a mimetic exercise which bordered on the formulaic.<sup>398</sup> In magazines such as *American Cinematographer* the amateur filmmaker was urged to develop the skills required to make professional movies. Likewise, articles such as the 1939 piece in the magazine *Popular Science* titled ‘Home Movies: How to Shoot Them Like a Professional’ invariably conceptualised cinematic ‘perfection’ as synonymous with the codes of Hollywood filmmaking. Amateurs

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<sup>396</sup> Swanson, "Inventing Amateur Film", 130.

<sup>397</sup> Amateur Cinema League, *The ACL Movie Book: A Guide to Making Better Movies* (New York: Amateur Cinema League, 1940).

<sup>398</sup> Patricia Zimmermann, "Professional Results with Amateur Ease: The Formation of Amateur Filmmaking Aesthetics 1923-1940." *Film History* 2, no. 3 (1988): 268. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3815121>.

were advised to study professional films in order to copy their techniques including their compositional style as evidenced in this advice column on amateur film from *American Cinematographer* in 1929:

Look at your own latest cinematographic effort. Then in the theatre compare it with similar shots in the professional picture. It is not difficult. You shoot on the beach. You do not like it. Pick a picture that has beach shots in it. Look them over and see what the professional did to make his shots effective.<sup>399</sup>

Thus in the 1920s and 30s American amateur filmmaking turned toward professional mimicry rather than aesthetic innovation. Such a development negates both the lesson in cinematic experimentation which Lindsay hoped amateur films could teach Hollywood producers and the challenge to cultural standardisation which he imagined local filmmaking practices would offer. Instead, as Zimmermann has shown, amateur film served to support the assumed superiority and standardisation of a highly codified Hollywood style, thwarting Lindsay's hopes for an innovative and influential movement of fictional amateur filmmaking. Tepperman's research into the Amateur Cinema League has likewise evidenced the marginalisation of fiction filmmaking in favour of documentary, while Lindsay's concept of film acting an industrial folk art was thwarted by the high cost of film production, a barrier which has been somewhat broken down today with the advent of digital technology and user friendly platforms. However, while a culture of regional amateur filmmaking did not emerge in early twentieth century America, Lindsay rightly predicted the rise of American amateur cinema that emerged in the 1920s, and did so by some years. While his ideas were out of step with his time, his work anticipated the mass accessibility of amateur filmmaking today.

### **Amateur and Community Filmmaking Today**

The contemporary landscape of community filmmaking is far from uniform. Like any sphere of media production, it is composed of a variety of approaches which align with and diverge from Lindsay's ideas to greater and lesser degrees. Today two elements of Lindsay's vision of a thriving culture of local filmmaking can be said to have been realised. Firstly, the

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<sup>399</sup> William Stull, A.S.C., quoted in "Amateur Movie Making," *American Cinematographer*, August 1929, quoted in Zimmerman, "Professional Results", 271.

democratisation of filmmaking technology away from a Hollywood elite and into the hands of the masses, and secondly, the recognition that community filmmaking can be used to represent marginalised sensibilities and worldviews, acting as a counterforce to a centralised, standardised culture. Both the decentralisation of media and its accessibility can be said to have exceeded Lindsay's hopes. Conversely, Lindsay's vision of community fictional filmmaking has not come to fruition as fully and is made relevant today precisely by its apparent scarcity. Lindsay's vision of the mass accessibility of filmmaking technology was ahead of its time by some decades. While the introduction of reversible 16mm film in 1923 enabled a minority of wealthy Americans to adopt movie making as a hobby, it is the post-war period which is commonly understood to be the era in which filmmaking was democratised in the United States. In 1923 the Cine Kodak camera was expensive and cumbersome – it cost \$335 (over half the price of a new Ford car), weighed approximately seven pounds and had to be cranked by hand twice per second during filming.<sup>400</sup> Over the course of the twentieth century filmmaking equipment gained in accessibility both in terms of the lowering of financial barriers to participation and in terms of ease of use. A key development toward 'user-friendly' means of creating movies was the re-introduction of the Super 8 format in 1946 which was released amidst the rise of an American consumer culture focused on family and leisure.<sup>401</sup> This invention, Zimmermann argues, meant that cost and skill were no longer a barrier to entry.<sup>402</sup> Later in the century the invention of video enabled the amateur filmmaker to playback their footage immediately and did away with the need to pay (and wait) for the film to be developed. Sony's DV-2400 Video Rover was another step toward portable video recording, as was the lightweight portapak of the 1970s, a decade which also saw the release of the Betamovie camera and the JVC VHS format. As Zimmermann's work has shown, these inventions further helped to establish a culture of American home movie making.

The twenty-first century has seen Lindsay's utopian hopes for the democratisation of creativity far exceeded. User-friendly, largely affordable moving image technology, coupled with the

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<sup>400</sup> Rebekah Willett, "In the Frame: Mapping Camcorder Cultures", in Buckingham and Willett, eds., *Video Cultures: Media Technology and Everyday Creativity*, 2.

<sup>401</sup> Maija Howe, "The Photographic Hangover: Reconsidering the Aesthetics of the Postwar 8mm Home Movie" in Rascaroli, Young and Moynahan, eds., *Amateur Filmmaking*, 53.

<sup>402</sup> Zimmermann, "Reel Families", 22.

invention of Web 2.0, have transformed much of America's population into modern versions of the 'itinerant producers' of the early twentieth century. As the ritual of cinema-going diminishes, the experience of filmmaking expands, and the very technologies which deprive the cinema of its audience transform movie-goers into filmmakers. Films are now made on mobile phones and cheap DSLR cameras while user-friendly editing software such as iMovie often come 'bundled' as standard with the purchase of a laptop. Amateur film festivals and competitions are now supplemented by video sharing sites such as Youtube and Vimeo. Additionally, the larger discourse around amateur filmmaking is now far more accessible and mainstream – courses, degrees, handbooks, websites and film festivals proliferate.

Although Lindsay's hope for an American cinema based in regional cultures did not come to pass, he rightly identified the possibility for community generated media to create alternative public spheres that work against an increasingly standardised culture. Over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries the dominance of a global media, monopolised by corporate interests, has been met with various challenges in the form of community media practices. Media theorist Kevin Howley describes community media as founded in a desire to 'supplement, challenge or change the operating principles, structures, financing and cultural forms and practices associated with dominant media'.<sup>403</sup> Although he did not use such terminology, Lindsay was quick to recognise that film could indeed be used to make space for worldviews, traditions and sensibilities which were at odds with the dominant ideology of American modernity, without naming it as such. Rather than referring to alternative media practices Lindsay thought in terms of localised cultures operating against national standardisation and of a culture of democratic arts which was always evolving. In this regard his hopes for community filmmaking are embodied in the contemporary 'participatory video' movement. Developed in the field of social and community development participatory video utilises audiovisual technology as a tool to enable the self-representation of marginalised or maligned cultures and sensibilities in order to build what Jaqueline Shaw terms 'expressive agency'.<sup>404</sup> While there is no common definition of the term, E.J. Miln defines participatory

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<sup>403</sup> Kevin Howley ed., *Understanding Community Media* (Los Angeles and London: SAGE, 2010), 2.

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Jaqueline Shaw, "Emergent Ethics in Participatory Video: Negotiating the Inherent Tensions As Group Processes Evolve", *Area* 48, no. 4 (December 2016). <https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12167>

video as ‘the use of filmic practices to engage and co-produce a conversation/research with people according to their interest and potential’.<sup>405</sup> Miln argues that participatory video should be grounded in ‘emancipatory epistemologies’, driven by an awareness of the power dynamics that inform not only modes of representation, but also the production of knowledge. In a project co-delivered by Ariella Orbach at the Mapuche School of Filmmaking and Communication in southern Chile, audiovisual technology is conceptualised as a means for ‘self-representative knowledge-sharing by Indigenous communities’.<sup>406</sup> The project aimed to create ‘a communication strategy grounded in the Mapuche way of communicating while incorporating new technologies’.<sup>407</sup> Orbach et al. argue that in these contexts, video is not only an appropriate form of communication, but one which is itself appropriated by a culture which communicates through oral and physiological modes of expression which are beyond the limits of textual representation. This recognition of the legitimacy of different modes of expression aligns with Lindsay’s vision of a syncretic form of modernity in which an industrial sensibility exists alongside a diversity of cultural forms, including those of regional and rural provenance. The participatory video mode of filmmaking ideally operates through an egalitarian and collaborative creative process, which enables the audiovisual representation of a seemingly inexhaustible array of subject positions. As is to be expected, in practice the ideals of such an approach are beset by problems including power relations and social dynamics, further complicated by the introjection of expensive electronic equipment. However ‘user-friendly’ these may be, these devices nonetheless require a particular relationship to technology that is far from universal (an issue Lindsay failed to confront). Nonetheless, in its ideals, if not in practice, the participatory video movement encapsulates many of the utopian hopes for film’s place within modernity which Lindsay expressed in 1915.

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E.J. Miln, “Critiquing Participatory Video: Experiences From Around the World”, *Area* 48, no.4 (December 2016), 402. <https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12271>

<sup>406</sup> Ariella Orbach, Juan Rain and Roberto Contreras “Community Filmmaking As Research: (Re)Considering Knowledge Production Through the Camera's Lens”, *Development in Practice* 25, no.2 (2015), 479. 10.1080/09614524.2015.1029437

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Orbach, Rain and Contreras “Community Filmmaking”, 484.

While the participatory video movement illuminates the ways in which filmic technology can be put in the service of egalitarianism and diversity, it is missing a crucial element of Lindsay's utopian programme – the imagination. Scholarship on community filmmaking makes clear the marginalisation of the imagination in the field which is dominated by documentary or nonfiction projects. Many projects seem confined to addressing policy issues, development work or the need for self-representation.<sup>408</sup> The right to an imagination is not the central tenet of such approaches. In contrast Lindsay's work argues that community filmmakers be understood as creative, original and innovative. His argument that cinematic technology should be used in order to unleash the imaginations of the mass population is perhaps his most important, if least prophetic, idea regarding amateur film.

The history of early amateur filmmaking reveals how swiftly the collaborative and inventive possibilities which Lindsay imagined for community filmmaking were foreclosed. The attention and optimism he bestowed on amateur film never found a central place within the discourse of film theory, however scholars of film history have begun to investigate amateur cinema as a serious topic of study, approaching amateur films as sociological texts that make a valuable contribution to cultural history.<sup>409</sup> Patricia Zimmermann's work has gone beyond this sociological approach to make the case that amateur films offer an oppositional aesthetic to dominant visual codes and can therefore be aligned with avant-garde practices. Yet the concept of a highly prized localised and communal practice of filmmaking remains largely unexplored. Lindsay's commitment to the democratisation of art is founded in his recognition of the utopian power of creativity and its ability to challenge the inevitability of present conditions, a power which is explored in both practical and theoretical terms in the next chapter.

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<sup>408</sup> See, for example, handbooks and compendiums such as Chris Atton, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Alternative and Participatory Media* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018); Buckingham and Willet eds., *Video Cultures: Media Technology and Everyday Creativity* and E.J. Milne, Claudia Mitchell and Naydene de Lange, eds., *The Handbook of Participatory Video* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2012).

<sup>409</sup> See Rascaroli, *Amateur Filmmaking: The Home Movie, the Archive, the Web* and Nicholson, *Amateur Film: Meaning and Practice*.

## **Chapter 8: The Utopian Power of Making**

### **Introduction**

The act of making is central to Lindsay's utopian vision of America. He believed that in order to overcome the alienations of modernity it was imperative to revive an American mode of agency that he saw in the founding fathers and the pioneers. Lindsay believed that such Americans had physically built a 'new world' and that modern technology now offered the chance for Americans to build the nation once again. This chapter will explore the role of making in Lindsay's work and how it manifests in his film theory. Firstly, it will consider Lindsay's romanticised concept of American agency put forward and the different relationship to making that America and Europe are ascribed by Lindsay and Georg Lukács respectively. Secondly, it will outline Lindsay's vision of a 'New Localism' based in the widespread engagement with the arts and crafts. Thirdly, it will explore Lindsay's celebration of elaborate film sets and his belief that in the midst of modernity such fantastical cinematic architecture could remind the American public of the possibility of re-making the world. While ostentatiously artificial film sets were to decline over the course of the twentieth century the chapter shows that an aesthetics of artifice has persisted throughout the history of film. This aesthetics of 'made-ness' is then contrasted with Vilém Flusser's theory of technical images that obfuscate their constructed nature. The chapter closes with a consideration of the politics of artifice and its relationship to made-ness, bringing Lindsay's utopian claims for artifice to



bear on the work of aesthetic theorists including Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukács, André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer.

### **American agency and Lindsay's 'New Localism'**

The theme of making runs throughout Lindsay's writings and underpins his highly idealised conception of the United States. Lindsay understood Americans to be a people deeply connected to their ability to build a new world, he believed America to be permeated with the mythology of the frontier and the pioneer spirit of figures including Daniel Boone and Johnny Appleseed. It's clear that the material construction of American society looms large in Lindsay's political imagination, when he writes, for example, that, 'The pioneer came west, and in the woods built his courtroom. He built beside it his school-house, his church, his town-hall, all of logs'.<sup>410</sup> In contrast to the mechanised state of the modern subject, Lindsay's American subject is defined by a capacity to build and create, as well as a proclivity for dreaming. In *The Art of the Moving Picture* the 'rampant speed-mania', which Lindsay criticised in American photoplay audiences, is not to be understood only within the phenomenological framework of the jolting hyperstimulation of modernity. Instead, Lindsay aligns this love of speed with a desire for forward movement, progress and the utopian project of the frontier. Americans, Lindsay implies, are unable to withstand inertia. In 1925 he wrote that America is 'literally a land of action and light.'<sup>411</sup> The creation of the United States is for him an instance in which the human subject was able to overreach the confines of a particular historical situation to bring a new milieu into being. His utopian programme is built upon the assumption that this agential legacy is bestowed to all future generations of Americans. In his work, the primary impulse of the American subject is one of poesis.

Lindsay's disparaging conception of Europe as a continent mired in the past is shared by Georg Lukács who, in the same year that Lindsay published *The Art of The Moving Picture* (1915), was undertaking his own theoretical enquiry into the ability of a particular cultural form to respond to the alienated conditions of modernity in *The Theory of the Novel*. Both texts attempt to identify how a cultural form (film and the novel, respectively) can enable the modern subject

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<sup>410</sup> Lindsay, "New localism", 5.

<sup>411</sup> Lindsay. *Progress and Poetry*, 187.

to overcome its alienated condition and realise its capacity to remake second nature. In *The Theory of the Novel* (written before his Marxist turn), Lukács' hopes for the redemption of modernity lie in the transformation that would occur when the constituent structures of society, once thought to be so solid, crumble like 'dry clay' as men overreach and challenge 'the sociological and psychological foundations of their existence'.<sup>412</sup> However, Lukács's text is mired in pessimism (the antithesis of Lindsay's American optimism) and plagued by the inherently conservative nature of Western Europe, which is 'so deeply rooted in the inescapability of its constituent structures that it can never adopt any attitude towards them other than a polemical one'.<sup>413</sup> While Lukács is filled with doubt as to whether Western Europe can provide the fertile ground on which to build a new world, it is exactly this utopian promise that Lindsay sees in America. America is idealised by Lindsay as the product of a rebellion against the confines of Western Europe. In Lindsay's analysis of the American Revolution the nation had asserted itself against centuries of European convention and overturned its stifling foundations. He imagines it to be a country forged from a profound discontent with convention, an imagined wilderness from which to create what we might call a new 'second nature'. Lindsay idealised America as a site of untamed nature and as a nation which was perpetually re-creating itself. This concept of America is indebted to the myth of the American frontier, so often conceptualised as the landscape of the epic, a mythic exterior offering the possibility of authentic experience. In the popular imagination the frontier was (and is) a land of self-reliance and self-actualisation, enacting the re-making of second nature from the raw material of first nature. In Frederick Jackson Turner's authoritative text *The Frontier in American Life* he outlines the implications of the closing of the frontier which signalled that loss of the possibility of encountering the world as the realm of legends, action and experience. Lindsay, however, never loses his belief in the possibility of meaningful labour and the capacity to remake social reality. In his utopian thought there is little distinction between the creation of a film and the creation of America. By 1925 in *The Progress and Poetry of the Movies* he goes so far as to suggest that American history can be understood as "a great photoplay to be controlled and conquered and made over again, made beautiful by the photoplay

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<sup>412</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 90.

<sup>413</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 145.

psychology.”<sup>414</sup> This concept of America as a nation which is perpetually remade resonates with Gilles Deleuze’s conceptualisation of America as a milieu defined by a perpetual desire for action and renewal which is reiterated throughout *Cinema 1*. For Deleuze the founding of the United States is the ‘fundamental film’ of American cinema, the material to which it perpetually returns. In Deleuzian terms Lindsay’s America can be thought of in relation to the action-image, a realm in which meaningful action can occur. According to Deleuze, the action-image is the relation between ‘milieux which actualise and modes of behaviour which embody’.<sup>415</sup> It is a domain in which human agency is effective and impactful, the creation of which he lauds as the universal triumph of American cinema.<sup>416</sup> Deleuze’s articulation of the action image corresponds with the imperative to transformation which, according to Lindsay, drives the whole trajectory of American history. The re-imagining of America advocated by Lindsay happens in the consciousness of the American people, but it is also a material project. Lindsay argues for a great democratic project which entails the physical rebuilding of the nation. He describes this as ‘landscape gardening on a tremendous scale’.<sup>417</sup> The agency Lindsay works to re-establish is premised on the capacity of the American subject to effect the transformation of the self and the environment both as an individual and as part of a civic entity. It is this conception of American agency which so readily lends its support to the romantic capitalist myths of self-creation and individual heroism and which is eventually perpetuated in an on-going quest for self-actualisation. In Lindsay’s work, however, the collective dimension of this mode of agency is privileged over individual self-discovery.

Lindsay’s “New Localism” is grounded in this mythical dynamic agency of American world-building. In this essay he argues for an American utopia in which civic culture is understood as the process through which the political, economic and social world is perpetually made and remade, both in its ideals and in its materiality. In Lindsay’s imagination, civic and political life are strongly tied to craftsmanship and creativity since they rely on the impulse to construct and

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<sup>414</sup> Lindsay, *Progress and Poetry*, 295.

<sup>415</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement Image* (London: The Athlone Press, 1992), 141.

<sup>416</sup> Deleuze, 145.

<sup>417</sup> Vachel Lindsay, “Vachel Lindsay Finds United States Innocent About Its Best Arts”, *Chicago Daily News*, Saturday January 7, 1928, Box 57, Vachel Lindsay Collection, Accession #6259-w, *Special Collections Depart., University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, Va.*

create. He instructs municipal leaders to take notice of young residents with artisanal leanings, imploring them to use such talents in the service of the town:

Village statesman: The person who most needs you is ten years old. He is maybe your son, or nephew or neighbor's child. You may not understand his bent, but if he is a maker of kites or water-wheels he is a Craftsman, he has the root of that matter in him. The public opinion on which you have a professional influence should be watching for his special bent, be it song or sculpture, and even now saying to him, "Prepare to serve your town."<sup>418</sup>

While water wheels have clear practical application, kites are made for splendour and reverie. The desire for colour, joy and the impulse for tinkering which he saw in his fellow Americans signalled to Lindsay an aptitude for improving civic life and a capacity for remaking the world. The utopian society he hoped to build depended on a craft renaissance which recognised the capacity for creativity in all Americans. As Lindsay termed it, his American utopia would require 'the putting of creative power into ninety million hands'.<sup>419</sup> The hands of the American people are a recurrent trope in Lindsay's work – the hands of the masses must be retrained, undoing the mechanised habits formed through contact with the pulleys and mechanisms of industrial machinery, reconnecting them with the 'sanctity of the work of the hand'.<sup>420</sup> The factory lever must be supplemented by the paintbrush, the hoe and the violin; the culture of handiwork and craftsmanship, which had been supplanted by mechanisation must not only be restored but expanded to become a truly egalitarian milieu.<sup>421</sup> In these declarations, the influence of William Morris, John Ruskin and the British Arts and Crafts movement on Lindsay's thought are clear. By the late nineteenth century, America had developed its own Arts and Crafts movement, albeit one which had lost its radical critique of capitalism. While Morris had made the transition from Romantic to Socialist in the 1880s, adopting a more radical analysis of capitalist modernity, Jackson Lears argues that the leaders of the American Arts and Crafts movement often recast craftsmanship and creativity as therapeutic

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<sup>418</sup> Lindsay, "New localism", 6.

<sup>419</sup> Lindsay, "The New Localism", 8.

<sup>420</sup> Lindsay, "Art and the Church", 3.

<sup>421</sup> Lindsay, "Art and the Church", 2.

enterprises.<sup>422</sup> As such, they merely served to ensure that alienated urban workers could adapt to their new conditions and better bear their own exploitation. While not a revolutionary socialist in the manner of Morris, Lindsay did propose a radical transformation of American society (and at times praised revolutionary action as in his poem, *Here's To The Mice*).<sup>423</sup> In his utopian vision, creativity and craftsmanship are not only vehicles of reform, but are part of a necessary restructuring of the relationship between the human subject and their labour. Creative action reveals to the ordinary American their latent capacity to re-make the world. For Lindsay, making is imbued with a potent energy, capable of revealing hidden potentialities in the present.

### **The Film Set**

In early twentieth century America, Lindsay witnessed the ways in which modern technology had proved itself able to rebuild the environment. As has been shown above Lindsay was captivated by the mythical, fanciful structures of the World's Fairs that he believed were evidence of the possibility of a fusion between playfulness and whimsy with the material might of industrial technology. His fantastical architectural aspirations were rooted in his Romanticism, a movement whose medievalism recovered an interest in castles, grottos, spires and labyrinths through a revival of Gothic architecture. Lindsay's architectural imagination is also infused with his Orientalism and his penchant for fairy tales, or as he termed it 'The J.M. Barrie and Lewis Carroll state of mind'.<sup>424</sup> Lindsay demanded a fairy-tale rebuilding of the public sphere and in *The Art of the Moving Picture* he suggests that cinema can remind Americans of the possibility of remaking the world by disseminating images of other realities. Magnificent film sets, or as he termed them "splendour" photoplays, were not merely pleasing aesthetically but were full of utopian promise. If filmmakers became more ambitious in the worlds they presented on screen, then the public would follow suit and raise their own expectations of their material environment. By encountering fantastical, stylised worlds on screen, he believed Americans would be prompted to look at their own surroundings more

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<sup>422</sup> Lears, "The Figure of the Artisan: Arts and Crafts Ideology," in *No Place of Grace*, 59-97.

<sup>423</sup> Vachel Lindsay, "Here's To The Mice" in *The Chinese Nightingale and Other Poems* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1917), 9.

<sup>424</sup> Lindsay, *Progress*, 287-298.

critically, with the hope that images of other realities would undermine the inevitability of their present conditions.

Lindsay's conviction that through exposure to artificial, fantastical realities, the utopian consciousness of the masses could be aroused seems at first to be an idiosyncratic assertion. However, this idea is an example of the affinity between Lindsay and Karel Teige, a leading figure in the 1920s avant-garde Czech group Devetsil. In Esther Levinger's article on Teige's cinematic utopianism she cites his argument for a proletarian art which does not seek to indoctrinate the masses through didactic sermonising. Instead cinema should present 'episodes from the unknown magnificent world which will one day be ours'.<sup>425</sup> Teige, like Lindsay, rejected the idea that verisimilitude had any emancipatory power:

It is not stories of misery, images of mines and metallurgical industries that represent reality to the workers, but stories of faraway tropics and poems of liberty and active life. The proletariat does not need images of a crushing reality, but a reality and an illusion that inspire and encourage.<sup>426</sup>

Both Teige and Lindsay sought to alter the contours of the given. The fantastical should not merely act as a supplement to the 'crushing reality' of the present but should supersede the present and ultimately become reality itself.

Lindsay recognised film's capacity for spectacle and argued that the photoplay could "speak the language of the man who has a mind World's Fair size."<sup>427</sup> *The Art of the Moving Picture* includes two chapters explicitly addressing the issue of cinema's relationship to architecture, one dedicated to exploring 'Architecture-in-Motion' and another on 'Architects As Crusaders'.<sup>428</sup> In these chapters Lindsay makes passionate arguments regarding cinema's ability to make the public more aware of the architecture surrounding them and to make architects themselves more ambitious. Elaborate film sets could provide 'tireless if indirect

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<sup>425</sup> Esther Levinger, "Karel Teige on Cinema and Utopia." *The Slavic and East European Journal* 48, no. 2 (2004), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3220029>.

<sup>426</sup> Levinger, "Karel Teige", 7.

<sup>427</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 158.

<sup>428</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 158.

propaganda that will further the architectural state of mind'.<sup>429</sup> Furthermore, the nation would be conceived of as a great architectural project, prompting an architectural consciousness to take hold in the population. Lindsay imagined a new American landscape filled with 'great cities born of great architectural photoplays'.<sup>430</sup> Lindsay hoped that film could elevate the role of the architect in public life, giving them 'a start beyond all others in dominating this land'.<sup>431</sup> Lindsay described the mechanical apparatus of film as a 'magnificent instrument' which could take theatrical accomplishments to even higher planes since it was 'capable of interpreting the largest conceivable ideas that come within the range of the plastic arts'.<sup>432</sup> Lindsay imagines that America could be turned into a dream world, a modern wonderland in which the mythology of the past is fused with the technological ingenuity of the present.

In his 1925 manuscript on film Lindsay goes even further in imagining what this American wonderland could look like, taking special inspiration from Raoul Walsh's *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924).<sup>433</sup> For Lindsay the film was not merely a vision of an Orientalist wonderland of glass and gilded minarets, but a declaration of the potential to build such a wonderland in the United States. Lindsay states quite simply that '*The Thief of Bagdad* is unmistakably 'an inspiration for an American Baghdad.'<sup>434</sup> This filmic city is 'a half-step toward an American goal'.<sup>435</sup> It provides America with a glimpse of its possible future – albeit an Arabian version. Walsh's 'mystic city of moonlight' was, he mused, already hinted at in the electric signs of Indianapolis and 'even in the rawest lights of Broadway'.<sup>436</sup> Lindsay's syncretic imagination conjured a vision of a city where 'skyscrapers of the night seem to rise out of the great deep of chaos, where modern and future heroes ride by upon a crystal dream-world'.<sup>437</sup> This is a version of

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<sup>429</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 59.

<sup>430</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 24.

<sup>431</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 58

<sup>432</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 161.

<sup>433</sup> Raoul Walsh, *The Thief of Bagdad* (United States: Douglas Fairbanks Pictures, 1924).

<sup>434</sup> Lindsay, *Progress and Poetry*, 216.

<sup>435</sup> Lindsay, *Progress and Poetry*, 192.

<sup>436</sup> Lindsay, *Progress and Poetry*, 192.

<sup>437</sup> Lindsay, *Progress and Poetry*, 192-3; Giovanni Pastrone, *Cabiria* (Italy: Itala Film, 1914).

modernity where America is no longer dominated by commercial interests but by the fancy and whimsy of childhood. Far from diminishing the imagination Lindsay imagines that technology can fuse with it to produce great feats of artifice.

The cinematic architecture that Lindsay imagines is spectacular and arresting – these fictional worlds are not mere replications of the environment as it is, but fanciful re-imaginings of it. It is notable that verisimilitude harbours no utopian power in Lindsay’s work, especially considering that so much early film theory is characterised by a focus on cinema’s reality effect. Lindsay’s originality in this early era lies in his excitement regarding film’s capacity for great artifice. He praised the ‘spectacular symbolism’ of Pastrone’s *Cabiria*, specifically citing the film’s ability to evoke ‘the strange and the beautifully infernal, as they are related to decorative design’.<sup>438</sup> The scale of the film sets that Lindsay admired far exceeded anything produced in the theatre, even by Max Reinhardt, due to the physical constraints of the proscenium arch and the immobility of the theatre audience in comparison to the mobile gaze of the cinematic spectator: the gates of Griffith’s *Babylon* in *Intolerance*, for example, are estimated to have been 150 feet high. Lindsay wanted filmmakers to create stylised, extraordinary exteriors which would demonstrate the potential of both the human imagination and industrial technology since he believed that cinematic depictions of marvellous places pointed to the magnificent possibilities hidden deep within current reality.<sup>439</sup> This suggestion was somewhat realised in the 1920s in films including *Metropolis*, *Häxan* and *The Ten Commandments* in which cinema presented extraordinary landscapes en masse.<sup>440</sup> The films which prompted Lindsay to make these utopian claims are what he calls ‘splendour’ photoplays (*The Thief of Bagdad*, *Cabiria*, *Intolerance* etc.), which operate through an aesthetics of exhibitionism. In *Intolerance* for example, the enormous set was foregrounded not just through its presentation on screen but also through publicity materials which promoted it as an attraction in itself. During the film intertitles also direct the audience’s attention to the set’s magnificence. One title card instructs the audience to ‘Note:- Replica of Babylon’s encircling

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<sup>438</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 58.

<sup>439</sup> D.W. Griffith, *Intolerance* (United States: D.W. Griffith, 1916).

<sup>440</sup> Fritz Lang, *Metropolis* (Germany: UFA, 1927).. ; Benjamin Christensen, *Häxan* (Sweden: Svensk Filmindustri, 1922; Tartan, 2013); Cecil B. DeMille, *The Ten Commandments* (Los Angeles: Famous Players-Lasky, 1923).



walls, 300 feet in height’, while another announces “‘the hall over a mile in length, imagined after the spectacle of an older day’.<sup>441</sup> These intertitles announce the task of the construction of the set in order to elicit awe in the audience in regard to such a masterful undertaking.

Lindsay’s claims regarding the utopian potential for fantastical film sets to inspire a new relationship to the built environment are echoed in the work of the Vorticist painter Wyndham Lewis who also saw a connection between cinema and architecture. Lewis believed that cities should be conceived of as avant-garde works of art and that they should take inspiration from cinema.<sup>442</sup> In Lewis’s 1919 text *The Caliph’s Design* an architect sketches his plans for the building of a modern Baghdad which Lewis later revealed was based on *Intolerance*, a film which had also inspired Lindsay’s architectural arguments in *The Art of the Moving Picture*.<sup>443</sup> Although Lindsay’s movie-inspired national reconstructions did not come to pass to the degree he had hoped, he did accurately identify two films which inspired their recreation off-screen. The Orientalist architecture from Walsh’s *The Thief of Bagdad* inspired the building of the City Hall in Opa-loka Florida (Figure 16).<sup>444</sup> In Los Angeles, traces of Lindsay’s architectural aspirations find concrete expression in its City Hall, which contains a pair of elephants homage to Griffith and the magnificent set of *Intolerance* (Figure 17).<sup>445</sup> A more brazen appropriation now opens the Los Angeles Hollywood and Highland Centre shopping mall with its own ‘Babylon Court’, featuring a replica of *Intolerance*’s massive gate and ,of course, two mighty ziggurats. Such examples show Lindsay and Lewis’s hopes that cinematic architecture could influence the world off screen to be far from naïve.

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<sup>441</sup> Griffith, *Intolerance*, Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SyqDQnoXa70> 0:21:15 and 1:42:01.

<sup>442</sup> Scott. Klein, ‘Modernist Babylons: Utopian Aesthetics and Urban Spectacle in D.W. Griffith and Wyndham Lewis’, *Modernist Cultures* 5, no.1 (2010): 12.

<sup>443</sup> Griffith’s set also famously served as the inspiration for Lang’s *Metropolis*, which was then echoed in Leni Reifenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will*. The dystopian vision of *Metropolis* and Reifenstahl’s subsequent fascist appropriation do not in themselves justify the rejection of the idea that such sets could not serve an egalitarian, utopian social model. Lindsay imagines film as able to provide visions which could be realised within a syncretic, socialist society. Leni Riefenstahl, *The Triumph of the Will* (Germany: UFA, 1935).

<sup>444</sup> Lauren Kroiz, “Stealing Baghdad: the City of Opa-locka, Florida and The Thief of Bagdad,” *Journal of Architecture* 11.5 (2006): 585-92.

<sup>445</sup> Klein, “Modernist Babylons”, 24.



Figure 16: Opa-locka City Hall, Florida, inspired by the Orientalist architecture in *The Thief of Bagdad*.

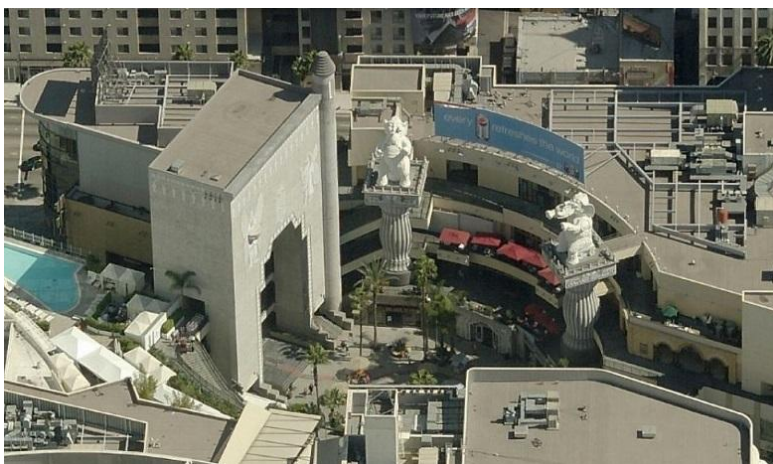


Figure 17: The Hollywood and Highland Centre designed as an homage to D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance*.

The materiality of the film set is central to Lindsay's claims for its utopian promise. To the contemporary viewer attuned to a digital culture in which the image frequently breaks free from any pro-filmic referent, the film sets that Lindsay admired are startling to behold. The richness of their materiality arouses a tactile, haptic curiosity in the spectator, inciting a desire to move amongst these extraordinary constructions. Pastrone's *Cabiria*, for example, includes a grand temple of Moloch, which is entered by way of a bestial mouth, while in Griffith's *Intolerance* civilians mill about under the magnificent girth of the massive elephants (Figure 18) and *The Thief of Bagdad* showcases both an orientalist city skyline and a spectacular

underwater scene with regal jellyfish (Figures 19 and 20). Through the magnificent architecture of such films Lindsay understood cinema to enact a confrontation between the mass public and the power of technology, prompting them to imagine a world in which technology could be used to elevate public life. In his utopian novel, *The Golden Book of Springfield* Lindsay could provide his readers with a written description of the material beauty of a utopian town, but cinema could present it as a material actuality. In his utopian imagination, these moving pictures engendered a collective dream that could become a social vision.

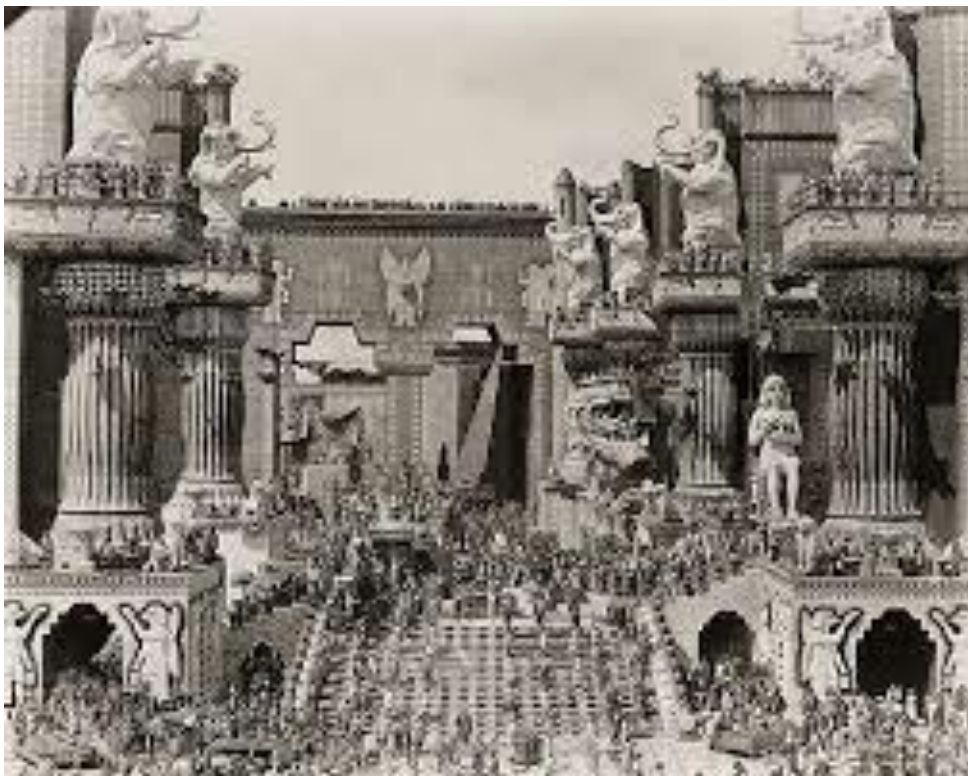


Figure 18: The Babylonian set in Griffith's *Intolerance*.





Figure 19: The Orientalist cityscape in *The Thief of Bagdad*.

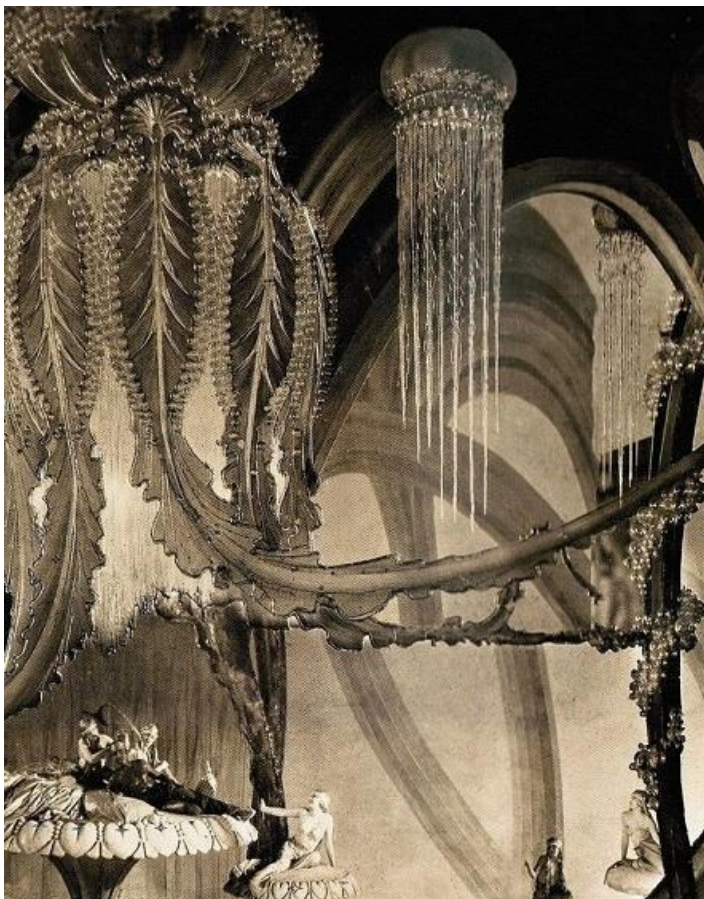


Figure 20: Ornate jellyfish in an underwater scene in *Thief of Bagdad*.

Lindsay declared his appreciation for the film set in 1915, before the advent of German Expressionism, the genre which is most often associated with pronounced set pieces and stylisation. Lindsay thus provides the field of film theory with a different concept of the film set than that put forth by theorists who approach it in the context of Weimar Germany. Lindsay does not reduce the film set to either its narrative function, nor does he approach it as a historical artefact that anticipates the rise of Nazism. From his pre-war, American vantage point Lindsay was able to see it as something far more utopian, as showcasing the utopian potential of modern technology to beautify the public sphere.

However, while Lindsay imagined film to inspire a collective, American mode of world-building, it was in fact the German film industry that embraced the collective element of filmmaking, enabling collaboration between set designer, director, and screenwriter. While Lindsay was writing *The Art of the Moving Picture* in the 1910s, Hollywood was already operating through a hierarchical, assembly line mode of production.<sup>446</sup> Moreover, when Lindsay formulated his utopian pronouncements on the ability of the pro-filmic world to redraw the public's expectations of their material environment, Hollywood was already developing strategies which would ensure that the *mise-en-scène* became subservient to narrative.<sup>447</sup> Kristen Thompson argues that as early as the 1920s the elaborate and conspicuously visible aesthetic style of German films was felt by audiences to be 'old-fashioned'.<sup>448</sup> Thompson's work shows that by the 1920s just as continuity rules were being established for editing, new guidelines were being developed for set design. Thompson shows how a new discourse around the role of the film set emerged in the early 1920s, citing several commentaries from critics and practitioners of the era. Art director Hugo Ballin was a key figure in this shift, championing the idea that backgrounds should be unobtrusive, arguing that 'when settings receive uncommon notice the drama is defective'.<sup>449</sup> His sets were praised by

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<sup>446</sup>Tim Bergfelder, Sue Harris and Sarah Street. *Film Architecture and the Transnational Imagination: Set Design in 1930s European Cinema* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007), 42.

<sup>447</sup> Kristen Thompson, *Herr Lubitsch goes to Hollywood*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), 54.

<sup>448</sup> Thompson, *Herr Lubitsch*, 124.

<sup>449</sup> Thompson, *Herr Lubitsch*, 56.

critic Kenneth MacGowan as ‘subdued’ and as having been created ‘with discretion’.<sup>450</sup> In this new discourse the set should not draw attention to itself, rather it should recede in order for characters and drama to come to the fore. This change in the form and function of the set was noted by the Austrian film architect Kurt Richter whose observations put Lindsay’s hopes for a future of fanciful and arresting cinematic architecture to rout:

Anyone who believes that their imitation of Indian architecture would launch a new era, or who thinks that their exhibition of drawings and models is aiding the advancement of film, does not understand the audience. It wants above all to see people in films, and for them it would trade the most beautiful landscapes.<sup>451</sup>

While Richter embraced the curtailing of the film set, others shared Lindsay’s sensibility, such as Robert Herlth who, in the 1950s, was still lamenting its decline. Herlth questioned the new focus on people and action, stating that ‘it is said that the audience only wants narrative and action, and that one does not need the dream sets or the magic of yesterday. In my opinion this view is mistaken’.<sup>452</sup> The ‘dream sets’ that had once been celebrated as part of the magic of cinema were in decline from the 1920s onward, unable to make their way from a dream to a material reality.

### **Artifice and an Aesthetics of Made-ness**

In Lindsay’s work it is the made-ness of the film set, the fact that it communicates its material construction, which can inspire the re-making of reality. While material, ostentatious sets declined in mainstream cinema from the 1920s onwards, an aesthetics of material artifice is nonetheless an important part of the history of film. Films that display their artifice can be thought of as operating through an aesthetics of ‘made-ness’, signalling their materially constructed nature. Far from being the sole province of German Expressionism and its heirs, images of made-ness lie scattershot throughout the history of film. From grandiose constructions to miniature models the made image is varied, circumscribed by aesthetic trends and changes to modes of production. A brief consideration of a selection of made images

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<sup>450</sup> Thompson, *Herr Lubitsch*, 56.

<sup>451</sup> Kurt Richter quoted in Bergfelder, *Film Architecture*, 45.

<sup>452</sup> Robert Herlth quoted in Bergfelder, *Film Architecture*, 45.

reveals their diversity. In a pastoral scene from Frank Borgaze's *Lucky Star* (1929) a tumbledown house sits nestled within a pastoral dell (Figure 21).<sup>453</sup> The place is boggy and bogged, a mesh of bulrushes, branches and fences which almost sags under its own weight. This is a scene of compacted verisimilitude, a world crammed in on itself under ten feet of painted sky. Other made images revel in their weightlessness, their hollow artificiality, such as Francesco Stefani's *The Singing Ringing Tree* in which the made world is luminous but fragile (Figure 22).<sup>454</sup> Barren trees are laden with silver curling ribbon and a mechanised copper goldfish floats in a shallow pool of stagnant water with a misplaced solemnity. A motionless mood pervades this plastic world which, despite its lakes and waterfalls, feels dusty and deserted. Made-ness can also be a messy affair, a haphazard game of material re-appropriation which occurs in the anarchic enclosure of Jan Svankmajer's *Alice* (Figure 23).<sup>455</sup>



Figure 21: Pastoral scene from *Lucky Star*.

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<sup>453</sup> Frank Borgaze, *Lucky Star* (United States: William Fox, 1929).

<sup>454</sup> Francesco Stefani, *The Singing Ringing Tree* (East Germany: DEFA, 1957).

<sup>455</sup> Jan Švankmajer, *Alice* (Czechoslovakia: Film Four International, 1988).





Figure 22: A giant goldfish in *The Singing Ringing Tree*.



Figure 23: Skeleton puppets in *Alice*.

The images of material artifice present in Lindsay's film theory and the aesthetics of made-ness which his work illuminates provide a strong contrast to the world of digital images we inhabit today. When considered together, the epistemological ramifications of the transition from material artifice to digital seamlessness becomes clear. The made image is the opposite of what Vilém Flusser conceptualises as the technical image which appears to be self-generated, as if brought into being by its content. Surrounded by technical images, Flusser argues, human beings 'forget they created images in order to orientate themselves in the world. Since they are no longer able to decode them, their lives become a function of their own images'.<sup>456</sup> Technical images present themselves as equal and at one with the reality they

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<sup>456</sup> Flusser, *Photography*, 10.



represent, Flusser warns, 'It thus seems as if they exist on the same level of reality as their meaning'.<sup>457</sup> In contrast, an aesthetics of made-ness is one which announces the labour involved in the production of the image, putting it in active conflict with an economic superstructure that operates through a fetishistic disavowal of labour and, in the case of film, the obfuscation of the apparatus of filmmaking. The technical image, which masks its made-ness, entrances its audience in its evisceration of the traces of its production, a deception which, Lindsay's work implies, denies the viewer the capacity to become aware of the made-ness of the world around them. In Lindsay's work, the fantastical materiality of the film set provokes a recognition of human agency which the technical image obscures, since technical images present themselves as an autogenetic form, emerging *ex nihilo*. Yet while digital images are more easily able to erase their seams and present a transcendent perfectionism, they too can display an aesthetics of made-ness. This can occur through an ostentatiously curated perfectionism such as crafted in Jeff Wall's *Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)*.<sup>458</sup> In this image, which is composed of 100s of digital photographs, the staged composition of an apparent snapshot of reality conveys its own impossibility and the fact of its adulteration, evoking what Laura Mulvey terms a 'technological uncanny'.<sup>459</sup> As well as communicating their made-ness through an uncanny perfectionism, digital images can also display their made-ness through glitches and other imperfections. The made image can be thought of as a cousin of Hito Steyerl's beloved 'poor image' which is a piece of illicit, degraded digital junk – 'the debris of audiovisual production'.<sup>460</sup> This type of image reveals its made-ness through its poor resolution, its blurred, pixilated form, from the damage wrought by various kinds of digital reproduction like file sharing and downloading.

The made image, similarly lacking in prestige, achieves its status as 'made' due to a quality present in its pro-filmic content rather than its form. In contrast to the mimetic aesthetic of the technical image, the aesthetic of the made image is defined by its overt human intervention; it

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<sup>457</sup> Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (London: Reaktion Books, 1983), 15.

<sup>458</sup> Jeff Wall, *Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)*, 1993, transparency on lightbox, 2500 × 3970 × 340 mm, Tate, London, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/wall-a-sudden-gust-of-wind-after-hokusai-t06951>.

<sup>459</sup> Laura Mulvey, "A Sudden Gust of Wind (After Hokusai): From after to before the Photograph." *Oxford Art Journal* 30, no. 1 (2007): 32, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4500043>.

<sup>460</sup> Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image", *e-flux*, 10 (Nov 2009): 1.

bears a trace of the labour of its construction and its pro-filmic moment. The revelation of the constructed nature of the image can occur through deliberate intention in films which foreground their fantastical settings. But made-ness can itself be manifest by virtue of technological changes that shift our expectations of moving images. What appears as ‘made’ changes over time, it alters as our sensibility to changing modes of production alter, re-shaping our mode of spectatorship in order to reveal seams where previously we saw none. These seams can manifest in the dissonance between a material set and a landscape provided through back projection. However, while techniques such as back projection and animation visually testify to the labour involved in their creation, the utopian potential of the made image that Lindsay directs us to specifically refers to the constructed materiality of the mise-en-scène. It is based on an index of an actual material interaction through which a real, physical environment was created. It gestures to a pro-filmic reality located somewhere and nowhere. It is persuasive of its material actuality while announcing its artificiality. Here the concealment of the trace of labour and production which is crucial to commodity fetishism, and particularly to the production of a film, is undermined; the made image is covered in handprints, haunted by handiwork. It echoes with footsteps, with the clatter of tools or the din of industrial machinery.

Lindsay’s writings are fueled by his desire to rejuvenate the American population by making them aware of the possibility for change, reminding them of their capacity to re-make the world. In order to convince people of the possibility of creating an American utopia, Lindsay needed to awaken Americans to other possible realities and undermine their sense of the inevitability of their current way of life. In Lindsay’s work, such an awakening is assumed to be wholly positive and emancipatory. However, the radical dismantling of established norms and traditions that once seemed immutable (second nature disguised as first nature) can also be conceived of as a break with the symbolic order that binds the subject together. The established order of society is restrictive, but also offers a schema through which the subject is held in place; thus, the revelation of its malleability should also be regarded as a destabilising event. In Elio Petri’s *A Quiet Place in the Country* (1968), the painter Leonardo Ferri experiences a psychotic breakdown, which at one point manifests itself in his manic desire to paint the trees outside his bedroom window red.<sup>461</sup> This scene (Fig. 24), in which Ferri and his lover Flavia

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<sup>461</sup> Elio Petri, *A Quiet Place in the Country* (Italy: Produzioni Europee Associate, 1968).

smother tree trunks with luminous red paint, evokes the sense of a taboo being broken. Ferri has registered first nature as a suitable site for artistic labour, blurring the boundaries between nature and canvas, art and life. If the character of Leonardo Ferri symbolises the psychotic rupture with social norms that must occur for these utopian, creative impulses to be acted upon in the private sphere, Lindsay's film theory points to the utopian possibilities that could be achieved if such a rupture was experienced collectively.



Figure 24: Painting trees in *A Quiet Place in the Country*.

### **The utopian power of artifice**

Debates regarding the politics of artifice form a central role in aesthetic theory. In Lindsay's work artifice has a clear emancipatory function. Yet artificial worlds can also negate the desire for remaking the real world and, instead, operate as an escapist fantasy which only safeguards the status quo. For example, the flamboyant and colossal theatrical staging of much of the work of Max Reinhardt earned him the title as 'high priest of theatricality', yet, rather than fuelling a utopian remaking of the world, he thought of his theatrical practice as providing respite from the misery of daily life. In direct opposition to Brecht, Reinhardt sought to 'bring joy to the people', to create a theatre that:

leads them out of the grey misery of everyday life, beyond themselves, into a gay and pure atmosphere of beauty. I can feel that people are fed up with finding their own misery again in the theatre and that they are longing for brighter colours and a heightened sense of life.<sup>462</sup>

While arguments for cinematic realism such as those made by Kracauer in *Theory of Film* (1960) and Bazin in *The Ontology of the Photographic Image* (1960) stipulate that film must not partake of practices which adulterate and stage ‘raw’, ‘objective’ nature, Lindsay states that it is, in fact, the camera’s ability for naturalism and photorealism which must be overcome. These fantastical, artificial spaces run counter to Bazin’s famous designation of the true work of cinema which is to ‘lay bare’ reality.<sup>463</sup> While the ‘old textbook’ interpretation of Bazin as a strict medium essentialist has been complicated, in *The Ontology of the Photographic Image* he does argue that adulterating the pro filmic material is to elevate faith in the image over faith in reality.

In contrast, Lindsay’s position echoes Karl Marx’s disdain for the abstract endeavours of philosophers who merely seek to understand the world rather than to change it. Changing reality, not merely depicting it as a de facto given, is the operating force behind Lindsay’s utopian claims for fantastical films that showcase an active intervention on the part of the human subject in its relationship to the world. Bazin’s critique of actively intervening in reality is somewhat misleading with regard to his relationship to the status quo. His own ‘faith’ in reality is in fact an attack on existing conditions, but by different means; his critique comes through a confrontation with the brutal truth of the world as it is, without embellishment. When Bazin confers his praise on Murnau, it is based not on the director’s gift for stylisation but on his composition, which ‘adds nothing to reality. It does not deform it’.<sup>464</sup> However, this deformation and remaking of reality is precisely the energetic promise of fantastical cinematic worlds; what Bazin termed the plastics of the diegetic world can, in fact, reveal the plasticity of

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<sup>462</sup> Max Reinhardt quoted in Martin Esslin, "Max Reinhardt: "High Priest of Theatricality", *The Drama Review*: TDR 21, no. 2 (1977): 9. doi:10.2307/1145120.

<sup>463</sup> André Bazin, and Hugh Gray, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image." *Film Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (1960),8. doi:10.2307/1210183.

<sup>464</sup> André Bazin, "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema", in *What is Cinema?* Vol 1. trans. Hugh Gray with a forward by Jean Renoir (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 27.

reality. Lindsay's attack on reality is in fact an expression of his faith in its undisclosed potential.

The question of whether non-realist works of art have emancipatory potential is the battleground of the famous 1938 debate between Bloch and Lukács, in which Lukács expressed his belief in the pernicious, reactionary and even fascist tendencies embodied in Expressionism. Lukács rejected the emancipatory potential of non-realist works of art, arguing that both fantastical and modernist works enable a solely surface level perception of capitalist society, obscuring the truth of its structural processes and obfuscating the reality of social relations. Rather than merely reflecting capitalism's false consciousness, Lukács argued that art must 'uncover hidden relationships' between the material world, social relations and the economic superstructure.<sup>465</sup> In his early aesthetic thought, this uncovering occurred through the form of the novel which could enact a literary illumination of the connections between the details of daily existence and their structural causes; connections which were otherwise obscured, leaving the modern subject ignorant to the truth of their own reality. In his later Marxist work, *History and Class Consciousness*, he argued that the reified subject's ignorance as to the deliberate, ideologically informed construction of social reality must be replaced with a proletarian class consciousness that recognises itself as an historical actor and that it is this transformation that both enables, and is the product of, a communist revolution. Martin Jay argues that Lukács conceptualised this revolutionary consciousness as founded in the ability of the proletarian class to realise that they have 'made reality', a transformative recognition of their class potential to act as the drivers of history.<sup>466</sup> For Lukács, as for Lindsay, it is the revelation of the constructed nature of reality that can lead to its radical re-making.

Once an advocate of the emancipatory potential of the mass ornament, whose artificial nature allowed workers to recognise themselves as reified souls, Kracauer's later *Theory of Film* outright rejects the emancipatory potential of fantastical diegetic worlds. In this text, Kracauer dismisses fantastical films, arguing that such films take place in 'a universe of its own which

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<sup>465</sup> Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, 60 and 137.

**466** Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 111.

would immediately crumble were it related to its real-life environment'.<sup>467</sup> Fantastical, artificial images were not simply benign for Kracauer. He believed they could indeed alter the relationship between the viewer and their current reality, but in a wholly negative sense. He thought that the production of a 'deliberately unreal world' could degrade, rather than redeem, reality. Fantasy films might provoke disappointment and dissatisfaction with daily life, but they would not lead to social praxis. He cautioned that exposure to 'strained', aestheticised films posed a danger to reality since the audience could become acclimatised to an elevated, fantastical world and, on returning to reality, would 'resent the unexpected emergence of a crude nature as a let-down'.<sup>468</sup> In this analysis, the experience of a heightened, fantastical world undermines the splendour of unadulterated reality, which is no longer able to engender our attention or awe. Writing much earlier, Lindsay imagined a different relationship between a visual spectacle and its audience. The subsequent disappointment with reality engendered by the fantastical harboured utopian potential; for Lindsay it is the assumed stability and continuity of the world as it is which crumbles in the face of the fantastical universe presented on screen. Kracauer's suspicion of pro-filmic artificiality partly stems from his notion that the fantastical was cocooned within an insular studio setting. He compares the staged worlds of fantasy to realist aesthetic practices which could 'lure the spectator out of the closed cosmos of the poster-like tableaux vivants into an open universe'.<sup>469</sup> Lindsay, by contrast, understood reality to be the space which had been closed off, its possibilities stymied.

Lindsay's arguments for the utopian function of fantasy and artifice rest on the assumption that film can elicit in its audience a recognition of the efficacy of human labour and imagination through showcasing a reality which is obviously artificial. By this logic, a display of artifice can reveal the laws of the status quo to be far from immutable. His work prompts us to conceptualise the film set as a material but liminal space that must be brought to bear on reality, to force what Lukács terms the "crumbling" of the constituent structures of society. The knowledge of the made-ness of the film set does not operate unconsciously like the knowledge that film is a series of fictional images as theorised by Christian Metz. Rather this awareness

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<sup>467</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), 29.

<sup>468</sup> Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 36.

<sup>469</sup> Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 80.

must be a sensation engendered by the content of the image itself; the made-ness of the mise-en-scène must be seen, must permeate the screen. Lindsay makes a bold and original claim for the utopian power of fantastical film sets, arguing that they gesture toward an unrealised reality. The spectacle of splendour on screen is, for Lindsay, an unmet promise of what could be. Though original in his identification of the revelatory power of the film set, Lindsay is not alone in arguing for the utopian power of transient architectural edifices. In their discussion on utopianism in 1964, Bloch and Adorno make reference to the ephemeral constructions of theatre and ‘tremendous buildings that could never be inhabited because they were built out of cardboard’, acknowledging that these transitory, yet physical, structures testify to the possibility of building another world.<sup>470</sup> In his article on Lindsay’s utopianism in *The Golden Book of Springfield*, scholar Ron Sakolsky notes exactly this affinity between Lindsay and Bloch, seeing in each of them a desire to ‘reveal what is concealed in that which already exists’.<sup>471</sup> For Lindsay, film should be used to provide more than fleeting escapism, it should undermine the modern subject’s loyalty to the status quo and disrupt the current situation in which, as Bloch describes it, ‘people are sworn to this world as it is’.<sup>472</sup> The physical constructions of the pro-filmic world, however, are themselves prone to crumble. These monuments are mere pasteboard forms lacking in stability. Such crafted constructions are persuasive of their physical actuality but also convey their transitory, insubstantial nature and in this sense they embody Bloch’s concept of a concrete utopian impulse that is not yet fully realised and which is still in the mode of ‘to come’. For Lindsay, any utopia is built on impermanence and experimentation and his work prompts us to consider the film set as an example of an experimental, transient and aspirational mode of poesis.

While Lindsay’s writings on cinematic splendour enable us to see the magnificent sets of commercial cinema as an invitation to rebuild the world around us, his ideas on the distinctly less grandiose field of amateur making also have much to offer us today. In 1915, Lindsay argued that Americans were mechanical by disposition and witnessed how they loved to crawl

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<sup>470</sup> Theodor Adorno and Ernst Bloch, “Something’s Missing: A Discussion Between Ernst Bloch and Theodor Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing” in Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 6.

<sup>471</sup> Ron Sakolsky, “Utopia at Your Doorstep”, 54.

<sup>472</sup> Bloch, “Something’s Missing”, 4.

on their stomachs to ‘tinker their automobiles’.<sup>473</sup> In the twenty-first century, theorist Valerie Frissen has described the digital age as one based in ‘tinkering’, arguing that a playful and improvisational relationship to technology, which she terms a “digital DIY practice” has been enabled by the internet.<sup>474</sup> Today, the most obvious manifestation of Lindsay’s hopes for a localised and egalitarian culture of physical making is found in the tinkering enabled by maker culture. This movement is often distinguished from both the inventors of previous eras and a purely internet-based making by its focus on using digital technology to create physical objects. Advancements in manufacturing technology including the digitization of the manufacturing process as well as the invention of laser cutters, have enabled a greater democratisation of making than could ever have occurred to Lindsay. This democratisation can be seen in the rise of contemporary makerspaces which began as places which literally gave adults space to make. Makerspaces were initially places in which individuals could gather to use tools and materials to make physical objects. They are places of formal and informal learning, often conceptualised as founded in a commitment to a DIY culture premised in the open exchange of skills, ideas and resources.

Advocates of maker culture such as Mark Hatch, the Chief Executive Officer of Techspace, often describe the movement in egalitarian terms which resonate with Lindsay’s idealised ‘New Localism’. For Hatch, ‘The real power of this revolution is its democratizing effects. Now, almost anyone can innovate. Now almost anyone can make. Now, with the tools available at a makerspace, anyone can change the world’.<sup>475</sup> More circumscribed, but no less enthusiastic about the egalitarian impulse at the heart of maker culture, sociologists Kuznetsov and Paulos conceptualise DIY culture as highly accessible given that the lack of equipment or skills pose no barrier. They argue that online DIY communities have a low barrier to entry, and that rather than competition between makers, these communities are driven by the values of

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<sup>473</sup> Lindsay, *Moving Picture*, 34.

<sup>474</sup> Valerie Frissen, "Playing with Bits and Bytes: The Savage Mind in the Digital Age." In *Playful Identities: The Ludification of Digital Media Cultures*, edited by Valerie Frissen, Sybille Lammes, Michiel De Lange, Jos De Mul, and Joost Raessens (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 7. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt14brqd4.10>.

<sup>475</sup> Mark Hatch, *The Maker Movement Manifesto* (New York, NY: McGraw Hill, 2014),10.



creativity and sharing.<sup>476</sup> Sites such as Instructables, Craftser, Ravelry and Dorkbot where people share and discuss DIY projects are cited by Kuznetsov and Paulos as evidence of DIY as ‘a multi-faceted movement which invites all practitioners--knitters, roboticists, fire artists, mechanics, designers, hackers, musicians, etc. to share ideas through a variety of mediums, including forums, instructions, images, video, and face-to-face meetings’.<sup>477</sup> Their research shows how DIY culture encompasses both traditional handicraft practices such as crochet and jewellery making as well as robotics and industrial design. Lindsay’s utopian writings describe just this situation in which industrial technology and handiwork co-exist and the social networks which today’s digital platforms enable are a contemporary manifestation of his ‘New Localism’, where community, as well as creativity, is highly valued. Lindsay’s work points us to the utopian and social power of commercial, artisanal and amateur making and should be considered part of a tradition of thinkers who argue for the need to democratise creativity in order to create a culture which is truly inclusive and innovative, a tradition which continues to this day.

## Conclusion

Vachel Lindsay’s aesthetic writings have much to offer us today. His work enriches the field of classical film theory by offering a highly original concept of cinema and its relationship to modernity. It also illuminates the utopian potential of technology by championing the social

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<sup>476</sup> Stacey Kuznetsov and Eric Paulos, “Rise of the expert amateur: DIY projects, communities, and cultures.” In *Proceedings of the 6th Nordic Conference on Human-Computer Interaction: Extending Boundaries (NordiCHI 2010)*. Association for Computing Machinery, New York, NY, USA, 295–304. [http://www.paulos.net/papers/2010/DIY\\_NordiCHI2010.pdf](http://www.paulos.net/papers/2010/DIY_NordiCHI2010.pdf) DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1145/1868914.1868950>

<sup>477</sup> Kuznetsov and Paulos, “Rise of the Expert Amateur,” 297.

and political significance of the imagination, casting a new light on the amateurisation of media in late modernity. Lindsay's value as a thinker lies in his ability to creatively re-appropriate the present, viewing it through the prism of the utopian energies from the past and the future. Witnessing the increasing industrialisation of early twentieth century America, he neither rejected modernity outright nor fully embraced the machine age. Instead, Lindsay developed a vision of how modern technology could compliment past traditions and be put to use in the service of society.

Lindsay's film theory is likewise a product of this syncretic sensibility. While so much early writing on film is driven by a desire to comprehend the implications of cinema's industrial character, Lindsay's work offers a concept of film which is better aligned with the eclecticism of late modernity than the mechanised preoccupations of early modernist movements such as Futurism or the Bauhaus. His understanding of film as an imagistic medium that is both old and new is found in the work of several of his peers, most notably Jean Epstein. Yet, even here, Lindsay offers an original perspective. His suggestion of a film practice which revives a mystical sensibility in which, for example, human actors can portray mountains and squirrels, is better viewed as a transgressive idea than an anachronistic one. He believed that film could not only re-animate the external world but revive a mimetic capacity that had been lost to the modern subject. While far from a mainstream cinematic practice, it is notable that Lindsay's acceptance of folk traditions, such as humans dressing as animals, found its way into one of Hollywood's most iconic productions – *The Wizard of Oz* (1939).<sup>478</sup>

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<sup>478</sup> Victor Fleming, *The Wizard of Oz* (U.S.A.: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1939).

While other theorists, such as Walter Benjamin, understood modernity as marking an epochal shift from artisanal to mechanical production, Lindsay argued for an intermedial approach to filmmaking, anticipating the ways in which the medium would rely on techniques borrowed from the arts and crafts. His work suggests an artistic lineage in which past traditions are maintained alongside modern technology, rather than being usurped by them. For Lindsay, demarcating certain forms and practices as ‘modern’, while labelling others as ‘traditional’ only served to isolate them from each other, halting the development of new forms and traditions. His work illuminates the significant contribution that artisanal techniques have played in the history of cinema and, indeed, their continued importance. Lindsay was able to understand film as a medium that enacted a fusion between artisanal making and industrial production at a time when few theorists were able to approach the medium as anything other than an emblem of industrial modernity. He celebrated film’s ability to engage with puppetry, folk tales, painting and illustration, practices which deserve to be recognised as having made significant contributions to the history of cinema.

In emphasising the important role that distinct artistic disciplines and cultural traditions can play in the creation of a film Lindsay once again draws attention to the different modes of making employed in the creation of a film. His insistence that film not sever its ties to craft traditions or the fine arts is delivered not only in the hope that the medium will gain legitimacy should directors manage to replicate the subtleties of light and shadow found in the work of Velázquez or Rembrandt, but in his belief that film could disseminate powerful aesthetic experiences to all parts of American society. By incorporating the skills of painters, illustrators and sculptors in the service of set design and special effects, as well as utilising folk cultures such as puppetry, film, like the United States, would be enriched through being founded in a diversity of traditions. The medium could bring together what had been separated into the spheres of ‘high’ and ‘low’ art, fulfilling Lindsay’s desire to birth a truly American art form. It is the work of *The Art of the Moving Picture* to provide filmmakers with the practices and techniques which would enable filmmakers to achieve this aim, both inside and outside of the film industry.

Lindsay’s film theory celebrates the accomplishments of both commercial and amateur cinema as sites of making, each with their own potential for greatness. In the commercial field, access to big budgets and technological know-how enable the creation of worlds of

splendour that far surpass the stage. While commercial set designers and builders could often be enmeshed in large scale technological enterprises rather than the sanctity of handiwork, such projects are still valued by Lindsay as acts of making. The commercial films of splendour that he so admired (*The Thief of Baghdad*, *Cabiria*, *Intolerance*) are celebrated by him as feats of extravagant world-building. Lindsay's criticisms of the film industry are centred on its lack of aesthetic ambition, a situation which was for him especially painful given his belief in the dormant creative talents of everyday Americans. However, should the industry heed his advice then commercial projects would no longer be routine or 'factory made', instead, well resourced directors would be free to be inspired by great works of art and, propelled by the full force of their imagination, would be able create wild, fantastical stories that defied logic - worlds of beauty, terror and enchantment. Such films could invoke awe and excitement in a deadened, apathetic audience, awakening their dulled senses and sparking their imaginations. In this utopian vision of a commercial landscape freed from commerce and driven solely by the demands of artistic expression, the creative talents of set designers, painters, sculptors and architects would reach new heights.

For Lindsay the smaller scale projects of amateur and community filmmaking were no less serious accomplishments, enabling modern Americans to exercise their imaginations and use the materials to hand to create the diegetic world. Community filmmaking is also imagined to be able to contribute to creating vibrant regional cultures. Lindsay's ideas regarding amateur filmmaking are both prescient with regard to the mass accessibility of filmmaking technology, and provocative in that they illuminate unexplored directions in community filmmaking, rejecting the necessity for community films to be relegated to the sphere of documentary. Lindsay's work offers a serious and much needed challenge to the dominance of nonfiction in community filmmaking, asserting both the importance of the imagination and the need to democratise creativity.<sup>479</sup> In his endorsement of an aesthetically exciting neighbourhood filmmaking practice, Lindsay recognised the importance of the amateur in expanding the

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<sup>479</sup> Many community arts projects in the UK which are often focused on the world as it is and the struggles that people face, rather than providing a space for people to ignite their imagination and engage in fantastical story-telling or more experimental practices. See Chocolate Films, <https://www.chocolatefilmsworkshops.co.uk/about-us/social-impact/>, Inner City Film, <http://www.innercityfilms.co.uk/future-hackney/>, Community Arts Northwest, <http://can.uk.com/current-artistic-programme/young-peoples-programme/a-generation-rising/>,

boundaries of cinema. This conviction is echoed in the work of Annette Michelson, who in her canonical essay on film's 'Radical Aspiration', stated that, 'the single most interesting fact about cinema' was that little Americans were making science-fiction films after school in their backyards.<sup>480</sup> Lindsay's work, too, illuminates the politics of the imagination and the need to retain the capacity to imagine the world other than it is. While re-imagining the world doesn't guarantee the possibility of changing it, he reminds us that changing it does require the capacity to imagine something different.

In the midst of the rise of maker culture the amateur has become an object of scholarly enquiry, one which has retained some of the utopian potential ascribed to it by Lindsay. In his book *Digital Aesthetics*, Sean Cubitt argues that the spontaneous creativity of the amateur could offer a challenge to 'a deeply stagnating culture' if society and the state could take seriously the value of learning, making and sharing. He situates these practices within 'that robust tradition, stretching back for centuries, of radical thinking, homespun cosmologies, decoration and cuisine, invention and dissemination'.<sup>481</sup> In another essay titled 'Amateur Aesthetics' from 2009, Cubitt describes the amateur as a playful, energetic figure:

The amateur is ready, like the musicians of the African diaspora, to transform every material, to show respect through manipulating and changing what comes to hand, seizing a technology, a technique, a shape or melody or image and making it anew.<sup>482</sup>

Cubitt's concept of the amateur is of someone operating through creative re-appropriation, of taking what is within reach and using it in new and unexpected ways. Cubitt offers a utopian take on amateur culture as based in 'an understanding that culture is not a collection of goods to be preserved but a resource of materials and skills'.<sup>483</sup> Likewise, Lindsay's community filmmakers use second-hand furniture, theatrical techniques and local events as the materials from which to create their movies. Lindsay's concept of an artist – be they amateur or professional – is one who is inspired by a cornucopia of practices, crafts and cultural

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<sup>480</sup> Anette Michelson, 'Film and the Radical Aspiration', *Film Culture*, no. 42, (Fall 1966), 421.

<sup>481</sup> Sean Cubitt, *Digital Aesthetics* (London: SAGE, 1998), 144.

<sup>482</sup> Sean Cubitt, "Amateur Aesthetics," Academia (website), [https://www.academia.edu/574424/Amateur\\_aesthetics](https://www.academia.edu/574424/Amateur_aesthetics).

<sup>483</sup> Cubitt, "Amateur Aesthetics".

traditions, including those which are outdated and outmoded. Just as Lindsay anticipated, modern technology did not inevitably lead to the obfuscation of older, non-industrial practices, but instead has produced a highly eclectic culture of making. Whilst so many twentieth century movements and theorists looked at modernity in terms of mass production and mechanisation, Lindsay's utopian imagination allowed him to envision a democratisation of art and creative labour. The vision of a widespread culture of amateur making which he projected long ago is now apparent. More than merely prophetic, however, his ideas regarding the ability of making to reconnect the modern subject to the power of their own agency and to illuminate the contingent conditions of social reality contribute new perspectives on the politics of making. Too long neglected, today Lindsay's utopian aesthetic writings serve as both a 'mirror' and a 'lamp', reflecting our own world back to us while illuminating its utopian possibilities.<sup>484</sup>

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<sup>484</sup> M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953).

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