

# Three Articles of Posthuman Modernism

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## The Meta-Cinema of Marcel L'Herbier (and Friends)

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On October 4, 1923, the American composer George Antheil made his highly anticipated Paris debut at the Champs Elysées Theatre, in front of a rioting audience. A few minutes into the recital the crowd became unsettled; members of the audience started to protest the offensive nature of the music, others jumped to the musician's defence, and before long the house was out of control. Unbeknownst to Antheil, the riot was in fact staged by his friends Marcel L'Herbier and Georgette Leblanc, who needed to film just such a scene for their upcoming movie, *The Inhuman Woman*. The ruse would only be revealed to him about a year after the incident. As he recalls:

I went to see a movie called *L'Inhumaine*, featuring Georgette LeBlanc. In this silent movie (still preserved by our New York Museum of Modern Art) you can if you wish see a vast rioting public . . . However, most curiously, this riot is no fake one. It is an actual riot, the same riot through which I played and lived that night<sup>1</sup>

Antheil took the manipulative stunt well, recognizing that the disturbance made for great publicity, and that it served his reputation as an *enfant terrible*, a self-styled "bad boy" of contemporary music:

I suddenly remember Georgette Leblanc walking up to my piano while the great floodlights in the balcony poured on us both simultaneously. I thought it odd then. So I naturally asked Margaret Anderson about it, not without a grin of appreciation. She said yes, it had been a *sort* of plot at that, but a plot in which she and Georgette had been sure I would greatly profit. (How right they were!) (*Bad Boy of Music*, 136)

*The Inhuman Woman* was not a success, but it stands out today as L'Herbier's masterpiece, a splendid example of the director's futurist aesthetic, at once the work

of an auteur, and a supremely collaborative modernist project. L'Herbier wrote and directed; Leblanc produced and played the main lead; Darius Milhaud composed the score; Fernand Legér designed parts of the set; and Margaret Anderson, Leblanc's partner and coeditor of *The Little Review*, promoted the title and worked the press. The extras in the unruly crowd included Pablo Picasso, Man Ray, Erik Satie, Darius Milhaud, and James Joyce. And of course Antheil himself deserves some kind of participation credit.

The film, in short, is a hub of avant-garde cooperation. It marshals the energies of art deco, cubism, dada, expressionist cinema, jazz, and modernist music.<sup>2</sup> It toys with sci-fi tropes and futuristic scenarios (in Italy it was released under the baffling, but strangely accurate title *Futurismo*).<sup>3</sup> Rosi Braidotti and Felicia Miller Frank both remark on its symptomatic power, an extraordinary ability to function as a document of and for its time.<sup>4</sup> Frank, in particular, offers a detailed analysis of the ideological complexities that sustain the narrative and prop up its status as a “manifesto for French artistic modernity” (“*L’Inhumaine, La fin du monde*,” 938). Embracing the seductions of modernist speed, and of an uninhibited technological future, *The Inhuman Woman* presents a sophisticated treatment of gender; but the same aesthetic is also bound up with the fantasy of a world made small enough to fit in a Parisian salon, a naive endorsement of the universalist presuppositions implicit in the concept of progress. As Frank argues, L'Herbier's work “merits attention, not only for what it can tell us about what its distinguished group of collaborators thought about technology and modernism, but also for how the film interrogates the categories of humanity and the inhuman under the aegis of French universalism” (939).

Focusing on this legacy, and the philosophical traces it picks up, I wish to draw out three articles defining of the cultural moment I refer to elsewhere as *posthuman modernism*.<sup>5</sup> Very briefly: 1) Both modernism and posthuman theory take custody of an epochal event within modernity, a technological acceleration of reality that reshapes ontological grammars and urges a redefinition of subjectivity in light of the supersession of enlightenment models of experience; 2) Both share in the stakes of a new materialism at the same time as they engage in a discourse centered on life, affect, and force. Simply put, posthumanism resurrects the singularly modernist intuition that vitalist rhetoric and materialist presuppositions must go hand in hand; and 3) Both are committed to a radical perspectivism—a Copernican decentering of the human eye from its place of privilege in received models of phenomenal experience, and, more generally, a disarticulation of the human body

understood as a discrete organic unit capable of synthesizing desire and sense perception.

### **Posthuman Modernism**

Before turning to an analysis of the posthuman resonances in L'Herbier's film, it is useful to fill in the historical context by which these ideas come to prominence in the contemporary critical landscape. What goes by the name of posthuman theory today is a plurality of intellectual projects variously developed from cybernetics, animal studies, ecofeminism, and a poststructuralist critique of liberal humanist ideology. It is my contention that the central concern from which all these disparate discourses radiate is in fact a modernist intuition: the discovery of an order of experience in which the organic and the inorganic have become indiscernible. Acknowledging this historical debt allows us to draw together, into a single conversation, different debates and currents of thought within posthumanism—to understand how the posthuman came to invite an association with bioethics and with cyberpunk mythology; with a post-Nietzschean interrogation of subjectivity and with an ecofeminist critique of speciesist privilege; and with a distrust of fantasies of digital disembodiment (doing away with flesh; transcending the human body), but also with a celebration of the digital turn, and an overt eroticization of technology. Taking as a starting point the interpenetration of life and machine, posthuman modernism is concerned with the unprecedented acceleration of processes of becoming, and the redistribution of reality onto a cyborgian realm.

Katherine Hayles provides a cardinal point of reference for this critical conversation.<sup>6</sup> Her work inscribes posthuman theory firmly within a history of late twentieth-century cybernetics; but it also situates that history within a broader discussion of the relation between virtual bodies and materialist models of subjectivity. In her seminal study, *How We Became Posthuman*, she mounts a polemic against transhumanist dreams of cybernetic immortality, taking issue with the idea that in some near future it will be possible to digitize consciousness, enabling a complete dematerialization of the self, and a removal of mind from the inconveniences of embodied experience. As Hayles argues, the scenario reproduces, in a contemporary, digital context, the errors of a Cartesian theory of mind. It promises, in short, a naive reversion to a long-discredited dualist ontology in which the body is cast as mere casing, and mortality is reimagined as an accidental condition that humans will learn sooner or later to transcend.<sup>7</sup>

While the posthuman, in its various articulations, has emerged as an important theoretical framework for modernist studies over the past few years, the

precise sense in which one field might be said to inform or to inflect the other remains open to debate. Earlier scholarship tended to favor single-author approaches, typically focusing on a central topic within a modern writer's body of work and relying on theoretical hindsight to reinvent standard modernist themes. I am thinking, for example, of Jeff Wallace's pioneering book on science in D. H. Lawrence (2005), but also Jonathan Boulter on Beckett and corporeality (2008), Derek Ryan on processes of material becoming in Virginia Woolf (2013), and my own work on figures of nonhuman time in James Joyce (2007).<sup>8</sup> It is only recently that critics have begun to flesh out a shared philosophical history, to trace the continuity of aesthetic norms and ethical values, between posthuman thought and modernism as a whole.<sup>9</sup>

Jeff Wallace identifies the inception of this history with a Nietzschean moment in modernism—specifically, with that radical revaluation of all values associated with Nietzsche's name and philosophical project. The ideal of a self-overcoming or self-exceeding humanity inscribes a posthuman inspiration at the very center of modernism. But, at the same time, Wallace argues, posthuman theory also functions retroactively as a critical principle capable of recoding many of the ideological coordinates that have shaped modernist studies over the years. The allusion, here, is to a vitalist tradition that gives modern, avant-garde culture its connotations of heroic vigor, masculinity, and egotism.

Jean-Michel Rabaté invokes precisely these values when he reflects on some of the ways in which modernism has been historically gendered:

There was a shared sense that "high modernism" had to be masculine, hence "hard," aggressive, ferocious even, against an effeminate culture of decadence. . . . Indeed, not so long ago, as influential a critic as Hugh Kenner refused to grant the epithet of modernist to Virginia Woolf, deemed to "soft" and not experimental enough. Kenner reserved the term for the group animated by Ezra Pound.<sup>10</sup>

In this connection, the posthuman has increasingly come to be conceived as a differential impulse inherent to the ideals of twentieth-century art, a kind of shadow twin that haunts historical constructions and unsettles critical staples. It emerges from a definition of modernism as masculine, egotistic, aggressively innovative, at the same time as it invites a revision—indeed an inversion—of those defining features.<sup>11</sup>

Drawing on these precedents, we might observe that the posthuman turn realizes a self-critical, self-historicizing disposition within modernism. Its senses,

and its rhetoric, are oriented towards the future, animated by the aims and methods of the avant-garde, a taste for riots, a bad-boy image, a flaunted immaturity, and a desire to break with the past. But its character is retrospective. It echoes that part of modernism that never ceases to interrogate its cultural currency, its relevance to the historical present, even as it stakes its legacy on a forceful forgetting of history and an aggressive pursuit of the new.

In the tension between these two moments, posthuman theory aligns the old avant-garde with the emergence of a new materialist ontology, while modernism, in turn, co-opts as part of its own legacy the birth of a new ethics and a new order of figuration centered on a critique of anthropocentric habits of thought. It is important to highlight the *co-implication* of these three rubrics—in other words, to stress that the term *posthuman* in posthuman modernism does not simply reduce to a steady supply of themes and ethical concerns vaguely related to some subaltern of the human species. Nor is it a case of redeeming modernism from its historical shortcomings—of discovering a wiser, greener twentieth century, a modernism for the rights of animals. At issue, rather, is an understanding of the radical nature of modernist strategies of figuration beginning in the recognition of the centrality of the machine in twentieth-century aesthetics. Not just a representation of nonhuman life, but the becoming cybernetic of perception, or the animal part of figuration.

Put another way, reading modernism alongside posthuman theory is not simply a matter of retrofitting modernist texts with contemporary posthumanist concerns—say an interest in animal subjectivity, or a fascination with robots and cyborgs, or even a dissatisfaction with anthropocentric ecologies—but rather, of attending to a peculiar mode of figuration in which the three articles set forth above are mobilized together. To recap: a reflection on the future of subjectivity in light of technological advances and the effects of unprecedented speed on the experience of everyday life; a strange combination of materialist and vitalist ideas wherein life becomes another name for reality, but a reality that is much too quick, or much too supple ever to conform to the version of it that is given in formal representations; and, finally, a radical perspectivism premised on a critique of organic perception.

### **Fetishes of the Avant-Garde**

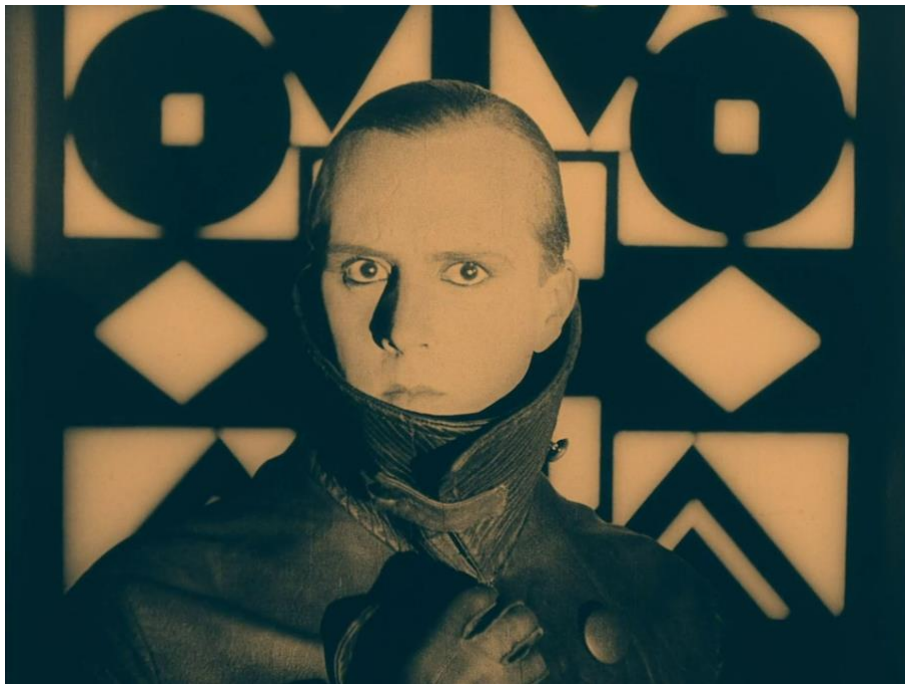
In developing these themes alongside an analysis of *The Inhuman Woman* it is necessary first of all to remark on the manner in which elements of the film's style interact with its narrative content. I have already mentioned that the film is aggressively stylized, and that it advertises itself as a celebration of futurist, cubist, and art deco aesthetics. What this means, in effect, is that certain features of an

image that are traditionally understood to be ancillary to representation become overly visible. Much of the semiotic richness of the film derives from this incongruity, this hypervaluation of the incidental, and of the background. Production design, sets, costumes, and casting choices intrude on narrative content.

Consider the two sequences in which the film's main characters are introduced. First, the grand entrance of Claire Lescot, the inhuman woman herself, the diva who makes a sport of courting and mercilessly rejecting male admirers. Her lavish international parties are the talk of Paris. In anticipation of her arrival we are shown the guests at her latest reception, framed in strangely narrow spaces or clustered in corners of the grand hall. The entire scene leading to Claire's fashionably late entrance is a deliberate contrast of deep and shallow perspectives, finally setting up the reveal with a wide-angle shot of Alberto Cavalcanti spectacular interiors.

The next segment introduces Einar Norsen as a quintessential modernist hero, a man who loves fast cars, but also a maverick scientist surrounded by the mystique of strange experiments and danger. The pacing of the action is urgent, almost frantic—appropriately enough, since Einar is late to Claire Lescot's party. Yet here too it is the production design that steals the scene. Two remarkable sets bookend the character's appearance. We see him first outside his own house, in silhouette, his face obscured by his driving clothes—then outside Claire's villa, his face finally visible against the background of her front door.





Figs 1-3. Stylised set design: Einar arrives at Claire Lescot's house in *L'Inhumaine*, directed by Marcel L'Herbier (Cinégraphic, 1924; restored and reissued by Lobster Films). Courtesy of the author.

It seems to me that this hypervalorization of the set designs has at least two effects. The first is to make modernist style, and by extension modernism itself, the overt theme of the film. The second, no less important, is to *abstract* the image—that is, to deemphasize the figurative in favor of the *mise-en-scène*. At stake, here, is more than an artistic manipulation of perspective. Time and again the visual syntax by which we are able to coordinate the functions of subject and spatial composition—or figure and depth of field—comes undone.

Two later scenes develop this same treatment of figure and ground into a metacinematic parable—a reflection on the power of film to bend time and space, and to reset the coordinates of embodied, material existence.<sup>12</sup> In these climactic set-pieces cinema is cast as the modernist art par excellence: part magic, part science, part phantasmagoric machine, capable of stirring suppressed desire, and projecting innermost anxieties. Its power is first intimated during the film’s second act, when, after faking his suicide, Einar visits Claire’s dressing room disguised as an older gentleman.<sup>13</sup> There he proceeds to lie to her about needing a witness to identify the body. It is a ruse to get her to visit his secret lab, but the deceit plays on the woman’s guilt and sparks her desire. As the scene progresses the pair move to a second room where we notice a coming and going of human figures projected as shadows against a large screen. They are silhouettes of patrons leaving the theatre after the performance; but the impression of some kind of phantasmagoric projection is unmistakable.







Figs 4 and 5. Shadow theatre. *L'Inhumaine* directed by Marcel L'Herbier (Cinégraphic, 1924; restored and reissued by Lobster Films). Courtesy of the author.

The next sequence —in which we finally get to see the inside of Einar’s lab—ups the ante and brings the metacinematic inspiration of L’Herbier’s plot into proper focus. (The position of the two scenes with respect to one another greatly determines their significance within the plot and reinforces the metacinematic allegory: first the phantasmagoria, *then* the demonstration of Einar’s technology: old magic heralding the new.) By the end of the film, Einar will have shown Claire two breath-taking inventions, the first of which consists, once again, of a cinema-like spectacle, a series of images moving on a screen; only in this case, we are not treated to some sort of low-budget shadow play in the backrooms of an old theatre. Einar wins Claire’s heart by showing her *television*, a device capable of broadcasting her performance live to the far corners of the earth, and of beaming the reactions of the audience back to the studio. Before the demonstration, the words “Le monde entier est ici” (“The whole world is here”) appear on screen by way of a teaser trailer, followed by “Déplacez-vous par TSF” (“Move with TSF”). The full ten-minute segment brings into stark relief the film’s investment in the alliance of technology and desire. But it also highlights the uncanny power of the new art, poised between phantasmagoria and pioneering science: a magical theatre, able to read and project images from the unconscious, and an extraordinary amplification of the human voice and the human eye.

The irony is that Einar’s invention stokes the diva’s love—humanizes her—by enabling her narcissism. The act of watching TV is a kind of narcissistic payoff, the thrilling confirmation that Claire’s art has become truly global; in short, it is a

technological amplification of the mirror image. Claire is able to spy on her own audience, to indulge secretly in the pleasure her voice brings to the far corners of the world, even to witness the dejection of her slighted lovers as they contemplate their defeat.



Fig 6. Stylized machinery. *L'Inhumaine* directed by Marcel L'Herbier (Cinégraphie, 1924; restored and reissued by Lobster Films). Courtesy of the author.

At first glance the twist would appear to suggest a betrayal of the critical edge one associates with posthumanist thought. If we accept Wallace's premise that posthuman theory inhabits modernism as a radical discourse capable of queering its defining values of egotism, aggressiveness, and heroic masculinity, then we might well read Einar's seduction of Claire as a restatement of normative gender roles. And, by the same logic, if we buy into Hayles's argument that the real target of posthumanism is not the supersession of the human species, but a critique of a certain ideological construction of the human, then the plot resolution of *The Inhuman Woman* must be seen to repeat the errors singled out by Hayles herself in her polemic against naive transhumanist fantasies of digital immortality and dematerialization.<sup>14</sup>

It is true that Einar's technology is more transhumanist magic than it is science. By indulging in the fantasy of abolishing time and space, even to the point of conquering death, the film reverts to a theory of the artist's ego as an abstract, all-powerful, all-encompassing act of self-expression. But this thesis is complicated by what I described earlier as the hypervaluation of production design, of precisely

those details of image composition that seem incidental to narrative content. These include (very briefly), an emphasis on the techno-material dimension of the image-making process itself, the sexiness of the design standing for the erotic appeal of Einar's inventions (fig. 6); and a persistent reshaping of the human silhouette, starting with the introduction of Claire Lescot as a stylized figure on an art-deco poster, on to her first appearance in the flesh, surrounded by puppet-like servants, to countless other instances in which stylization and phantasmagoric distortion impinge on human form (fig. 7). My claim is that these strategies jointly reflect a desire to resist, if not reimagine altogether, the logic of figuration so integral to the workings of the human eye.



Fig 7. Claire Lescot with smiling servants. *L'Inhumaine* directed by Marcel L'Herbier (Cinégraphic, 1924; restored and reissued by Lobster Films). Courtesy of the author.

### **Cyborgian Affect**

I began this essay by referring to *The Inhuman Woman* as a hub of avant-garde cooperation, and a sort of programmatic document for an entire community of *bad boy* artists. A full treatment of that idea is not possible here, but I do want to say a few words about Fernand Léger's spectacular set designs for the interior of Einar's futuristic lab.

In an article written for *The Little Review*, Léger provides the following comment on the inspiration behind his own cinematic language:

Every effort in the line of spectacle or moving picture should be concentrated on bringing out the values of the object—even at the

expense of the subject and of every other so called photographic element of interpretation, whatever it may be.

All current cinema is romantic, literary, historical expressionist, etc.

Let us forget all this and consider, if you please: a pipe—a chair—a hand—an eye—a typewriter—a hat—a foot, etc., etc. . . . In this enumeration I have purposely included parts of the human body in order to emphasize the fact that in the new realism the human being, the personality, is interesting only in these fragments and that these fragments should not be considered of any more importance than any of the other objects listed.<sup>15</sup>

Film scholars will recognize in these views a reference to the use of extreme close-up in Léger's own experimental film *Ballet mécanique* (1924). Léger's camerawork and editing style famously eschew traditional narrative content—plot, character, a story-based synthesis of camera movements and points of view—in pursuit of a so-called pure form, a cinema of impersonal affects, of images connected by repetition, rhythm, and associative syntax. Malcolm Turvey and Christopher Townsend both align this aesthetic program with political anxieties prevalent in France after the Great War—and in particular, with the intuition of a radical shift in human history and human evolution, heralded by the mechanization of vital processes. Turvey notes, to this effect, that “avant-gardists sometimes seemed to subscribe to a neo-Lamarckian belief in the possibility of the literal and rapid evolution of human beings into machine-like entities”; he then goes on to quote from a letter by the filmmaker to his art dealer: “The contemporary environment,” Léger writes, “is clearly (dominated by) the manufactured and ‘mechanical’ object; this is slowly subjugating the breasts and curves of woman, fruit, the soft landscape.”<sup>16</sup>

Townsend elaborates on this context by teasing out the ideological inspiration behind Léger's purist aesthetic, describing it as “a conservative revision of Cubism,” effectively a betrayal of “the radical developments of pre-war Cubism and Simultaneism that concerned themselves with the visual instability of the subject/object relationship in space/time.”<sup>17</sup>

I find these arguments persuasive in their insistence on a properly historicized and politically sensitive account of the artistic ideals of the time. But my impression is that they fail to do justice to Léger's very deliberate emphasis on limbs and distorted silhouettes. What to make of a style that sets out to abstract and reshape the body, and a machine aesthetic that specifically reframes limbs as everyday objects? Townsend touches on this issue when he remarks on the

neoclassical drift of purist art, dismissing it, I think unfairly, as a precious aestheticism. Reality is stylized in accordance with classical ideas of harmony and proportion, and objects are contemplated in terms of their sheer aesthetic value.

It is hard to see how any viewing of *Ballet mécanique* could yield the impression of a comforting or even familiar aesthetic experience. But even setting aside any divergence of opinion based on subjective or impressionistic readings of the film, it is necessary to dwell on two aspects of Léger's treatment of the human form.

The first, and perhaps most evident, is the use of close-up for the purpose of fragmentation. Think of it as the equivalent, in film language, of a poetic exploration of the constitution of sense *from* sense perception, an emphasis on the genetic priority of the part over the whole, akin to what Husserl would try to describe under the heading of passive synthesis. As the body is disassembled, perception is made inorganic; and reality is atomized, released for the moment from the synthesizing labor of consciousness only to be built again (to be given to attention) detail by disjointed detail. I should mention that my reading of Léger's technique here is diametrically opposed to the one proposed by Townsend, who views it rather as an affirmation of the integrity of the human form, a suspension of the camera's impersonal movement with a view to expressing a sense of interiority. Townsend's claim is that the focus on "the 'beautiful' face, entire and symmetrical, in the shape of 'Kiki,'" offers "a moment of brief respite from the incessant flow of mechanical and mass-produced images" ("The Purist Focus," 167). Yet this privileging of the face is simply not borne out by the main examples of close-up in *Ballet mécanique*. Nor does one recognize in Léger's camerawork, even in his most stylized treatment of the human figure, an attempt to render the face whole. More often than not, it appears dramatically decentered, partially occluded, or unnaturally lit. When it is properly centered, shown flat against the screen, it is denatured by the lack of negative space. One shot shows a mouth at a remove from the rest of the face. Another abstracts the eyes. Style and design are aligned, consistently, with dismemberment.



Figs 8-10. Close-up in *Ballet mécanique*, dir. Fernand Léger (Synchro-Cine, 1924). Courtesy of the author.



The second salient aspect of Léger's treatment of the figure is a flattening of ontological hierarchies, a scandalous rejection of common-sense order, implied in placing, say, a human hand or human feet in the same series as other types of object: a pipe or a hat or a chair. The arrangement accords with two radical positions taken up by the avant-garde under the influence of vitalism: the assumption that reality is a multiplicity of forces, distributed on a single, immanent plane; and the notion that the dizzying speed and technological advances of the modern world call for a cinematic transformation of the eye, a manner of seeing freed from habitual syntactic categories, such as foreground and background, or subject and object of representation.

The same manipulation of the syntax of foreground and background is at stake in the futuristic set design of Einar's lab—and the same attention to the impersonal, machine-like rhythms of the image. L'Herbier's film is certainly more traditional in its handling of plot, but here too the goal is to liberate cinema from what Léger calls its "Romantic, literary" character, in short, to rid perception of the habits of organic eyesight. Indeed, both *L'Inhumaine* and *Ballet mécanique* explore the point at which the organic and the mechanical disappear into each other, testing out a kind of cyborgian affect. Objects are eroticized, and stylized forms subsume and reshape the human silhouette.

The final act of *The Inhuman Woman* drives the point home with its frenetic tempo (achieved through fast cuts and an urgent beat of repeating images), accompanying a series of tight shots of pistons, blinking lights, and busy men in strange lab gear (fig. 11). Incidentally, it is part of the film's semiotic richness that the affect mobilized by these compositional elements ill fits the character and resolution of L'Herbier's plot. Where design, rhythm and camerawork pitch the cinematic image at the point of overlap between human being and machine-life, the plot recycles its own cyborgian energies to serve a clichéd human drama.



Fig 11. Lab gear and human form in *L'Inhumaine*, directed by Marcel L'Herbier (Cinégraphic, 1924; restored and reissued by Lobster Films). Courtesy of the author.

### **The Romance of Technology: Matter and Magic**

The frantic pacing of the climactic second scene inside Einar's lab offers perhaps the most obvious example of this misalignment between style and plot. Where the excesses of avant-garde design foreground rhythm in order to emphasize the primacy of an ever-changing, surging, presubjective reality over distinct eidetic forms, the economies of the plot remotivate that same urgency as a race against time, a mad experiment to bring Claire back to life. By the same token, L'Herbier's aesthetic makes a dazzling spectacle of Einar's inventions: the striking close-ups of bits of machinery, the sensational lab gear, the bold set designs that steal the scene, all serve to quicken technology, to invest it with an erotic charge, underscoring, once again, the breakdown of the distinction between mechanical processes and organic life. Yet these effects are also deployed towards a resolution of the melodramatic plot, as *vague* indicators of the miracle of modern science. In this context, technology is treated no differently than wizardry or magic. Style replaces procedural detail, and the figure of the inventor-hero, still tasked with representing the ideals of the day, somehow parts company with the values of modernity.

It is tempting here to draw a comparison with Joyce's use of the idea of television in *Finnegans Wake*, since something of the same tension between ageless wizardry and cutting-edge science is in play in Joyce's novel. Joyce too relies on an aggressive style that obtrudes on content, strains narrative economy and short-circuits syntactic relations. But where L'Herbier is content to forego technical details



altogether in favor of a stylized rendering of the glamour of science, in Joyce's television scene the technical and material processes sustaining the new technology are shown to be inextricable from the element of phantasmagoria. It is important to mention that Joyce wrote the episode some ten to twelve years after the premiere of L'Herbier's film, with the intervening years marking the very first successful experiments in the transmission of moving images. In other words, for L'Herbier television was a thing of the future, whereas for Joyce it was already a demonstrated scientific curiosity. But I believe the comparison also reflects a substantial difference in the writer's and the filmmaker's respective attitudes to the relation between machine life and organic process, two contrasting ways of affirming the coimplication of technology, life and matter.

The scene from Book II.3 of the *Wake* relates, in exaggerated detail, the procedures by which a televised image gives itself to the eye. It does so by taking *light* itself as its theme, atomizing the entire process, describing the charge of light particles upon a screen, the formation of figures from that charge, and so on. (In keeping with the book's reliance on semantic overdetermination, the televised story is an anecdote from the Crimean War, supplemented by allusions to Tennyson's *Charge of the Light Brigade*.) To be sure, there is no pretense of scientific accuracy, and the technical terms that pepper the paragraph denote only the most impressionistic understanding of the principles involved. But the sense of the ontological primacy of televisual reality is unmistakable—as is the belief that an investigation of the magic of imaging technologies must attend to the material dimensions of the image, the dance of electromagnetic forces, the violent barrage of light, the drama of photochemical reactions:

In the heliotropical noughttime following a fade of transformed Tuff and, pending its viseversion, a metenergic reglow of beaming Batt, the bairdboard bombardment screen, if tastefully taut guranium satin, tends to teleframe and step up to the charge of a light barricade. Down the photoslope in syncopanc pulses, with the bitts bugtwug their teffs, the missledhropes, glitteraglatteglutt, borne by their carnier walve. Spraygun rakes and splits them from a double focus: grenadite, damnymite, alextronite, nichilite: and the scanning firespot of the gunners traverses the rutilanced illustred sunksundered lines. Shloss! A gaspel truce leaks out over the caeseine coatings. Amid a fluorescence of spectracular mephiticism there caoculates through the inconoscope stealdily a still, the figure of a fellowchap in the wohly ghast<sup>18</sup>

Joyce's "heliotropical noughttime" is the zero hour when night turns into day, but also the infinitesimal instant ("no time at all") required of any single unit of duration ("now-time") to emerge and fade into the next. The description harks back to a Bergsonian concept of matter that circumvents the opposition between ideality and materiality, and calls upon the image to serve as middle ground: "Matter, in our view, is an aggregate of 'images.' And by 'image' we mean a certain existence which is more than that which the idealist calls a representation, but less than that which the realist calls a thing; an existence placed half-way between the 'thing' and the 'representation.'"<sup>19</sup> In accordance with this definition, Joyce's "noughttime" is matter, and matter emerges-and-fades, develops-and-dissolves, precisely, in the manner of a moving image.

By contrast, L'Herbier's bold composition results in an *abstraction* of reality. As we have seen, his reliance on design disassembles the human figure, while the tendency to invest technology with an erotic charge blurs the boundary between machine life and organic form. Einar's television is the ultimate expression of this taste for abstraction. It affords Claire the fantasy of rising above the here and now without compromising any part of her sense of self. Three title cards, punctuating her televised performance, spell out the point: "Elle voyage sans bouger à travers l'espace aboli . . . / à travers la joie e la douleur des êtres . . . / elle oublie le temps . . ." <sup>20</sup> But perhaps the most extraordinary moment in the whole sequence consists of a long tracking shot that focalizes no one in particular, an airborne movement that picks up pace incrementally, in the manner of a speeding train, to suggest the transmission of radio waves from Paris to the far corners of the world. We follow the invisible movement, *see* the acceleration . . .

### **Echo and Narcissus**

The analysis developed here presupposes a direct genealogical connection between high modernism and posthuman theory. More precisely, it builds on the assumption that one of the prominent topics in contemporary posthumanist discourse finds its earliest expression in a high-modernist aesthetic devoted to the theme of machine life and to the contemplation of reality as a middle ground of mechanical and vital processes. On the one hand, the dream of a technologically mediated dematerialization; on the other an understanding of life as irreducibly material and perspectival: Claire Lescot's romance with the machine captures both sides of this contradiction.

As Maureen Shanahan has argued, Leblanc's characterization of Claire inscribes a figure of resistant, queer sexuality within the ostensibly heteronormative

politics of the film, ultimately subverting the ideological standards of the plot's neat resolution. In this respect, too, *The Inhuman Woman* appears to rely on a conflation of the visible and the invisible elements of the scene, an overlap of background and foreground, of the subject of representation and the ancillary detail. As the personality of the real-life diva obtrudes on that of her character it becomes a signifier, an unmistakable intertext that undercuts the movement of desire presented the story. In Shanahan's words, "As a heterosexual couple, Claire and Einar limn a range of contemporary types. Yet they always seem wrong . . . To the Parisian audience of 1924, Claire's age and careerism and Einar's effete bachelor ways were discordant notes in opposition to the demobilization of women from the labor force, the postwar natalism, and the *ordre familial*."<sup>21</sup>

Claire's romance with technology plays for similar ideological stakes. It promotes a fantasy of cybernetic dematerialization, but also invites a cyborgian reconfiguration of the human body; it serves the logic of a plot in which the inventor-hero overcomes the sexual indifference (the inhumanity) of his love interest through sheer genius, but simultaneously urges a recoding of the gender stereotypes that sustain the conventional narrative. An important aspect of the machine's hold on Claire is the intuition that it is both a wonder of modern science (in other words, a gift to all of humanity), and a personalized device. Here is a new technology that is sure to change the world, yet was tailor-made for one woman, invented for her pleasure. On TV Claire can be Echo *and* Narcissus at one and the same time: loving and loved; able to reach a global audience by becoming pure voice, but entirely self-possessed, and invested in the power of her own reflected image; dematerialized, but eager to mirror herself in the adulation of her fans; feminine and masculine, a private woman and a global phenomenon.<sup>22</sup>

At the start of the film we find her at the height of success, bored with the Parisian scene and contemplating a world tour. Her suitors vie for her favor by offering her access to a new audience, a new *global* outlet for her art. One is a powerful businessman who owns the twelve most important theatres in the United States. Another is a Russian revolutionary leader who wants her to become the voice of an international political movement. By comparison, the Maharajah's offer seems refreshingly straightforward; he merely wants to add Claire to his harem. But this option too serves a global-political allegory. In rejecting him, Claire rejects the seductions of the East, the very flip side of a Eurocentric, globalizing, technologically curious modernity. The implication is that the sexual competition is also a war of ideologies, waged for the benefit of the world at large, and by extension, for the good of humanity.

Einar's invention is a perfect expression of the Eurocentric values of the age. But as technology outbids the appeal of global wealth and political idealism it also amplifies those aspects of Leblanc's performance that suspend a heteronormative coding of the plot. In the honing of a perspectival reality in which the human eye has come unmoored from its organic ground, and in the attendant ontological shift to a middle ground between organic and inorganic being, *The Inhuman Woman* complicates the humanist positions it appears to endorse.

Fittingly, the very last scene sounds the conventional note of Claire's rehumanization through the apparent taming of her desire, and the affirmation of love as a miraculous cure; but it does so by way of exaggeration, archly, while reasserting the diva's incorrigible narcissism and her performative mastery over her own sexuality. With an emphatic raising of the brow, and a teasing pause before the last all-important word, Claire gazes in her lover's eyes: "Je voulais venir à tous prix pour l'expérience dangereuse . . . c'était par amour pour . . . l'humanité" ("I had to hurry back at all costs, to experience the danger . . . it was for love of . . . humanity").

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> George Antheil, *Bad Boy of Music* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, Doran and Company, 1945), 136.

<sup>2</sup> For a sense of the film's participation in a cubist aesthetic, see Standish D. Lawder, *The Cubist Cinema* (New York: New York University Press, 1975).

<sup>3</sup> Some of the film's motifs and set pieces—in particular, the numerous drives at breakneck speed, and the death-defying scientific experiments with repeated close-ups on lab equipment that advertises "*Danger de Mort*"—seem to be lifted directly from imagery deployed in the writings and programmatic essays of the major exponents of the futurist movement. One need look no further than the founders' *Manifesto* (especially articles 1, 4 and 5):

- 1. We intend to sing to the love of danger, the habit of energy and fearlessness. . . .
- 4. We affirm that the beauty of the world has been enriched by a new form of beauty: the beauty of speed. A racing car . . . is more beautiful than the *Victory of Samothrace*.
- 5. We intend to hymn man at the steering wheel, the ideal axis of which intersects the earth, itself hurled ahead in its own race along the path of its orbit.

(F. T. Marinetti, "The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism," trans. Lawrence Rainey, in *Futurism: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi, and Laura Wittman [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009], 49–53, 51).

Then again, we encounter the same imagery—the same cult of speed and masculine heroism—in several essays published by Marinetti, Giacomo Balla, Carlo Carrà, Francesco Balilla Pratella, and other artists in their circle. The following passage from "Multiplied Man and the Reign of the Machine" is only one of many that resonate closely with L'Herbier's vision: "we must prepare for the imminent and inevitable identification of man and motor, facilitating and perfecting a continual interchange of intuitions, rhythms, instincts, and metallic disciplines that are absolutely unknown to

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the great majority of people today and are divined by only the most clear-sighted minds" (F. T. Marinetti, "Multiplied Man and the Reign of the Machine," trans. Lawrence Rainey, in *Futurism: An Anthology*, 89–92, 90).

<sup>4</sup> See Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (London: Polity, 2013), 105; Felicia Miller Frank, "L'Inhumaine, La fin du monde: Modernist Utopias and Film-Making Angels," *MLN* 111, no. 5 (1996): 938–53.

<sup>5</sup> See Ruben Borg, *Fantasies of Self-Mourning: Modernism, the Posthuman and the Finite* (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> See in particular N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999); and "Refiguring the Posthuman," *Comparative Literature Studies* 41, no. 3 (2004): 311–16.

<sup>7</sup> Cary Wolfe raises some of the same issues in relation to recent developments in bioethics. His work brilliantly discusses the potential contribution of posthuman theory to ethical debates on special difference, and lays out the terms of an urgent critical re-evaluation of the differences between human and nonhuman being, traditionally understood in terms of linguistic ability, self-consciousness, and inalienable rights. Taking issue in particular with contemporary cognitive-scientific approaches to consciousness and language, Wolfe writes: "just as different forms of being human in the world are re-written . . . in terms of a homogeneous Cartesian ideal, so nonhuman beings, in all their diversity, are now rendered not as fully complete forms of life that are irreducible to such a thin, idealized account of what counts as subjectivity but rather as diminished or crippled versions of that fantasy figure called the human" (*What is Posthumanism?* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010], 45).

<sup>8</sup> See Jeff Wallace, *D. H. Lawrence, Science and the Posthuman* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Ruben Borg, *The Measureless Time of Joyce, Deleuze and Derrida* (London: Continuum, 2007); Jonathan Boulter, *Beckett: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum, 2008); Derek Ryan, *Virginia Woolf and the Materiality of Theory: Sex, Animal, Life* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013). Two recent titles must be added to this list: Jean-Michel Rabaté's monograph on Beckett (*Think, Pig! Beckett at the Limit of the Human* [New York: Fordham University Press, 2016]), and a special issue of *Humanities* devoted to "Joyce, the Animal and the Nonhuman Turn," guest edited by Katherine Ebury (*Humanities* 6, no. 3 [2017]). These works return to a single-author focus, but do so with a sharper sense of the broad historical and ideological continuities obtaining between modernism and posthuman theory.

<sup>9</sup> See for instance the September 2015 special issue of *Twentieth-Century Literature* "Modernist Ethics and Posthumanism," eds. Derek Ryan and Mark West; Jeff Wallace, "Modern," in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Posthuman*, eds. Bruce Clarke and Manuela Rossini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 41–53; and Erin E. Edwards, *The Modernist Corpse: Posthumanism and the Posthumous* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> Jean-Michel Rabaté, *The Pathos of Distance: Affects of the Moderns* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 38.

<sup>11</sup> Thus Wallace: "Heroic vs anti-heroic, egotistic vs post-anthropocentric, conflictual vs peaceful, loud vs quiet. My thesis is that while the nature of modernism as we understand it seems to call for an emphasis on the first term of these pairings, the binary itself begins to dissolve under the developing influence of posthumanist theory" ("Modern," 43).

<sup>12</sup> These reflections on the ability of film to bend time and space will turn out to be a recurrent preoccupation for L'Herbier. He would return to them most strikingly in *Le cinématographe et l'espace: chronique financier*, a lecture, and the basis for a cine-conference, on this very topic. The text is reprinted in Noël Burch, *Marcel L'Herbier* (Paris: Seghers, 1973), 97–104. I am grateful to the expert reader at *Modernism/modernity* who directed my attention to this text.

<sup>13</sup> Incidentally, the theme of fake death would turn out to be a recurrent preoccupation for L'Herbier through the 1920s. His next film, after *L'Inhumaine*, would be an adaptation of Pirandello's *The Late Mattia Pascal*.

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<sup>14</sup> Hayles writes: “the posthuman does not really mean the end of humanity. It signals instead the end of a certain conception of the human . . . Located within the dialectic of pattern/randomness and grounded in embodied actuality rather than disembodied information, the posthuman offers resources for rethinking the articulation of humans with intelligent machines” (*How We Became Posthuman*, 286–87).

<sup>15</sup> Fernand Léger, “A New Realism—The Object,” *The Little Review* 11, no. 2 (1926): 7–8.

<sup>16</sup> Malcolm Turvey, “The Avant-Garde and the ‘New Spirit’: The Case of *Ballet mécanique*” *October* 102 (2002): 35–58, 45; Léger, quoted in Turvey, “The Avant-Garde and the ‘New Spirit,’” 45.

<sup>17</sup> Christopher Townsend, “The Purist Focus: Léger’s Theory of the Close-Up,” *Angelaki* 16, no. 1 (2011): 161–80, 164.

<sup>18</sup> James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 349.

<sup>19</sup> Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy M. Paul and W. Scott Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1990), 9.

<sup>20</sup> “She travels without moving, through abolished space... / Through the joys and pains of other beings... / She loses track of time...” (my translation).

<sup>21</sup> Maureen G. Shanahan, “Indeterminate and Inhuman: Georgette Leblanc in *L’Inhumaine* (1924),” *Cinema Journal* 43, no. 4 (2004): 53–75, 60–61.

<sup>22</sup> L’Herbier’s fascination with the theme of Echo and Narcissus, and more generally, his interest in the tension between image and sound (or figure and voice) is clearly documented in one of his unrealized treatments, a planned adaptation of Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The preparatory notes for the film shed light on a perceived allegorical connection between the central conceit of Wilde’s novel, and the state of the art of cinema—the integrity of the silent picture, soon to be compromised by the intrusion of sound. For a detailed discussion of the project, see Michael Temple, “‘Cet incomparable Wilde’: étude de trois scénarios de Marcel L’Herbier pour l’adaptation du *Portrait de Dorian Gray*,” *Mille huit cent quatre-vingt-quinze: Revue de l’association française de recherche sur l’histoire du cinéma* 64 (2011): 102–19.

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