VORTRAG

Rotating Discs and Moving Pictures:
Marcel Duchamp's Approach to Film

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This is not a lecture, but a starting point of a research project which aims at exploring the "cinematic" qualities of Marcel Duchamp's visual arts, in order to connect the analysis and historical reconstruction of his contributions to cinema with other artworks and discourses elaborated by the French artist, within the framework of Avant-garde Film Studies. I am eager to explore a selection of artworks held within the Duchamp Research Centre at the Staatliches Museum Schwerin. My aim is to analyze and interpret these pieces, highlighting the links between their aesthetic styles and the artist's investigations into cinematic language. I am particularly interested in studying Duchamp's optical and rotating discs, as well as his experimentation with surfaces as screens. Ultimately, my project seeks to uncover the connections between Duchamp's use of ephemeral devices to create motion and his lesser-known interest in the cinematic medium.

Anémic Cinéma: Play on Words and Kinetic Pictorialism in the Context of Dada Cinema

I will introduce now some information on *Anémic Cinéma* and its importance in worldwide cinema.

The context is that of Dadaism, a movement characterized by three macro-questions, namely non-sense as a conceptual horizon, automatism as a compositional methodology, and improvisation as a horizon of overthrowing the symbolic: in short, rejection of all canon, destruction of meaning. There was a reason for that: Dada's anti-art agenda was a direct response to the terrible mass slaughter of WWI. The irrationality of capitalism and the warfare state were perceived as a nightmare which could only be answered with a rejection of the values of a society that had allowed this to happen, namely a denial of the artistic and cultural values of the old society. To cite the founder of the movement, Tristan Tzara, "Dada arose from a moral need, from a deep feeling that man, the centre of all creations of the spirit, had to re-affirm his pre-eminence with regard to all the impoverished notions of human substance,

with regard to all dead things and ill-achieved gains… Honor, Country, Morality, Family, Art, Religion, Liberty, Fraternity, etc- all these notions had once answered to human needs, now nothing remained of them but a skeleton of conventions". Dadaism had a great liberating force and helped to modernize all artistic fields, from literature to the visual arts. Dada's manifesto echoed Marinetti's *Manifesto of Futurism* (for issues such as the rejection of the past, the questioning of the previous traditions, the approach of creating programmatic manifestos for different areas of artistic expression), but went even further, demolishing any certainty, including Dadaism itself. The Avant-garde reconfigures the attitude between high and low culture. The word "Avant-garde" means "advance guard" (from the medieval Latin "ab ante guardare", "to look ahead"), and it's used in military lexicon (frontline troops). This word testifies how the Avant-garde pushes the boundaries of what is accepted as the norm or the status quo. Already in the context of the Italian Futurist movement, cinema was identified as "the possibility of an eminently Futurist art and the expressive medium most adapted to the complex sensibility of a Futurist artist." In fact, cinema is the answer to the question of the "complex sensibility" of modern artists. The typical elements of the cinematographic language, its key to the construction of a visual storytelling, were pinpointed by the Futurists in the fragmented vision and the "poly-expressive" reconstruction of reality. Both were recognized as two basic principles that could be achieved through the montage, a kind of cinematographic equivalent for the assembling of mixed media in sculpture and the collages; these issue will be pivotal for all the avant-garde movements in their cinematic production.

Also the encounter between Dadaism and cinema produced a number of masterpieces, free from the need to produce a meaningful storytelling structure.

The prominent artist Marcel Duchamp directed an avant-garde film, *Anémic Cinéma*, in 1926, but although it takes up some of the motifs of Dadaism (such as mocking phrases and puns) it was filmed after the spontaneous dissolution of the movement. Nineteen rotating optical discs are filmed in it, some composed of hypnotic figures, others of complicated phrases.

In 1938, the Museum of Modern Art's film library in New York obtained a 35mm nitrate print of Duchamp's groundbreaking *Anémic Cinéma*. This avant-garde film marked Duchamp's first artwork to be acquired by a museum, making it a truly significant piece of cinematic history. It gained wider circulation after MoMA's film library made a print available to US and Canadian programmers through its lending program. Despite Duchamp's claims to be less interested in cinema, his acquisition of a camera and its incorporation into his studio practice marked him as a trailblazer among visual artists during the 1920s. His *Anémic Cinéma* was one of the earliest attempts at abstract film, characterized by a series of verbal puns that critics hailed as innovative. The film's anagrammatic play on words also reflected the conceptual discourse that was related to the presence of the text, questioning the "abstract character of the filmic image", to quote Judovitz. Despite the first isolated efforts by Hans Richter in 1929, in a

program he curated for the Stuttgart Film und Foto exhibition, and by Julien Levy in the 1930s, *Anémic Cinéma* began to circulate mostly in the 1940s, appearing in programs of avant-garde and artists' films such as *Le retour à la raison* (by Man Ray, 1923), or *Ballet mécanique* (by Fernand Léger and Dudley Murphy, 1924).

It is noteworthy that Duchamp chose not to show his film within the conventional framework of circulation and distribution of avant-garde films. Instead, he opted for private screenings and exhibition only to friends in Paris and New York, where he brought his 35mm print while en route to the US to contribute to an exhibition of Constantin Brancusi. In New York, he rejected the idea of making the print publicly available in theaters, referring to the "obscene" verbal puns on the discs. Despite the general interest in the cinematic medium's material qualities and conceptual discourses, it seems Duchamp was not interested in showcasing his work in a traditional movie theater. P. Adams Sitney noted the lack of depth in the optical and textual disks, which he considered a fundamental "anemia" in the cinematic medium. According to Sitney, the title itself "implies that cinema is anemic because it all takes place in the mind of the viewer through automatic responses, as that viewer is duped into believing that the successive still images move, that their flatness is really depth, that they bear a relationship to their titles."

While not abundant in number, Duchamp's interactions with various media were significant and occasionally short-lived. They offer a unique vantage point for exploring his work in terms of radical experimentation. One such medium was cinema, which Duchamp ventured into with his seminal *Anémic Cinéma* project. He pursued other film projects, collaborated with filmmakers like Hans Richter, and even made public television appearances between the 1940s and 1960s.

According to Alexander Kauffmann, he first evidence of his possession of a movie camera dates 1920, according to a letter that Marcel Duchamp addressed to his sister and brother-in-law in Paris from New York, where he was living. Between 1920 and 1921, Duchamp created a female alter-ego, Rrose Sélavy, and posed as her for a series of portraits taken by his friend and photographer, Man Ray. Rrose Sélavy served as both the "author" of *Anémic Cinéma* and the name inscribed on the wooden box of Duchamp's Ernemann-Werke Filmkamera.

Total Works of Art: the Historical Framework of the European Avant-garde

During the 1920s, artists in the European avant-garde began to branch out and experiment with various artistic disciplines beyond traditional forms like painting and sculpture. Many of these artists delved into the realm of cinema, utilizing the technology and language of film to create a new kind of language that pushed the boundaries of the medium. This "cinematic imaginary" was pervasive in the avant-garde movements, with visual artists, poets,

playwrights, and filmmakers alike engaging with discourses of film language in domains that were traditionally far from the cinematic context. Though these unique works of art were totally unrelated to the commodified circuit of production and distribution, they helped shape the still-undefined canons of official cinema.

What the avant-garde artists proposed was a complete upending of the models and codes that governed the production and interpretation of films. They aimed at rupturing the structures of communication that were inherent in the language of film and instead offered new, more challenging codes of reading which were often lyrical and highly meaningful. The result was what they referred to as "pure cinema." The cinematic avant-garde, during those years, sought to legitimize the film language by placing greater emphasis on rhythm - an aesthetic element in itself - thereby dispensing with narrative drama and theatrical space in favour of focusing on the iconographic and visual aspect of film.

The avant-garde films represented a victory for the imagination, showcasing an autonomous art theory that was theorized, organized, and configured in a completely different way. These works were characterized by a plethora of divergences and variations, and conjugated to linguistic specificities. The rejection of and estrangement from official film production and the denial of the commodity-representation dialectic, formed the main common ground. It was, however, a complex and process-driven decision, with the relationship with the audience continuously built through models of decodification and by violation of the conventional moving image universe. The avant-garde films achieved a great deal of innovation in their treatment of the visual horizon and showcased new forms of the visible made possible by their research into film technology. The values of experimental formalism, through the mixing of various techniques and diverse aesthetic goals, were fully demonstrated in *Anémic Cinéma*.

To give a little bit of context, *Le retour à la raison* is credited to be the most radical work of the Dada avant-garde, and was made entirely in 24 hours to be shown at the "Cœur à Barbe" evening at the Michel Theater on July 6, 1923. It is a project born almost by chance, juxtaposing images with no connection to one another, following Dadaist doctrine. The leader of the movement, Tristan Tzara, had commissioned it from Man Ray only a day in advance, and the result is a (deliberately) chaotic and nonsensical product. To create a complete film in one night, Man Ray combined some strips of film he had shot earlier with other sections, including his "rayograph" technique extended to moving images (an object is placed between a light source and a photosensitive film, as opposed to traditional photography in which photographic film captures light reflected from an object), then Man Ray sprinkled salt and pepper on one piece of film and pins on another. We see everyday objects such as springs, nails, thumbtacks, then nighttime illuminations, the writing "dancer" with cigarette smoke, hanging paper shapes that create light and shadow play on the wall, and finally the nude body of Kiki de Montparnasse, muse-model in many works by Man Ray. Man Ray's little film

accomplishes with film something similar to the ready-made assemblage of Dada "painting." On the other hand, the interweaving of the random elements with others of much sought-after photographic refinement (the arabesques of the shadow of a curtain on the naked body of the model, in the final part) bring us inside Man Ray's art, based on a dosage of improvisation and formal rigor. *Le retour à la raison* destroyed, with its anti-structure and absolute casualness, any attempt to pigeonhole cinema into the categories of art and delimit its field of action on the basis of those "specificities" (such as editing, close-up, etc.) that were being theorized and experimented with, in those years. It is interesting to note, however, that the novelty of these works, precisely because of a discussion of the new visuality and the painters' use of cinema in those years, is not so much to be sought in the techniques employed, but rather in the rejection of a formal structure.

The other case I mentioned, *Ballet mécanique*, is another exemplary film within the cinematic experience of the European avant-garde. I feel particularly lucky since I had the chance to explore in deep this film for a restoration project carried out on the hand-colored 35mm film print held at EYE Filmmuseum, the National Dutch cinematheque in Amsterdam. In the 1920s, a need arose among the artists of the European avant-garde currents to invent a different kind of cinema: the technology of cinema is thus exhibited as research on language. This film consists of an exploration of images of the modern era, made up of close-ups, repetitions, oscillations, and views of objects. There is no plot; the "ballet mécanique," which even from its title evokes the contrast between the harmony of dance and the mechanical rhythm of the cinematic device, is composed of images of objects, moving plays of light and shadow, details of people and inanimate objects, often seen in the same repeated shot, mounted rhythmically with others. *Ballet mécanique* thus creates a new formula of reception in the repetitions of vertical and horizontal dominants, based on rhythmic and formal logic. Completed and presented in September 1924 as a controversial multi-authored work, involving Fernand Léger, Dudley Murphy, but also Man Ray, Ezra Pound, and Georges Antheil, *Ballet mécanique* refers to the leitmotifs of the postwar world: rhythm, speed, modernity. Léger was aware that speed constituted the defining aspect of modern life ["La vitesse est la loi du monde moderne"].

So *Anémic Cinéma* was not the only film in the 1920s dealing with certain avant-garde paradigms and aesthetic horizons, but can be placed within a very rich and productive context.

Conceptual Layers: Readymades, Verbal Puns, Optical Motion

The whole "cinematic" dimension of Duchamp's work was closely tied to the concept of ideomotricity in his "motorised" artworks (such as his "rotating" sculptures) and the project of his stereoscopic film *Elsa*, unfinished, up to the realisation of *Anémic Cinéma*. We may

extend the concept of "ideomotor image" also to words, such as the titles of the paintings, notes, puns, works on the verbal rhythm and frequency; the setting in motion of words and letters generated a dynamic condition in dialogue with the language process.

Anémic Cinéma is considered an instance of Duchamp's passage from a critique of the pictorial image to a critique of the aesthetic vision: the coexistence, in this film, of the visual dimension alongside a verbal instance raises questions about the role of the word in Duchampian aesthetics. *Anémic Cinéma* reconnected to the conceptual and aesthetic discourse opened by the readymades. Just "like the readymade, which is doubly constituted through the interplay of an object and its title", to cite Judovitz, *Anémic Cinéma* worked by combining optical graphic research and the layers of meaning intertwined with the verbal puns.

The spinning discs in *Anémic Cinéma* carried a dual significance, linking their circular motion to the cinematic medium while also evoking kinetic works related to optics. In the film, the optical discs rotated rightwards, while the verbal discs rotated leftwards. This intersection between visual research and optical science connected to the *Bicycle Wheel* with the scientific research that in 19th century employed the observation of the spokes of a moving wheel as evidence of the functioning of "retinal activity."

In *The Photoplay*, Hugo Münsterberg summarized the history of experiments prior to the patents of the first cinematographic devices, and mentions the optical illusions arising from the apparent backward movement of the spokes of moving wheels. Focusing on the instances of optical research and the illusion of the "third dimension", in regard to *Anémic Cinéma* and the *Rotorelifs* of 1935, Duchamp specified that a more detailed perception could be achieved by closing one eye rather than holding both eyes open.

Screens, Surfaces, and Reliefs

Duchamp dedicated much thought on the issue of the screen. He reportedly screened *Anémic Cinéma* not on a standard movie theatre screen, but on a surface of mirrored glass, that he had "constructed specially for the first projection" during a 1965 interview with the film critic Toby Mussman. Mussman described the screen's construction as having consisted of "translucent glass, like that used in bathroom windows, with a reflective mirror-silver backing", in a certain spiritual continuity with his famous work *The Large Glass*. Recent research in film history and media archaeology suggested this continuity also with practices from early cinema, since the mirror screens were used in order to increase the amount of light reflected, enabling screenings in the daylight, typical condition of fairground and café-concert venues of early film. Other artist's notes for unrealized films indicated a steady interest in non-standard projection screens, such as turning screens or rubber and canvas surfaces.

Moreover, screens and surfaces conceptually intertwined problems of color perception, at the center of Duchampian artistic reflections; indeed, color contributes to a perceptual contradiction, provided by a "painting" smooth to the touch, but in relief visually. It is in this direction that Duchamp's "optical" works, such as his his *Optical Discs*, the *Rotoreliefs*, and *Anémic Cinéma*, were all characterized by the illusion of relief.

Project goals, theoretical frameworks, and deliverables

The meta-design stage of this project includes the first exploration of over ninety of Duchamp's artworks hosted at the Staatliches Museum Schwerin. As a researcher in the field of Film Studies and Film History, with a previous record of publications on Avant-garde cinema, I believe that this interdisciplinary approach may support possible new readings of Duchamp's aesthetic, despite a rich scholarly literature on the work of one of the most innovative artists of the twentieth century.

The methodological framework of my research will intertwine the instances of Art History with the Film History and Media Archaeology, i.e. a theoretical approach for delving into the complexities of historical knowledge and media culture, focusing on a cultural and material history of technology. The concept of archaeology, to which this approach refers, is taken from Michel Foucault's idea of "archaeology of knowledge", that is, the analysis of the birth and relationship between discursive formations and knowledge.