

# **A Functionalist Cinema: “Twilight of Film” by Raoul Hausmann**

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**A Functionalist Cinema: “Twilight of Film” by Raoul Hausmann**

Translated and introduced by Paul Flaig, University of St Andrews

Raoul Hausmann’s essay “Twilight of Film” [*Filmdämmerung*] was written in March 1929 and published twice the following year. It first appeared in *a bis z* [A to Z], a German journal founded and edited by the Cologne-based painter Heinrich Hoerle as a venue for “progressive artists” to confront the political and economic crises of the day that would cease publication just after Adolf Hitler’s election in January 1933.<sup>1</sup> An abridged version of the essay was published in French two months later in the June 1930 issue of a journal named after and published by *Cercle et Carré* [Circle and Square], a transnational collective of avant-garde artists, writers and architects from across Europe and which included among its contributors Constructivists, Futurists, members of the Bauhaus as well as Dadaists like Hausmann.<sup>2</sup>

Where might we locate the essay’s author or argument within this assortment of avant-garde movements and at this fraught historical moment? Hausmann was and is still perhaps best known as the “Dadasoph” of Berlin Dada, famed especially for both his biting screeds and manifestos as well the extraordinary montage techniques he developed with his one-time partner, Hannah Höch. Yet this title barely scratches the surface of Hausmann’s activities during both Berlin Dada’s heyday in the tumultuous aftermath of World War I as well as later cultural shifts, within Germany’s Weimar Republic, towards New Objectivity and political polarisation in the mid to late nineteen-twenties. Already in the first histories and reminiscences of Dadaism, Hausmann was singled out for the extraordinary range of his activities. In *Dada: Art and Anti-Art* (1964), Hans Richter would recall of his fellow Dadaist, “Hausmann tried

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<sup>1</sup> Raoul Hausmann, “Filmdämmerung,” *a bis z: organ der gruppe progressive künstler* 7 (1930), 26-27.

<sup>2</sup> Raoul Hausmann, “Crépuscule du Film,” *Cercle et Carré* 3 (1930), 10.

everything. His versatility was inexhaustible.... On one day he was a photomonteur, on the next a painter, on the third a pamphleteer, on the fourth a fashion designer, on the fifth a publisher and poet, on the sixth an ‘optophonetician’...<sup>3</sup> To this we can add several other roles including novelist, sculptor, philosopher, critic, photographer and, not least, dancer, with Hausmann’s athletic performances so famed that he would be documented mid-posture by photographer August Sander for the latter’s landmark portrait series, [“Face of the Time.”](#)

Yet despite Hausmann’s “versatility,” cinema is noticeably lacking among these varied pursuits. For most Dada scholars, the explanation for this seeming disinterest is simple: Aside from the fact he lacked the technical and financial means to actually produce films, there is the more important point that Hausmann understood his various artistic practices as more cinematic than cinema himself.<sup>4</sup> One of his earliest Dada texts is entitled “Synthetic Cinema [Cino] of Painting” while a later manifesto proclaimed, “Our art is already today the film! Simultaneously, event, statue and image!”<sup>5</sup> He described his unpublished novel, *Hyle*, as “a film of all feelings, the events within not a description, but rather the furling and unfurling of waves of touch, taste, smell, hearing, sight and the movement between things.”<sup>6</sup> Here Hausmann’s interest in synaesthesia as a translation of one sense through another is inextricable from his interest in the inter-medial, with literature, painting or dance similarly capable of translating cinematic forms and effects without the actual use of cinema itself.

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<sup>3</sup> Hans Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1997), p. 108.

<sup>4</sup> See Michael Erlhoff, *Raoul Hausmann, Dadasoph: Versuch einer Politisierung* (Hannover: zweitschrift 1982), p. 90.

<sup>5</sup> Raoul Hausmann, “Synthetisches Cino der Malerei” [1918], *Bilanz der Feierlichkeit: Texte bis 1933 Band 1*, ed. Michael Erlhoff (München: text + kritik, 1982), pp. 14-16, and “PREsentismus: Gegen den Puffkeismus der teutschen Seele” [1921], *Sieg Triumph Tabak mit Bohnen: Texte bis 1933 Band 2*, ed. Michael Erlhoff (München: edition text + kritik, 1982), p. 25.

<sup>6</sup> Raoul Hausmann, *Hyle* manuscript. Accessed at the Hausmann Archive of the Berlinische Galerie. See also Eva Züchner, “Hyle—weil wir nur Stoff sind: Hausmanns morphologischer Roman,” ‘Wir wünschen die Welt bewegt und beweglich’: *Raoul-Hausmann-Symposium der Berlinische Galerie*, ed. Züchner (Berlin: Berlinische Galerie, 1995).

Inspired by his Dadaist experiments with textual montage and sound-poetry, Hausmann attempted to build and patent the aforementioned optophone, a machine that could convert sounds into visual images and visual images into sounds. These and other attempts to move between senses by moving between media has made him, for more recent scholars, a prescient figure, his ideas and inventions anticipating the emergence of media technologies like television, media theorists like Marshall McLuhan and media artists like Nam June Paik.<sup>7</sup> Pavle Levi has described Hausmann's efforts as part of a broader movement within the interwar European avant-garde to both realise and surpass "cinema by other means."<sup>8</sup>

Yet as "Twilight of Film" as well as several other largely neglected and still untranslated texts makes clear, Hausmann was not so disinterested in the cinematic medium as we might assume. In keeping with his reputation as versatile polymath and in contrast to his Dadaist peers, the Dadasoph was, in Eva Züchner's words, a "passionate filmgoer" who took in a range of genres, including slapstick, expedition documentaries, science films, romantic comedies, *Bergfilme* [mountain films], tragic melodramas, Soviet montage, socialist dramas, early musicals and experimental works by fellow avant-gardists.<sup>9</sup> In a later unpublished essay, "The Development of Film" (1931), which both cites and expands on many of the points raised in "Twilight" in response to the sound film, Hausmann reveals an extraordinary if idiosyncratic interest, moving from *The Epic of Everest* (J.B.L Noel, 1924) to Joris Ivens' *Zuidersee* (1930) to the censored

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<sup>7</sup> See Ina Blom, "The Touch through Time: Raoul Hausmann, Nam June Paik and the Transmission Technologies of the Avant-Garde," *Leonardo* 34:3 (June, 2001), 209-215, Jacques Donguy, "Machine Head: Raoul Hausmann and the Optophone," *Leonardo* 34:3 (June 2001), 217-220, Marcella Lista, "Raoul Hausmann's optophone: 'universal language' and the intermedia," *The Dada Seminars*, ed. Leah Dickerman (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2005), pp. 83-102, Arndt Niebisch, "Ether Machines: Raoul Hausmann's Optophonetic Media," *Vibratory Modernism*, ed. Anthony Enns and Shelley Trower (New York: Palgrave, 2013), 162-176, Doron Galili, *Seeing by Electricity: The Emergence of Television, 1878-1939* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> Pavle Levi, "Cinema by other Means," *October* 131 (Winter 2010), 56.

<sup>9</sup> *Scharfrichter der bürgerlichen Seele: Raoul Hausmann in Berlin 1900 – 1933*, ed. Eva Züchner (Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 1998), 260.

sexual reproduction documentary *Das keimende Leben: Ein Film vom Werden des Menschen* (Hans Ewald, 1930) to interviews with Greta Garbo, Charlie Chaplin and perhaps his most esteemed filmmaker, Alexander Dovzhenko, whom Hausmann appears to have personally heard describe a fascinating, never made sound film.<sup>10</sup>

Such interests were not purely those of a film spectator, critic or theorist. Indeed, his archive reveals that Hausmann himself hoped to make cinema precisely through cinematic means, having outlined in the twenties two fascinating yet sadly never initiated film projects. An extraordinary if idiosyncratic example of useful cinema, the first was to be entitled “A Fashion Film” [Ein Kleidungsfilm] and was to use documentary footage, comic stunts, special effects and sartorial display to instruct male viewers how to dress themselves both fashionably and functionally.<sup>11</sup> The second can only be described as a Dadaist slapstick short to be called “My Engagement” which suggests, in its plot and gags, the strong influence of Buster Keaton but also features fashionable dress as one of its comic points of interest.<sup>12</sup> And in 1957, Hausmann would finally make a film, *L'Homme qui a peur des bombes*, in which, accompanied to a soundtrack of his own sound-poems, he grimaces and gesticulates for the camera.

In his published writing, Hausmann reveals this interest in filmmaking. In a 1924 essay published in Richter’s avant-garde journal *G*, “Fashion,” he writes, “Sometime I’d like to film the Tauentzienstrasse in slow motion” so as, he goes on to explain, to capture the functional and more often dysfunctional way ill-dressed German men move down one of Berlin most famous thoroughfares. Both “A Fashion Film” and “My Engagement” sought to realise this

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<sup>10</sup> “Die Entwicklung des Films” [1931], *Scharfrichter der bürgerlichen Seele*, 340-353.

<sup>11</sup> Raoul Hausmann, “Ein Kleidungsfilm.” Accessed at the Raoul Hausmann Archive of the Berlinische Galerie.

<sup>12</sup> Raoul Hausmann, “Meine Verlobung,” Accessed at the Raoul Hausmann Archive of the Berlinische Galerie.

desire by using one synaesthetic medium, cinema, to illuminate another, clothing, which Hausmann defines as “the function of the body made visible—and to be dressed means to have a consciousness of the body.”<sup>13</sup> Such appeals to the functional might suggest that Hausmann was turning from the nonsensical yet sensational provocations of Dadaism to the smooth efficiency and cold precision of New Objectivity or, more broadly, the Fordist logic and machine aesthetic that fascinated so many other European avant-gardists in the mid-twenties. In fact, his celebration of functionalism or what he called the “universal functionality of humans” is more singular and indeed sensational than might otherwise be assumed.<sup>14</sup> For Hausmann, making a medium—whether it be cinema or optophone, fashionable clothing or dancing body—functional did not mean efficiently servicing some utilitarian end or Fordist rationale but rather translating one means of sensation via another so that, in the example of “A Fashion Film,” film makes spectators both see and feel how one might dress while dress, in turn, makes one similarly conscious of one’s very own body as its own kind of technical medium in motion.

Hausmann thus shared with his peers an interest in mechanising the human sensorium through technologies like cinema, but for radically different ends. As he put it in the 1921 essay “The New Art,” it is “through the demonstration of the marionette-ness, the mechanization of life...that let[s] a different life be conjectured and felt.”<sup>15</sup> Paradoxically, it was only by reducing the human corpus to an inert, mechanical medium—a dancing marionette, a fashion mannequin, a comic puppet—that allowed this “different life” to be thought and felt and thus

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<sup>13</sup> “Mode,” [1924], *Sieg Triumph Tabak mit Bohnen*, 104, translated and introduced by Brigid Doherty in “Fashionable Ladies, Dada Dandies,” *Art Journal*, Vol. 54, No. 1 (Spring, 1995), 50.

<sup>14</sup> “Zweite Präsentistische Deklaration,” *Sieg Triumph Tabak mit Bohnen*, 85. Hausmann elaborated on this functionalism in two short texts, “Universale Funktionalität” and “Die Universal Funktionalitätsprinzip,” both of which can be found in the Raoul Hausmann Archive of the Berlinische Galerie.

<sup>15</sup> “Die Neue Kunst,” *Bilanz der Feierlichkeit*, 181.

to *function*, in what Hausmann describes as a “haptic art” in which media become relays for an immersive, animating mingling of sensation, matter and technology that shatter the “bourgeois type as normal person.”<sup>16</sup>

This curious fusion of the Dadaist and the functionalist is central to the argument of “Twilight of Film” and helps distinguish the essay from the many accounts of cinema produced by his peers in this period. At the same time, without Hausmann’s recurrent and, at times, abstruse appeals to what we might call a *functionalist cinema*, “Twilight of Film” might only be read as yet another avant-garde attempt to wrest cinema from more conventional narrative and documentary modes. Seemingly against his aforementioned openness to intermediality, Hausmann begins the essay with a desire to strictly define the specificity of film by excluding the vast majority of contemporary film practices from the very category of the filmic. Truly cinematic works should not be driven by the need to tell a story or turn a profit; they should not imitate literature, theatre nor should they pursue cinematic effects for their own sake or, alternatively, in the service of some philosophy, poetry or politics. Hausmann’s examples of such uncinematic forms of film are diverse and striking. They include both the expected—epics by Fritz Lang and Cecil B. DeMille—as well as the surprising: Paul Fejös’ technically virtuosic depiction of love, labour and leisure in New York City, *Lonesome* (1928), and, in his original manuscript for the essay, the now forgotten documentary by aviator Gunther Plüschow, *Silberkondor über Feuerland* (1929). Against these examples, Hausmann paradoxically praises films driven by their individual creator’s singular, often abstract vision—Viking Eggeling’s *Diagonal Symphony* (1924), Man Ray’s *Emak Bakia* (1926)—while concluding that cinema is above all a medium for the masses. The latter point is best demonstrated by Soviet filmmakers like Dovzhenko and Sergei Eisenstein, yet Hausmann ends his short text by disagreeing with

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<sup>16</sup> “PREsentismus,” and “Die Kunst und die Zeit,” *Sieg Triumph Tabak mit Bohnen*, 30 and 7.

the latter's attempt to define cinema through an intellectual montage in which the clash of images resolve into a legible idea. If cinema cannot be reduced to industry, art, poetry, science or philosophy, how should we understand it according to Hausmann? His own, final definition of film as "a formal design [Gestaltungsform] of life" comprised of a series of different functions (form, light, rhythmic-movement) hardly settles the matter and gives the impression that Hausmann, ever the contrarian, prefers saying what cinema is not rather than offer his own concrete definition of what it is or might better become.

There are, however, several intriguing moments when Hausmann's functionalist account of cinema comes to the fore, suggesting a singular take on the medium that is no less prescient or fascinating than his interests in montage, fashion or the optophone. His positive appeal to American slapstick, for instance, certainly fit within broader avant-garde celebrations of the genre, but the functionalist basis for his appeal is singular. Hausmann is drawn to Chaplin's Tramp and Keaton's deadpan because of their synaesthetic ability to both "see" and "sculpt" space through their physical movements and bodily gestures. They attend to the fundamentally optical nature of cinema while, at the same time, using their bodies to relay to spectators a visceral sense of how space is formed by both the position of the camera as well as their own movements negotiating that space and its various objects. And if they function it is only through comical dysfunction or playful re-functioning, as with Chaplin's iconic transformation of bread rolls into dancing feet. In this they correspond to those mechanical, marionette-like figures Hausmann once proclaimed as the means and media for sensing a "different life" as well as the Dadasoph's own attempts to viscerally embody that life in montages, dance performances, fashion designs as well as his two aborted film projects.

In his appeal to the similarly marionette-like movements of shirt collars filmed by Man Ray, Hausmann suggests that it is better not to speak of “optical associations” in cinema, but rather “form-functions.” Despite the awkwardness, in both German and translated English, of such neologisms, Hausmann is here attempting to find those “other means” described by Levi and other scholars within cinema itself, whether it be through material use of light, rhythmic pulsation of images and various special effects, all of which take the viewer through a sensational exploration of “analogies or oppositions between forms, objects, movements.” If not over-used as a gimmick or deployed for dubious effect, the dissolve, in one of Hausmann’s more revealing examples, can be used to variously show the human nose as body part, landscape and geometric shape. Anticipating later avant-garde films like Willard Maas and Marie Menken’s *Geography of the Body* (1943), Hausmann here applies to cinema the same inter-medial, synaesthetic logic he had earlier applied to other examples of “new art”: what matters here is not the meaning or idea conveyed by a particular object on screen, but rather the movement and translation between the images via dissolves, camera movements and cuts, which, in film, function as what he calls an “optical event.” Hausmann here and in his other writings on film finds this functionalism on display in such disparate examples as *The Gold Rush*, Dovzhenko’s *Earth* (1930), Man Ray’s *L’Etoile de Mer* (1928) and the arctic expedition film *South* (Frank Hurley, 1919). What unites all these films is an emphasis on cinema as what he calls “an expression of correspondence of the powers that live in things,” which may explore the outer world of appearances or instead plunge into the more abstract yet no less material universe of light and shadow, surface and depth, movement and stasis. Such moments of pure functionalism may arise in narrative, documentary or experimental cinemas, but however or wherever they appear, they offer, for Hausmann, the most compelling case for film within his broader effort to create what he once called a “Dada...more than Dada.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> “Dada ist mehr als Dada” [1921], *Bilanz der Feierlichkeit*, 166-171.

The admittedly inchoate theory of film underlying “Twilight of Film” should also, I would suggest, be of interest beyond the particular context of Hausmann or Dada’s transformations over the nineteen-twenties. Its attempt, in defining film, to thread the needle between abstraction, entertainment and politics recalls similar efforts by other avant-gardists of the time, ranging from Antonin Artaud to Jean Epstein to Hausmann’s former colleague in Richter’s G group, Walter Benjamin. And in trying to develop new taxonomies to name the sensations and forms of film, the Dadasoph anticipates the far more sophisticated efforts of philosophers like Gilles Deleuze, who, like Hausmann as well as Benjamin, detected an affinity between the tactile, assaulting gags of slapstick and what Hausmann once described as the machinic vitality of Dada.<sup>18</sup>

### **Raoul Hausmann: *Twilight of Film***

As projected before us in every cinema, film has nothing to do with the optical possibilities upon which it should actually be constructed; it arises from the mistaken assumption of being required or capable of competing with literature and the theatre. Yet film’s pre-conditions are of a quite different kind: they are not found in the possibility of literary representation, nor in a moment of psychology or storytelling even if all filmmakers believe that film is constructed on the basis of recording motifs, stories and minds. The tragedy of the word is something quite different from that of the gesture, the comedy of some fable different from optical comedy. Why is Chaplin so effective? Because, whether tragic or comic, Chaplin performs optically rather than in a literary manner (i.e. not through “motif”). Chaplin is no actor (there is no such thing as acting in a pure, original form; acting only presents something imaginary, departing

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<sup>18</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, “Balancing-Sheet Program for Desiring Machines,” *Chaosophy*, ed. Lotringer (New York: Semiotext[e], 1995), pp. 125-141.

from literary motifs). As with an acrobat, Chaplin performs [spielt] only from corporeal possibilities (one thinks of his best film, *I A.M.* [1916] or the dance of bread rolls in *The Gold Rush* [1925]). Using his gestures to resolve, through the body, the problem of spatial formation and of the field of film's movement makes him not psychologist but rather one of the first physiologists. Chaplin sees with all his limbs; it is as if he sculpts in space.

But excepting Chaplin, a few old Fox slapstick comedies or Buster Keaton films, we discover, for example, ten commandments, or the Nibelungen or all the men and women not only on the moon but also tasked with continuously producing that single motif that costs money but which has the motive of making even more money, until the end of days and until the end of our ability to shoot more film.<sup>19</sup> That is not film but rather pure speculation on the cluelessness of an audience who has not been shown anything better.

So let us say it once loud and clear: a film emerges not only from recording a bit of acting and not only from recording shots of nature. Let us say that it requires a formation, an optical construction from analogies or oppositions between forms, objects, movements. This in order to produce a film which can be either an expedition into the appearance of things or a purely optical one, made from refracting transparent materials in optical relationalities. For film's material is the functionality of forms in light.

The Swede Vicking [sic] Eggeling was the first to grasp this; consisting entirely of abstract form-functions [*formfunktionen*] which originated from painting, his film [Diagonal Symphony, 1924] was a singular achievement, one that, despite the efforts of [Walther]

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<sup>19</sup> Here Hausmann is obviously referencing *The Ten Commandments* (Cecil B. De Mille, 1923), *Die Nibelungen* (Fritz Lang, 1924) and *Frau im Mond* (Fritz Lang, 1929).

Ruttman and [Hans] Richter, remains unrepeatable. With *Emak Bakia* [1926] Man Ray created a consistently optical-photographic film, a film well and truly made from optical ideas. At the moment news comes from Paris that Man Ray has created two more films: *L'Etoile de Mer* [1928] and *Das Château du Dé* [1929], both constructed from optical associations, precisely what we would rather name an affinity of form-functions. Man Ray's *Emak Bakia* shows that film does not emerge out of literary ideas, but rather out of optical facts such as, for instance, the carousel of light evoked by a spinning prism or the movements of shirt collars which seem to dance like marionettes on invisible threads.

Finally, we must demand of every film that it give us optical facts. Yet every optical fact becomes, in the extensive black and white presentation of film, a form-function and loses its particular significance as an organ; for example, in form-functional terms, a nose can be an analogue of a triangle, the bend of a street or a mountain (just as one should in any case uncover the human face as a landscape and not as an advertisement for make-up), while it is quite insignificant from the technical standpoint of film that we suddenly catch sight of an eminent archbishop's nose on screen. But if we use the apparatus' technical possibility of the dissolve in order to save ourselves from having a psychological or political scene that is awkward to perform and let, if need be, the eminence's nose suddenly become a potato, we might have led a long-winded historical spectacle back to its optical foundations and chosen a way which in other cases became meaningless, for instance as recently made by a director into a thing-in-itself [Ding an sich] in the silly American comedy, *Lonesome* [1928]. Every technical possibility should serve the construction of the film only from optical analogies or optical contradictions—technical possibility just for the sake of possibility is worthless, as with some

directors who excessively use dissolves.<sup>20</sup> Every technical possibility is meaningful only when supporting, refining or strengthening the design [Gestaltung].

But we will find film for film's sake—film without content or conviction—attractive only briefly. Such a film can only open up new possibilities in theory; in the long run it cannot offer, for all its endless variations, satisfaction to the people as a mass. In his book *Filmgegner von Heute, Filmfreunde von Morgen* [1929] Hanns [sic] Richter thus calls for a film poetry, which he understands as the total sum of technical possibilities and use of associations. Yet this film poetry has a dangerous affinity with literature and is thoroughly imprecise; it is wax in the hands of a director who would unscrupulously use heroes—or pity—or associations of innocence to glorify the mood of a politically motivated murder – today poison gas over Berlin, tomorrow, just as associatively, national youth. Let it thus be said that a film consists of optical elements, of manifold, associatively ambiguous optical facts, of their sensible and consistent montage: yet it will only be used for the purposes of form once it is underpinned by a new conviction to show – to reveal – something new. The mere search for originality is no less a conviction than making money. Thus, film must first gain a mass audience, we must fight for these masses. Russia is the only nation where this is happening. But when Eisenstein explains that both the old type of original cinematography as well as the type of abstract films will vanish before the new, intellectual concrete film.... That the intellectual cinema will be the cinema of concepts, it will be the immediate expression of an entire ideological system.... one must doubt this confusion of dialectical form and functional form: optical things do not let themselves be minted as concepts. In film the object only seems concrete—a tea kettle altered by the optical point of view and lighting conditions is not a clear-cut concept. This conflation

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<sup>20</sup> In his original, hand-written draft, Hausmann writes here, “And as an example we would here choose two films: Eisenstein's [*Battleship*] *Potemkin* and Plüschow's [*Silberkondor über*] *Feuerland*.”

of film and philosophy can succeed one day; but it contains the condition of its own failure—it is literary. Film is not a science which precisely identifies; nor is it art but rather a formal design [Gestaltungsform] of life and like every such form to be understood only as an expression of correspondence of the powers that live in things. And we must thus say: film cannot be designed as a dialectic of forms; only the corresponding elements of things are capable of being formed—and in film these are called form-function, light-function and rhythmic movement-function.

### **Author Biography**

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