ЧЕЛОВЕК С АППАРАТОМ КИНО
To introduce the discussion, I’ll try to give a short account of what I did in this book (not what I “intended” to do - because a book, in my view, is a step – an inflexion in a process – rather than the result of a decision; so I shall not tell what I wanted to do but what I think I have done)

*Aisthesis* is a book about the texture and the logic of what I call the aesthetic regime of art. This means first that “aesthetics” for me does not designate a discipline dedicated to the study of art works or of the Beautiful. It designates the regime of experience within we have been accustomed to identify artistic practices, to perceive art works and to give them a specific mode of intelligibility. As I have tried to argue, since *The Politics of Aesthetics*, it is not enough that poems, sculpture, music, theatre, dance are practiced for art to exist. Those practices are experienced within regimes of experience which allow or don’t allow them to be perceived as artistic.

The term “*Aisthesis*” has designated the mode of experience according to which, for two centuries, we perceive very diverse things, whether in their techniques of production or their destination, as all belonging to art. This is not a matter of the “reception” of works of art. Rather, it concerns the sensible fabric of experience within which they are produced. These are entirely material conditions—performance and exhibition spaces, forms of circulation and reproduction—but also modes of perception and regimes of emotion, categories that identify them, thought patterns that categorize and interpret them. These conditions make it possible for words, shapes, movements and rhythms to be felt and thought as art.

(Here I make a short parenthesis about my method. My way of dealing with historical materials is clearly at odds with the forms of analysis that distinguish the material reality of a practice or its material conditions from its ideological interpretation. For me the modes of perception and categories of interpretation are material realities that are part of the reality of that practice in a distribution of social activities. This is what is entailed in the very notion of a “distribution of the sensible”. This theoretical stance goes along with a political stance. The progressive view is readily equated with the method that explains the high by the low and the
celestial ideas or appearances by their mundane conditions. My own position is that this kind of explanation – which separates the real from the appearance, belongs in reality to a hierarchical distribution of the thinkable)

Now there is something more about the aesthetic regime of art. This regime is the first in which Art exists as the name of a specific sphere of experience. All kinds of arts and practices existed before then, to be sure, among which a small number benefited from a privileged status, not due to their intrinsic excellence but to their place in the division of social conditions. Fine arts were the progeny of the so-called liberal arts which were distinguished from the mechanical arts because they were the pastime of free men. This means that the principles of selection and hierarchy that structured them were heirs to a hierarchy of forms of life so that Art, as we know it, Art in the singular and with a capital A began to exist when that hierarchy began to vacillate. Art and aesthetics did not exist, as the opinion goes, because artists and art institutions distanced themselves from the vulgar conditions of prosaic activity and class domination. On the contrary they began to exist as the consequence of the collapse of a hierarchy. This means that the study of a particular regime of identification of art is also the study of the construction of the notion of Art itself.

Most of the fourteen scenes gathered in my book are illustrations of that process. They show how the new paradigm of Art was constructed through the blurring of all the distinctions that opposed high art to low – or popular- art, fine art to applied art or even art to the world of non-artistic ordinary reality. Hegel proclaims that a representation of poor beggars- that belonged to the low genre of “genre painting”- can show us an example of the artistic Ideal. Banville, Gautier or Mallarmé- three poets who are held to be champions of pure poetry find the model of ideal poetry in the pantomimes of the Funambules, the stunts of the “English clowns” or the dance of Loïe Fuller at the Folies Bergères. With Whitman the most prosaic or even disgusting aspects of everyday life accede to poetic dignity. In the time of Stieglitz the same goes with the “mechanical reproductions” of photography. With Behrens the artist becomes a builder of factories, etc.

One must not be mistaken about the meaning of those scenes. The point is not simply that the aesthetic regime is a regime that can welcome anything whatsoever in the sanctuary of art, since there are no more rules of inclusion. There are no more rules but there is a sensible tissue which produces the new visibility of all those prosaic things or performances as artistic
objects or performances. From a cognitive point of view, this means that it is by looking at the forms of introduction of those things and performances that we can best perceive the texture of that tissue. The cases on which I focus are cases in which the identity of an image or a performance is at issue with the identity of art itself, cases in which the question “is this art?” is indiscernible from the question “what is art”? They are cases in which the singularity of the object or of the performance reveals the mutations in the very paradigm of art or –in other terms – in which art is redefined through the very description of those performances that “were not “ and now “are “ art.

We can rethink from that point of view the criteria that have been generally accepted as characteristic of modern art. Let us think for instance of the privilege of presence over representation and of the form over the content which has been hailed as a characteristic of the autonomy of art and readily equated with a distance taken from the forms of popular art. The scenes devoted to the Hanlon Lees, Loïe Fuller or Charlie Chaplin challenge this interpretation. It is no coincidence that those performances were raised to the excellence of art by champions of so-called “art for art’s sake”. As a matter of fact it is the popular performance that gives the best idea of the pure performance that has no end but its own perfection. In this sense the scenes of Aisthesis are in line with my analyses on literature in which I refuted the hackneyed oppositions between romanticism, realism, symbolism, etc., and more generally the opposition between realistic art and pure art or art for art’s sake, by showing for instance that the “formalist” project of the “book about nothing” in Flaubert was in accordance with the introduction in the novel of those lifes that were worth nothing in the old representative regime and the old society. In Aisthesis I made the point that the real father of the modernist project – inasmuch as such paternity suits make sense – could be Emerson, the “idealistic” philosopher, when he drew the program of the poet of modern America which is the poet of modern life as well and I showed how this program calls into question the very opposition between spiritualism and materialism. It turns out that the prosaic enumeration of the most vulgar realities in Whitman’s poetry is at the same time the spiritual link that withdraws all those prosaic realities from their subjection to their economic function and to the order of private property. That’s why this enumeration which links anything with everything can serve as a model for cinematographic montage and for the art of the new communist world, as it does with Vertov. In a different way the line that runs from Ruskin and the Arts and Crafts to the designers/engineers of the Werkbund and the Bauhaus shows us how the reduction of architecture and decorative art to the function of sheltering human
beings and their activities goes along with the necessity of symbolizing the new common world in which this reduction of the marks of class distinction to functional rationality is achieved.

In such a way, it turns out that the superficial oppositions between form and content, presence and representation, ideality and prosaic reality, purity and usefulness cover a much more complex issue. The construction of the sensible fabric of Art and aesthetics is a process of displacement of the categories through which a lived common world is experienced. The point is not that aesthetic art welcomes anything. It is that it changes the very status of the “anything”. The notion of symbol that is at the core of the problematic of modernist architecture and design as it is at the core of the invention of the prose poem, the revolutions of the stage or the practice of cinematographic montage is not the mark of a specific artistic doctrine. It attests to a much wider attempt at reconfiguring the status of the things and the activities through which the individuals in a society take part in a common world. Once again, such processes have nothing to do with an “aesthetic” or “idealistic” transfiguration of the social relationships. The reconfigurations of the sensible, the reconfigurations of the forms of communication and community through which things, actions and subjects are linked - or, in Marxist terms, the transformations of the sensible into the super-sensible- constitute the core of artistic practice as they constitute the core of those processes that we call economy or politics as well.

That’s why what appears to be crucial in the aesthetic regime of art is not a mere principle of inclusiveness and equality that makes all subjects equally interesting. It is the destruction of what was the true core of the representative logic: the hierarchical model of the work, namely the organic model whose principles can be traced back to Plato’s *Phaedrus* and Aristotle’s *Poetics*. For Plato the true *logos* is a living body with all its members well articulated under the command of a head. What makes the poem for Aristotle is not the rhythm of the verse, it is the action, which means a connection of causes and effects according to necessity or verisimilitude – a connection that Aristotle opposes to the mere succession of facts happening one after another. The aesthetic inclusion of the everyday is made possible only by the destruction of this organic model. And it is exactly the process that we can see at its inception in the description of the Torso by Winckelmann – a description made in a book that invents the modern notion of art by inventing the notion of a “history of art”. The description of the Torso ruins the organic model by making this body without head or limbs the masterpiece of
Greek art and the highest expression of Greek freedom. That freedom itself has a very specific form of expression: it is expressed by the wavelike movements of the muscles of the Torso. The impersonal, inorganic, endless movement of the wave is substituted for the hierarchical structure of the organic body and the cause-effect model. It imposes a totally new model of the whole in which the whole is not more the articulated totality but the infinite power which is felt only in the parts, which also means that any part is able to express it. The history of the aesthetic regime is the history of the multiple forms taken on by this dismemberment of the representative body, from the eulogy of this torso without head and limbs to the hyper-fragmentation of cinematographic montage. The model of the wave is at work in the idea and practice of the new poem as well as in the tension of Rodin’s sculptures, the flight of Loïe Fuller’s veil, the stylized vegetation of decorative art and the free movement of modern dance, and it contaminates the very conception of the dialectic montage. It is in its forms that the “democratic” life of all replaces the hierarchical order of the organic totality. The uncertainties and contradictions of cinematographic montage, as they appear in the scene devoted to the communist films of Dziga Vertov bring to light both the relations and the tensions between aesthetic equality and political revolution.

That history clearly calls into question the fairy tales of so-called Modernism about artistic modernity as the conquest of the autonomy of the artwork against commodity culture and medium specificity. To the extent that modernism designates a real historical project, it designates the exact contrary of what was named so in the 1940’s. It designates the construction of a “medium” which is not the material isolating a specific practice but the destruction of the organic model and the weaving of sensible fabric within which practices become art to the extent that they loose their specificity and construct fragments of a new life of all. Modernism as it has been conceptualized in the wake of Greenberg’s polemics is a late invention, an attempt at erasing and nullifying what had been the core of historical modernism: the fusion of the forms of art with the forms of a new life. That’s why I stated that Aisthesis could also be viewed as a counter-history of modernity and insisted in the last chapters on those tensions both inherent in artistic practice and its relation to revolutionary that undermined the historical modernist project and made the invention of retrospective modernism possible.

Now it is clear that I feel no interest in proving that so-called Modernism is misnamed. What interests me is to reconstruct the set of relations of which this particular ideology is at the
same time the denial and the by-product. It is to bring to light its complexity and notably the
complexity of the relations between the form of equality which is at its core and the strategies
of political transformation. I have mentioned the contradictions inherent in the practice of-
and reflexion on- cinematographic montage in the times of Vertov and Eisenstein: on the one
hand, the process of fragmentation and the accelerated rhythm of the montage are supposed to
be attuned to the Taylorization of industrial processes which is itself supposed to be subjected
to the planned rhythm of development of the socialist State. But the montage makes a whole
in which all parts are equal, all express in the same way, according to the aesthetic logic, the
power of the whole – a form of equality which contradicts any strategy of subordination of the
actions to the ends determined by a leading head. Now this contradiction has to be traced back
to the very birth of the aesthetic regime and the very principles of aesthetic equality. The
dismemberment of the representative body means the dismemberment of the notion of action.
The “poetic” action, as it had been theorized by Aristotle, was clearly linked with a
distribution of human beings, separating acting men – men able of pursuing great designs and
even of acting for the sole pleasure of acting- from passive – or “mechanical”- men, enclosed
in the circle of ends and means determined by a life dedicated to its mere survival. From the
very beginning, the aesthetic logic does two things which seem contradictory though they
result from the same logic: according to the new expressive logic, it makes the statue of the
god the expression of the people; but this new link between the productions of art and the
freedom of the people is also a break with the models of the story with its causes and effects,
and of intentional action with its ends and means. The virtue of Hercules according to
Winckelmann, of the Juno Ludovisi according to Schiller, of the young beggars painted by
Murillo with Hegel is that they do nothing and care for nothing. The new novel, from
Stendhal and Balzac to Zola sends the children of the lower classes to the conquest of social
power and embraces with them all the spheres of social life, but it does so the better to
conclude that knowledge gives no power and that the very will to act is the source of all
illusions and all disasters . The theatre itself, the ancient stage of “active men,” in order to
draw itself closer to art and life, comes to repudiate action and its agents by considering itself
a choir, a pictorial fresco, or architecture in movement. Photography consecrates the triumph
of the gaze over the hand and the exemplary cinematographic body turns out to be the one that
is constantly bombarded by events, none of which are the result of its intentions. The
renovators of dance and theatre freed bodily movements from the shackles of the story but the
emancipation of movement also distanced it from rational, intentional action directed towards
an end. The aesthetic paradigm of the new community, of men free and equal in their sensible
life itself, tends to cut this community off from all the paths that are normally used to reach a
goal. And when art wants to become action, that action is contaminated by its contrary. The
model of the artistic performance that wants to become directly a social action is in fact the
model of “free movement”, the endless movement that does not achieve any purpose.

Hasty minds could undoubtedly see this as the sign of an irremediable breach between
aesthetic utopia and real political and revolutionary action. Instead, I recognized the same
paradox in it as the one I encountered in the practices and thoughts of social emancipation.
Emancipated workers could not repudiate the hierarchical model governing the distribution of
activities without taking distance from the capacity to act that subjected them to it and from
the action plans of the engineers of the future. In that sense the complex relations between
aesthetic equality and revolutionary politics analyzed by Aisthesis run parallel with the
complex relations of the emancipated workers with the missed encounters of the emancipated
workers with the saint simonian apostles that I studied long ago in my Nights of Labour now
renamed Proletarian Nights. The contradictions of the aesthetic communism created by the
aesthetic regime of art are not the proof of the distance of art and aesthetic utopia from the
reality of social transformation. In their way they bring to light the same tensions that were at
work in the programs and strategies of social transformation. They can also provide us with
an oblique way of thinking about their ways and their dead ends.
Modernity revisited

The remarks that I will present here are in line with the basic assumption that I made some years ago in *The Politics of Aesthetics*. The assumption is that Art does not exist by itself. Even though art histories use to start from prehistoric rock paintings, Art itself, viewed as a specific form of experience is a historical configuration that has not existed in the Western world for more than two centuries. There were arts, for sure, much earlier: arts meaning techniques, ways of doing things; and some of them had a specific status, for instance “liberal arts” or “fine arts” but Art in the singular and with a capital A, Art as a specific mode of experience did not exist.

This means two things: first “art” only exists within a specific regime of identification that allows objects or performances made by very diverse techniques for very diverse destinations to be perceived as belonging to a unique mode of experience. It is not a mere question of the “reception” of the art works. It is about the very fabric of experience within which they are produced. This fabric is constituted by concrete institutions - places for performance or exhibition, modes of circulation and reproduction- but also by modes of perception and affection, concepts, narratives and judgements which identify them and make sense of them. It is this tissue that makes it possible that words, narrations, forms, colours, movements and rhythms be perceived and thought as being art. This is the first point.

Now comes the second: if the existence of something like art depends on such conditions, this means that it depends on a certain distribution of the sensible, meaning a certain form of relation between modes of doing, modes of seeing, saying and thinking. Now that form of relation that distributes objects and performances into certain spheres of experience, such as “art” for instance, is at the same time a form of relation that distributes human beings according to their ways of doing and their ways of being. The visibility of something called art rests on a certain distribution of human activities, on the high or low status of those activities, on the visibility or invisibility of the human beings that perform this or that activity. As is well known, the hierarchy separating the “liberal arts” from the “mechanical arts” was not predicated on the intrinsic quality of those arts but on the quality of the people who enjoyed them as their activity or their entertainment. In other terms, the form of visibility of art rests on a political configuration of the community, meaning a certain distribution of human activities and of their visibility. Art with a capital A does not exist because artists and art institutions distanced themselves from the vulgar conditions of prosaic activity and class domination. It exists as the consequence of a redistribution of human activities and of their mode of visibility and thinkability. This must lead us to revise some notions belonging to the history of art and of its relation to politics, such as the notions of “modernity” and “avant-garde”. Those
notions were destined to historicize the transformations within the field of art and their connection with political transformations. But, if it turns out that Art itself is a historically determined configuration of experience and that the content of that historicity is a redistribution of the sensible, a reconfiguration of the relations between the forms and spheres of human activity, those notions must be rethought from that angle.

The point is that the usual notions of modernity and modernism are most or less predicated on a very simple and simplistic view of the action of time. Let us think of the canonical analysis presented by Clement Greenberg in “Avant-Garde and Kitsch”. His analysis of the opposition of the two terms is in keeping with a view which has been dominant since the times of counter-revolution and romanticism: a view of modernity as a process of acceleration provoking the collapse of the tradition. Modernity is thus given two main aspects. On the one hand, it means the disruption of the fabric of common beliefs and values linking together the practice of the artists, the content of their works and the expectations of their audience. As Greenberg puts it: “All the verities involved by religion, authority, tradition, style, are thrown into question, and the writer or artist is no longer able to estimate the response of his audience to the symbols and references with which he works”. On the other hand, modernity means a high-speed process of mechanization and industrialisation which bears two consequences: the first one is the process of fast urbanization of the rural masses: those masses are severed from their traditional culture as they enter the world of literacy but they are deprived of the “leisure and comfort necessary for the enjoyment of the city's traditional culture”. What they discover, instead of leisure, is thus a “new capacity for boredom” which leads them to “set up a pressure on society to provide them with a kind of culture fit for their own consumption”, a demand which is precisely satisfied thanks to the second aspect of the process of mechanization: the possibility of producing at high speed industrially made cultural products such as tin pan alley music or popular magazines.

In such an analysis, the question of time is viewed from a very restricted angle. Modernity means a speeding-up of time. And that speeding-up provokes a split between two forms of activity: an activity whose aim is to produce things destined to accelerated social consumption – industrial production, including cultural industry; and an activity which has no more any definite social aim and must consequently become an end in itself – high art. Interestingly the very opposition of autonomy and heteronomy is seen as the mere effect of modernity as acceleration. In a way, “high” art has no other choice than to move forward without any end but its own preservation. But, at the same time, this endless forward movement restages an opposition between those who move forward, ahead of their time, and those who lag backward. It comes as no surprise that those responsible for the reign of the rear-guard are the children of the backward
class, the children of peasants forcefully drawn from their slow mode of living toward a use of time for which they have not the appropriated culture. Not incidentally a huge part of Greenberg’s demonstration is devoted to the characterization of Stalinist art as kitsch culture, the culture of the sons of peasants who recognize their image in the rear-guard paintings of Repine and of his imitators. This analysis is not a simple transposition into the artistic field of the Trotskyist view of Stalin as the incarnation of the peasants. It is also a way of imposing an understanding of modernity against another: that which had been precisely embodied by the Soviet Revolution and by its artistic avant-garde: modernity as the equation of artistic practice with the construction of the forms of a new life. Greenberg puts paid to this modernist dream with a simple dilemma: either the separateness of high art or the universality of kitsch culture. But in order to do so, he has to reduce issues of temporality to a mere matter of moving forward or backward. He has to focus on time as quantity, while the main issue is about the “quality” of time, that quality which is at stake in the question of the capacity or incapacity of the sons of peasants to enjoy “leisure”. But if he can do so, it is perhaps because the modernist dream itself had always failed to isolate this “qualitative” aspect, which means to isolate time as a category in the distribution of the sensible from time as a matter of old and new, slow and fast. Revisiting modernity for me means trying to restage time as a form of distribution of the sensible, to see what problems it raised at the core of the modernist dream of coincidence and how those problems led to the triumph of the simplistic view of modernity which still prevails in the discussion about modernism and postmodernism.

What forms of redistribution of the modes of human perception and human activity are at stake in the modernist will or the modernist dream? What forms of temporality are at play in that redistribution? I’ll try to substantiate that inquiry by commenting on an example borrowed from a historical sequence which emblemizes the forms of redistribution of the sensible that are at issue under the names of modernity and avant-garde. Here are two posters designed in 1928 by two Soviet artists, the Stenberg brothers. They are made to advertise a film—a film which is emblematic of both a certain idea of cinema as an art of modernity and of an idea of Soviet political art as a form of art immediately equated with the construction of a new form of life, Dziga Vertov’s film known as Man with a movie camera. What we see on the posters is the Russian title Cheloviek c kino apparatom, whose literal translation is Man with a movement machine—an expression which has a slightly different resonance, as if behind the obvious visibility of a character (the cameraman) practicing a definite activity (cinema) we perceived a whole distribution of the sensible affirming the contemporaneousness of a certain type of humanity with the activity of movement and the use of the machine.

Let us start with the simplest and the most obvious fact about those two posters: their distance from the normal way in which the characters and
situations of a movie are usually illustrated. On both posters we have the figuration of a female body. But that female body is not featured, in the usual way, as an object of desire. Nor is she a character exhibiting the signs of some recognizable feeling or emotion. She exists only as a performing body even though, in order to achieve her performance, she needs to be divided in two parts: a part performing the movement of dance and a part performing the act of seeing. Clearly those two performances – moving and seeing – are exactly the same as the performances of the machine – the “kino-apparatus” itself. The posters liken the curve of the dancing legs to that of the cameraman bent over his machine and couple the eye of the woman with the eye of the machine. They clearly tell the viewers: this film belongs to a new time since it is not a film telling a story with actors expressing the emotions and feelings of fictional characters and urging spectators to identify with those characters and share their emotions. This is no more representation. This is a direct performance of art, and what the poster displays is the means that this art sets to work.

At first sight this opposition between representation and direct performance may seem to validate the idea of modern art, as autonomous art, doing away with representation in order to explore the possibilities of its own medium. But it soon appears that, instead of confirming it, it changes the very idea of medium by making it no more the material and the support of a specific practice but a global sensorium in which several practices become indistinct as they are referred to one and the same form of materiality and function. The modernist paradigm of autonomous art based its argumentation on the distinction made by Lessing between the art of words and the art of visual forms, the art of time and the art of space. Here this distinction is refuted in a quite aggressive way: on the second poster notably, the parts of the body and the letters giving the title of the film and the names of the film maker, the cameraman and the editor are combined so as to suggest at once the lens of a camera and the movement of a propeller cleaving through the air. Words, visual forms and movements are turned into the same dynamic reality. The poster constructs for the film and for itself the sensorium within which an assemblage of written words is the same as a display of visual forms because both are manifestations of the same movement. On the surface of the poster, everything is moving, and all movements are homogeneous.

Of course neither the film maker nor the designers of the posters have invented that coincidence. That convergence between the art of words, the art of forms and the art of movements has been for long at the core of the attempts of artistic novelty: In the 1890’s poets like Mallarmé, in search of a new poetic writing, saw the model of such a writing in the dance of Loïe Fuller, a dance conceived no more as the imitation of a story but as the display of visual forms in space, combined with the resources of electricity; in a similar way, the reformers of the theatre imagined an art in which words would only be, as Meyerhold put it once “drawings on the framework of movements”. Then
cubist painters like Braque and Picasso put the words of the newspapers on their canvases and futurist painters like Boccioni and Severini broke the surface of their canvases into innumerable facets in order to make them express the dynamism of modern life and popular entertainment, and so on and so forth. But soviet artists are in the best position to make us feel that what is at issue in this privilege of movement: what is merging into one unique sensory fabric is not only the arts of words and the arts of forms, the art of time and the arts of space; it is also the forms of art and the forms of collective life: an aesthetic revolution which is a political revolution as well, a re-distribution of the sensible.

Now the problem is: how characterize this revolution? What is this “life” which appears as the fabric within which the forms of art lose their separateness? There is a well-known answer to that question; it emphasizes that words, forms and movements, i.e. the forms of expression of art are no more a spectacle offered to the contemplation of passive viewers. They have become actions in a world where productive action, the action of men working with machines, is the living core of collective life. “Everything is movement” thus could be translated: “Everything is action”. But it is a strange type of action: an action performed by bodies that are only shadows – like the cameraman on the first poster – or are fragmented into parts that look like the cogs of a machine, in the case of the female dancer. It turns out that it is not only a question of opposing a direct performance of the bodies to the shadows of the old stories of love and hate. It is a question of destroying the organic model which sustained both the representative idea of visual beauty and the representative conception of the poetic plot.

The point is that the representative order did not get its norms from the idea of “imitation”. It got them from a definite idea of action, linked with a definite idea of the organic body. Poetry, according to Aristotle, was not so much verse as it was action: a concatenation of events linked together by necessity or verisimilitude. As a consequence, a painting, a sculpture or a ballet could be thought as art, in the representative tradition, if their combinations of forms could be seen as the representation of such actions. But conversely the narrative model of “action” was governed by the visual model of the body, the living whole composed by a leading head and functional members all articulated with one another. But that is not the whole story. Action was not only a certain concatenation of events. It was also a form of life, the lot of a specific group of human beings. Action is not the simple fact of doing something and “passivity” is not simply the fact of doing nothing or of being subjected to an external activity. Action and passivity are categories in a distribution of the sensible. Action is a category that draws a line of separation between two ways of doing and two classes of human beings: there are active men, men who are able to conceive great ends and to take the risk of pursuing them and there are passive men, men who are enclosed in the circle of reproductive life, where any activity
is only a mean for that reproduction. Those men had a name: they were called “mechanical” men or mechanics: men only living in the sphere of practical means aiming at immediate goals; men whose bodies were distorted by the fact of being dedicated to immediate needs. The model for classical beauty could only be given by active men, men whose free body lived in a sphere of ends that were no means for any end but themselves. Those active men were also called men of leisure in opposition to the “mechanical” men. This is the key point about modern and modernist temporality. The issue of time is not simply about the old and the new, the fast and the slow. It is about the distribution of the sensible, about the “quality” of a form of life. Men of action and men of leisure do not live in the same time as the mechanical men.

Such is the background of the representative regime of the arts, the background that we must have in mind if we want to understand what is at stake in the aesthetic revolution and in the politics of the aesthetic revolution. Such is the distribution of modes of doing and being that is ruined down by the posters we are looking at and the film that they advertise. The destruction of the plot is not simply the opposition of direct performance to representation. It is the destruction of the organic model of action and of the whole distribution of the sensible to which it belonged. This is why the becoming-political of art cannot be equated with its becoming-active, with the transformation of the “spectacle” into “action”. The opposition of “action” to the passivity of the spectacle remains within the old model. What disrupts this model is the dismissal of the opposition itself. It is what is done by the shift from action to movement. If movement is the medium within which words and visual forms become the same, it is not because movement means the energy of action. On the contrary it is because “movement “means the destruction of the classical models of action and of the acting organic body. The body of the dancer offers a new paradigm of “dynamism” to the extent that it is a non-organic body. This non-organic body must not be thought as a Deleuzian “body without organs”. Instead it is a body to which its fragmentation gives a twofold power. It is a functional body, a body which is entirely devoted to its functional performance, while, at the same time, it is an expression of the power which is superior to organism, which is “life”, the principle of all what moves and acts, of what dissolves the privileges of action into the equality of movement.

This is also the point where the machine comes in. The performance of the human body looks like the performance of the machine and, conversely, the performance of the machine-eye looks like the performance of the human eye. But this fusion of the body and the machine, and more widely the role of the machine in so-called avant-garde art has nothing to do with a naïve admiration for technical novelty, speed and efficacy. It has to do with the destruction of the organic model. On the one hand, bodies are active insofar as their fragmentation makes them work in the same way as the machines with their wheels and cogs. On the other hand, the machine is much more than the power of technique. It is
the abolition of the opposition between men of ends and men of means: the machine does not know of such distinctions. It does not know of the opposition between activity and passivity. The machine, and notably the machine producing moving images is much more than the more exact and more powerful agent substituted for the human agent. The wedding of the dancing woman with the vision machine in the save movement achieves an overall destruction of a hierarchical distribution of the sensible.

But it achieves it at the cost of some oddities which are visible on our posters: ecstatic as the dancer may look, it turns out that the very space of her manifestation is no space for real dancing. The chequered ground on which she is supposed to dance is turned into a skyscraper, so that her dance becomes a flight or a fall seen from a reverse angle. The equivalence of the ground and the sky, the up and the down denies the depth of the three dimensional stage on which dancing bodies are used to draw their figures. So the acting body is not a body and the space is no space for action. The dancing woman is in fact a combination of two bodies. The first one is an ecstatic body, symbolizing an adhesion to a holistic impulse of modern life. It is not incidental then that this “woman” with her short hair, her ring and her high-heeled shoes looks like an American free-woman more than a Soviet activist. The second one is a mechanical body, a fragmented body. It obeys a rule of fragmentation and combination of the fragments which is the rule commanding in the practice of film montage as it is in taylorised labour and Leninist strategy. On the one hand, the dancing machine is the immediate identity of work and leisure. On the other hand it is a splinted body.

The same goes with space. In a way the space which both welcomes and rejects the dancer is an American space, at least an American space as is dreamed by Modernist Europe: a space entirely covered by modern skyscrapers. But the perspective within which the latter are represented, flying far from the old earth and proudly defying the sky belongs to a space that breaks away from the normal representation of the 3d dimension on a bi-dimensional plane. The main feature of that space is obliqueness. It is also a typical feature among Soviet avant-garde artists. Let us think for instance of Rodtchenko’s photographs with their dramatic oblique high or low angles, of El Lissitzky’s prouns or of Tatlin’s architectural projects such as the Lenin Tribune or the Monument to the Third International. The diagonal has been theorized by El Lissitzky as the spatial configuration well suited to the new communist age in the same way as the sphere was to the classical order and the vertical to the gothic; it constructs an egalitarian space which has abolished the very hierarchy of high and low and an infinite space which can no more be embraced within the categories of our order: the infinite universe of the new life.

This is what accounts for the oddities of the representation: the posters construct a modern time-space which tries to merge three things: artistic anti-representative modernity, modern life and communist revolution. The
identification cannot be direct, it has to be symbolized. It requires the weaving of a specific fabric – an aesthetic fabric which unites the three terms. But it unites them as the performance of a splintered body in an impossible space, a space made of time – made of time which is ahead of itself.

This makes for a double split: the split of the moving body and the split in the time of its performance. Let us examine them in turn. The first problem is about that “movement” whose temporality is opposed to that of the representative action? How are we to characterize this movement itself? What the vitalist body and the mechanical body share in common, is what opposes both of them to the model of action. Action means the pursuit of definite ends through appropriated means. Movement means a sequence of acts, irrespective of the ends to which it is subordinated. In that sense, movement is both what serves action and what neutralizes it, the absence of end, which means the “inaction” which is at the service of action and can be made autonomous, apart from it, and possibly against it. The issue of that inactive action is not something new. It was, from the very beginning, at the core of the polemics which initiated the collapse of the representative model. Let us think of the 18th century polemics about the theatrical action and its effects. Around 1760, this model came in for two types of criticism that can be epitomized by two books. Diderot’s *Conversations on the Natural Son* and Rousseau’s *Letter on the Spectacles*. Diderot criticized the two main aspects of the theatrical convention: the contrived cleverness of the plots with their “coups de theatre” to which he opposed the reality of situations in ordinary life; the conventions of noble language to which he counter-posed the variety of tones, smothered cries, interruptions, silences and the multifarious gestures and attitudes which express the truth of the feelings, the intensity of emotions and the multiplicity of their quasi-imperceptible variations in real life. The convention of theatrical “action” and the conventional tones and attitudes of the actor had to be replaced by a language of the body, a language of corporeal signs. The keyword of that critique was the word *expression*. A few years later, Rousseau’s *Letter to d’Alembert on the Spectacles* focussed on the effects of the dramatic performance: In spite of its pretences, theatre teaches nothing, he said. The only feeling that it produces is the passion for theatre itself, that is the passion for shadows, for a shadow of happiness for which the spectators give up the pursuit of happiness in real life. This is why he opposed to the false lessons of morality of the theatre the collective energy given to the Spartan citizens by their songs and dances or the sense of community and brotherhood conveyed by the Swiss popular festivals.

Those two critics had the same target: the “artificiality” of the theatrical “action” and the lie of its supposed effect on society. Both opposed to the appearances of action the direct expression of life. Now that “expression” of life was split from the beginning. On the one side it was a new form of spectacle: what Diderot and the reformers of the theatre in his time could pit against the
mimetic order is a form of hyper-mimesis: a semiological performance, a language of the body which still is a language of motivated signs, supposing an overall correspondence between the feelings of the souls and the traits, gestures and attitudes able to express it. That language claimed to be heir to the ancient Roman pantomime, but its visual model was much more a pictorial one, that Diderot found epitomized in the paintings of Greuze, with the intensity of diverse emotions expressed by each character on the canvas. So, on the one hand, life meant the subjugation of movement to a language of signs, its subjugation to a form of hyper-mimesis. On the other hand, the festival replaced the theatre as the immediate expression of life. Now this entire absorption of the spectacle into collective action meant a return from the representative order to the ethical order. It restaged the Platonic opposition between the theatrical lie and the authenticity of the choreographic performance in which the gestures of the citizens “imitate” the very principle of their collective virtue.

None of those two forms of “expression of life” could really break the old privilege of “action”. What could break it was a form of movement capable of abolishing the hierarchy inherent in both action and inaction; the hierarchy opposing active men to passive men and that opposing men of leisure to those men who only know the alternation of work and rest. Strange as it might seem, “expressive life “had to be contaminated by powers of “inexpressiveness” and inaction, and it is that contamination that is witnessed by the performance of the vitalist and mechanical dancer on our posters. It is worth examining the genealogy of that contamination. In the same time as Diderot and Rousseau opposed expressive life to theatrical action, Winckelmann proposed its paradoxical analysis of the statue known as the Torso of the Belvedere: a statue of Hercules deprived of the arms and legs necessary for achieving his Labours. This Hercules, he said, is only pondering on his past deeds, but, as he has no head for pondering, his thought is only expressed by the curve of his back and the muscles of the torso whose forms are “engulfed by one another” in a continuous movement similar to the indifferent rise and fall of the waves. This in-different “rise and fall” of the wavelike muscles entails a new idea of movement: an idea of movement which neutralizes the very opposition of movement and rest. That identity of movement and stillness got a name: it is a free movement, a movement which is not fettered by the obligation to perform actions or express emotions. This implies a new idea of the body, of its life and of its movement that XXth century dancers and performers will set out to revive by looking at Greek vases or sculptures. What makes the body living is no more the organic link of action in which limbs obey a head; nor is it the language of the expressive body translating thoughts and emotions into gestures and attitudes. The “free movement” is a movement that has no end in the two senses of the word: first it never begins, nor does it ever end. Next, it has no goal. It is this endlessness that makes the wavelike undulations of the Torso better embody Greek freedom than the parades of the Young Spartan ephebes.
Thirty years later Schiller made the idea of the “freedom” expressed by the statue both more explicit and more problematic as he turned the identity of movement and immobility into an identity of action and inaction. What he called the play-drive is not so much a specific type of movement as it is a specific form of experience: a form of experience in which the subject is no more determined to enact a specific capacity in order to respond to a specific impulse, need or interest, as it happens in the ordinary forms of experience. Aesthetic freedom or play is the experience of a capacity of indetermination which is properly an experience of humanity as such: the experience of a capacity which can be shared by anybody as it dismisses the hierarchical oppositions that structured both action and inaction. That which shines on the face of the Greek deity, Schiller says, is idleness, the absence of any care and will. Now those attributes of the deity are in reality the attributes of the free people who commissioned the work of the sculptor. They are the characteristics of aesthetic experience in which the usual hierarchies of sensible experience are suspended. Aesthetic freedom is freedom from the power of will and notably from the will to use art in order to produce effects on individuals and collectives. In that sense play can be set as the notion founding both a new idea of art and a new idea of the individual and collective art of living.

We can now go back to our posters. What appears on their impossible surface is not only the passage from representation to direct performance. Nor is it the holly wedding of the human body with the machine. It is a new configuration of space and time in which the daily activity of men and women is identical with the indifference of the free movement and the “inactivity” of play expressing collective freedom. This combination of divine “indifference” with the energy of the construction of the new communist life may look strange. But we must not forget that “communist life” means two things: for those who are at the head of the Communist Party and of the Soviet State, communism is the form of collective life that will result from the success of the plans of development of industrialisation and collectivization. It will be the result of science, hard labour and discipline. In short communism is a matter of ends and means. But, before being a goal to be reached, communism is an aesthetic idea: the idea of a form of sensible experience within which precisely the hierarchical separation transforming the human activity into a simple means in the service of external ends has been abolished. It is the idea of communism that the young Marx had expressed in some famous texts – an idea that was clearly an aesthetic idea inherited from Schiller and from his Romantic readers: the idea of a form of community in which the ideality of the human essence is no more separated from the concrete life of the individuals. As long as communism is posited as a goal to be reached through a right adjustment of ends and means, it remains in the old representative and hierarchical plot. In order to be reached at all, it has to exist already as a form of sensible experience. This is an “anticipation” of the future which has not much to do with the usual idea of the avant-garde. The
point is not to be ahead of one’s time or ahead of the crowd. The point is to put
two temporalities in one and the same time: a temporality of ends and means
and a temporality within which they have become indistinct. This is the way we
can translate the famous project of union between the French heart and the
German head, the French temporality of action and the German temporality in
which action has absorbed the moment of inaction. As the young Marx
perceives it, modernity is not the reign of contemporaneity; nor is it the
disenchanted time of the loss of common beliefs and values; it is the time of a
disjunction of temporalities. And the “task of the present” is the task of filling
the gap between two temporalities. Now there is an interesting convergence
about that disjunction and about the reconciliation of the disjointed
temporalities. Just as the young Marx made this statement, a very similar
diagnosis was made, on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, by another disciple
of German Idealism, I mean Emerson in his lecture on “The Poet”. In the same
way as Marx, he affirmed that what modern Humanity needed for the
resumption of its sins, was a new confession. This new confession, he said, is
the task of the poet. The poet to come is the one who finds in the apparent
triviality of the new American world or as Emerson puts it “in the barbarism and
materialism of the times, another carnival of the same gods whose picture he so
much admires in Homer”. The task of that poet is to give their spiritual meaning
of symbols of common life to the display of prosaic objects and the network of
mundane activities. As is well known, the first person who proposed himself to
play the part of the poet-to-come was Walt Whitman. And he did it by giving to
all prosaic activities the most immaterial link: the suspension points which link
the sentences of *Leaves of Grass*, a book – we must remember – that has
neither a beginning nor end. Now my point is that, by defining the task of
the poet, Emerson might well have formulated the most accurate statement of
what modernity and modernism mean. The task that he gave to his poet is the
task that so-called avant-garde artists set out to fulfill: the anticipation of the
life-to-come, the construction of a sensorium in which the old divisions have
already been abolished, in which all activities are equal and express the same
spirit of community – a spirit which is present in the same way in the power of
the useful machines and in the cheerful manifestation of vitality of a dancing
woman, a spirit of endless movement.

It is this endless movement that Dziga Vertov’s *Man with a movie camera*
sets out to display. The film tells no story, it only connects activities, those
activities that are performed everyday in the streets, the shops, the factories, the
offices, the stadiums or the workers’ clubs. Filming is not a way of representing
those actions. It is an action that creates a link between all those actions and
organizes them into a “film-thing” which is itself part of the construction of the
new life. In that sense the montage is the exact equivalent of Whitman’s
suspension points. It draws the spiritual thread which is the communist soul of
all those activities. Its main operation consists in rendering all of them equal.
This means three things: first making them equally important; next fragmenting them in very short pieces; and finally editing them according to an accelerated rhythm. The machine of the operator and that of the editor make all those fragmented activities the expression of a new collective life characterized by the instantaneous connection of all movements. In such a way the assembly line in the factory and the wipe given by a shoe-shiner in the street, the work of the miner and the doing of nails in a beauty parlour are represented as equivalent manifestations of energy. This overall connection has a condition. The condition is that each of those actions be disconnected from its own temporality, disconnected from the ends that it pursues. The detractors of Vertov had already made the point about his earlier films: his machines might compose an impressive symphony of movement, but nobody knew how they functioned and what they produced. This is the point. Vertov does not “represent” communism as the result of a planned organization and hierarchy of tasks. He creates communism as the common rhythm of all activities. Now this common rhythm supposes that all those performances share the same characteristic: unwillingness. This equal intensity and makes productive work and free play identical. But that identity can only be achieved in the space of play. This is what is illustrated by the last part of the film in which we meet again the dancer and the tripod as we see the film being projected in a theatre. Those sequences show us two opposite performances of the machine – or two metaphors of cinema: there is the performance of the employees in the telephone exchange, ceaselessly plugging in and unplugging, which is the metaphor of the filmic action as an interconnection of actions. But we have seen before the condition of that interconnection which is that all the actions are split up into fragments, appearing and disappearing at the same accelerated speed. This is why the tripod and the camera provide us with a very different image of the machine: they are turned into automats bowing to the audience before making the demonstration of their tricks. On the one hand the cameraman is only the employee of the telephone exchange that connects every activity with all other activities. On the other hand he is the magician that turns all of them into tricks. But the coincidence of work and play must be shown in a space which is itself a space for play: the movie theatre where the spectators recognize themselves and laugh at the spectacle of the frantic acceleration of their daily activities – which means that they play with the idea that those activities are the implementation of the communist idea.

Not surprisingly the builders of “real” and “effective” communism disliked both metaphors and they levelled against the film maker two accusations: on the one hand, whitmanism or “pantheism”, which meant for them the fascination with the ceaseless flow of reality; on the other hand, “formalism” which meant the pursuit of art for art’s sake. Both accusations amount to the same. What is common to the whitmanian or duncanian rhythm and to “formalist” play is that both make will and unwillingness equivalent. This
equivalence might well have been the core of the aesthetic revolution and of its
two offshoots: artistic modernism and communism. That alliance was
unacceptable for the constructors of “real” communism. Consequently they
urged artists to give up the pretension of weaving the sensible forms of a new
community. There could only be one temporality: the temporality of ends and
means, which was also the temporality of work and rest. What Soviet artists had
to do was to serve the strategy of the party by representing the efforts and the
problems of the real people and by recreating them after the pains of their
labour. In other terms they had to go back to the representative logic in which
the artists provide a determined class of people with a specific combination of
pleasure and education. That first repression of the communist project by the
communist State paved the way for the second one: its theoretical obliteration by
Marxist intellectuals who erased its historical forms and reinvented Modernism
as the autonomisation of high art, breaking away from culture industry, in order
to commit itself to the sole exploration of its medium. I think that it could be
interesting to-day to revisit the whole story.

Jacques Rancière