







# REDISCOVERING GERMAN FUTURISM 1920 - 1929

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Kurt Ralske & Miriam Atkin

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*Rediscovering German Futurism 1920-1929*

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# INTRODUCTION

Kurt Ralske

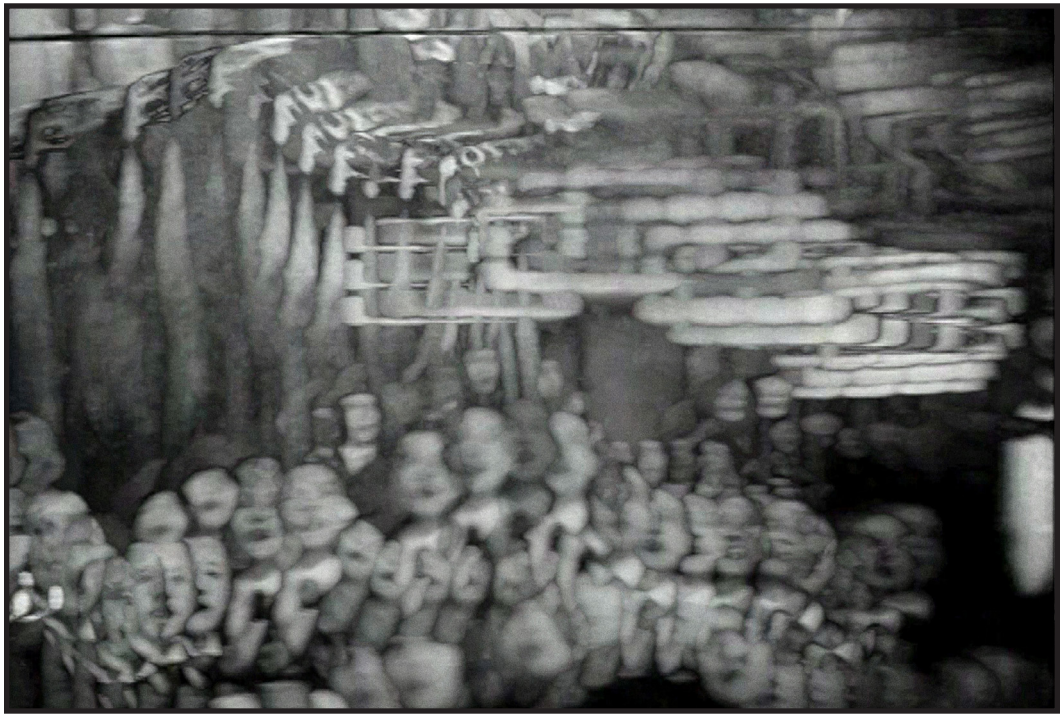
The archive is thought of as the place where cultural artifacts go to die. On occasion, however, something startling crawls forth from the boneyard, Lazarus-like, unexpectedly vital. Such a creature instantly changes the terms of the discussion.

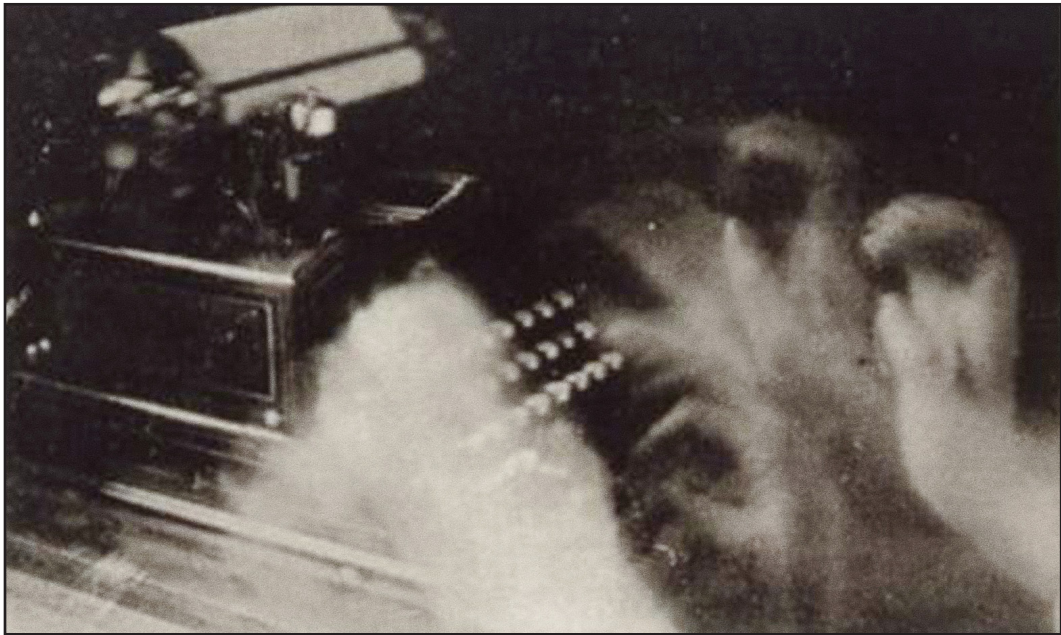
Seventeen long-forgotten reels of nitrate film in the archives of the F.W.Murnau Foundation in Weisbaden, Germany, rediscovered in 2010, command us to reevaluate existing narratives around the history of cinema. These experimental films, unseen for decades, were made in 1920s Berlin by the same directors, cinematographers, and special effects artists who worked on the most famous classics of German silent cinema. They are the shadow-production or deepest dreams of the era: a hidden parallel path to the well-known commercial output of the directors Fritz Lang, F.W.Murnau, G.W.Pabst.



In these films, abstract forms in space are created from temporal distortions. Motions appear as diffuse volumes, and discrete events are multiplied unto obscurity.

Instead of time, there is simultaneity.





This image-of-simultaneity was beloved by the Italian Futurists of the 1910s, as seen in these two photographs of Anton Bragaglia.



The newly-rediscovered films reveal how the German version of the image-of-simultaneity transformed beyond itself.

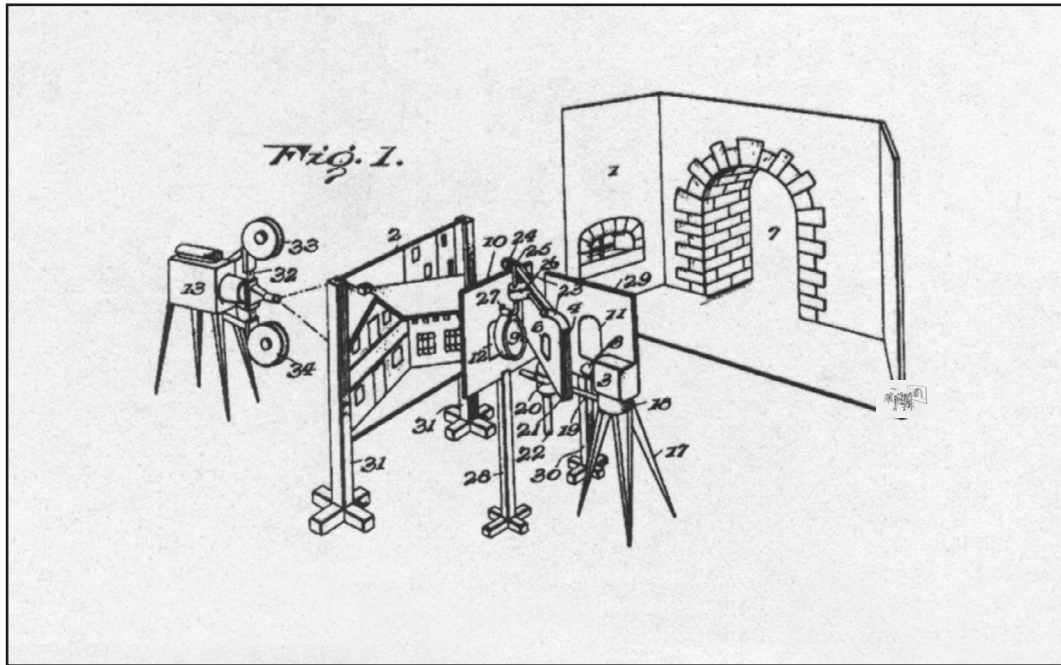
**Bewegungsrhythmus**  
**Studie**  
**num. 4**

**Eugen Schüfftan**  
**1925**

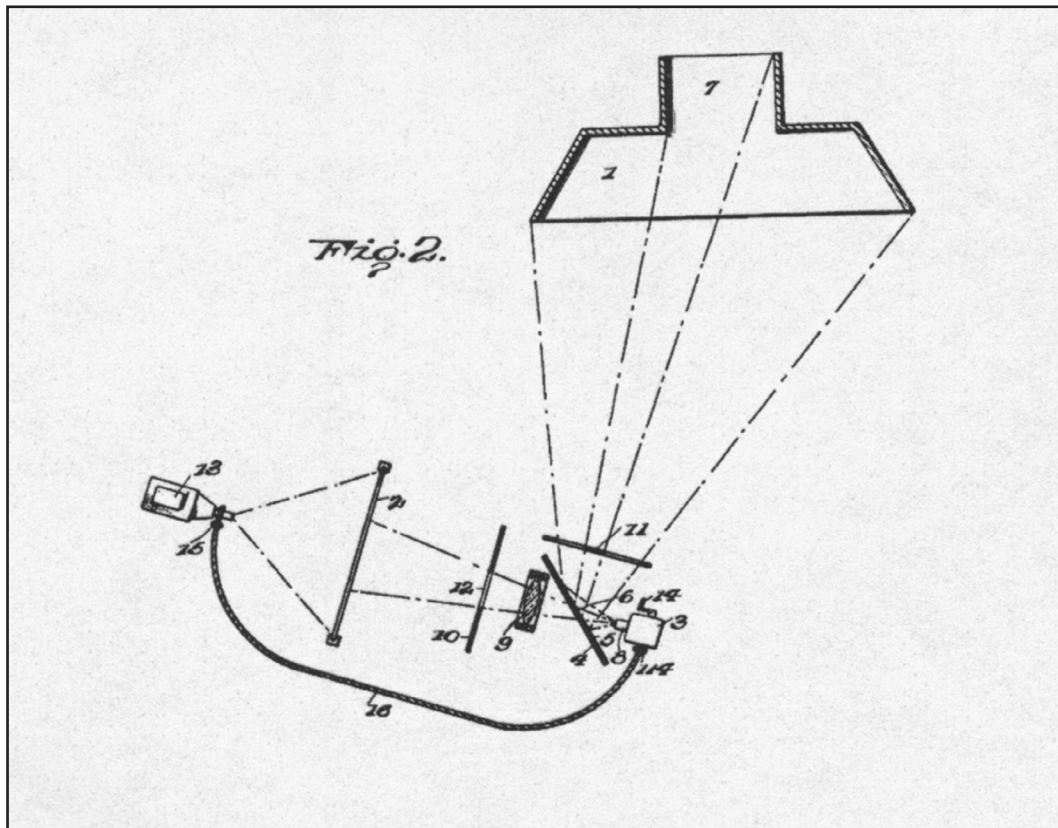
# Der Tod des Doktor Schön

Eugen Schüfftan  
G.W. Pabst  
1929

Some of the rediscovered films were created by Eugen Schüfftan, cinematographer and special effects artist, working with various collaborators.



Schüfftan, creator of the special effects of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), invented a technique of combining images using a projector and a partial mirror.

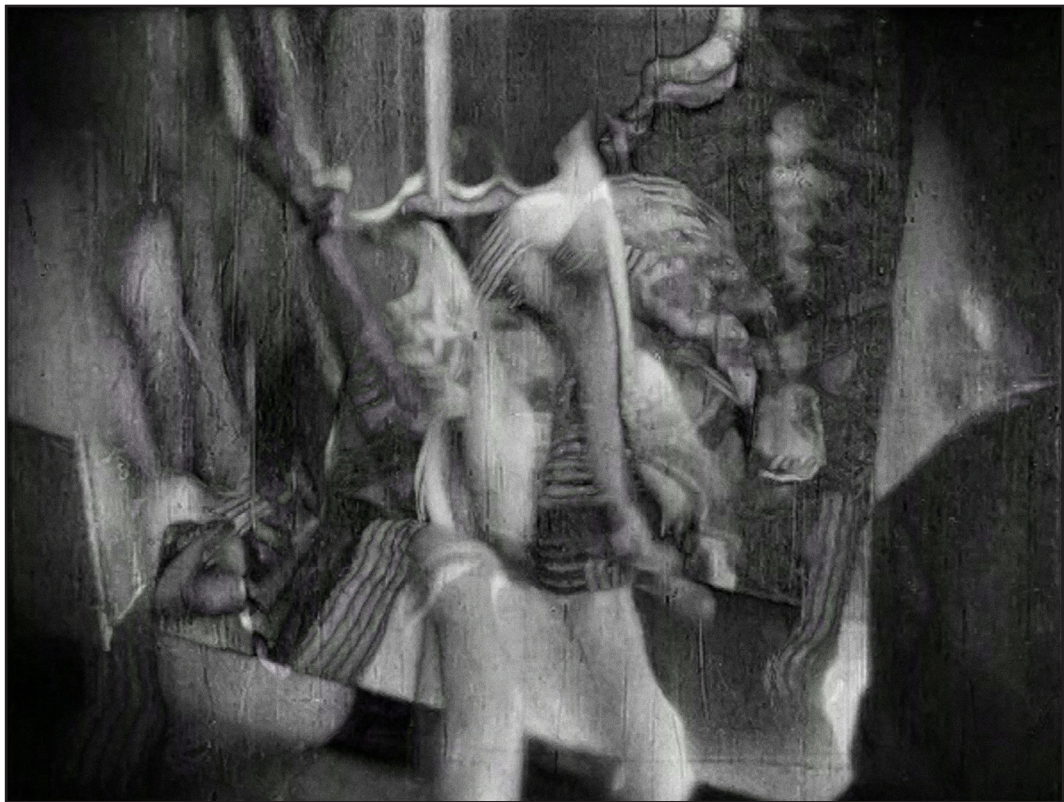


The German film studio UFA received a patent for this process in 1924.

The rediscovered films appear to have been produced with a modified version of the process utilizing optical printing and multiple projectors.

The images of German Futurism are both improbable and necessary. They reveal the act of image-making turned against itself.

Why do we create images? At times, it is an exercise of power: we wish to control or dominate what is depicted. At other times, we make images in pursuit of knowledge, or an expression of love for the subject. These contrary impulses—which would seem to be incompatible—are fused together in German Futurism, like a metallic alloy whose density surpasses either of its constituent elements.









REDISCOVERING  
GERMAN FUTURISM

Miriam Atkin



1.

Die allererste Dämmerung



*In real life there are both machines and people. We have hoped that here in the human world the latter would remain first and foremost, with machines subservient helpers. Yet our poor hope plods and rarely gains its object. Once upon a time we came to the devastating realization that the happy machine, zippy and industrious, is no slow hoper: it knows an end when it sees one. Thus begins the story you have gathered to hear...*

Is it the case that our faces are recognizable as our own only because, while voluntary muscular control of the Orbicularis Oculi works to sculpt the brow, we deliberately rouse the Zygomaticus to invite its own, unique curvature, its signature smile? Do we wake up each day and, without knowing it, willfully decide to flex our facial muscles in such a way that allows us to yet resemble ourselves?

Here we have the common yet timelessly relevant human drama of a man's desperate effort to remain himself despite all odds. Despite dirigibles, clocks, pump trolleys, electric lights, and Atomic Robot Men—all the buzzing and whirring mechanical doodads that think like us but only insofar as we make them do so.





Futurism is about our day-to-day dealings with the minute hand, elbows, levers, eyelids, lampshades, and most importantly the legs we use for running –our volition, our means of travelling, as the clock's arms travel about its face.



Is it the multitudinous multiplication of men enabled by the new preponderance of moment-collecting movement machines that can fling fast into the future some stock still humans and turn them to hordes of humming hoi polloi that peoples our modern militia?

Are restless spirits, angel choirs, homunculi of awareness, Amesha Spentas, auras, presences, vibes, and hunches only blobs and scribbles on the poorly-applied ether-themed wallpaper that hides a wall so black and infinitely hollow that the room it encloses is consequently made to appear like the liveliest battlefield—overrun by trembling aeroplanes and racing automobiles wearing bonnets adorned with great tubes like serpents breathing explosive discharge—over which our homunculi can watch, horrified, but never intervene?













2.

Allein mit Säufen



Though it has been largely by way of newscasts and telethons that we have become familiar with split-screen technology—first popularized by '60s era cinematographers—the German Futurists had presaged the use of this visual effect four decades earlier. Those excavators of the unconscious dredged up the deep motivation behind a surface that was to become universally recognizable far in the future of popular media. For, the human head houses an inward-looking eye—the pineal chakra of da'ath—and so it was with this force of pure insight and the imperial horsepower of progressive politics that the Futurists' Now Mind was synchronized with the universal Future Mind, which has since become present and channeled into the split-screen talking head television news sequence. Between this artful technology and the Futurist techno-art we can isolate a fundamental difference in process; in the positioning of the eye and in the way it turns.



It is the difference between the work of the scholar and the work of the visionary. The atheist apothecary and the howling coyote. The jazzberry jam crayola crayon and the sagging tailpipe, loose and belching.

One sees already with a design, such that projection and vision occur simultaneously, and the other sees from the inside and takes in too much too fast, leaving little time for reflection. And thus even the critic must relax into the warmth of the eyes' burning rays, where the internal fire goes out to meet the external one, which, in our case, has borne the form of man from the frothy ocean, its countershadow meeting the shore where is the definitely fathomable foundation of all scholarly activity.

As legend has it, this was the moment when the furred and ambiguously outlined aquatic ape lifted itself from oblivion and faced its new look in the image of The Thinking Man.







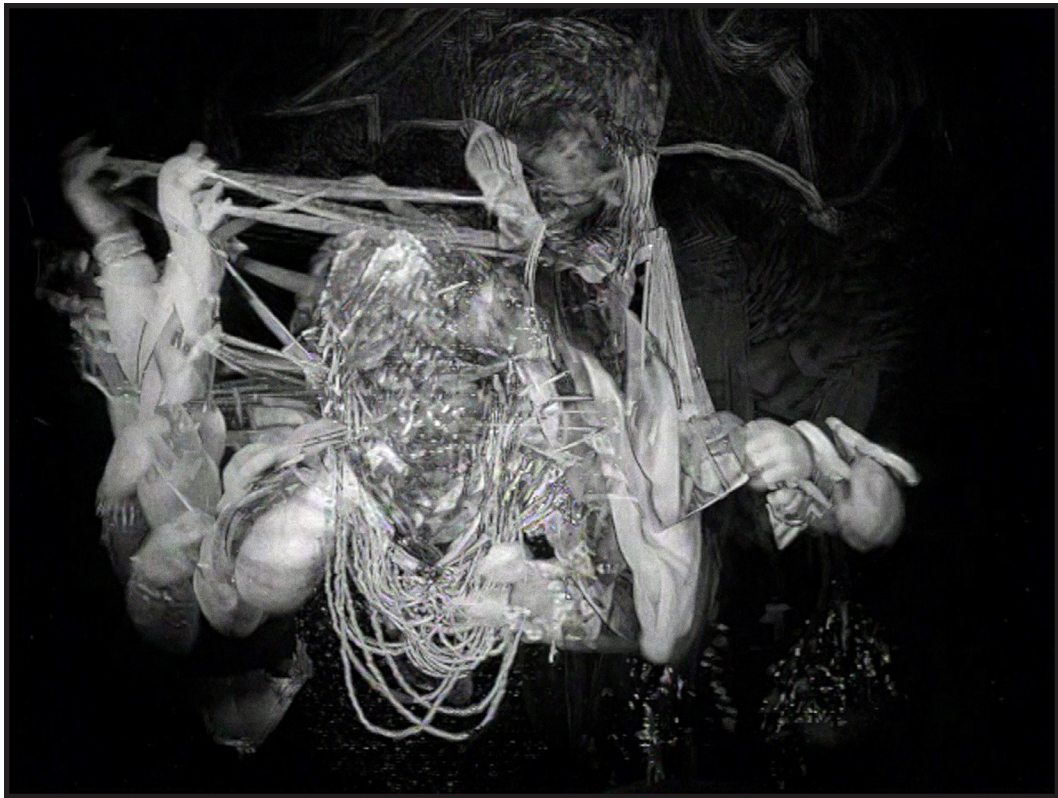


3.

Verziert mit blasse Kreuze



Are the baroque flourishes and gilt curlicues of the 19th century rail passenger compartment interior accidentally reminiscent of the knotty and intricate outward aspect of an incipient inward idea—the kaleidoscopic image of unruly anatomical and psychological landscapes ripe for trimming and pruning at the hands of fast and sharp scientific vocabularies?







Does science spin our guts into sentences? Does it ask us to wake up early in the morning, plant one last kiss on the cheek of a sleeping lover and then shout into the dawn, "with these final words I surrender the muscles of my mouth to you, Science" and so resign to their fate in a steamy, belching stewpot alongside assembly line birthmarks, tear-moistened eyes, ink-stained fingers, and assorted wounds and scars steeped for savor, substance, and the mute satiation of hungry throats once used for speaking; concocted for the ultimate purpose of perfection in the efficient management of consumption and waste?

Does Marinetti's heated restlessness  
express a deranged fidelity to the dream  
of someday waking up refreshed to an  
utterly worthwhile breakfast?

If we were to assess the evolutionary  
prospects of warring nations,  
would we not conclude that those  
committed to fighting would outlast those  
committed to winning?



4.

Wir, verletzt und doch furchtlos



The German Futurists imaged an expressivity that went no deeper than the gesture. Pure expression is a ghost with no face. The young man pictured here knows that what he feels inside of him is real—the rocking, virtuosic blast beat of his heart incidentally synchronized with a death walk drum roll and all its attendant unheimlichkeit—yet he's not sure how feeling happens, nor what he looks like when he's sad. Sad because his canny ears listen faster than the soundtrack. Because his perfect eyes see farther than The End. Who is he when he knows neither what he sees nor what sees him? He is ohne ein Heim.













5.

Oh, mütterlicher Abgrund!



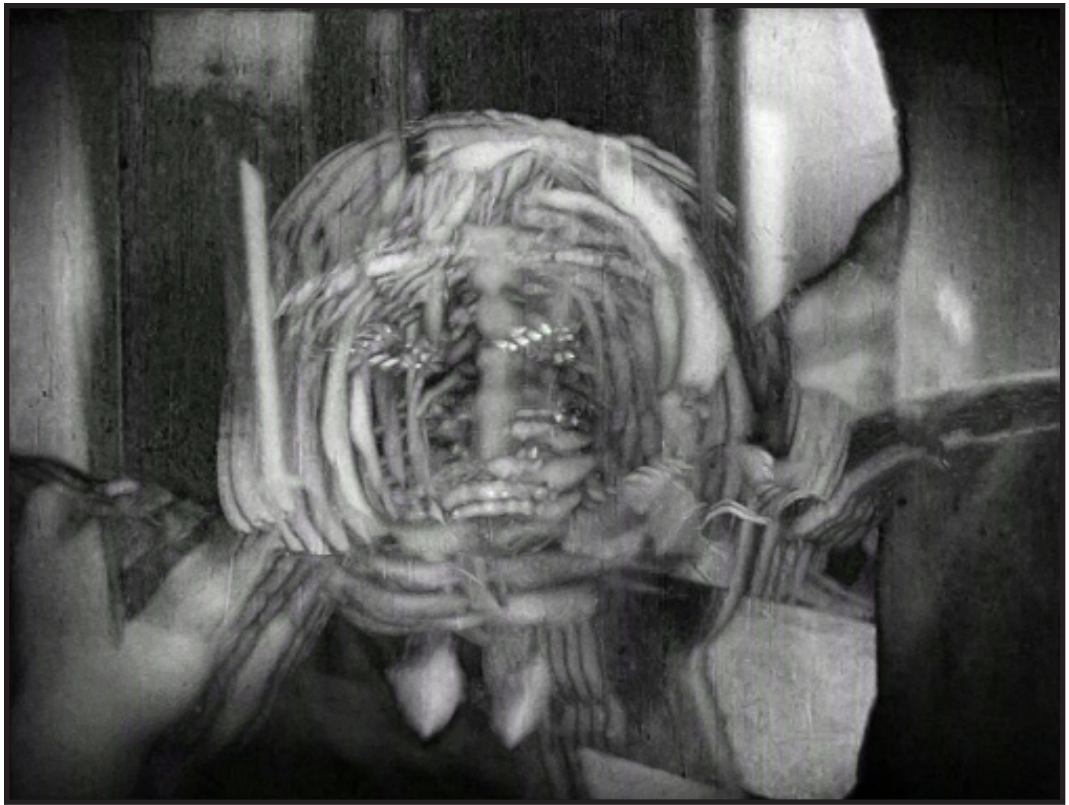
A scientist of the unconscious might use an image such as this to establish the particular character of one's cognitive faculties. "What do you see?" he'd ask, looking down into his papers. Is it a broken chimney stack, twisted metal, a desk chair? The moldering architectural ruins of long-defunct urban industry? Au contraire. Pictured here is a subaquatic hydrothermal vent, or deep sea "black smoker." But that doesn't matter, he would say.

*To see a state-of-the-art, maximum security sand castle in a grain of sand.*

And so we have hit upon the crux of German Futurist investigation into the nature of progress—that the "galloping question" had missed the mark. If we can now think fast enough to see that in a single moment all four hooves indeed leave the ground, in order to obtain a real answer we'd all have to fall dead before getting a good look at the Now Mind in stop-motion.

Brain death is no match for  
an intellect that buries its own  
bones a thousand fathoms  
below the black waves  
rippling with light refracted  
from the white moon where it  
has set up and trained  
a camera on the disgusting  
process of its own decay  
way way way down.





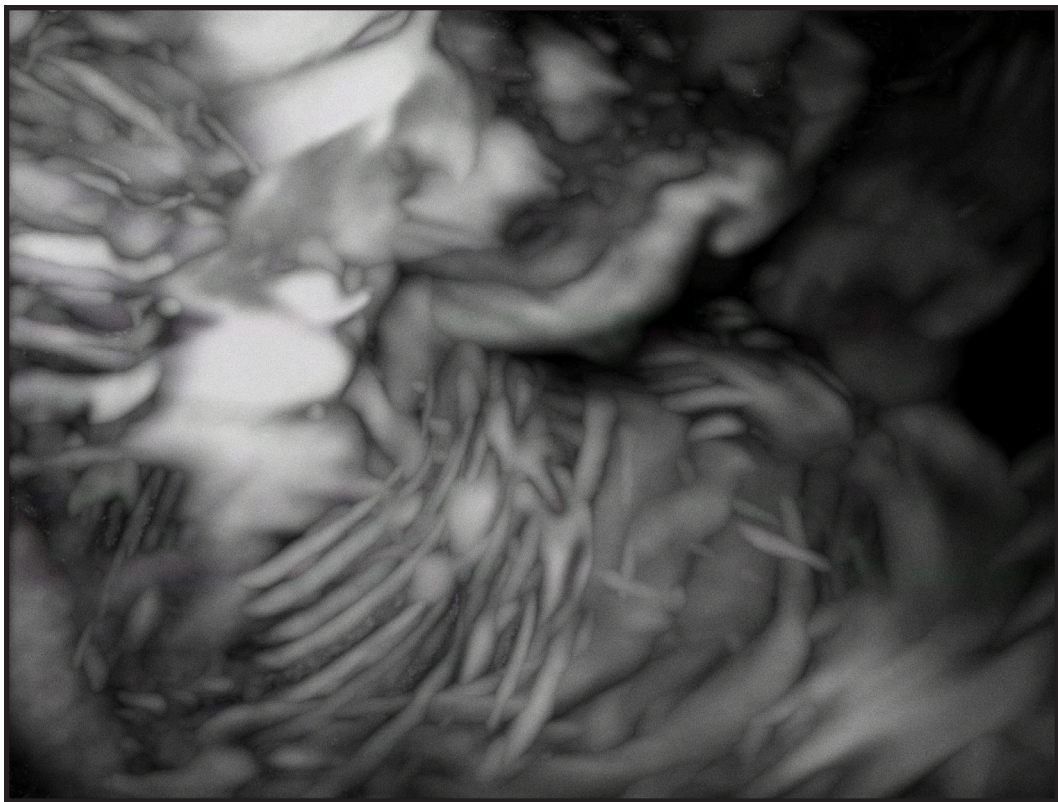


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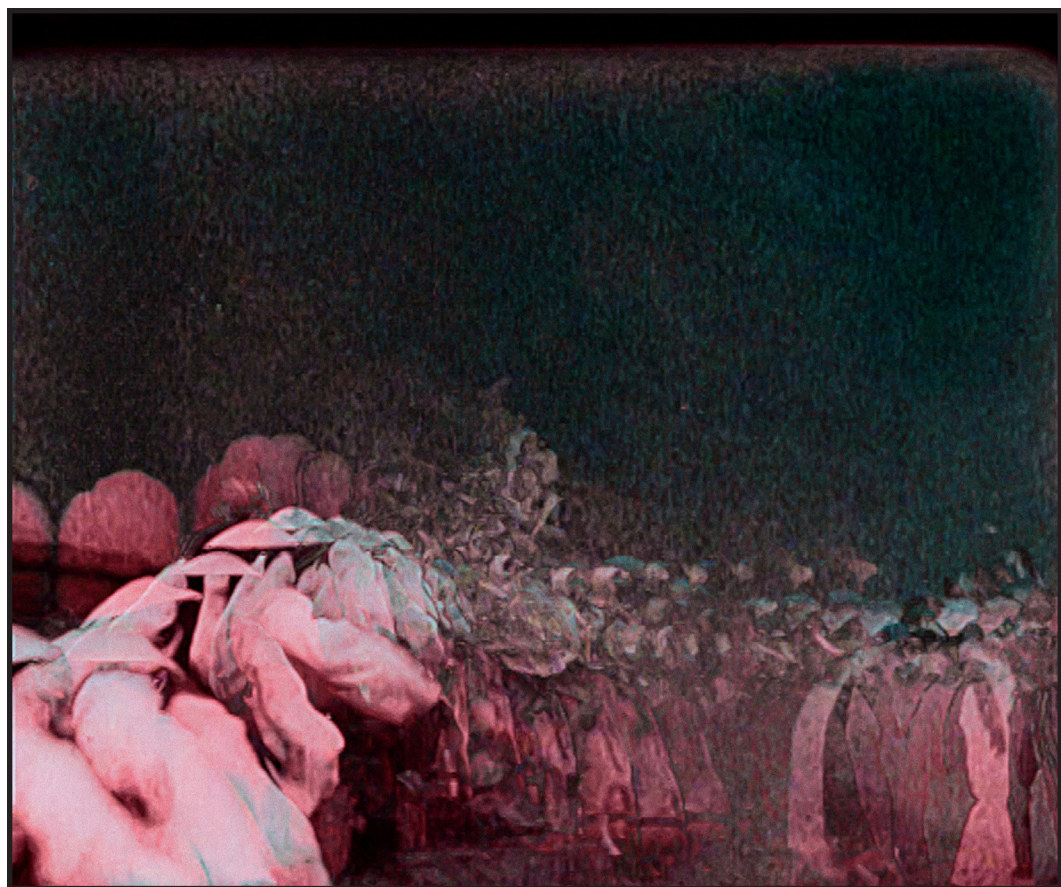
Entwurzelt durch den überschwemmenden Po

They say that if the human senses were to be sufficiently quickened, 500 million of us would feel whipworms (of the parasitic Trichuridae family, each one up to 1.96850 inches long) squirming around inside our large intestines. And have we really considered the insidious and utterly unreserved nature of the exploitation in which these nasty little animals partake? One trip down the digestive tract and the whipworm immediately begins to resemble the winding road he's just traveled. He not only likes our bodies but is like our bodies. Nowadays we have smart, mechanical surrogates to take pensive walks down the roads which we once could feel inside of us by simply sitting quietly.

Thus it is the endoscope that wields the power to stage our era's creative tour de force. Its road leads to the future, to the light at the end of the tunnel which darkens the duration of every human life. For, when the outside is moving so fast, when the frames are whirling around us at such a speed that the single picture is as inscrutably alive as our messed-up hairstyles and twitching umbrellas, we must turn inward in order to know what our bodies can even do anymore.



Perhaps we'd learn that a morning stroll can exceed the pace of 24 frames per second so as to facilitate movement of the bowels and obviate those intestinal complications which accommodate the endoscope's proclivity to scene-stealing.









7.

Verrücktheit trieben uns aus uns selbst heraus

In the Futurist conceptual schema the staircase is a stock symbol. Its technology dates back long before our Gregorian calendar and has been rendered nearly obsolete by the escalator and the elevator, not to mention our counter-futurist agrarian fantasies about ranch-style sub-urban living. If the Futurists care nothing for the past then the staircase is atemporal because it is neither passé nor avant-garde: its embellishment is extraneous to its reason in movement, whether progressive or regressive.



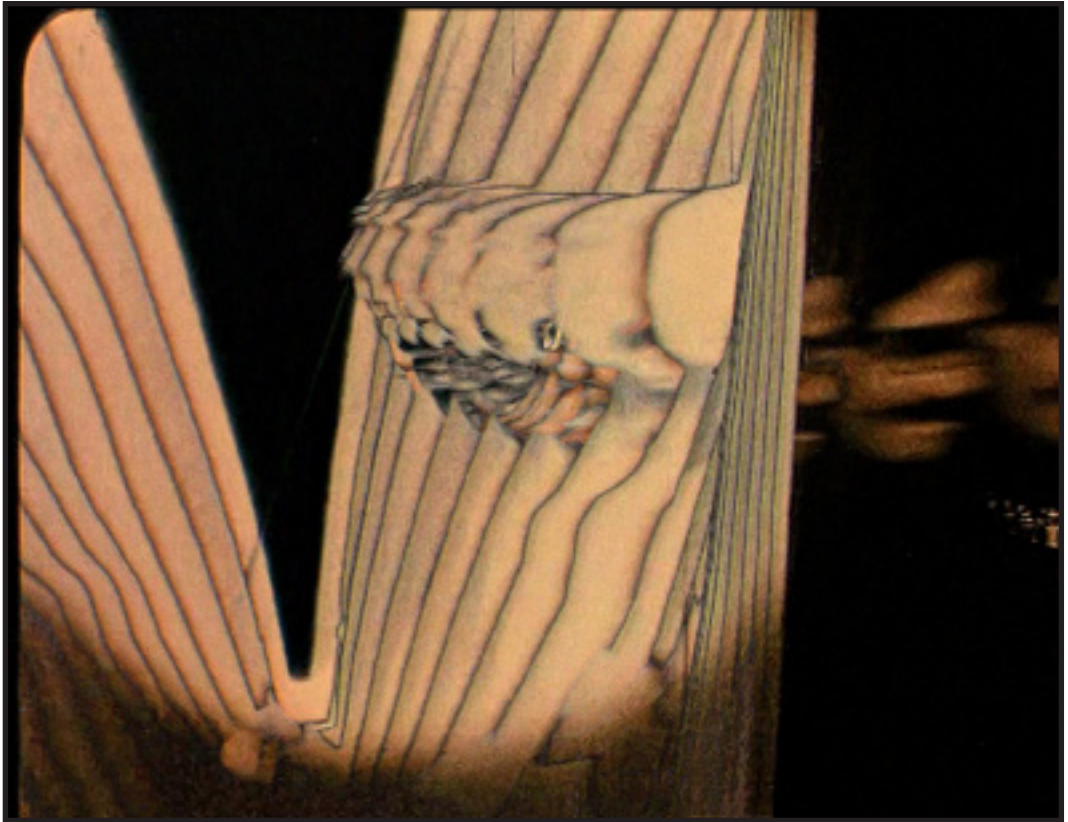
In the above image the figure is descending, as implied by the positioning of the hand. But the import of what is happening here takes second place to the glaring artificiality of its setting. The banister is as hard and unadorned as an archetype hastily penciled on a newsprint wall. And yet this bare-bones sketch has more depth than real life, which the man hopes to find downstairs, where he can regain his composure.





Returning from the vanguard where he has exploded into an expressionist welter of disembodied sensation, he will descend and look to the poor saps seated in the movie theatre in order to learn how to collect himself into a proto-human.





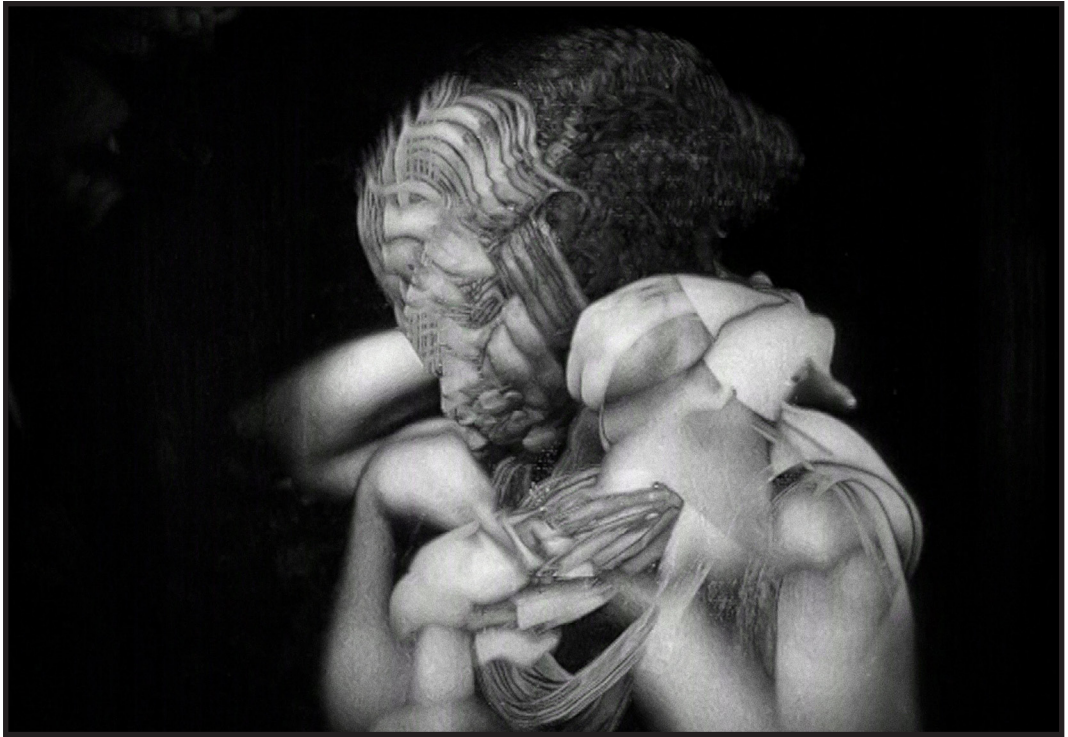


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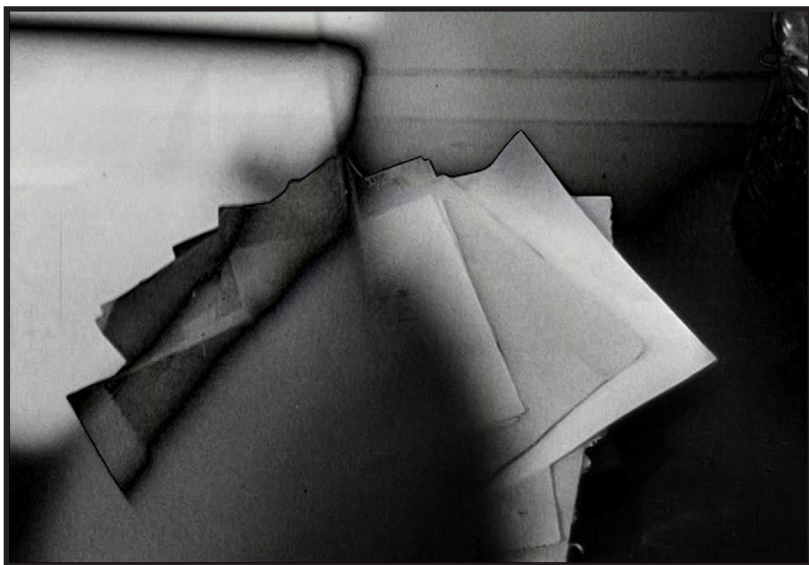
Auf meinem Auto, wie eine Leiche



Do you ever walk by a beachside restaurant in a resort town, see the happy people lounging amid breezy white linens and think "this is the only way I can really know the sun"? As if the arid gleam of freshly laundered muslin cabana curtains makes you feel in your needy bones what light really is even before you've had the chance to turn your face up to the sky? Love seems to express itself best in the images that flash by us when we're moving; in shapes cast over the windshield from the flickering signpost at a lonely Nevada gas station at midnight and in the posture of girl and boy kissing on the shoreline across the promenade as we pass by on an introspective walk at sundown.



In this regard, and to our present consideration of feeling, terror and love are opposed. What do the symbols we know of Terror and Love come to look like once we get older and no longer really believe in those things? When hatred for death and desperate tenderness become one another and implode, scattering meaning everywhere, leaving ruined shopkeepers scavenging in the rubble for the scattered letters of burnt-out neon signs? Right now is the post-apocalypse, and here are its impossible pictures.







9.

Schöne Ideen, die töten

*I see in the future a questioning of the terms of the question;  
a reality that admits it cannot hold;  
a desire for Death's opinion on life and  
the despair at this impossibility...*

– F.W. Murnau

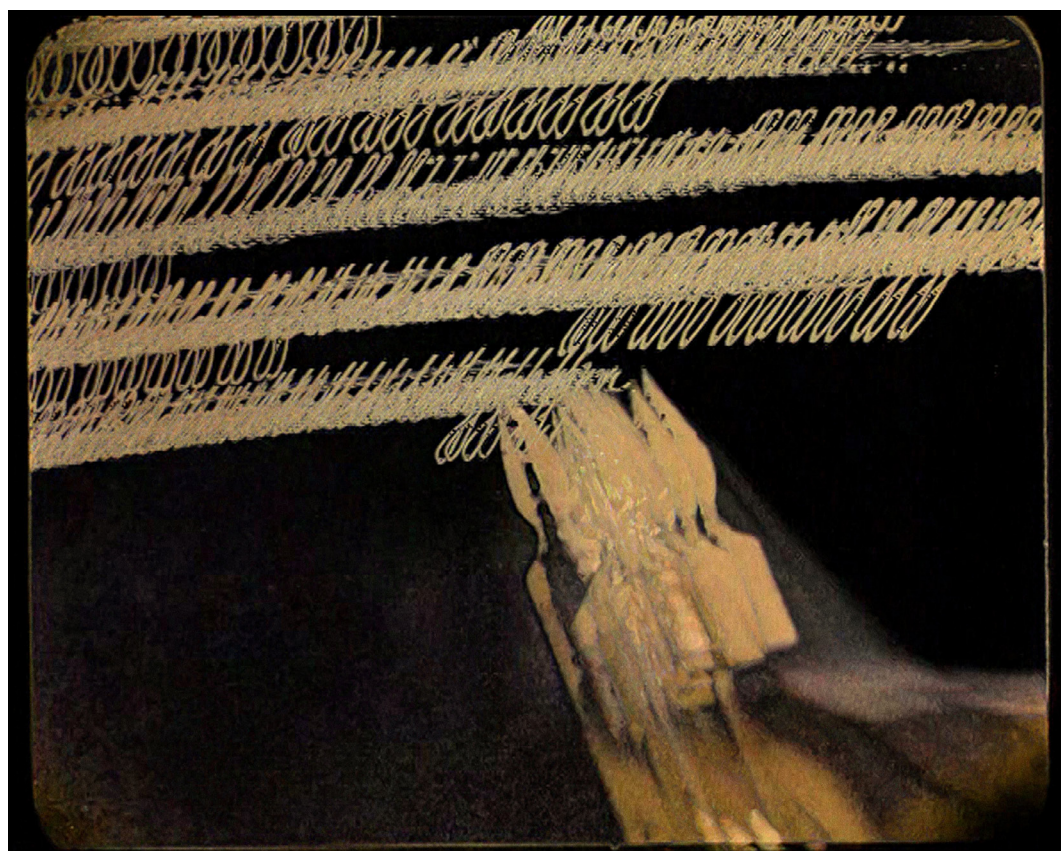
*We have been up all night, my friends and I...  
we have been discussing right up to the limits of logic  
and scrawling the paper with demented writing.*

– F.T. Marinetti

With the grisly repercussions of the pairing of machine and politics well-known to us in the 21st century, we can now read Marinetti's "we" as a pronouncement of the fascistic bullying power that any cult of technology would have unavoidably claimed for itself one hundred years ago. Furthermore, the ideological drive to laud "beautiful ideas which kill," a proposed aim of futurist art as per Marinetti's 1909 manifesto, is doubly, abominably significant when considered alongside the Nazi doctrine of Aryan beauty. This drive, specifically in its German expression, perhaps can be seen to have culminated, for all practical purposes, in a total defeat of beauty's victims. If the inevitable rise of Nazism was a conscious or unconscious topic in the films which this essay aims to prove attributable to a movement called German Futurism, Marinetti's battle cry rings particularly ominous to our retrospective understanding of that movement. And, if we are to examine futurism in light of its explicit fascism, we must consider the paradox that is built into its ideological program: if art is in the violent, frenetic, movements of warfare; in "the roaring motor car which seems to run on machine-gun fire," then when the battle is won, art dies. If such an art were to truly believe in itself, it would be compelled to treat its enemy with the care befitting an intimate friend.

Thus, to our consciences conditioned to imagine that evil has an Aryan face, the German incarnation of that aesthetic attitude occurs as the memory of a massacre that won't stop killing. Perhaps, then, the art in question cannot properly be called a movement, as it does not wish for its own victorious fulfillment and subsequent widespread implementation as political/aesthetic program, but rather depends upon the strength of its opposition in order to maintain the hostile conditions necessary for its sustained action. And it is, in a sense, still sustaining itself, as history has failed to produce new monsters and victims.

Leaving us its images as monument to the inception of our current angel of death, German futurism was an effort, both suicidal and homicidal, that hoped to infinitely delay its own success; the drive toward death for which death would prove a disappointment; insomnia as political project. And now, a century later, as the next logical development of that drive, and after bearing witness to an ongoing grandiose technological massacre of the familiar, art strives to maintain an intimacy with death so that it may hear the angel speak its opinion on life.







10.

Die Sterne werfen Trotz an uns



Let us address the question of sequence. Flipbook animation technology begins with the entirely un-sexy atomization of the flirting game into a series of neutral stances; the rippling Jell-O-on-springs propulsion apparatus is stalled, freezing the left-right hip sashay, meaty parts jutting, so that what had looked like the promise of chops for dinner is in the end just a lull in conversation. And yet the tragedy is not in the likelihood of global catastrophe borne by our future or in the insistent dead weight of the past, but in the valueless anonymity of the present.

Take, for instance, the plight of the film noir detective. Here on the left sits D. Capellanus, private eye, in his dark private eye apartment, a cat pawing its battered dish in the corner, wine glasses collecting dust on the kitchen shelves. The bare hanging bulb that dimly lights his place from behind only serves to remind him of how conspicuous is his loneliness as the reason for his wholehearted but fundamentally empty fidelity to the pursuit of a faceless adversary.



Like the cat, D. fingers a plate on the table before him, crusted with yesterday's dinner. He sees himself as if from far away. Then his nemesis, R. Helmet, enters, standing in the doorway, frozen, his big, round, head looking.



Capellanus turns and sees.  
The lonely image of himself  
at the table vanishes from his  
mind. The bulb flickers out. In  
an instant he loses his head—  
his perspective, his vision and  
cognition, all collapsed into  
the unitary and unprecedented  
emotion that this moment of mo-  
ments has prompted.

Is it that the clunky perfs and sprockets nuts bolts gears wheels warp and weft of the brain-toward-death combusting over the kitchen table breakfast nook are, without the intervention of mechanics or politicians, so naturally good at what they do—silently, modestly, seamlessly tectonic—that they appear to us as white and spiritual as the windy robes of ghosts?

*I see you Helmet. Your shape in heavy outline, hovering in my doorway like you had twelve wings, your globose head looking at me as though full of eyes. You are clumsily tri-dimensional as you emerge from the gossamer light that beckons me now. Let me rise and come to meet you.*



The private detective slowly crosses the room, shedding bits of energy and subatomic particles at such a rate that, unbeknownst to him, he is already just a ghost once he reaches his destination.

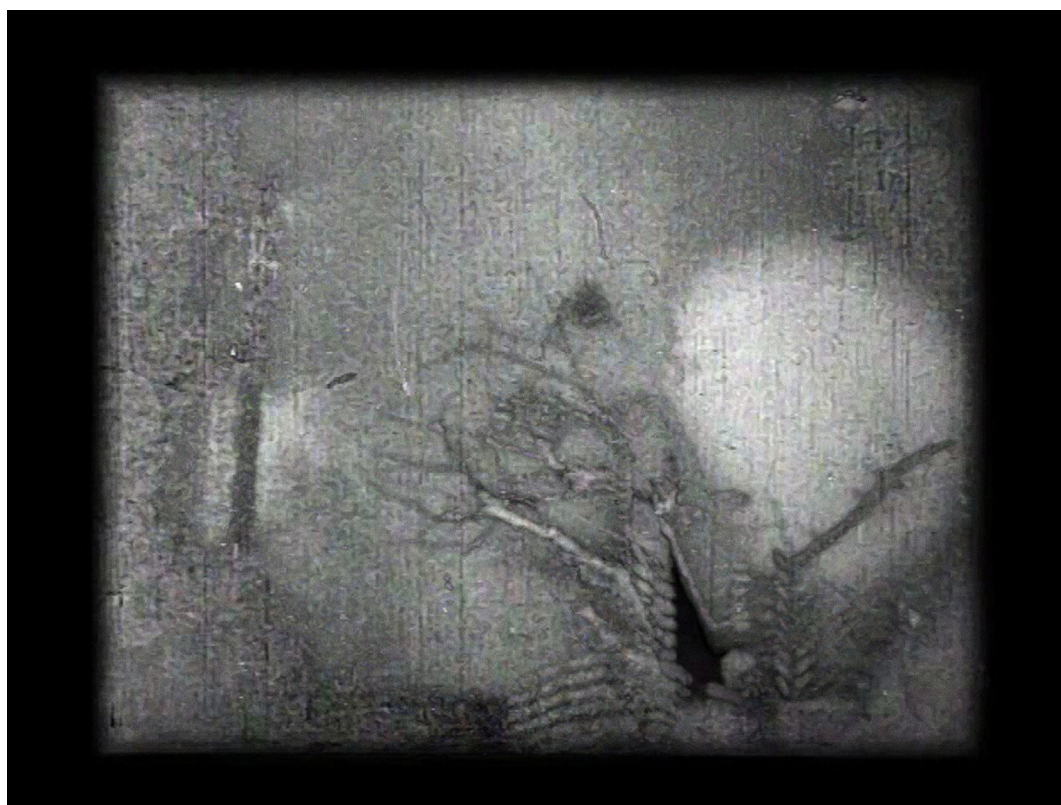


Helmet retreats a few steps, making way for the hot churning mass and watching it billow from the apartment. The outer wall of D. Capellanus's residence is black. It is a sturdy, old-fashioned kind of wall that reveals nothing of the pathetic history it has housed—the cigarettes, the late nights at the window, crackling broadcast jazz tunes and women in picture frames. This image shows that wall and the narrow door at its center, open wide with Capellanus's whirling light matter issuing from it.



At this point we can only speculate as to whether or not there is a room inside. But we have a sense of the wild, uncontained intention behind the wall, seeking the space ahead of it, heaving and surging into whatever it finds. It is something infinitely big and growing, like flood tides moving over city blocks, washing away people in their cars and filling the gaps between buildings, filling up everything, rising higher and spreading out wide under the sun's capacious rays so that there are no longer any objects and the city is just a soothing sort of rushing noise under full-spectrum lighting.











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