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Breakdowns and Short Circuits: Media and Modernity, 1895-1920

by

Em Sandberg

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

German

and the Designated Emphasis

in

Film Studies

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Anton Kaes, Co-chair
Professor Niklaus Largier, Co-chair
Professor Karin Sanders

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Breakdowns and Short Circuits: Media and Modernity, 1895-1920

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by Em Sandberg

Abstract

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Professor Anton Kaes and Professor Niklaus Largier, Co-chairs

Early twentieth century Northern European cultures were fascinated with systems of energy and their breakdowns. During this time of intense electrical innovation and the development of psychophysiological sciences, energy was understood to pervade all of life – be that in electrical wiring, sound waves and light, or the nerves of the human body. In this conceptualization, observation of life and its processes could no longer be considered as separate from the energies it sought to examine; observation was embedded in an energetic fabric. Ultimately, observation from an inherently and perpetually fallible position found its expression in the category of the “breakdown”; the category expressed cultural and aesthetic concerns about the body’s embeddedness in a wider system of energy. Taking psychophysiology and emergent electrical networks as historical contexts, this dissertation examines how predominantly visual media in early twentieth century Modernist and Expressionist works in the German and Scandinavian contexts used the category of the “breakdown” to probe the intractability of the observer from larger energetic systems. My dissertation provides three reevaluations of canonical figures in the German and Scandinavian contexts: August Strindberg, Georg Kaiser, and Robert Reinert. In each, the breakdown of autonomy and critical distance became the *a priori* of expression, resulting in an exploration of cyclical narrative forms. In these looping structures, failures to critically distance one’s self from electrical infrastructures engendered their own production of nervous and electrical energy; the attempts to produce distance generated energetic excesses that were ultimately contested and/or refunctionalized by the system from which they arose. These works thereby present a critical theory of affect in the era of electric media – and its lasting relevance to today.

To my parents, Mark and Elisabeth

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Note

Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own. English translations of all quotes will be provided in the body of the text; the original quotes in the endnotes. If, however, the original language is of particular importance to the analysis, both the original and the translation will be provided in-text.

Introduction: Circumscribing Breakdown

Let us begin with the present and loop back around: in *The Atlantic*'s March 2021 Issue, Jerry Useem, a contributing writer for the magazine, wrote an article entitled "Bring Back the Nervous Breakdown," the tagline for which read "It used to be okay to admit that the world had simply become too much." Starting the article by noting the early 20th century's equivalence between nervous disorders and the common cold, Useem argues for a reevaluation of the term "nervous breakdown": "The nervous breakdown of turn-of-the-century Europe was not a medical condition, but a sociological one. It implicated a physical problem—your 'nerves'—not a mental one. And it was a onetime event, not a permanent condition. It provided sanction for pause and reset that could put you back on track." The historical term for such a condition varied; though more transnationally understood through official diagnoses like "neurasthenia" or "hysteria," the first official use of the term "breakdown," Useem claims, is to be found in Albert Abram's 1901 *Nervous Breakdown: Its Concomitant Evils—Its Prevention and Cure—A Correct Technique of Living for Brain Workers*.¹ The somewhat interchangeable terms ("neurasthenia," "hysteria," and "breakdown") served as catch-all diagnoses, which, over the course of the twentieth century, would eventually give way to more specified diagnoses with individualized pharmaceutical treatments in lieu of the ostensibly restorative "rest cures." Ultimately, Useem wants to reintroduce the term "nervous breakdown"; the diagnosis and its treatments should be made acceptable and institutionally encouraged to maintain mental health of American labor.

As a result, Useem's argument raises the question "What does it mean to break down?" The answer reveals a peculiar paradox of the phenomenon; Useem points to the discursive *functionality* of what has conventionally been understood as the *dysfunctional* or, in its starker iterations, the *nonfunctional*. In this sense, Useem unfurls a flood of more questions concerning the social, political, economic, and environmental implications in the concept of the breakdown. For instance: What, exactly, is functioning and what, exactly, is breaking down? What does it mean for an individual and, still further, a system to break down? What kind of functionality is at stake? What is the discursive power of the term "breakdown"?

Useem's answer to some of these questions relies on a sense of regeneration; breakdown is meant restoratively, a way to "put you back on track." His argument thereby extends beyond the attempts to keep anxiety at bay (which, in contemporary society, include but are not limited to mindfulness techniques, positive thinking, exercise, CBD-infused essential oils, and antidepressants); he embraces the nervous breakdown as a *productive* phase of labor. In Useem's view, then, the discursive parameters of the nebulous category of "breakdown" are centered around maintaining, if not increasing, the potential efficacy of capitalism's labor force; the "breakdown" is generative of and for capital.

At stake in Useem's framing of the "breakdown" is how the psychological phenomenon fits into a larger system; what seems to be the isolated mental collapse of the individual is revealed to be a nexus of political, social, and economic forces, all of which in turn seek to recuperate the dysfunction they enact. Whether or not one agrees with Useem's treatment of the "breakdown," he illuminates, perhaps somewhat unintentionally, an often-overlooked quality of the phenomenon: "breakdown" is a *systemic* term; it marks a juncture at which an economic and/or technical system's effects might be observed and potentially mitigated in their *dys-* or *non-*functionality.² Useem's argument demonstrates, then, one way in which the breakdown can be coopted for the support of a particular economic or social arrangement.

If the “breakdown” marks a decisive moment in which the expression of a system’s effects becomes available to perception, then its *representation* – that is, the articulation of its observation – becomes the pivot upon which its discursive power is enacted, perpetuated, and/or dismantled; the discursive representation of the breakdown shapes its political power. To critically observe the breakdown is to articulate a relationship of power between an individual and the systems in which she participates. In this act of articulation, be it within a scientific or more overtly aesthetic context, there is something of a critical position manufactured between the breakdown and its observer. Articulation and externalization of a breakdown offers distance to the experience and, in turn, one might well be better able to read, as it were, the organization of relationships between individuals, technology, capital and power. Representative of this viewpoint is Irene Engelstad’s literary study of Amalie Skram, entitled *Sammenbrudd og gjennombrudd* (“Zusammenbruch und Durchbruch” or “Breakdown and Breakthrough,” to mark the German/English equivalents). Here, she argues that Skram’s depiction of female mental breakdown in *Professor Hieronimus* was itself a breakthrough in literary modernity (known in scholarship on Scandinavian studies as “The Modern Breakthrough”); by staging her own traumatic breakdown in her semi-autobiographical novels, Skram launched an effective literary – that is, overtly aestheticized and narrativized – critique of patriarchal power in its treatment of nervous disorders. As such, Skram’s staging of the nervous breakdown both generated a personal and critical distance to the phenomenon and, moreover, marked out a site for literary and linguistic experimentation. Skram demonstrates the extent to which the “breakdown” can become a rhetorical position of critique from which to articulate, illuminate, and potentially liberate the subject from modernity’s systemic conditionings; breakdowns become *progressive*.

This dissertation represents a prolonged engagement with the political potentialities of the term “breakdown.” By taking the early twentieth century as its period of analysis, I argue that Useem’s contemporary enthusiasm for the term is predicated on a historical and aesthetic exploration of the relationship between functionality and dys- or nonfunctionality. At stake is precisely the relationship between individuals and the systems in which they participate; the question is whether the “breakdown” supports or undermines a given ordering of power relationships within a techno-capitalist society. To answer this question, it is worth emphasizing that both Engelstad’s analysis and this dissertation assume that articulations of power and systemic relationships are often narrative. Furthermore, the recognition of and supposed distance to the breakdown can be considered a matter of narrative form and rhetorical effect. As such, the leading questions of this dissertation are: What did it mean to aesthetically articulate the breakdown and, in turn, observe these expressions within a highly visual culture? What did it mean to watch the breakdown?

Nervous Receptions

The category of the “nervous breakdown” is by no means a stable category; it is deeply inflected by its historical contexts, of which there are numerous iterations over at least the last three centuries. To understand the inflections of the term, this dissertation harkens back to the so-called *fin de siècle*, when literature, art, science, and sociology grappled with the phenomenon of the nerve and nervous energy. Popularized by psychophysicists such as Hermann von Helmholtz and Gustav Fechner in the mid-nineteenth century, the role of the nerve as a conductor of the body’s energy became one of the central preoccupations for turn-of-the-century discourse and offers a particularly forceful expression of the structure of the “breakdown.”

August Strindberg's pithy remark in his 1895 essay "Sensations detraquées": "And the nerves? Everywhere!" point to the pervasiveness of the phenomenon.³

Strindberg's ecstatic proclamation is an oblique answer to the leading question of his essay: "Am I at the point of growing new skin and becoming modern?"⁴ The essay is dedicated to articulating the contours of a (markedly male) subject fit for the conditions of modernity; nerves became the vehicle through which one might reconcile oneself to modernity more generally. The fascination and romanticization of the figure of the nerve was by no means an isolated case. As Matthew Wilson Smith has noted in *The Nervous Stage: Nineteenth-century Neuroscience and the Birth of Modern Theatre*, nerves were understood as nodal points of mediation, simultaneously occupying and translating between realms of materiality and subjectivity, gesture and language. Literary and art critic Hermann Bahr elaborates on this position in his 1891 *Overcoming Naturalism (Die Überwindung des Naturalismus)*, in which he calls for "a nervous Romanticism" and "a mysticism of nerves"⁵ as an antidote to the aesthetic failings of the Naturalist movement. As Bahr would have it, this new aesthetic would involve coming ever closer in experience to the level of nerves, at which energy was understood to be materially processed; Bahr called for an artistic reconciliation of subjectivity and the nervous world in itself. Bahr and Strindberg, at least in the writings listed above, encapsulate a Northern European propensity to see the nerve as the scientific, material grounding from which to aesthetically investigate the possibility of new and modern modes of being. This was a Neoromantic articulation of the nerve's role in modernity.

Such romanticism of the nerve should well be read in tandem with a nearly opposite and arguably more pervasive reception of nervous science. Nervousness was also seen as a specifically modern affliction, whose perceived urgency and pervasiveness often led to its conceptualization as an epidemic. Christoph Asendorf sums up this cultural attitude: "'Nerves' is a word, like 'nerve' and 'nervousness,' that derives from the French *nerveux*, which merely meant 'sensitive' in the eighteenth century, but slowly underwent a change in meaning [. . .]: from 'sensitive' to 'trembly,' that is, from a mode of perception to an illness."⁶ This illness's symptoms commonly included, but were not limited to mental illness, fatigue, lethargy, fragile or weakened constitution, and excessive displays of emotion, particularly in cases of hysteria. Indeed, cultural theorists like Max Nordau would rail against the perceived weakness of the subject and, by extension, the sovereign state – and would go so far as to attribute the cause of nervousness to a long historical process of degeneration. Nordau's *Degeneration (Entartung)* is perhaps the strongest articulation of a cultural pessimism surrounding nervousness.

Yet the apparent diversity of symptoms which could be chalked up as overall "nervousness" gave rise to an equally extensive list of potential causes within modernity. Scholarly works such as Joachim Radkau's thorough *Age of Nervousness: Germany between Bismarck and Hitler (Zeitalter der Nervosität: Deutschland zwischen Bismarck und Hitler)* or Michael Cowan's more recent *Cult of the Will: Nervousness and German Modernity* help to illuminate how the term "nervousness" essentially amounted to a notion of instability – the malleability of which could be adopted to any number of cultural tensions or concerns within an increasingly industrialized modernity. For instance, Cowan notes how sociologist Willy Hellpach worked with the slippage between physiological science and culture in his 1902 *Nervousness and Culture (Nervosität und Kultur)* by mobilizing the corporeal nervous system as a metaphor for the larger intertwining of national economies and the precarity of individual subjects therein; as Cowan summarizes, the "nervous system" was an operative discursive metaphor for "a precarious and unpredictable post-1873 marketplace."⁷ Ultimately, Cowan's work shows how

much of German discourse surrounding the perceived problem of nervousness attempted to reassert sovereignty over the singular subject – be that the individual body or the grander German nation state – through the figure of the will. This *Wille* offered the potential to (re)train the mind to adapt to modernity’s chaos and uncertainty – a discursive solution which demonstrates the extent to which the intense industrialization and globalization in turn-of-the-century Europe posed a threat to the stability of the modern subject’s autonomy. I would propose to call this strain of reception – however pessimistic or Romantic its iterations might turn out to be – a kind of systems-theoretical viewpoint, in which discursive focus was centered on an increasingly prevalent sensibility for being energetically and inextricably connected to an always removed elsewhere. The fact that a technical network and the effects of a system might originate from far away.

The elaboration of “nervousness” as a systemic issue was not always so clear-cut as Willy Hellpach might envision it, as only an expression globalization. Georg Simmel, for example, understood the nerve as a kind of node from which culture would further develop and evolve; the system was more open-ended. He writes in his 1907 “Sociology of the Senses (“Soziologie der Sinne”):

War die Untersuchung bis dahin auf die großen, entschieden gesonderten Körperorgane beschränkt, deren Form- und Funktionsverschiedenheiten sich ohne weiteres darboten, so zeigte sich nun erst der Lebensprozess in seiner Bindung an seine kleinsten Träger, die Zellen, und in seiner Identität mit den zahllosen und unaufhörlichen Wechselwirkungen zwischen diesen. (“Soziologie der Sinne”)

If this kind of investigation has been hitherto limited to the large and distinctly separate organs of the body, whose diversity of form and function were apparent from the start, then the process of life has now shown itself through its smallest supporters – the cells – and as its identity with the countless and endless interactions between them.

Simmel’s text demonstrates an increasing sensitivity for what he calls the *Wechselwirkungen* (“interplay”) of both the organic and cultural body; the senses and their interactions with their environment are increasingly understood as the building blocks of modern culture. This understanding represents a crucial turn in which society is understood, at least in part, as derivative *and* determinative of biological material—that is, as shaping and shaped by the functioning of individual nervous systems. The nervous body extends *beyond* the individual.

Simmel’s contribution here was further bolstered by the psychophysiological science of the day, which increasingly understood the subject in terms of disparate and (re)combinable physical parts. Ernst Mach, a leading psychophysicist and sociologist of the time, offers a more sober analysis of the implications of nervous science in his 1885 *Analysis of Sensations (Analyse der Empfindungen)*: “When I speak of my own sensations, these sensations do not exist spatially in my head, but rather my ‘head’ shares with them the same spatial field.”⁸ The body is, in this instance, *desubjectivized* and turned into one medium among a vast field of media.

Asendorf summarizes the philosophical implications of this scientific position in his *Batteries of Life*: “[H]ere only mood remains [. . .] ultimately independent of [the subject]. [. . .] Moods tune a person as an instrument is tuned by an alien hand. [. . .] The subject is, according to the unspoken consequence, nothing more than the rather accidental conjunction of stimuli, whereby the distinction between inner and outer is no longer tenable” (171-2). Instead of a clearly definable grid of relationships – which might be subsumed under a singular cause such as, in Hellpach’s determination, global capitalism –, the nerve, for some scientists and cultural theorists registered and produced a desubjectivized *field* of stimulation of ambiguously defined

contours. These fields produced and carried currents through and beyond the once contained, now porous Cartesian mind. One might see these positions as desubjectivizations, anticipating – at least, to varying degrees – later systems theoretical approaches.

Of Nerves and Electricity

The positions outlined above were all first and foremost concerned with the modern subject's shifting status and constitution within modernity. In its most radical forms, this concern essentially disassembled (or broke down) the individual's body to reveal it as just another medium in wider and numerous fields. As will be discussed in this section, this nervous field – more often than not – was understood in terms of *electricity*. Electricity experienced intense scientific scrutiny throughout the 19th century, not least due to the technological advancements it promised, such as the telegraph, the telephone, public lighting, film, photography, among countless other applications. Michael Faraday came to be seen as one of the leading pioneers in electromagnetism, particularly in light of the first electrical generator, the Faraday disk, built in 1831.⁹ The electrically sensitive disk would be rotated adjacent a magnet or magnetic field, which would direct electrical energy out toward the disk's rim and ultimately into attached external circuits (Fig. 1). The two spools of wire functioned as these nodal conductors and their interaction across distance served as an embodiment of Faraday's law of induction, which stipulates that “the magnetic flux is that flux which passes through any and every surface whose perimeter is the closed path.”¹⁰ In essence, the device showed how electricity could, given the proper infrastructure, span the gap between two spatially distanced nodes.

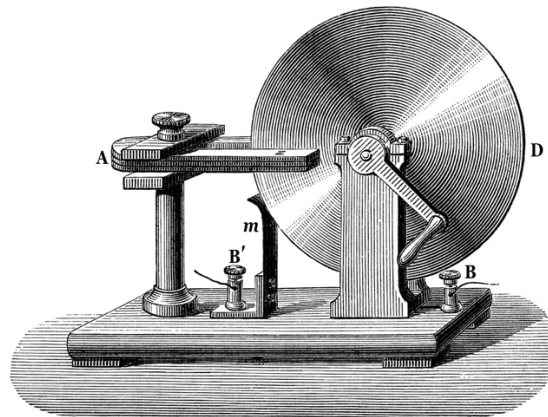


Fig. 1: A Faraday Disk from 1831

Faraday's law and invention were emblematic of a process of rapid technological innovation and industrialization over the course of the 19th century, primarily owed to scientific exploration of electrical current. Indeed, electrical industries continued to expand and at unprecedented speed throughout the late nineteenth century, when these kinds of electrical technologies increasingly pervaded all aspects of public and eventually private life: from street lighting to incandescent lamps; from telegraph to telephone wires; from the magic lantern arc lamp to cinema's floodlights – electricity unlocked a dizzying array of new possibilities and, consequently, models of societal and economic organization.¹¹

Many European nations shifted from gas to electric illumination, particularly in the 1870s and 1880s, when Faraday's dynamo-prototype was more frequently put into increasingly efficient practice. Berlin, for instance, introduced in 1884 “block power stations”, which

supplied a whole block of flats”¹² with indoor and outdoor lighting. Ultimately, this basis carried through the beginning of the 20th century: “[b]y the 1910s some 15 percent of private households in city areas were supplied with electricity (including light). And by the end of the 1920s, an estimated 70 percent of metropolitan households were connected to the city’s power network.”¹³ Indeed, “[b]etween 1900 and 1910, the main thoroughfares of the major cities were gradually being transformed from the obscurity that came with gas lighting to a network of electrically illuminated arteries,”¹⁴ an observation corroborated by the estimation that electrical power supplied by Allgemeine Elektrizitäts Gesellschaft (AEG) and Siemens & Halske increased by approximately 400 percent between 1900-1933.¹⁵ As cultural historian Andreas Killen suggests in his *Berlin Electropolis. Shock, Nerves, and German Modernity*, Berlin was just that: an *Electropolis*, a city intensely invested in the development of electrical infrastructure, as evidenced by its literally and metaphorically electrifying 1896 Treptow Park Trade Exhibition.¹⁶ In short, electrical networks were growing at a rapid space and increasingly became the energetic tissue of not only the public and private spheres, but the German nation as a whole.

Alongside the development of modern energy grids emerged equally novel modes of electrical communication, both wired and wireless. Indeed, even more theoretically oriented scholars, most notably Friedrich Kittler, understand these innovations in technology and recording as tectonic shifts between historical (and technical) eras.¹⁷ By 1900 alone, for instance, Berlin already had 50,000 telephone connections in place,¹⁸ all of which were augmentations and expansions of preexisting telegraph wire infrastructure built throughout the mid 19th century. Further still, one would not be foolish to wager that there existed as many visions for wireless communication, as scholars like Erik Born, Friedrich Kittler, and Jeffrey Sconce have shown; communication by means of electricity – that is, electromagnetic waves that pervaded the known atmosphere – increasingly became an object of intense theoretical and scientific experimentation.¹⁹ Communication hubs – telegraph posts, postal offices, institutions like the 1903 Society for Wireless Telegraphy, Telefunken (*Gesellschaft für drahtlose Telegraphie, System Telefunken*)²⁰ or Germany’s first radio station in 1906 – sprang up across the German nation, virtually bringing to fruition a version of Samuel Morse’s predictions for his technology in 1838, namely that “the whole surface of this country would be channeled for those nerves which are too diffuse with the speed of thought, a knowledge of all that is occurring throughout the land.”²¹

It is worth highlighting that the development of electrical infrastructure was by no means limited to Berlin, Electropolis though it might have been. Countries including, but not limited to America, Great Britain, and as will be of focus here, Sweden, were all heavily invested in their own technological development and, as it turns out, often took cues from each other and Germany in particular. This can be seen with a brief glance into Swedish technical manuals from the turn of the century, which, more often than not, include long lists of newer German and American technological innovations as well as further technical literature.²² Indeed, Sweden’s electrical infrastructure boomed alongside Germany’s in the 1890s, during which Stockholm and Malmö built their first municipal electricity plants and switched from gas to a direct electrical current as a source of city street lighting. While the energy production from these plants was initially relatively modest, the demand for electricity increased dramatically; in 1900, Stockholm granted just over 8 million SEK for new electrical facilities, which would come into operation even as soon as 1903 in Värtan. In 1902, Sweden would pass the Electricity Act, serving as the legislative groundwork for electrical energy distribution up until its revision in 1996. Until then, the law “established the national market for electricity as a number of regional and local

monopoly markets. Thus, under these rules the owner of a regional grid or of a local distribution network had an exclusive right to serve all customers connected to the grid or located in the area, but in addition to the exclusive right, there was also an obligation to do this.”²³ As in Germany, Swedish energy grids were operated by a select handful of companies that oversaw both production and distribution of energy, in effect creating a unique kind of monopoly.^{24,25}

In short, the electrical period can well be read synonymously with increased sensitivity toward network phenomena; private houses and public spaces were all but interlinked, their boundaries penetrated by wires and electromagnetic waves. Yet how was this intense expansion of infrastructure, this ubiquity of electrical technology as well as technical discourse experienced? To be sure, these early moments of electrical innovation ultimately signal for many scholars the radical transformations of modernity; energy and resource distribution systems – be that gas, coal, or electricity – provided the fundament for radically different experiences of space and time.²⁶ As James Carey has claimed, electrical communication contributed to a drastic compression of space and time through the seemingly immediate speed of its transmission.²⁷ As a result these technologies quickly became objects of fascination for American and European cultures. Insofar as the theories, practices, and innovations surrounding electricity and electromagnetism conceived of the ways in which electricity permeated the known atmosphere and could be funneled strategically to bridge geographic distance, these cultural imaginations had a heyday in producing fantastical, utopic and dystopic, celestial and demonic visions of modernity and its technologies; the electrical compression of space and time drew out cornerstone tensions of modernity – between presence and absence, embodiment and disembodiment, materiality and immateriality. Electricity, like Strindberg’s nerves, was everywhere; one needed only to learn how to harness and functionalize its conductive energy to unlock hidden secrets of the world, to build a national or spiritual community, to synthesize the split between the physical body and immaterial soul.²⁸

Asendorf’s *Batteries of Life: On The History of Things and Their Perception in Modernity*²⁹ and the as-yet untranslated *Currents and Radiation: The Slow Disappearance of Material Around 1900* (*Ströme und Strahlen: Das langsame Verschwinden der Materie um 1900*) both show the extent to which rapid electrical industrialization seeped its way into accounting for human experience, in its philosophical, biological, and cultural valences. Reading the development of Western European capitalism alongside 19th century scientific and technological discourses, Asendorf, in his *Batteries of Life*, locates the first major articulations of this relationship in nineteenth-century Romanticism’s fascination with energetic flow and the concept of transcendence:

Things that flow (water, crowds of people, etc.) seem to move autonomously, to be without beginning and end. [. . .] The romantic model of a flow of thoughts, in which there resonates the image of the self flowing, attempts to counter [. . .] quantification; everything flows; the (poetic) stream cannot be particularized—an idea of communication without end. A flow is the counterpart to reification.³⁰

Energy production and electricity were understood as kinds of transcendent forces that ultimately encapsulated materiality; to have access to “flow,” was to occupy something of a transcendent state that encompassed both the material and immaterial world.

Tracing electricity’s evolution into mid-nineteenth century scientific positivism, into aesthetic movements like Impressionism, Decadence, and Expressionism, and finally into the explosion of cultural and sociological theories around the turn of the century, Asendorf demonstrates the various departures from this Romantic vision, which are left to contend with

the fragmentation of the subject and its perceptual apparatuses within capitalist modernity. As industrialist capitalism and “objective” culture (to borrow Simmel’s term) develop, the flow of electrical currents increasingly coincides with the flow of money and objects, which in turn mediate the modern subject.³¹ In describing Strindberg’s so-called “Elektrowahn,” Asendorf writes: “objects transform themselves into electrification machines that render the subject a victim of currents. [. . .] The invisible electrical currents are the metaphor of the life of the nerves: the body becomes a force field, a contingent intersection of effects determined elsewhere.”³² The individual’s body was radically *mediated* by – and ultimately began to discursively share the same status *with* – the objects that constituted modern environments. Electricity began to approach Ernst Mach’s concept of the mind that coinhabits a spatial field as and with other conductive apparatuses.

Asendorf’s subsequent *Currents and Radiation* supercharges his *Batteries of Life*. Building off his characterization of the electrified and therefore disassembled, fragmented and decentralized subject, Asendorf devotes the book to the overlap between electricity and “nervousness.” Here, he shows how the discursive disassembly of the subject was propagated by increasing networked societies: “the human is now an information-processing system. [. . .] The division between electrical supply and its consumer is untenable; the nervous system and that of electrical supply are parts of a total system.”³³ For Asendorf, this functionalization of the human body extends beyond only discipline or surveillance; the body is essentially understood as a mechanical cog in a capitalist and networked machine: “The goal was an economy of labor power.”³⁴

Key to this functionalization, according to Asendorf, was the concurrent emergence of “Leitungsnetze” – that is, networks of energy distribution. These material infrastructures were the vehicles for “the distribution of egalitarian energies,”³⁵ which reversed the relationship between consumer and energy resource: “The central water supply determines the decentralization of the users, who no longer come to the water whereas the water comes to them.”³⁶ At stake in this description is the autonomy of an implicitly bourgeois individual, whose status and situatedness within society – be that in a metaphorical or literally spatial sense – became embodiments of contestation and, ultimately, decentralization. In this light, network logic, as it was articulated through the archival material of Asendorf analysis, essentially infiltrated bourgeois space and autonomy; all individuals became a part of a material network.

It is worth mentioning that the *form* through which the consumer’s enlistment in this wider network was conceptualized was precisely a *circular* form; energy distribution systems of water, gas, and electricity were understood as a “Kreislauf” (“loop,” “cycle,” “circuit,” etc.). Ferdinand Braun’s popular treatise *On Electrical Transmission and Rotary Current: an Exoteric Experimental Lecture (Über elektrische Kraftübertragung insbesondere über Drehstrom: Ein gemeinverständlicher Experimentalvortrag)*, for instance, understands this cyclical form in the singular dynamo: “We imagine that an inestimable liquid, electricity, flows through the wire; always around in a circle, from one pole, through the wire, to the other, through the element back to the first, and so on so forth, like the blood circulation in an organism, in which the heart represents the element, the source of the liquid flow.”³⁷ Asendorf argues that this biological analogy is then extended to the city and its larger energy networks: “Through the supply-veins of the city’s artificial body, the people of this technicist utopia are plugged into a perpetual loop. [. . .] The municipal utilities provide the closed loop. [. . .] [I]n the system of circulation, there is no interruption, it perpetuates itself into all eternity.”³⁸ In short, the core of a circulatory system is metaphorically and, in the case of electricity, literally, the closed circuit in all its proper

functioning. To be enlisted in networked modernity is to be coopted by the larger, closed, and perpetual circuit of technical capitalism.

Asendorf's account raises the questions: what happens to that system when its individual parts threaten to break down, to lose their functionality in a larger cyclical system? Does the "nervous breakdown" allow for a critical position from which to view and potentially disrupt the cyclical flow of energy processing? What does this period's mobilization of the cyclical form say about the individual's perceptive capacities, the systems and processes of capitalist modernity, and the strategies available for reckoning with either or both? These are the central questions of this dissertation as it demonstrates how aesthetic Modernist trends – and, more specifically, works adhering to a more Expressionist aesthetic – are grappling with these hidden questions, however obliquely. Broadly speaking, I will show how my objects of investigation use the breakdown as a way of breaking open the hegemony Asendorf ascribes to the closed circuit; the breakdown is a site of power negotiation between subject and technical network.

Breaking Down Discourse

A word on terminology and methodology: it important to state that the term *breakdown* has been, both throughout its history and more noticeably at the turn of the century, as malleable as the term "nervousness" itself.³⁹ As is evidenced by Abram's *Nervous Breakdown* – Useem's reference at the beginning of this introduction – medical conditions like hysteria and neurasthenia shared considerable conceptual overlap, of which "the breakdown" took equal part. One might then wonder: why choose *this* term over the diversity of other terms? For one, keeping the term "breakdown" allows for a consideration of its broader history; while it was certainly inflected by a particular historical moment – as was the case with *hysteria* or *neurasthenia* –, its etymologically Germanic variations (*Zusammenbruch*, *sammanbrott*, etc.) possess a wider historical breadth that extends beyond just the turn of the century. The "breakdown" had and continues to have staying power.

Second, the "breakdown" seemed to offer a more comprehensive term that *united* distinct yet at times overlapping diagnoses. While the diagnosis of neurasthenia applied across wide swaths of society – indeed, it was a kind of mass diagnosis since it was a diagnosis of the masses – the diagnosis of hysteria was often reserved for either middle to upper class women or emasculated men. As Didi-Huberman notes in his impressive *Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpetriere*, "hysteria" became a way of both *producing* and *controlling* feminine excess. Charcot – the leading scientist on hysteria in the mid-nineteenth century – photographed his female patients and their hysteric gestures to provide the evidence of the evasive condition. However, this act of photography was, to varying degrees, an overt staging and theatricalization of the condition; the hysteric symptom had to be *staged* for it to be *evidenced*. In this way, hysteria posed a kind of semiotic loop, in which the sign constantly (and theatrically) rehearsed its control over the excess it produced; hysteria inadvertently raised the question of the visual sign's semiotic reliability.

While the loop of masculine hermeneutics – really, a nearly perfect encapsulation of Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze – constituted the core of hysteria, it is equally important to note how the condition was deeply sensitive toward the systems-theory position outlined above. Indeed, it is worth dedicating some space to an articulation of hysteria as a systemic disorder, provided by none other than the early-career Sigmund Freud and his partner Josef Breuer. According to their *Studies in Hysteria (Studien über Hysterie)*, hysteria revolved around unresolved memories, which were provoked by a "foreign body"⁴⁰ that would obstruct

and divert currents of psychic activity into somatic, hysteric symptoms. In attempting to articulate the mysterious and semiotically frustrating condition of hysteria, Breuer writes:

Wir hätten uns eine zerebrale Leitungsbahn nicht wie einen Telephondraht vorzustellen, der nur dann elektrisch erregt ist, wenn er fungieren, d.h. hier: ein Zeichen übertragen soll; sondern wie eine jener Telephonleitungen, durch welche konstant ein galvanischer Strom fließt und welche unerregbar werden, wenn dieser schwindet. -- Oder, besser vielleicht, denken wir an eine viel verzweigte elektrische Anlage für Beleuchtung und motorische Kraftübertragung; es wird von dieser gefordert, daß jede Lampe und jede Kraftmaschine durch einfaches Herstellen eines Kontaktes in Funktion gesetzt werden könne. Um dies zu ermöglichen, zum Zwecke der Arbeitsbereitschaft, muß auch während funktioneller Ruhe in dem ganzen Leitungsnetze eine bestimmte Spannung bestehen, und zu diesem Behufe muß die Dynamomaschine eine bestimmte Menge von Energie aufwenden. -- Ebenso besteht ein gewisses Maß von Erregung in den Leitungsbahnen des ruhenden, wachen, aber arbeitsbereiten Gehirnes.⁴¹

We should not picture a cerebral path of conduction as a telephone wire that is excited electrically only when operating (which, in this case, means transmitting a signal), but rather as if it were one of those telephone lines along which there is a constant flow of galvanic current and which cannot be excited if this current dwindles. Alternatively, we might do better to think about an electrical system with many different branches for supplying light and transmitting motor power, a system that is required to make each lamp and machine operate simply by establishing a contact. For this to be possible, that is, for everything to be ready for work, a certain degree of tension must be present throughout the entire network of conductors, even when the system is at rest, and to this end the dynamo has to expend a certain amount of energy. Similarly, a degree of excitation is present in the conducting paths of the brain when it is resting, but awake and ready for work.⁴²

In attempting to understand mental processes at all, Breuer eventually settles on the analogy of “eine viel verzweigte elektrische Anlage für Beleuchtung und motorische Kraftübertragung” (“a branched electrical system for illumination and transmitting motor power”). While “Übertragung” (“transmission”) certainly resonates with the theorists’ theory of conversion, which details the ways in which ideational energy is converted in somatic symptoms, the terms “motorische Kraftübertragung” (“transmitting motor power”) and “Dynamomaschine” (“dynamo”) imply the whole cultural and technical logic that emerged precisely during this period in history.

Not only do Breuer and Freud lean on technical vocabulary to process the very notion of hysteria; the technical infrastructure they reference was also in development. As Bürgel notes in his history of Berlin powerplants, the technology itself was, by today’s standards, laughably jury-rigged, and thereby required “a certain dexterity and presence of mind in operation.”⁴³ Indeed, these *Dynamos* – an early term for electrical generator – required human intervention in the form of a “manually operated rheostat,” which would functionally initiate, monitor, and switch off the electricity of both the *Dynamos* and the circuit-connecting lamp-battery.⁴⁴ Suffice it to say, the *Dynamos* were in their tumultuous infancy; their invocation in Breuer’s analogy thereby connects the theorists’ psychosomatic research (and, interestingly, emergent psychoanalytic theories) with what was for the time a form of ‘new media.’ Their research buys heavily into a cultural imagination and sensitivity towards the interconnectedness of individuals across a

system; the nervous system is a network to be managed, maintained, and monitored, yet is one subject to accidents, short-circuits and, indeed, breakdowns.

At this point, it is important to recognize the potential for Breuer's analogy to assume a Kittlerian valence: the technological infrastructure becomes the a priori of human experience, insofar as the psyche is recognized in the same terms as the media that condition its experience. In his lucid introduction to Friedrich Kittler's *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, David Wellbery writes: "Indeed, in its nervous system, the body itself is a medial apparatus and an elaborate technology. But it is also radically historical in the sense that it is shaped and reshaped by the networks to which it is conjoined."⁴⁵ In this model, the individual nervous system might well be understood as merely a peripheral conductor of a larger technological, electrical network, whose shared medium is precisely energetic conduction.⁴⁶ Such an approach bears out the characterization of Freud and Breuer as the operators of a manual rheostat: Once the blockage in psychic affect is "entladen" ("discharged"), the physical malfunctioning of the body can cease and the operations of a material network can continue. To administer therapy is to ensure the proper functioning of energy processing in a network's liminal nodes. Freud and Breuer are external rheostats that ensure the proper functioning of an otherwise mechanical system of energy.

Hysteria, then, is a breakdown of the closed circuit that Asendorf identifies. Breuer even goes so far as to conceive of hysteria as such in an oft-ignored footnote:

"I have no wish to flog the comparison with an electrical system to death [. . .]. But we would still do well to call to mind how the insulation of a lighting system is damaged by high tension, producing a 'short circuit' at one point; should electrical phenomena (such as heating, sparking and so on) not appear at this point, the lamp at the end of the wire will not light. In the same way the affect will not arise if the excitation flows off as an abnormal reflex and is converted into a somatic phenomenon."⁴⁷

Hysteria arises when an energetic current is unable to be processed fluidly. Still further and not without significance for this project, hysteria is functionally, as it were, a short-circuit, a mechanical, electrical breakdown that serves as a hindrance to a larger technological and, as Asendorf would have it, capitalist system's smooth functioning.

In this way, hysteria becomes something of a position of resistance; whether denying the totality of the male gaze or the proper functioning of capitalist energy production and distribution, hysteria is that which seemingly breaks the circuit, disrupts the circuitous self-propagating form. Yet for as much as hysteria disrupts one circuit – the proper functioning of the body's nervous system – so, too, does it provoke and perpetuate other forms of power. Indeed, the studies of hysteria by Freud and Breuer seem to enact precisely this sort of cyclical repetition, many of which end in a kind of failure to adequately address or diagnose the condition.⁴⁸ At one point Freud will even remark that hysteria has something of the genre of melodrama's cyclical rise and fall: "Rather, the interruption [. . .] often occurs at the most awkward points, precisely when we might be able to approach a decision or when a new theme arises. These are the same difficulties that spoil anyone's reading of a novel serialized in a daily newspaper, when the heroine's decisive speech or, say, the ringing out of a shot is immediately followed by the words: "To be continued."⁴⁹ That the case studies of *Studies in Hysteria* present themselves more as repeating and recurring melodramas highlights the persistent need to reveal a moment that makes sense of a (female) body's relationship to its extended environment. The resistance of the position, in other words, cyclically spurs on the attacks towards itself; this is not to assign fault to that resistance, but to illustrate that the denial of one circuit is the functionality

of another. (To be sure, the very term “resistance” has a home in technical discourse; resistance in, for example, wires, appliances, coil heaters, etc., is used to functionalize friction, either for beneficial byproducts such as heat, or to insulate and conduct electricity safely and efficiently).

Neurasthenia, on the other hand, became a ubiquitous diagnosis after George M. Beard popularizes the term on an international scale with his 1881 *American Nervousness. Its Causes and Consequences*.⁵⁰ Here, he attributes the symptoms of neurasthenia – which included fatigue, headaches, hysteria, depression, among others on a perpetually growing list – to civilization more widely: “The chief and primary cause of this development and very rapid increase of nervousness is *modern civilization*, which is distinguished from the ancient by these five characteristics: steam-power, the periodical press, the telegraph, the sciences, and the mental activity of women.”⁵¹ In short, anything that might have been understood as technological, social, or industrial development was understood as an underlying cause for the functional disorder.

Even without naming the condition outright, one of the most lasting accounts of the time was given by Georg Simmel his 1903 essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life” (“Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben”). Here, Simmel identifies one of the major plights of modernity to be the overstimulation wrought by urbanity. The metropole’s stimulations invigorate the nervous system, to its delight, yet produces the appetite for greater and greater stimulating effects; urban life anesthetizes the psyche. Through this depiction, Simmel identifies the figure of the blasé individual – a site of contestation between competing stimulants as they attempt to break through in affective – that is, both innervating and enervating – force. It is precisely this blasé quality that was seen as the foundation for the functional disorder of neurasthenia. By implication, it might well be said that to be functional – that is, free of neurasthenia – was to have fresh nerves, to be psychically available for stimulation, to be meaningfully impacted by one’s environment. To *remain* functional in an apparently high-speed urban environment became a task for systems productive of spectacle, stimulation, or, in Freud’s terms, serial melodrama; the psyche had to be passively and repeatedly enlivened to greater and greater heights.

This looping structure did not go by unnoticed by the period’s thinkers. While the form is perhaps more subtly articulated by Simmel, it is directly named by a small handful of the time’s psychophysiologists. Most notably, Swiss psychiatrist Otto Binswanger publishes in 1896 a collection of lectures entitled *The Pathology and Therapy of Neurasthenia (Die Pathologie und Therapie der Neurasthenie)*, in which he calls this neurasthenic loop a “*Circulus vitiosus*.” This name continues to possess a certain currency as it reappears two years after in Alfred Goldscheider’s *The Role of Stimulation in Pathology and Therapy in Light of Neuroscience (Die Bedeutung der Reize für Pathologie und Therapie im Lichte der Neuronlehre)*. The term’s potency travels far and wide, ultimately earning a title of its own as Jamieson B. Hurry’s 1915 *The Vicious Circles of Neurasthenia and Their Treatment*. Here, Hurry credits Binswanger and Goldscheider with this term and is one of the most explicit works in delineating the precise form of neurasthenia. Hurry identifies the basic stages of this circle as such: Exhaustion of Nerves → Disordered Ideation → Functional Disorder (fig. 2). Simply put, the affective valences of a thought would create a dysfunction that reinforced both the thought and its energy.

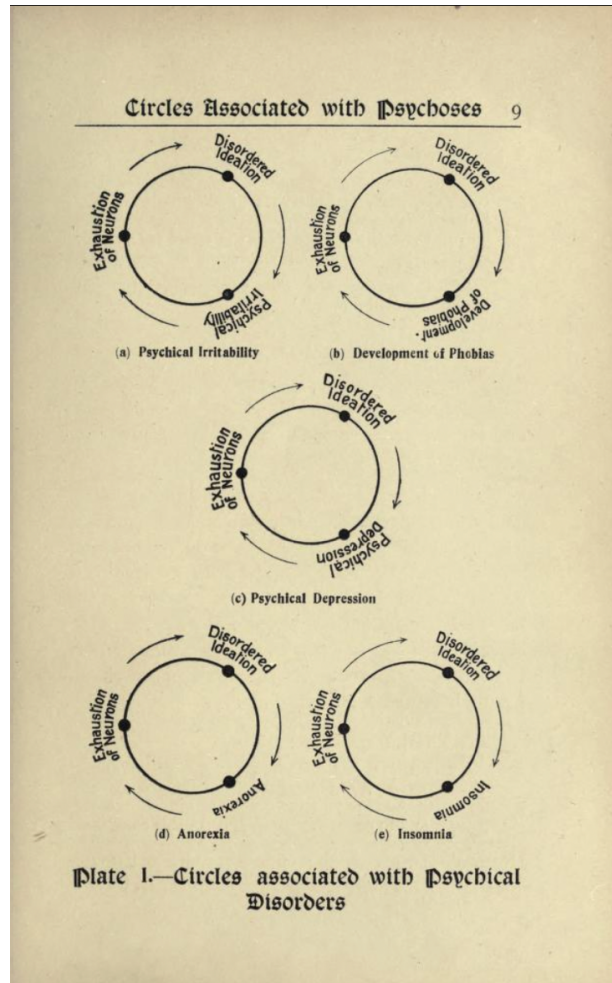


Fig. 2: Jamieson's Basic Stages of the Vicious Circle

Binswanger's definition of the condition aligns closely with the figure shown above. Binswanger writes:

“On the one hand the reserve of potential nutriment (*Arbeitsvorrat*) is lessened; hence any stimuli that reach the neurons cause a more rapid and greater liberation of kinetic energy. A larger proportion of “irritation work” (*Erregungsarbeit*) is performed and thus the supply of available nutriment is more rapidly consumed. But on the other hand the power of doing negative work is diminished, *i.e.* the storage of potential nutriment takes place more slowly and less satisfactorily. The final result is a complete collapse of the power of work.”⁵²

To be sure, Binswanger's definition is all but paradigmatic of Asendorf's account of the period; nervous discourse was first and foremost a concern about the place of the human as functional material in capitalism's literal and metaphoric machinery. Beyond these more explicit references to labor, however, lies a somewhat more subtle characterization of the condition that resonates with Asendorf's claim that the system's networks depended upon a necessarily closed circuit: Binswanger wants a terminus to the breakdown, an end point to a mental or systemic logic; for Binswanger, the vicious circuit of neurasthenia *ends*.

What if this is not the case? What if, instead, we were to follow Jamieson's suggestion in 1915, introduced here in a humble footnote to his introduction:

Although the expression Vicious Circle is too ancient to be discarded, “vicious spiral” would in some respects be more exact. The process may then be visualized by the diagram of a spiral in which the successive loops represent the increment of the several factors.⁵³

Jamieson’s invocation of the “spiral” is by no means banal; the figure, in another striking example of discursive resonance with Jamieson’s contemporary electrotechnical industry, is precisely the shape through which electricity was generated and, indeed, transformed at a nodal dynamo.⁵⁴ For instance, an “Induktionsapparat” (“induction apparatus”) within a dynamo consisted of iron magnets and wires wrapped as spirals around them. Two sets of these wired magnets would act as alternators of current; the strength or weakness in one set would inversely correlate to a partner set.⁵⁵ In short, induction as a process of energy production depended on the interaction between magnetic fields and spiraling wires moving against and with each other.

And what are the implications of this perhaps seemingly banal discursive resonance? For one, the overlap muddles the waters of Breuer’s analogy and points to the slippage between function and dysfunction: is the spiral a functional piece of hardware – that is, the fundamental form of efficient energy production – or the form of mental dysfunction? The tension in the metaphor and discursive overlap between nervous bodies and electrical infrastructures need not be a problem for my project here; instead, it demonstrates that the definition of functional energy production was more difficult to maintain than perhaps commentators of the time had thought. In this way, the spiral’s function is itself negotiated through two competing discourses; as much as the spiral negotiates, regulates, and produces energy, its political role, in turn, is subject to its own process of discursive negotiation.

To the point of cultural politics, Jamieson’s conception of the spiral as a kind of serial accumulation might well be understood through another German cultural critic of today, Diederich Diederichsen. Specifically, Diederichsen’s *Self-Doping: Self-Realization, Romanticism of the Artist, Participation (Eigenblutdoping: Selbstverwertung, Künstlerromantik, Partizipation)* explores the “loop” as the foundational form of the German *Bildungsroman*; the constitution of the bourgeois subject depended on its departure and eventual return to that class. The period in between was marked by different kinds of social conditioning – *Bildung* – through which the bourgeois, often male subject was more clearly able to define himself in relation to the world around him. As Diederichsen notes, this model of social development eventually comes to be recognized as a kind of purgatorial condemnation; the “loop” becomes a prison in which the subject is doomed to continually *arrive* at the starting point.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, Diederichsen’s essay attempts to reclaim a kind of *postmodern* loop, in which the beginning of the process is given more emphasis than the end; the beginning continually offers the opportunity to break from the prescriptive path of the closed circuit.

In the context of the breakdown, Diederichsen’s essay helps characterize the phenomenon as a site of potential in the subject’s (un)becoming. As this dissertation argues, the breakdown was by no means definitively “a one-time event,” like Useem understands it – nor was it a circuit that might ever be completed, like Binswanger implicitly hopes or Asendorf posits as an inescapable systemic web. Instead, the “nervous breakdown” might be best understood as a kind of vertiginous spiral, one that recognized both the electrical circuits and systems that entrapped the individuals as well as their at least partial resistance to their functionalization. Indeed, I argue that the breakdown signaled a constitutive tension within modernity, a simultaneous functionality and non-functionality upon which a system of media and technology capitalized. The breakdown was, in other words, the non-functionality upon which a system’s functionality was constituted;

it was the site at which a determining system's otherness attempted to break free, a negotiation of power that added the three-dimensional depth of a spiral to the endless tracing of a closed circuit's predetermined course.

The aesthetic works analyzed in this dissertation thereby occupy a liminal zone between Diederichsen's conceptions of the modern and postmodern loops; the (short) circuit becomes the figure of resistance and resignation held in perpetual tension. As such, its political weight resonates strongly with Wendy Hui Kyong Chun's theorization of contemporary network society in her article "Crisis, Crisis, Crisis, or Sovereignty and Networks." Following Agamben's basic thesis in *State of Exception* – namely, that the state of exception undergirds much of the foundation of Western political thought and, more precisely, the normal functioning of government as such – Chun argues that "crises are not accidental to a culture focused on safety, they are its *raison d'être*. In such a society, each crisis is the motor and the end of control systems."⁵⁷ In essence, code and crisis work together to produce the illusion of a sovereign; code continually produces epistemological parameters, the basis from which crises are perpetually identified. As such, new media infrastructures produce and undermine the promise of a sovereign subject that might effectively address, that is, decide a crisis' outcome; the machinic production of crisis threatens to exhaust us "in an endlessly repeating series of responses. Therefore, to battle this twinning of crisis and codes, we need a means to exhaust exhaustion, to recover the undead potential of our decisions and our information through a practice of constant care."⁵⁸

Chun's post-structuralist attempt to reclaim "undead potential" over and against a technical infrastructure is an unsettling relic of the 20th century, as this dissertation will show. Like Chun, the Modernist and emergent Expressionist works analyzed here seem to attempt to "exhaust exhaustion," to break free from a closed-circuit intent on producing the perpetually unfulfilled desire for a sovereign decision. To be sure, the ambiguity of this position was far more rarely represented by medical or even sociological discourses of the time; interest in the phenomenon of the vicious spiral seemingly had to include discursive solutions – or, at the very least, some kind of *terminus*. The wager here is that the works analyzed in this dissertation were, by contrast, far more occupied with exploring, rather than resolving, the tension between functionality and dys- or nonfunctionality in a technical society.

Watching Breakdowns

This final section begins again with the dissertation's opening question: what did it mean to *watch* the breakdown? The question is perhaps already a step too far; scholar Jonathan Crary has dedicated much of his career to providing thorough summations and elaborations of the nineteenth century's scientific, sociological, and aesthetic fascination with the categories of nervousness, attention, and, at the issues' cores, *observation*. First, his by-now seminal work *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the 19th Century* shows how new visual technologies in the 1820s and 30s resituated sense perceptions as physiological, that is, nervous processes that could be scientifically measured. Crary's subsequent work *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture* then traces how "attention" emerged as an object of study. Specifically, the scientific measurement and quantification of perception made it clear that something happened *before* the moment of perception's registration; the articulation of perception was discursively decoupled from direct perceptual experience. Late nineteenth century science's focus on the category of "attention" was therefore seen as acting on a sort of promise to regain access to an untarnished self-presence of the perceptual act; attention was "a specifically modern problem only because of the *historical* obliteration of the possibility of

thinking the idea of presence in perception; attention will be both a simulation of presence and a makeshift, pragmatic substitute in the face of its impossibility.”⁵⁹ From this, Crary’s Foucauldian approach asks how spectacular culture of the late 19th and early 20th centuries created new regimes of control through attention management – through the promise and allure of presence itself.

Crary’s model, it should be noted, aligns closely with Asendorf’s insofar as both describe the slow atomization of perceptual processes⁶⁰; to “see,” to “watch,” etc., was always already a fragmentation that may be said to have perpetually sought a kind of deliverance unto a reunified state between stimulus and linguistic articulation, body and (self-)observer, body and environment, or, in its simplest form, signifier and signified. Moreover, both accounts share a resonant historical backdrop – an increasingly technological culture that promised to enhance, augment, and perhaps fulfill the capabilities of the eye and its promise of knowledge. In his recent *Seeing by Electricity. The Emergence of Television 1878-1939*, Doron Galili makes this context his focused object of attention in his second chapter by showing “how the first designs for electrical visual media were modeled after the manner in which modern physiologists depicted the structure and function of the human eye.”⁶¹ A particularly salient example of this is Galili’s discussion of an experiment by future dynamo-producer Carl Wilhelm Siemens in 1876, which is worth quoting at length. Here, Siemens constructs a mechanical eye, which:

consisted of a selenium cell -- an electric current connected to a plate of selenium -- that Siemens mounted inside a hollow ball, opposite a circular opening covered by a glass lens. [. . .]

Siemens placed an illuminated screen in front of the artificial eye's lens. The light was then focused on the selenium plate, thereby causing its resistance to decrease and change the amount of electric current in the circuit. As Siemens demonstrated, changing the color of the illumination caused the selenium to conduct varying amounts of electricity. Furthermore, Siemens suggested the possibility of attaching an electromagnet to the sliding eyelids and connect it to the selenium cell's electric circuit. This way, when strong light fell on the selenium, enough current would be supplied that the artificial eyelids could close themselves and block the light -- just as if they were protecting the eye from overstimulation and allowing it to restore the selenium's original resistance.⁶²

In short, the technical and artificial eye was created to mimic protection against perhaps one of *the* primary causes of neurasthenic breakdown: overstimulation. Indeed, machine and human subject were in a state of coevolution, each influencing the other’s role and composition; what was understood or meant to be “functional” within the conditions of modernity was itself in a state of negotiation.

The kernel of promise within this experiment was, as Galili argues, “to see by electricity” – a phrase borrowed from an 1890 issue of the *Coventry Herald* in America⁶³ – which posited that the human eye was an electrical instrument and vice versa. As Heinrich Herz asks in an issue of *Electrical Review* from 1889: “The domain of electricity thus pervades all nature – it pervades ourselves; in fact, is not the eye an electric organ?”⁶⁴ Ultimately, this prosthetic union between the physiological eye and electricity was understood as potentially offering fuller knowledge with a turn toward the broader horizon of the network: “with moving image transmission media, one could survey the visual world thoroughly and systematically from a position of mastery and control.”⁶⁵ Indeed, electricity’s promise mirrored that of nervousness; each was discursively framed as a means of ascending to a position of epistemological power.

As Asendorf notes, Aby Warburg poignantly articulates the underbelly of these promises in his lecture “Images from the region of the Pueblo Indians of North America” (“Bilder aus dem Gebiet der Pueblo-Indianer in Nord-Amerika”).⁶⁶ In this essay, he devotes much attention to the visual iconography of indigenous cultures and, in particular, to the figure of the snake biting its tail: “The figure of the snake in the sky is used for the mathematical determination of a perimeter, the sparkling points are contained by a worldly image, in order to conceptualize eternity at all. The space of reflection is born.”⁶⁷ In other words, the use of myth opens up a critical distance that allows for one to conceptualize one’s place in the cosmos. Warburg then compares this model to his contemporary technological age, which discards the snake in favor of technological infrastructure.⁶⁸ He sums this up at the end of the lecture: “Telegramm und Telephon zerstören den Kosmos. Das mythische und das symbolische Denken schaffen im Kampf um die vergeistigte Verknüpfung zwischen Mensch und Umwelt den Raum als Andachtsraum oder Denkraum, den die elektrische Augenblicksverbindung raubt, falls nicht eine disziplinierte Humanität die Hemmung des Gewissens wieder einstellt” (“The telegram and telephone destroy the cosmos. In the struggle for spiritual connection between human and environment, mythic and symbolic thought create a space of reflection or thought, which momentary, electrical connections steal away, lest a disciplined humanity does not reinstate a restraint of reason”).⁶⁹ “To see by electricity,” for Warburg, was less a promise than a threat to the time and space for poetic reflection; “to breakdown” might well be understood, then, to stake a critical position through mythic – and, notably, visual – signs and symbols, ones which might be able to found an alternate circuit, as it were, between the human and the cosmos.

The dogged question of this dissertation is: to what extent Warburg’s *restraint* – or resistance, say – is just another rheostat, another electrical producer and regulator in the web of circuitry. Warburg’s worries, in other words, ask: What kind of critical position is available within the circuitry of modernity? Is there a visual mode that allows for an articulation of a more encompassing beyond? Building from these questions, this dissertation asks: can *watching* the breakdown excise one from a vicious spiral? Does viewing it as a formal feature of an aesthetic work create enough critical distance such that the spiral becomes innocuous? Or does an embrace and traversal of the spiral offer its own perspective?

The works of this dissertation’s analysis are invested in scenes that depict moments of visualizing or viewing both mental and technological (often electrical) breakdown, either directly in a work’s content or form. Its objects of analysis are therefore in large part dedicated to the emergent medium of film, conventionally understood to have been born in the Swedish and German contexts of the variety show in the years 1895-1900.⁷⁰ The decision to center this book around film and its media environment is based on a couple of further essential deliberations. First, cinema as a medium embodied the notion of modernity’s urban *shocks*, as Benjamin will state in his *Kunstwerk* essay in 1930s Weimar.⁷¹ More than rhetorical flourish, Benjamin’s label encapsulated both the electrical and nervousness discourse with which cinema was described in its nascent years across Europe.⁷² Though film in the 20s and early 30s would come to be more overtly understood in its biopolitical valences,⁷³ Scott Curtis’ *The Shape of Spectatorship. Art, Science, and Early Cinema in Germany* demonstrates the extent to which early film’s reception was molded by preexisting societal institutions, many of which hoped to retain their discursive power over and against the medium and its newly fashioned audiences. For psychophysiological science, one of the most prominent of these institutions, film functioned simultaneously as a neuroscientific tool of observation as well as a threat that reconfigured the nervous individual into a larger biopolitical mass.⁷⁴ As such, film was a medium up for debate – it could either be

folded back into the functional power of preexisting institutions or it could mark a radical breaking apart of bourgeois life.

“Schocks” implicated film’s electrical context as well. For example, Denmark, which embraced cinema early on and served as a gateway to other Scandinavian countries, tellingly labeled the phenomenon as “elektriske lysbilleder.”⁷⁵ To be sure, this moniker was no accident; many early silent film clips are devoted to depictions of electrical power and electrical illumination, be that in Edison’s “Electrocuting an Elephant” (1903) or Porter’s “Pan-American Exposition by Night” (1901). Such was the electrical nature of film, whose very existence was attributed to Thomas Edison by the brother and sister Dickson in their 1895 *History of the Kinetograph, Kineoscope and Kinetophonograph*:

The great issues of electricity were satisfactorily under way. The incandescent light had received its finishing touches; telephonic and telegraphic devices were substantially interwoven with the fabric of international life; the phonograph was established on what seemed to be a solid financial and social basis, and the inventor felt at liberty to indulge in a few secondary flights of fancy. It was then that he was struck by the idea of reproducing to the eye the effect of motion by means of a swift and graded succession of pictures and of linking these photograph impressions with the phonograph in one combination so as to complete to both senses synchronously the record of a given sense.⁷⁶

Though the amount of credit the Dicksons attribute to Edison for the invention of cinema is certainly inflated, their characterization of its emergence is nevertheless striking; cinema was, at the very least, *understood* as an outgrowth of an electrical network connecting the globe. Far more than depictions of electrical power and, indeed, far more than electrical means of projection, the early silent cinema was a network phenomenon. It is important here to note that both cinema and nervousness shared the network as their infrastructures. And, just like Hellpach’s description of nervousness as a product of an erratic and precarious system of global capitalism, film found itself at the whims of its technical infrastructure. Cinemas were often sensitive to, if not concerned with where and how their energy would be supplied from a greater electrical grid; film could only be projected by those who could afford the energy costs.⁷⁷

Film, electricity, and nervousness – three essential categories for turn-of-the-century modernity. So much so that Benjamin’s politicization of cinema’s *schocks* can be read as a predecessor to more contemporary film scholarship’s by-now infamous “modernity thesis.” One of the fundamental assumptions of the argument is that early silent cinema – that is, in its primarily non-narrative, exhibitionist, and “fractured” form – *reflects* the conditions – the *schocks* – of modernity.⁷⁸ Ben Singer’s account of this argument helpfully breaks it into three parts: a) film is like modernity in its cuts, motion and fragmentation; b) film is a part of modernity; and c) film is a consequence of modernity, insofar as modern, urban environments effected changes in perception.⁷⁹ Singer pinpoints the last of these claims as the most controversial.⁸⁰ His solution is to view film as co-determinative with the culture in which it arose; modernity determined film as much as film determines modernity. While the intensity of this debate has certainly waned in the last decades, it is nevertheless interesting to note that the argument is precisely about the degree to which film provided a kind of distillation of perceptual breakdown – and to what extent film refunctionalized those moments of disruption in its later narrative form. Just as the electrical networks and nervousness were in transformative processes, so, too, were film and its spectators.

This transformation of society is in accordance with Anton Kaes’ claims in his early scholarship on the *Kinodebatte*. Kaes argues that the emergence and centrality of narrative film

in the 1910s and 1920s “forced mainstream literature into a self-reflective mode”⁸¹; modernisms were, in large part, responses to the quickly shifting media landscapes and, more specifically, film.⁸² If the semiotic loop rears its ugly head in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as both Crary and Asendorf suggest, Kaes’ argument implies that film, at the very least, intensified the jarring and quickly shifting relationship between the sign and the signified, between the observer and the world. In short, film challenged modes of observation and narrativization that literature had long taken for granted; to *watch* life happen – let alone to watch a breakdown – increasingly meant something radically different for artists across all media.

The use of film as an anchor for this dissertation ultimately converge on one point: film was emblematic of a rapidly shifting media environment, both registering media forms recently added into discursive consideration, such as nerves and electrical generators, as well as causing transformations in older media forms, such as literature and theater; film became a cipher through which modern media environments came to be understood and reshaped. Indeed, film was as receptive to modernity’s conditions as it was creative. To this effect, this dissertation addresses scenes of breakdown to show both the dominance and fragility of the visual mode itself; visibility became a primary mode of observation and registration, yet its epistemological stability was undermined by invisible or corporeally felt effects, be that of sound, nervousness, or electric shock. The breakdown of the modern subject’s autonomy was understood in scenes of spectatorship as a breakdown of visibility itself; the stability of the eye (and “I”) was undermined by the body’s exposure to its energetic environments. This breakdown could not be understood only pessimistically, which would suggest a closed loop, a secure epistemological frame from which to understand the world; rather the works described here offer a *critical* mode, by endlessly tracing the excesses that escape a complete visual knowledge. Indeed, their focus is on the refunctionalization of excess, the ways in which visibility continually attempts to recapture and reencode (to use more systemic or technical language) that which has eluded its grasp.

Theoretical Considerations

While this project is more historically oriented, insofar as it draws out theoretical considerations from the historical discourse and context surrounding each work, it is worth highlighting touchpoints with other theorists, whose work and taxonomy lend a helpful hand in understanding the early twentieth century’s media environment and, more specifically, film’s emergent role within it. For one, this project is invested in moments of media inscription, that is, the registration of media effects as they enact themselves upon the nervous body. Friedrich Kittler’s *Discourse Networks 1800/1900* and *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* offer similar visions of a post-subjective media approach. In broad strokes, Kittler’s main concern is data inscription, processing, and circulation; human subjectivity becomes an at best minor category of consideration. In this way, Kittler radically shifted how the body was to be considered; the body became a nervous fabric available for inscription and, in the case of military operations, conscription. As such, this theoretical approach helps articulate the crisis of the subject, that is, the overwhelming intuition that human subjectivity had been radically altered and displaced by media more generally and film, in particular (Kittler’s *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* in fact displaces the human subject as the object of psychoanalysis in a transfer of Lacanian methodology to these three media forms; film becomes the daydreams of information-processing systems). Ultimately, Kittler’s approach offers what I call a *closed-circuit* model, which aligns with both Crary’s and Asendorf’s more deterministic accounts.

The second theorist, Gilles Deleuze, is the figure with whom this dissertation resonates more strongly.⁸³ Without getting too lost in the proverbial weeds of Deleuze's taxonomy, perhaps most obtuse in his *Cinema 1. The Movement-Image* and *Cinema 2. The Time-Image* (to which continually revised and updated companion dictionaries are provided by contemporary scholars), it is nevertheless helpful to gloss over some of the clearer terms to highlight the ways in which the intersections between film and the aesthetic works analyzed here might be seen from another angle. At the center of Deleuze's project is a notion of affect, which I understand here as the moment of bodily inscription before its perceptual or linguistic articulation. By creating a processual space between inscription and its articulation, Deleuze holds open a sense of possibility in the act or motion of becoming; inscription can be shaped, reshaped, combined, layered, and so on. The articulation of the nervous phenomena of the body, is by no means an observational position removed from inscription; rather, perception becomes a way of shaping or reshaping media effects. Registration is creation. This notion of pre-encoded possibility is what he calls immanence, a term of *monism* heavily elaborated upon in his *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*. Fittingly placing emphasis on sensorial experience, Deleuze writes: "God is said to be cause of all things *in the very sense (eo sensu)* that he is said to be cause of himself."⁸⁴ Immanence becomes this causal loop, at once the registration and expression of itself.

Deleuze applies similar notions in his *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*. "The fold" alongside the concept of immanence above, expresses what I understand as the *open-circuit* model, which argues that the registration and articulation of media effects in turn shapes the very environment from which it arose; as Deleuze writes in a shorter companion to his book, this folding, or, in my work's vocabulary, this circuit, "determines and brings form into being and into appearance, it makes of it a form of expression, *Gestaltung*, the genetic element or the line of infinite inflexion, the curve of a single variable."⁸⁵ Perception is always in a process of becoming, shaped by, shaping, and reshaping the context, the ground, the environment from which it arises.

The resonances between Deleuze's position and say, Ernst Mach's are striking and demonstrate that turn-of-the-century psychophysiological sciences were already beginning to articulate the radical desubjectivization of the human subject. Indeed, the "brain" and its perceptions were no longer contained within the human body; rather, the brain, the nerves, and their perceptual activities had become additional media in producing extra-subjective "moods," as Asendorf will call them.⁸⁶ The independence of this period's thought from (and concurrence with) an overly determinative Deleuzian framework has been noted by Pasi Väliäho's *Mapping the Moving Image. Gesture, Thought and Cinema circa 1900*. Väliäho takes the extra step by showing how the disintegration of the human subject neatly aligned with the emergence and specialization of visual media; cinema and image technologies, Väliäho claims, should be understood as emerging primarily from the scientific laboratory, in which the body and its physiological, automatic and sympathetic processes were studied, fragmented and manipulated. Väliäho's approach is meant to highlight a new cultural paradigm in which a focus on affect and physiological processes cast the relationship between the body and its technological media environment as increasingly blurred. As a result, these discourses destabilized the notion of a contained subjective experience by conceptualizing both images and the physiological perceptions thereof as nearly always in processual movement, as simultaneously descriptive and affecting. The body-in-space, the vibrating nerves, the cinema, and its deluge of imagery all became mobile and malleable functions in the production of affective texture.

The emergent silent cinema was, by no stretch of the imagination, one of the primary emblems for modernity in turn-of-the-century Europe, particularly because it challenged the constitutions of social, political, and individual bodies; cinema demonstrated the extent to which perception was up for grabs in a continually evolving and often chaotic environment of nervous stimulation and frenetic electricity. For the Modernist and Expressionist works analyzed in this dissertation, the breakdown thus became a site at which the otherwise unwitting or unintentional contributions of the nervous body and its perceptual, often visual processes to the registration and reshaping of its environments were brought to the fore; at stake for them was the *functionality* of perception and whether its conscription in a technocapitalist system could be effectively disrupted.

Chapter Overview

The first chapter provides a reexamination of August Strindberg's mental breakdown and his late career works. Strindberg's tumultuous real-life breakdowns-turned-art represented both a falling apart and an emergence; his aesthetics of breakdown located moments of becoming, in which the modern subject simultaneously was interpellated by a system yet strained against this system's constrictions. A cat and mouse game – a vicious spiral – became a perpetual yet ever-changing coevolution between system and subject. My contribution in this chapter is to show how Strindberg's looping forms in his arguably most canonical works *Inferno* (1896-7), *Till Damaskus I (To Damascus I)*, 1898), and *Ensam (Alone)*, 1903), encapsulated this dynamic and were in large part born of his fascination with electrical, visual technology; as a product of his culture, Strindberg desperately longed to see the networks that persecuted him, to make visible the energetic forces of modernity, such that he might extricate himself from their power. By narrating his perceptual processes, Strindberg stages the way in which visual perception is shaped and reshaped in a continually innervating (or enervating) spiral, perpetually oriented toward a mystic and messianic horizon, a beyond of what Strindberg understands as a technocapitalist purgatory (if not outright hell). The optimism and pessimism of the breakdown created a cycle of ensnarement and flight.

By beginning with Strindberg and his attention to theater, light, and visual technologies, I set the stage for the following chapters, the first of which centers around Georg Kaiser's *Von morgens bis mitternachts* – a classic example of the cyclical *Stationendrama* form re-popularized by Strindberg. By contrast, Kaiser's *Stationendrama* makes its preoccupation with electricity, light, nervous energy, and spatial disorientation its more explicit concerns (though most scholarship has strangely only focused on the role of money in the play). My contribution is to give sustained attention to Kaiser's treatment of electrical and nervous networks as they shape the logic – and indeed, the circular form – of the play itself; Kaiser's play highlights a vicious circle in which human autonomy is always chased by a technical network. By drawing attention to the play's form – and ultimately, to that of its filmic adaptation in 1920 –, I demonstrate how the category of the breakdown served as a site of articulation, as an a priori to expression itself. In this sense, I push back against interpretations that view the cashier's demise as an apothecic breakdown, as a linear culmination of modernity's logic; the breakdown was there from the beginning, coursing through the electrical wires of the play-turned-film.

My third chapter turns to the post-war melodrama *Nerven* (Nerves) by Robert Reinert. I argue that the film pushes against a diagnostic gaze as an effective resolution to the nervous breakdown; rather, it implicates itself in the very creation of nervousness and the disintegration of the human subject while simultaneously asserting and undermining the dominance of the

visual mode as a satisfactory epistemological tool. The resultant (dys)function of the film, I argue, is made possible by linking the film's exaggerated melodramatic form with industrial malfunction; dysfunction spurs melodrama, the very being of the film's narrative form itself. At its core, the film is therefore concerned with an untamed production of affective excess as a result of societal collapse. I argue that this structure should be understood as the category of breakdown; by looking for an escape from electrical, nervous modernity, the film enacts and can ever only express itself at all from the breakdown. Breakdown was the grounds for expression; breakdown had become functionally dysfunctional and dysfunctionally functional within a technical system of energy distribution.

As this dissertation ultimately illustrates, none of the artists or their works found a solution to the problem of perception's functionalization, yet this is precisely the point: their failures should be read as the attempts to create a critical understanding of the perceptual processes in which they found themselves always already embedded. In short, they attempted to open up the determinative closed circuit, desperate to find a beyond to their interpellation as perceptual cogs, careful to highlight the political valence of resolution. As will be apparent by this dissertation's conclusion, these circuits, even now, have yet to be defined as open or closed; dysfunctional functions and functional dysfunctions reveal themselves as staying dichotomies throughout 20th and 21st century technical modernity. As such, these works demand reevaluation as living artefacts of the past, present and future; though they offer neither satisfaction, liberation, nor resolution, they invite us to explore the whirling eddies of our networks. Time to loop back and begin again.

Chapter One: Strindberg and Circuitous Sights

1895 is the starting point for our investigation of the nervous breakdown. The year marks the midway point for a decade of intense electrical development; the apotheosis of psychophysiology in the form of Breuer's and Freud's *Studies in Hysteria*; the conventionally accepted birth of silent cinema for many film histories; and the eventually self-reported mental breakdown of renowned Swedish playwright and author, August Strindberg. The year, in short, bears witness to an intense convergence of discourses and viewing practices in increasingly technical, media-saturated landscapes.

Infamously, Strindberg's oeuvre is marked by a mid-life mental breakdown; his semi-autobiographical *Inferno* was read by Strindberg's contemporaries as proof of his nervous collapse. Since then, scholars like Ulf Olsson have understood the work as an exploration of madness as a *literary* phenomenon; Strindberg's works – and his so-called *Inferno* crisis in particular – redirect the pathologizing of the individual author to literature as a whole; Strindberg implicated the very act of writing within the context of his contemporary's pathologizing gaze. Specifically, Olsson reads Strindberg's treatment of madness as a performed condition of post-Enlightenment modernity, of which Reason and Emotion are shown to constitute a fundamental, irreconcilable tension; against the more bourgeois writers and thinkers of his day, Strindberg uses madness and unsavory political stances to draw attention to the ways in which Reason and Emotion operate in societal structures of power.

This dynamic is expressed through an unsettling characteristic of Strindberg's later works, the focus of this chapter: neither he nor his characters are ever able to find a stable or safe position from which to gain a distanced picture of the nervous body. Individual perspective is shown to be both fractured and fragile, confoundingly, and intricately woven into the nervous networks of modernity that extend beyond and coopt individual autonomy. This chapter argues that the relationship between the breakdown and technical networks – particularly those enabled by increasingly pervasive electrical technology and media – allowed for a looping articulation of modernity's unsettled subjects. First, the chapter recapitulates scholarship on Strindberg's relationship to both nervousness and nervous breakdowns; Strindberg should be understood as positively embracing the "breakdown" as a position from which to critique an electrification and functionalization of the human body. Building on Ulf Olsson's characterization of Strindberg as a proto-Frankfurt School thinker, the chapter then examines how the relationship between breakdown – that is, dys- or nonfunctionality – and a technical system's functionality are expressed in Strindberg's work through cyclical or recursive forms. The chapter's first argumentative thrust is that Strindberg's frequent use of a recursive and circular aesthetic form should be read as embodying the continual negotiation and renegotiation of the once-autonomous, now-atomized body vis-à-vis a system of technical media. In highlighting this form, I argue that Strindberg offers a contrast to Asendorf's and Crary's closed-circuit models, as discussed in this dissertation's introduction; Strindberg pushes back against the notion that a system of technical media has only a unilateral or hegemonic influence of power. Instead, Strindberg offers an open-ended model of affect, in which perceptual processes, nerves, and electrical infrastructure co-determinatively shape each other in a dynamic of dysfunctional functionality.

The chapter runs through several thick-descriptive flashpoints – namely, the memoir-novel *Inferno* (1896-7), the play *To Damascus I* (*Till Damaskus I*, 1898), and a series of vignettes from *A Blue Book* (*En Blå Bok*, 1907) – before settling on a close reading of the ending

scene in Strindberg's semi-autobiographical novel *Alone (Ensam)*, 1903). I argue that the novel, appearing in the wake of Strindberg's purported mental breakdown in *Inferno* and his oneiric plays, embodies the vicious circle of melancholic neurasthenia, as described in this dissertation's introduction; perceptual stimulation, narrative of that stimulation, and the resulting dysfunction continually affected the other in a looping pattern enabled by an electrical network and its media. Understanding his crisis as an enmeshed position – that is, one that offers space for critique yet also shows that critique is wrapped up in a system of media effects –, Strindberg, I argue, casts the nervous breakdown's position in an ambiguous light. The breakdown's dys- or nonfunctionality is understood as always straining against a system that continually works to refunctionalize it, that is, make a productive energetic node of a larger electrical network; Strindberg's critical contribution is to reveal function and dysfunction as cooperative and co-constitutive within modernity's emerging technical conditions. Ultimately, this analysis points the way toward later Modernist and Expressionist works concerned with the rise of silent cinema as an innervating and enervating visual apparatus; my reading of the poignantly visual closing scene demonstrates the conceptual power of the period's electrical media landscape and, on a meta-theoretical level, articulates a critical model – the codeterminative open-circuit – for understanding bodily perception and its (re)functionalizations in systems of media, even today.

The Reactive Writer: Strindberg's Late Career Works

1896 was a watershed year for Strindberg. He came to experience an intense mental decline, documented in his semi-autobiographical diary *Inferno*. The diary details the narrator's economic poverty, alchemical and occult experiments, paranoia, and delusions of persecution by the so-called Powers, which are characterized as forces whose influence on human destinies can be intuited or read through the signs and omens present in Parisian urban life. The diary novel, originally written in French, presents a kind of Baudelairean and Benjaminian flâneur – though Strindberg's flâneur is anything but detached. Instead, his attempts at reading modern urban life are more akin to a psychiatric patient, “carrying out a prolonged free association test on himself by making the physical world of his daily existence into a vast inkblot.”¹

Strindberg's *Inferno* caused widespread speculation on Strindberg's mental health. Understandably, the proximity of the novel to Strindberg's actual life caused many to openly worry about or dismiss Strindberg as a paranoid madman; to many, including most conservative critics, Strindberg was mentally unfit, and his dogmatic and radically individualist opinions and ideas were to have posed a threat to liberal societal values and structures. Unsurprisingly, the young experimental psychologist Karl Jaspers pathologizes the notion of “mad genius” in 1922 *Strindberg and van Gogh*. Suffice it to say, Strindberg's novel might well be understood as a magnet of attention, one which tested cultural responses to nervous deviations and aberrations in individual bodies.

It takes some work to understand *Inferno* and Strindberg's subsequent works as a continuation of his previous thought. Yet a lack of perspectival stability pervades them all; Strindberg's *Inferno* and post-*Inferno* works foreground precisely the instability of any singular, purportedly stable position from which to fully understand the world, from which to exert a kind of total, Foucauldian discursive power. As Olsson suggests in *I'm Going Mad (Jag blir galen)*, Strindberg's *Inferno* staged madness as an issue of discourse, power, and the relationship between the individual and an antagonistic society. The work, and literature more generally, is understood to register this nexus through speech and narrative perspective; madness is born of the gap between the observer and the observed, the writer and the written. Building off Olsson's

characterization, Strindberg's mid-career works are often understood as a wallowing in the fragility and vulnerability of the individual perspective as it is subjected to the innervating and enervating forces of modernity – be it political opponents, the madness discourse, or, as I will examine later in this chapter, technological infrastructure and visual culture.

Olsson's later and much more recent *Paradoxografi* picks up on this fragility; it suggests that Strindberg's late-career works might well be read as performing the impossibility of a truly free or autonomous, liberal subject. In his book and other articles, Olsson offers a reconceptualization of Strindberg's later career as that of a *reactive* – as opposed to *reactionary* – writer. He sums up this conceptualization in his “Strindberg Goes to Frankfurt: Critical Theory and the Reactionary Writer”: “In *Inferno*, we get a portrait of the writer as a haunted man, moving—as if acknowledging Adorno's analysis of the symbol's loss of its referential powers—through a world where any object can turn into a message directed to him, forcing some kind of reaction in him.”² In *Inferno* and late career works by Strindberg, the world not only asks for interpretation, but *imprints* itself on the very physiology – on the reactive nerves – of the writer.³ The nervous body becomes political: “Strindberg forms an identity of the writer who, from a political point of view, could lead anywhere: left-center-right. The direction would depend on what kind of provocations the writer faced. [. . .] [B]eing just the nervous response to stimuli, the self will never stabilize.”⁴ *Inferno*, then, might best be understood as the dawning of Strindberg's experimentation with a reactive dialectics. In staging an intimacy with the actual affective experience of “reactivity,” so, too, does he register the variety of power relationships between the modern subject and modernity's discursive forms, forces, and conditionings.

Olsson's argument is that this critical, nervous reactivity—the nakedness of the individual, as it were—becomes of special interest to later Frankfurt School theorists, including Löwenthal, Lukács, Benjamin and Adorno. The latter two importantly and repeatedly understand Strindberg as “a kind of Virgil in a profane comedy: with Strindberg, we move down into the darkest abyss of late capitalism—its code name being catastrophe.”⁵ This formulation is repeated in Benjamin's 1938 “Central Park”: “The concept of progress is founded in the idea of catastrophe. That is “goes on” is the catastrophe... Strindberg's thought: hell is not anything that stands before us – but *this life here*.”⁶ Key to this characterization is the fact that Benjamin speaks neither of a definitive, singular moment of breakdown, nor of a fixed Archimedean point from which to understand the nervous body's situatedness in emergent late capitalism; instead, the category of the breakdown signals an inescapable *in media res* of modernity and its far-reaching inscriptive forces. It has become the fundament to the experience of modernity at all.

It is important to note that Strindberg's treatment of “breakdown” is necessarily ambivalent; it registers both the experiential torment of modernity's inscriptions, from which Strindberg's subjects desperately try to escape, as well as something of a critical awareness towards larger structures, discourses, or technological forces – however ambiguous and occult their delineation as ‘The Powers’ might be. As such, breakdown might be understood as the torment of critical thinking altogether, the impotent knowledge *that* one is being subjected and interpellated by larger systems of power. With this realization, Strindberg's mid- to late-career works are centered around ways of expanding or pushing beyond this knowledge in the attempt to find transcendent relief and restore a wholeness otherwise lacking to the modern subject.

It is worth lingering on Strindberg's late-career treatment of nervousness as a systemic issue, as it demonstrates an elaboration of *Inferno*'s main impulses and sets the stage for my later analyses of circularity. The first volume of Strindberg's *A Blue Book* as a particularly poignant example, offers pithy encapsulations and crystallizations of his *Inferno* period just a decade

earlier. Strindberg includes a small entry entitled “Logik i neurasthenin” (“Logic in Neurasthenia”).⁷ A teacher and a student, whose dialogues permeate the collection as a whole, tour a region called Kvalhem (literally translating to “Torment’s Home”), a Dantean Hell in which artists and scholars suffer poetic punishments for the ways they chose to seek knowledge in Earthly life. The first figure is a gifted artist who “drew nonsensical and trifling caricatures, distorted all that was beautiful into ugliness, and all that was great into pettiness.”⁸ His punishment is to sit and make balls of dung. The second figure is found attempting to graft peaches with turnips, a punishment fitting for a former symbolist author who wished to revitalize poetry’s capabilities. The third figure is a scholar who repeatedly and literally reads himself sick; in order to find God, he has to undergo the trials and tribulations of seeking knowledge thereof. Upon seeing these three figures, the student remarks, “Why, it is just like that in our lunatic asylums” to which the teacher responds, “And there is logic in neurasthenia, here as there.”⁹

It is worth asking: what does Strindberg mean when he describes a “logic of neurasthenia” at the end of the vignette? If “neurasthenia” functioned as a catch-all term for psychophysiological conditions ranging from mild depression to acute nervous breakdowns, any proposed “logic” of neurasthenia must be of an equally grand scale; neurasthenia, whether physiological affliction or discursive framework, is systemic. Conversely, the vignette also displays a fixation on the self, typical of Strindberg’s works; the presented figures can be read as stations along Strindberg’s vast career, during which he experiments with various forms and genres, including materialist naturalism, symbolism, modernism, occultism, among others. It can well be said that Strindberg’s overall concern, even throughout these diverse stages, is the increasingly frustrated attempt to gain access to a truly autonomous self; if, as Olsson suggests, Strindberg’s late works stage a kind of eternal, purgatorial, and irresolvable struggle with interpellating “powers,” then a first glance at “Logic in Neurasthenia” would well suggest a similarly pessimistic viewpoint. After all, the use of symbolic types in the vignette resonates strongly with emergent Expressionist aesthetic, which is, more than anything, concerned with the disintegration of the individual subject; archetypes index a process of depersonalization and anonymization of the modern subject. Moreover, the fracturing of a singular subjective position into diffuse characters can well be read alongside the nervousness discourse, which, as mentioned in this dissertation’s introduction, was principally concerned with the breaking apart of the modern subject’s coherent unity. Each character, in other words, might be metaphorically understood as a nerve of a broken-down subject, whose exact contours cannot be recombined into a whole.

However, the pessimism that might arise from the recognition of an irrevocably splintered subject is tempered by the piece’s implicit invocation of Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*. Specifically, the poetic punishments of the three figures as well as the Virgil-like teacher and student all call to mind Dante’s circles of Hell. Indeed, much of *En blå bok* seems to stage Dante-inspired dialogues about the Hells of modernity; most overtly here, the teacher and his student are, in a manner of speaking, touring the circle of Hell belonging to the artist and his various phases. Such a literary reference would inspire at the very least a more stable, if not transcendent, framework from which to make sense of one’s life. The hint of transcendence or the possibility thereof is mirrored precisely through the Romantic ironic mobilization of diffuse figures; the figures, though representative of the modern subject’s dissolution, also present the possibility for *recuperation* of an authorial “I.” If each figure is representative of a stage in Strindberg’s career – including the teacher and the student – then each seems to be an *index* for the “I,” a position of performance that intimates an “I” locatable in a transcendent sphere.

Such a transcendence might not align with more conventional understandings of Enlightenment Idealism or Romanticism. The short dialogue's implicit citation of Dante's *The Divine Comedy* sets up an affinity between a divine hierarchy of punishments allotted to those wishing for knowledge and the institutionalization of neurasthenics in asylums; spiritual orders correspond to earthly orders. Indeed, Strindberg might well have said it as such, given his well-recorded and self-professed fascination with the pre-Enlightenment Swedish mystic Emmanuel Swedenborg. Swedenborg's concept of "correspondences" attempted to demonstrate how materially grounded life on Earth would mirror and run parallel to an imminent, transcendental spiritual realm.¹⁰ Eventually, Strindberg gladly adopted this term in his search for a religious or spiritual framework that would encompass the modern self and, further, justify his lifelong suffering. In "Logic in Neurasthenia", Strindberg implicitly characterizes neurasthenia – nervous exhaustion and, indeed, breakdown – as an "Earthly" or material phenomenon through which one might intuit a higher sphere of correspondence. Neurasthenia is *justified* as part of the search for spiritual or transcendental knowledge and, as such, might well signal the typically Expressionist viewpoint that the dissolution of the subject is a painful but necessary process to break with bourgeois culture. To break *down* is to hopefully, yet torturously break away.

This need for a justificatory framework highlights the extent to which neurasthenia was a hermeneutic key for understanding modernity at large: neurasthenia was situated in a chaotic mess of stimulation, which lacked a coherent form, a logic. Though there was a *system* to be intimated, a logical framework that connected the proverbial dots, "Logic in Neurasthenia" shows how this form had to be imposed from an "outside," transposed from a separate discourse. This logic ends up being akin to Dante's circles of Hell; neurasthenia is a circular plane in a vertical hierarchy of transcendence. Though the "circle" as such is not directly mentioned as a term in the piece itself, both the invocation of Dante as well as another short piece from *En blå bok I* provide the necessary context. In "Ringsystemet" ("The Ring System"), the teacher speaks: "In our old schools, the pupils were arranged not in classes, but rings, and the forms were not placed in rows, but in circles. When I read of the circles of Dante's hell, I thought of my old school. But outside in life, I found this ring-system also. Men seemed linked together in concentric circles, each of which formed a little system of views. [. . .] When I read a paper or a book which comes from other circles than mine, I only see so much—that they are mad or stand on their heads."¹¹

Here, the circle serves as a direct reference to Dante's Hell; the circle is an institutional form that determines how and what kind of knowledge circulates. In typical fashion, Strindberg flips the script: as an author infamously deemed mad by society, he accuses those who profess to possess a contained or epistemologically complete discourse as the mad ones. One should, in Strindberg's eyes, be wary of embracing words alone as satisfactory tools in explaining the self and its world; distance is at stake, and, for Strindberg, this distance becomes an amorphous space of rhetorical negotiation.

Strindberg's refusal of a tight hermeneutic, discursive or institutional circle ultimately plays out within the conversation between teacher and student. Strindberg's focus on himself as dissolved author stands in opposition to institutional power, insofar as he transposes an esoteric, mystical framework onto an institutional framework. Neurasthenia as both an institutional discourse and diagnosis is a discursive and mad circle of Hell, which Strindberg attempts to transcend through a highly personalized mobilization of figures; to stage these figures of the self implies a potentially critical distance to them. In such a light, both teacher and student appear as incomplete figures of the 'mad' author Strindberg; their witnessed exchanges are a means of

rhetorically creating distance to the very notion of neurasthenia and its systemic effects. Figures become rhetorical play, a kind of multimedia education in what it means to belong to nervous modernity and offer at the least and likely no more than the rhetorical *effects* of distance.

In essence, neurasthenia was understood by Strindberg as a discursive and psycho-physiological circle that functioned as an epistemological grounding and imprisonment of the modern subject; just as much as the circular form allowed for an understanding of the individual mediated in and through modernity's forces, so, too, did it pose discursive limits that trapped this individual in a vicious circle that would often culminate in breakdown. By intimating higher spheres of esoteric knowledge through loose citations of literary religious texts as well as rhetorical effects, Strindberg seeks to push beyond the condition of Earthly – that is, nervous – incarceration. Ultimately, such attempts should not be viewed as offering a fixed or stable metaphysics; rather, they might be better understood as just that: attempts or, literally and etymologically, *essays*, of which *A Blue Book* abounds.

To draw the circle back to *Inferno*, it is worth asking: what makes the relationship between individual and system so potent for Strindberg's historical time? Is it, as Olsson and my analysis thus far have suggested, predominantly a matter of discourse? Both Olsson's later *Paradoxografi* and Erik Østerud's conveniently titled anthology chapter "Electricity and Nerves – August Strindberg's *I havsbandet* and a Central Aesthetic Category of the *Fin de siècle*"¹² understand Strindberg's themes of madness, technology, and discursive power as enmeshed within emergent electrical systems. While Olsson argues that Strindberg's seemingly arbitrary reactivity can be read as a reaction to this emergent infrastructure, Østerud argues that electricity and nervousness offered a means to reflect on modes of realism and allegory; Strindberg's breakdown diary is the aesthetic pivot from Strindberg's earlier scientific realism towards his unabashed use of allegory in his oneiric theater pieces: "In the dreamscape of allegory, the wanderer/pilgrim does not know exactly whether that which he observes belongs to the world out there or whether it only amounts to projection of his own fantasies."¹³ It can be noted here that Østerud's claim – namely, that Strindberg moves towards allegory's ambiguous play between signifier and signified – pairs well with Freud and Breuer's own investigations into the relationship between materiality and the experience thereof. In this light, Strindberg can be read as embracing the tensions of the psychosomatic approach that vexes Freud and Breuer, seemingly to no end.¹⁴ Still further, Østerud's formulation of Strindberg's aesthetic shift carries with it – intentionally or otherwise – connotations of projection technology. Indeed, the rest of this chapter is dedicated to exploring how electricity, nervousness, and *projection* were all intimately bound up as a nexus of categories particular to a period of intense industrial development of technical and media networks.

It is at this point that a restatement of this chapter's contributions is warranted: if, as Østerud convincingly argues, *Inferno* marks an engagement with nerves and electricity in both content and, more crucially, form, the question remains precisely *what* form, if any, becomes the most important. Is it formless reactivity? Is it allegory? As I am arguing in this dissertation, the recursive or circular form – one that came to mirror the ways in which electrical circuits were conceived – is simultaneously the problem and perpetually unsatisfactory answer to the question of neurasthenia and, in Strindberg's case, allegory; in contrast to Benjamin's Angel of History – a figure only looking back – Strindberg uses the circular form to repeat catastrophe, to anticipate it, to more fully recognize the all-pervasive, simultaneous, and overlapping conditionings of the individual subject through the electric forces of modernity. As will now be shown, the problem of circularity as and because of neurasthenic breakdown increasingly becomes a *formal* question

aimed at articulating energy production and distribution. While many of Strindberg's late works employ circular forms, I will limit myself here to a brief exploration of *To Damascus I*, which sets the stage for a closer analysis of Strindberg's poignantly visual *Alone*. The analysis ultimately makes clear that the circular form, as a method of exploring technological and nervous modernity, was intimately bound up with its evolving electric and pre-cinematic media environments.

Nervous Panoramas: *To Damascus* (1898)

The first two parts of *To Damascus* quickly followed on the heels of the so-called *Inferno* crisis. For the sake of brevity and because *To Damascus I* was initially meant as a standalone piece,¹⁵ it will be the primary focus of this section. The plot centers around "Den Ökande" – "The Stranger," as per most English translations, though the name more literally translates as "The Unknown One" – who embarks on a mental "pilgrimage without a Mecca."¹⁶ The lack of a Mecca is reflected further in the play's barebones plot: The Unknown One and the Lady strike up an adulterous affair (the Lady is married to the later introduced Doctor, who houses the madman Cesare). The two decide to flee and visit the Lady's parents, who ultimately disapprove of the Unknown One and his writings. The Unknown One then suffers an accident and receives charity from a mental asylum for six months. The Lady and the Unknown One search for each other by retracing their steps; they eventually meet back up at the spot where the play began.

The play has often been read as a dive into the modern psyche's oneiric depths, situated against the modern institutions of marriage, medicine, and insane asylums. Sprinchorn, for example, interprets the play as "a study of guilt and the workings of conscience. [. . .] Dante created an inferno in which he could delight at seeing his enemies tortured; Strindberg fashioned an inferno out of his own guilt [. . .]. He endeavored to trace his feelings of guilt to their source, hoping in that way to rid himself of them."¹⁷ As the Stranger elopes with the Lady – the central, albeit loose plot in the conventional sense – , the Stranger attempts to come to terms with a kaleidoscopic array of characters, which morph into contrarian doublings of his ego and transfigurations of aspects of his inner life. Presaging the vignette explored above, *To Damascus* represents an attempt at reconciling the self within the context of modern institutions; the play is a proto-psychoanalytic exploration of the unconscious, the past, and the potential deliverance from these to a higher understanding or state of modern being.

The play's historical radicalism stems from its spatial conceptualization of the unconscious, the making-visible of "a realm with its own laws and logics."¹⁸ In brief, the main focus of the play is directed towards visual flux. Often elided in the description of the play is the fact that its recursive form allows the spectator to make sense of these figures at all; far be it from a theatrical staging of *Inferno*'s rambling narrative, the circular form of *To Damascus* packages visual flux as something repetitious, however chaotic or obtuse its moments of transformation might appear. Indeed, it may well be remarked that the circular form itself is something of a repetition, a proto-Expressionist recuperation of the Medieval station drama ("Stationendrama") which appropriates the story of Christ's crucifixion yet offers no successfully linear or progressive path to a transcendent point (in this case, Damascus). As the Unknown One is ultimately told in the play itself, there are only seven doubly repeated stations instead of Christ's progressive and unique fourteen. The central station of the play – the pivot at which the Unknown One begins his return – is the Helping Hand, mistaken at first for a charitable, religious organization only to be revealed as an insane asylum. Either way, this central hinge of the play signals what Strindberg sees as the core of modern being: an institution,

one that straddles both the experiential transcendence of religion and the material-scientific viewpoint of psychophysiology. The Helping Hand therefore represents something of an epistemological aporia, a literal turning-back, in understanding the modern subject. The play unfurls and rolls back in on itself, reveling on the path of religious transcendence without deliverance.¹⁹

The circularity within the play is ultimately encapsulated by the protagonist's comparison of his experience with the unspooling of a panorama, which he offers at the Helping Hand:

“But then – yes, then I lay there and saw my whole life unreel in a kind of panorama from my childhood, through my youth, right up to.... And when it was finished it began to unreel again—and the whole time, I heard a mill turning—and I hear it still. Yes, now it's here too!”²⁰

The water wheel, as is described throughout the first two parts of *To Damascus*, evokes a processing of the past; the sound of the water wheel accompanies the playing and replaying of one's history and subconscious forces. Yet the watermill's symbolic function extends beyond mere processing; it couches the act of recollection in terms of energy *production* as well. Therefore, visiting the past is, for Strindberg, far from just a melancholic view of one's past struggles; instead, this replaying of the panorama is an active production of energy in the present. The act of viewing the past must be understood in terms of the *effects* viewing itself produces.

Vreni Hockenjos comes to a similar understanding by reading the metaphor in the context of Strindberg's early cinematic media environment. For one, she argues that the invocation of the panorama is anything but innocuous; instead, it serves as the grounds for the formal composition of the play. She also suggests that the mill's metaphysical 'grinding' of the individual subject might well be read as “the big wooden rollers upon which the moving panorama canvas was mounted.”²¹ Ultimately, Hockenjos argues that Strindberg's use of the panorama is mobilized to highlight the felt mediatization of experience: “The simulation turns into the ‘original’ experience, occupying a space somewhere between observer and observed, such that the real is always already shaped by its simulation [. . .] In *Legends*, Strindberg in fact refers to the mechanically repetitive life-review also as ‘the disease of the age’. Perhaps we may diagnose this disease also as *mediatization*.”²² Hockenjos' term “mediatization” effectively gets at the tension between recollecting the past and that recollection's constructive effects for the present and future.

Hockenjos only obliquely situates *To Damascus*' media situation in terms of the nervousness discourse. Relying on Kittler, she notes how the panorama dovetailed with an intensifying frequency of reports on near-death experiences, which “may have less to do with an actual increase of close calls than with a growing scientific interest in psychological and physiological phenomena.”²³ Yet the idea of moving-panoramic viewing as “la maladie du temps” registers a deeper resonance with the nervousness discourse, which was equally worried about a widespread physical, spiritual and cultural epidemic. At stake was pathological illness, that is, a lost autonomous subject within environments of media effects – be that those of panoramas or nerves. If this overlap registers a concern for mediatization and, still further, the pervasive *epidemic* of mediatization, then the seeming aural omnipresence of the waterwheel's energy processing and production might be understood as metonymic for environmental forces in general; the watermill becomes an index for extrasubjective forces that process and produce an individual's experiential world. *To Damascus* is by no means a simple solipsism, in which the world only resides in the individual's head. Rather, it points unsettlingly outwards by staging the *limits* of the individual's perspective and the intuition of extra-subjective forces that shape and

mold experiences of space and time. Strindberg questions how the individual human subject can be understood at all if its conditioning is always at a torturous yet tantalizing remove.

In addition to the larger nervousness discourse, Hockenjos also seems to elide a tension inherent in the term “panorama,” which she argues is the primary media influence on the play’s mobilized metaphors. For instance, Erkki Huhtamo’s *Illusions in Motion: Media Archaeology of the Moving Panorama and Related Spectacles* demonstrates that “panorama” referred to two different media with their own respective spatial logics. On the one hand, a panorama could refer to a *moving panorama*, which relied on a linear unfolding of images. As a poignant forerunner to silent cinema’s vast array of image transmission apparatuses (e.g. the bioscope, the kinematograph, the vitascope, etc.), the moving panorama would offer the experience of linearity only to eventually end; all that could then be done would be to rewind and start over. On the other hand, panorama simultaneously denoted a perhaps more contemporary understanding of the phenomenon; the panorama was an immersive circle whose sequence of viewing was anything but clear or preordained. In this model, viewers were invited to revel in a circular form without necessarily tracing the circle in a linear fashion.

My intention here is not to claim that Strindberg was invested more in one understanding or another. To the contrary, it is more productive to think of the tension between these two competing spatial logics as precisely at the core of Strindberg’s larger project. If the panorama is, etymologically speaking, a technology that allows one to view *everything*, the idea that one could view everything in two different ways might have well been a testament to a plurality of incomplete modes, which only offered the *experience* of seeing everything. The panoramic circles, whether a stable container like the circles of hell or a linearly unfolding and refolding stream of images, posed more of a puzzle than a solution to Strindberg.

The viewing of the total network of modernity’s forces might well be read retrospectively in the opening scenes of play, during which the Unknown One comments on the Lady’s crocheting of a shawl – a materially cyclical and repetitive act in itself:

“LADY: Only a shawl.

STRANGER: It looks like a net of nerves and knots: your thoughts. I imagine the inside of your brain must look like that – ”²⁴

Each knot in the shawl becomes a nerve in a larger, fibrous fabric; the inner subjective life of modernity’s subjects become both depersonalized and reified, an object to be traced, read, and viewed; the nervous life of an individual is only produced by that individual as an external object. In this externalization, there is, too, an implicit gendered dichotomy between the Lady, who is involved in the crafting or shaping of the fabric, and the Unknown One, who more or less *reads* each knot, as a turn-of-the-century psycho-physiologist would aspire to do; the Lady leads, as she does in the closing scene, while the Unknown One is led and asked to watch, read, and register occurring phenomena. This is eventually replicated in a passage just two pages later, as the Unknown One begins to improvise and a poem, whose imagined imagery gradually intensifies:

STRANGER: [. . .] Now I see – do you know where? – in your shawl – a big kitchen, white, with lime-washed walls; three small windows, deep-set, with lattices and flowers. In the left-hand corner stands a stove, in the right a dining-table with pine benches; and over the table in the corner hangs a black crucifix. Beneath it burns a lamp. But the ceiling is of sooty brown beams – and on the walls hangs mistletoe, rather withered –

LADY [*frightened*]: Where do you see all this? Where?

STRANGER: In your shawl.²⁵

Ultimately, the setting described here is revealed to be the home of the Lady's parents; the Unknown One has read the Lady's mind. It is, moreover, important to note that this reading points in two directions: on the one hand, it recalls the Lady's own memories of the house as it foreshadows, on the other hand, a coming station in their oneiric journey. Strindberg's reading of an externalized nervous fabric is both retrospective and anticipatory.

Yet Strindberg's narrator can only ever purport to having access to such knowledge; at best, his narrators are only ever mystics tossed about in the tumult of modernity's nervous forces. Indeed, the sense of having viewed everything – whether a panorama or the nervous life of an individual – is an aesthetic and poetic experience without the security of an objective perspective; Strindberg's subjects are enmeshed in the fabrics they view, and what remains is an unsettled paranoia towards experience and its plural forms. The question that plagues Strindberg and his narrators is how and from what source experience at all is produced. What funnels energy from elsewhere in and through the modern subject?

Returning to the panorama example, the gesture towards the sounds of the waterwheel can now be understood as the earnest question: to what extent is the desire to know or understand already the effect of an elsewhere, of an externalized nervous fabric, a media-technological infrastructure? As the waterwheel is eventually said to be something that perpetually grinds the characters and the past in the second part *To Damascus*,²⁶ it registers the repetitive processing of the human body, mirrored in the progressive fragmentation – that is, breakdown – of space and time throughout the plays; material and experience break down together just as they are continually rewoven into a circular shawl, to borrow the Lady's metaphor. Yet by staging fragmentation – thematically through symptoms of mental illness, such as hallucinations, or formally through transformations of space and time – *To Damascus* asks the reader to understand a central purgatorial category of modernity through the artwork's form.

In all this, Strindberg implicitly suggests that the way forward or out of the hell of modernity's fragmentation is to develop some relationship to the form that produces it, to circularity itself. In his earlier career, Strindberg's goal might have been to ascend to the autonomy or power of this circle instead of laying subject *to* it. In contrast, the subjects of *To Damascus* are precisely that – subjects. Despite the distancing effect that Strindberg may enact through his adoption of the circular form, his writings and theatrical productions are meant to be simultaneously engrossing; distance never implies an unaffected subject, whether author or reader. The search for more total understanding is always inflected by a temporary affect or desire – an excess – that leaves the subject vulnerable and subject to attack, manipulation, or, quite simply, instability and change. The affective enmeshment of the individual is therefore simultaneously the torturer and always only potential vehicle of delivery from the hell of madness. In *To Damascus I*, this somewhat eschatological promise is encapsulated by the ending's note of, at best, ambiguous optimism; the Lady's suggestion that the church songs might offer something “new” is ultimately only a guess as to whether the play's staged nervous breakdown produces something beyond torturous repetition. While Parts II-III, which pessimistically stage the turmoil of continued married life, seem to undercut these hopes, all three nevertheless highlight the category of the nervous breakdown as a fundamental and productive category of modernity; what is produced might only be a limited critical theoretical understanding of the breakdown as both cultural phenomenon and ambiguously productive form.

Closed and Open Circuits in *Alone* (1903)

The purpose in laying out Strindberg's engagement with the circular form in a substantial amount of his post-*Inferno* work is to highlight, first, Strindberg's attempt to gain an understanding of cause-and-effect in media environments; at the core of Strindberg's circles is the neurasthenic and, as will be illustrated throughout this chapter, a nervous melancholic condition²⁷ – the vertiginous spiral of nervous cause and effect, each folded into the other in the experience of mediatization. Second, the circular form and Strindberg's continued interest in energy processing and production begs to be read through Strindberg's actual historical context, in which electrical technology and, more specifically, *circuitry* became dominant categories in both professional trades and popular imaginations. With these two thrusts in Strindberg's thought – neurasthenia and electrical grids – I now turn to Strindberg's 1903 *Alone*, a semiautobiographical novel that demonstrates both a sensitivity to historical context and implicitly intervenes in contemporary considerations of affect and media environments. In the section that follows, I propose that *Alone* asks the reader to understand its circularity – and, by extension, that of Strindberg's other works – as a problem of nervous spectatorship in electrical modernity. In this configuration, image culture and technologies are understood to offer potential escapes from the tortures of neurasthenic breakdown, which accounts for the text's circular structure and thematic exploration of repeated images. At stake is the process in which the human body is functionalized, broken down, and refunctionalized in an electrical grid.

Ensam lacks a distinctive plot: the book records the musings and observations of a middle-aged man who elects to self-isolate. Put in a somewhat reductive manner, the arc of the novel is marked by three main stages: the middle-aged man's disavowal of social situations; his observations and explorations of memory and urban life as a solitary flâneur; and his return to "my solitude, my work, and my battles."²⁸ The latter two stages – which comprise much of the novel – are peppered with voyeuristic scenes in which the narrator gazes through various ocular equipment – such as binoculars or telescopes – or through literal windows onto familial life, to which he feels ultimately shut out. Many of these episodes are ultimately disrupted by the physical limits and vulnerability of the individual perspective. In at least two instances, the narrator observes the interior of a house from the street-level, only to be surprised by bodily contact by a passer-by; the narrator's attempts to secure a fixed position from which to safely view and potentially understand the unfurling of perception are ultimately undermined by the narrator's own physical situatedness. In this light, one way to understand the novel is as a search for perspectival security within urban modernity.

The novel has been compellingly discussed as the mobilization of the anthropological gaze,²⁹ a psychoanalytic reflection on the presence and absence of the self in the age of photography,³⁰ or a proto-Frankfurt School reflection on the vulnerability of the body as an inscriptive surface within capitalist modernity.³¹ Each of the three scholars above makes their arguments through readings of the novel's final window-gazing scene. Here, the narrator, while looking up from the street at an apartment he had owned in his youth, is clapped on the back by his friend, a young composer, who now rents the unit. The two head up together, and the composer begins to play on piano for the narrator. The narrator notices a woman feeding a child in an apartment across the way. As the narrator and his friend meet day after day, the narrator repeatedly witnesses the same silent scene. Eventually, the narrator finds out that the composer continually plays his music for the scene below; the rhythm and flow of the composer's music seem synchronized with the woman's gestures. Ultimately the composer falls in love and leaves the narrator alone in his apartment, having joined the woman and child.

Olsson's reading of *Alone* in *Paradoxografi* emphasizes the literary treatment of the physical body as an inscriptive surface for electricity:

“But the number of dichotomies, to which the description generally adheres, is generated by a dialectic, which Strindberg in *Alone* determines as “disharmonious energy converters” or “harmonious energy breakers.” The electrification metaphor is not just a superficial way to modernize and create the text simultaneously; it is also a recurring element of Strindberg's authorship and thus central: it is about how power is generated. Electricity is used, also as a literary metaphor, to produce – and when it fails, the power disappears [. . .]. This is why Strindberg changes the power's strength and why the current turns on and off in his texts – for them to become talking and active.”³²

As Olsson highlights, the modern subject effectively becomes a cipher through which electricity and modernity's affective forces more generally are processed between input and output; the individual is coopted into the circuits of modernity as a *function*, to express it in this dissertation's language.

With Olsson's analysis, one might understand the novel's lack of plot as a kind of embodiment of reactive dialectics within electrical modernity; the apparent formlessness or arbitrariness of the novel, which overrides traditional conventions of the genre (e.g. liberal and progressive enlightenment, self-development, etc.), is owed to its electrical and nervous contexts. The production of narrative within and as a product of an electrified field becomes the main conceit of the novel, rather than any satisfying resolution. Olsson's argument that Strindberg's invocation of electricity amounts to a reckoning with power, it must therefore be said that the dynamics of power are never settled. Indeed, Strindberg's paranoia, melancholy, and other self-staged neuroses might well be read as hauntingly ambiguous indexes of electrical power's sources and distributors; Strindberg's received, felt, and registered electrical power, as it courses through his body, fuels the search for or at least reconciliation with its irretrievable source. The amorphous form of Strindberg's novel therefore registers this hope's continual deferral.

Such are the implications, at least, of Olsson's argument, which allows one to cast *Alone* as almost a melancholic iteration of *Inferno*. Both novels are, in this reading, composed of apparent ramblings and unmoored reactions of a physical, thinking body. And, to a certain extent, this is certainly true. Yet this implication – to be sure, Olsson does not necessarily endorse that view outright – might well be nuanced with a closer attention to the novel's seeming lack of form. This section and chapter seek to redress the extent to which the recursive or cyclical form – one that is intensified by its neuro-electrical discursive context – is part and parcel of Strindberg's position as reactive dialectician. This section argues that the novel and its narrator embody the electrical circuit as a recursive form; the novel highlights the nervous individual's perpetual becoming-functional within electrical modernity's circuitry. The novel demonstrates, in short, what my project has understood as functional dysfunction – the continual breaking down and subsequent renewal of various circuits of power.

We begin (again) with the individual, the narrator at the center of the quasi-memoir. He writes: “[T]ron är mitt lokalbatteri utan vilket jag icke får det stumma pergamentet att tala. Tron är min motström som väcker kraft genom influens; tron är rivtyget som elektriserar glasskivan; tron är recipienten, och måste vara ledare, eljes blir intet mottagande; tron är mediets uppgivande av motståndet, varigenom rapport kan inträda” (“Faith is my receiving battery without which I cannot make the silent parchment speak. Faith is my countercurrent that creates energy through induction; faith is the friction cloth that electrifies the glass plate; faith is the recipient and must

be the leading conductor, otherwise there will be no reception; faith is the medium's renunciation of resistance, through which a connection can be made."³³



Electricity Machine from 1862 at Swedish National Museum of Science and Technology

Strindberg's use of *tron* straddles a religious and secular (and, indeed, technical) context; indeed, it is both *faith* and perhaps *belief* more generally. This ambiguity lends itself to considering Strindberg's disposition towards narrative more broadly: belief – which may well be a fundament to narrative at all – powers and ultimately *is* an electricity machine; it creates an electrical circuit; one whose description is markedly both technical and material as well as spiritual and immaterial. Moreover, belief serves as a kind of affective disposition that borders on independence from the individual subject, whose role is, at best, that of a “medium”; belief is current, conductor, and circuit to which the subject, if one still likes to speak of it at all in a conventional sense, is privy. At stake, then, is the affective disposition of the individual *towards* inscription to produce something that speaks – and affects – for itself.

This position aligns well with the Svenska Akademiens Ordbok definition of *lokalbatteri*: “*teleg.* electrical battery brought into operation by the line current at the receiving station, thereby setting the writing apparatus in motion.”³⁴ In short, the *lokalbatteri* serves as an important metaphor of the writer's own receptive position; the autobiographical narrator opens his body up to the energetic, indeed, electrical inscriptions from his environment, which, in turn, incite the production of narrative. A result of modernity's inscriptions on the individual nervous body, narrative text is understood as a part of the energized and innervating field from which it was born; its effectiveness depends on the functionality of the circuit of belief.

Such a circuit can be more clearly seen in the novel's concluding scene. Here, the narrator's friend, the composer, plays music while the narrator ruminates on his experiences of death and the lingering effects that death can enact on the living. The narrator then returns to his senses, which are in the midst of being excited if not overstimulated:

“Tonmassorna liksom trängde ut mig ur det trånga rummet och jag fick ett behov att kasta mig ut genom innanfönstren. Därför vände jag på huvudet och lät blickarne gå ut bakom nacken på den spelande; och som inga rullgardiner funnos, rände de ut och över

gatan in i en våning i huset mittemot, som låg något lägre, så att jag kom mitt in till aftonbordet i en liten familj.”³⁵

“The masses of tones pushed me out of the cramped room and I felt the need to throw myself out through the interior windows. So I turned my head and let my eyes go out from behind the neck of the player; and as there were no roller blinds, they ran out and across the street into an apartment in the house opposite, which was a little lower, so that I joined right up at the evening table of a small family.”

The passage above indicates a nearly scientific disposition towards perception; the narrator categorizes perceptions as independent (e.g. the “masses of tone” and “glance,” both of which seem to act of their own accord).³⁶ With his perceptual act decoupled from subjective experience, the narrator attempts to observe himself, much like the scientist Jonathan Crary describes in his scholarship. Yet the narrator’s objective observations cannot be disentangled from the overtly first-person narrator whose autobiographical voice is, as Ulf Olsson argues, often willfully and knowingly unreliable. The narrator asks two questions through the observation of his perceptions: how are acts of perception dictated by in turn, impactful on their environments?

It is, in this sense, worth lingering on what might be meant, precisely, by the word “blick.” On the one hand, “blick” might well be understood as “gaze,” which, in most scholarly treatments of the term, is concerned with the enactment of power over a given observable object. In these instances, the “gaze” singularly determines what is allowed to be seen; it amounts to the abstract parameters of vision that condition or construct whatever is being seen. In this passage, we are therefore already on shaky ground; the gaze’s repetition undercuts what would otherwise be understood as any one singular, unified, and autonomous master-gaze. Power is no longer assured through the gaze, its fallibility apparent through its repetitious assertions.

Linda Rugg offers a now oft-cited interpretation of this kind of fragility. She begins by noting how the narrative is centered around the narrator as he “watches others, watches himself, and comments on himself watching.”³⁷ Rugg reads this obsessive gazing against Strindberg’s incessantly produced photographic self-portraits, insofar as both represent the search for a self-explanatory symbolic or gestural realm, for the completeness and self-presence of a self, to which the narrator finds himself perpetually shut out.³⁸ Central to Rugg’s reading, then, is the resonance between text and photographically reproduced image; both are ultimately inadequate modes of recording the self’s gaze at itself. Rugg therefore views the ending as a melancholic reflection on the perpetual deferral of self-presence, regardless of how “advanced” recording technologies may be; the self always escapes the perception of itself. In such a way, the masterful gaze is diffracted through both literary and technological acts of perception.

On the other hand, we might well understand “blick,” in its more conventional translation into English, as “glance,” a word that connotes an almost polar-opposite of “gaze,” insofar as a glance is casual or unabsorbed. The tension between the gaze and the glance is productive, insofar as it embodies what Crary identifies as a central philosophic, scientific, and aesthetic discourse of turn-of-the-century Europe: attention and distraction. Whether “blick” is meant to denote a fractured “gaze,” or, perhaps more intuitively, “glances” or “looks,” its plural form implies the inability to be *singularly* absorbed. In his *Suspensions of Perception*, Crary argues that the attention sciences discursively invoked perception’s deferral of self-presence, which ultimately provided justification for sustained efforts in controlling and manipulating the body. If perception was, as Crary implies, subject to this kind of manipulation by outside disciplinary or technological apparatuses, then the narrator’s multiple, fragmented glances in the passage above might well be read as being reunified or, perhaps more aptly put, *coerced* into a uniform

moment. Indeed, the narrator's invocation of "glances" encompass those of the reader; just as Strindberg directs what might be his own multiple glances, so too does he direct the reader's attention as well. The passage thereby demonstrates how narrative necessarily involves a literal concentration of perception, in which some stimuli or viewpoints are artificially given precedence over others.

As will be recalled from the introduction, Crary's argument finds strong evidence in Georg Simmel's oeuvre and, specifically, his 1903 essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life" ("Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben"). In articulating the enervating vicious circle of modernity, Simmel employs a postlapsarian model of perception's wholeness and modern fragmentation:

Der Mensch ist ein Unterschiedswesen, d.h. sein Bewusstsein wird durch den Unterschied des augenblicklichen Eindrucks gegen den vorhergehenden angeregt; beharrende Eindrücke, Geringfügigkeit ihrer Differenzen, gewohnte Regelmäßigkeit ihres Ablaufs und ihrer Gegensätze verbrauchen sozusagen weniger Bewusstsein, als die rasche Zusammendrängung wechselnder Bilder, der schroffe Abstand innerhalb dessen, was man mit einem Blick umfasst, die Unerwartetheit sich aufdrängender Impressionen.³⁹ Man is a differentiating creature. His mind is stimulated by the difference between a momentary impression and the one which preceded it. Lasting impressions, impressions which differ only slightly from one another, impressions which take a regular and habitual course and show regular and habitual contrasts – all these use up, so to speak, less consciousness than does the rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions.⁴⁰

Hidden in this seemingly straightforward passage describing overstimulation, Simmel conceives of the perceptual act as quantifiable: reception of imagery requires either "weniger" or, conversely, "mehr" consciousness in relation to what can be captured "mit einem Blick" ("less"; "more"; "with a single glance"). *More* consciousness – which might well be a synonym for attention – is what allows for a reunification of perceptual fragments. Within this context, Strindberg's text demonstrates this supposed unity of a perspective – this greater, as it were, consciousness – as coercive; any singularity of a perspective is a concentration of power, rather than a safe conceptual assumption.

The question remains *whose* power is being enacted in the supposed singularity of a perceptual act. I am suggesting here that Strindberg's text demonstrates a kind of *textured* gaze, where the nervous power reaches beyond the locus of the individual narrator; instead of a presumed autonomy of the author of his narrative – instead of a gaze that is the sole producer of a narrative – Strindberg's narrator seems to implicitly admit to a lack control, even over his own senses; the onslaught of visual and aural stimulation coupled with the automaticity and independence of the narrator's own senses produce a text beyond the control of any autonomous I. The narrator's attention, in other words, is coerced by the promises from a medial elsewhere in the moments he seems to enact some sort of authoritative gaze; the angelic sight of the woman across the way enacts control over his gaze. The fragility of control coincides with the very iteration of a narrative's power, leaving any influence the subject might have over the textured gaze as tenuous at best. The dynamic at stake here is a gaze invested in energy, one that produces energy at the moment of energy's registration. What remains is a production run amok, the function of a writer at the whims of yet equally participatory in an otherwise chaotic field of

media and stimulation. In the language of *To Damascus*, Strindberg's autobiographical musings are part of an extra-individual, nervous fabric.

To be clear, my reading of this ending scene considers both Olsson's characterization of the "reactive" writer and Rugg's somewhat deconstructionist analysis of the narrator's self-presence. My reading combines these concerns – perpetual deferral and the inscribable body – by examining the narrative's staging of modernity's circuits (it should be noted, too, that Rugg felicitously describes the scene as a kind of "circuit of seeing and being seen"⁴¹). At stake in this scene are, in short, circuits of energy as it *processes and produces* the individual gaze. The "gaze," then, becomes a nearly de-subjectivized category, insofar as its production and effects extend beyond the boundaries of autonomous subjectivities; the spectator is, as the narrator muses about himself earlier on, a kind of regulatory apparatus of belief, continually affecting and affected by the nervous electrical energies that course through him.

Strindberg's self-fashioning as a stopover in the circuit of energy and narrative – both explicitly as a telegraphic apparatus in this section's opening passage and in how perception is described and recorded in the novel's closing scene – deserves a deeper attention to Sweden's historical context, particularly regarding its electrical infrastructure. As explored in my introduction, turn-of-the-century Sweden was not far behind Germany, the principal developer and purveyor of electrical energy. In fact, Sweden was quick to follow in Germany's footsteps, highlighted by an abundance of German technical treatises in Swedish electrical engineering.⁴² The resonances between Germany and Sweden even extended to the economics of electricity; energy producers and distributors in both countries were one and the same. As a result, energy companies had an immense amount of power and were, economically speaking, a centralization of power.

This concentration of power *over* power is anything but banal. In broad terms, it highlights something of a tension when discussing the notion of technical networks. For one, the development runs aground perhaps more contemporary assumptions that a technical network is by nature a kind of decentralization in terms of autonomy. To be sure, this sensibility certainly existed alongside the emergence of historical user-to-user technologies, such as the telegraph. In such a light, this attention to the economic structure of the energy systems that *power* these communication technologies demonstrates something of an initially counterintuitive dynamic. The question arises: how should the two directions of centralization and decentralization be squared away?

One way to understand this tension is to emphasize that this historical period was a time of emergence and becoming; energy networks were being crafted on the fly. Indeed, nodes of energy production and processing were readily identifiable; dynamos and powerplants were, for the time being, *localized* insofar as they provided energy to a relatively small number of surrounding blocks. Nevertheless, it was the goal of these energy distribution companies to continually expand out and away from being the purveyors of only local grids. Indeed, this period is marked uniquely by the rapid expansion of electrical infrastructure and should be understood as a processual negotiation between this system and the individual it threatens to displace, subsume, or, perhaps to Strindberg's utmost horror, forget.

Why is this significant for Strindberg's novel? My contention is that Strindberg's closing passage (as an encapsulation of the whole novel) reflects the power negotiation within a simultaneously centralized and decentralized technical network. After all, the question presented there is precisely concerned with what and how the individual body was understood to be "powered" – as both affecting and being affected by the electrical system in which it participates.

One need only recall Strindberg's characterization of belief: his *lokalbatteri*, which did not merely receive energetic current; more specifically, it provided electrical power to the telegraph or telephone stations themselves, rather than the networks' lines. In other words, the *lokalbatteri* allowed for the local station to be connected at all to the more geographically expansive system of wires. Strindberg's invocation there and the closing voyeur scene of his novel therefore highlight the negotiation of power between the local and the network, the nodal and the wired elsewhere. This dynamic, in fact, becomes the focal point of Swedish essayist Magnus Florin's new collection of essays on Strindberg's relation to light and lighting. He notes that before the city had developed a full-fledged electrical grid, electricity supply was sometimes provided by private initiatives and hardware,⁴³ a condition which Strindberg goes at pains to register in, for example, his 1905 *Street Images (Gatubilder)*. The first two poems describe rows of bleak houses and angst-ridden occupants, which culminates in the image of a cross rising above the town. The third and final poem switches abruptly to the underground as the setting for a somewhat frenzied dynamo:

"Och därnere längst i mörkret,
Syns en dynamo som surrar
Så det gnistrar omkring hjulen;
Svart och hemsk, i det fördolda
Mal han ljus åt hela trakten."⁴⁴
"And down there in the dark,
Lies a dynamo who hums
As sparks fly around the wheels;
Black and terrible, in secret,
He grinds out light to the whole neighborhood."

The personification of the dynamo here helps blur the lines between author and technical medium. Magnus Florin writes of the poem:

A completed personification connects both the author's and the machine's generations of light: the dynamo is a "He" who "sits in the dark" and gives light to the people. The power station is authorship, literature is a machine, the writing is the transforming dynamo that turns movement into light, itself separate from humans. The personification goes a step further: the dynamo's dark cellar has a neck, like the suckling Orpheus with his throat: "The cellar neck is both door and window --".⁴⁵

While Florin draws tight equivalences in the implied analogy, one might even content oneself with the fact that the hardware of energy production *and* distribution are embodied by a single, visible (even despite the poem's literally dark setting) figure. The locus of power is tantalizing close, only seemingly able to be seen at all, perceptible in the obscuring dark as it is. Indeed, what Florin takes as analogical equivalence might well be understood as a kind of frail analogy, in which identification is never actually all that clear cut. There remains an unelidable slippage between author, energy, and system.

Still further, Florin does not note this final image's context, which both ends the series and follows numerous depictions of bleak, grey houses, and a culminating image of a cross towering above. Strindberg's abrupt reversal to the underground is a literal undermining of the religious symbol that seems to win out; beneath the symbol of religious belief that dominates the landscape is the system of energy that courses beneath it. The electrical underpinnings of belief and society altogether have come back around in this post-*Ensam* poem.

Strindberg leaves us, then, with a textured gaze, a production of text and affect whose producer is a network, an interwoven nervous fabric of media and its frustratingly uncountable parts; the textured gaze is about the relationship between vision, energy, and power within a technical modernity and thereby extends beyond a closed circuit, as it were, of narrative and vision. Instead, its “texture” comes from the material and nervous affective forces that may well express itself in energy-dependent multimedial, forms.

At this point it is worth returning to one of the constitutive elements of the scene in *Ensam*: vision – whether demonstrated through one or multiple gazes – is at least in part dependent on the sounds produced by the narrator’s friend, the composer. Indeed, it is worth noting that even the narrator’s memories, on which he ruminates shortly before the scene analyzed here, occur concurrently with the composer’s music, which is more than once noted parenthetically in the text: (“(The music continued while I watched this whole show, and undisturbed I continued to remember.)”⁴⁶ And even right before the larger passage analyzed above, the narrator writes: “(Vännen vid flygeln som, troligen påverkad av mina tankar, hållit sig i det mörka gjorde här en övergång och föll in i något mycket ljusst.)” (“(The friend at the piano who, probably affected by my thoughts, remained in the dark made here a transition and fell into something very bright.)”⁴⁷ Notably, the causal relationship implied in the second quote here reverses the directionality of impact; there arises a circuit of interaction between the impact of music on the narrator’s visions (whether real or from memory) and his narrative articulations of those effects. The breaking apart of vision means that it participates in a field of stimulation and mutual interaction, to use language proposed by Ernst Mach; media affect and are affected by each other.

It is crucial to note, too, the narrator’s use of “troligen” – probable, likely, believable. Indeed, belief is reintroduced into the equation and becomes the motor that allows for an articulation of a kind of energetic circuit; belief allows both the narrator and, by extension, the reader to tentatively make sense of an otherwise potentially incomprehensible field of chaotic stimulation. Belief’s circuit, in other words, amounts to an epistemological tool in understanding the interrelatedness of media and its consumers or spectators. This notion of belief – or “faith” in its more religious connotations – is, in fact, played out in the narrator’s observation of the family across the way:

Om jag sökte hemligheten i det behag den unga flickan spred så låg det mera i rörelse än form; och hennes rytmiska rörelser syntes stämma med hans musik, ja det föreföll som om han komponerade till hennes takt, hennes dansande steg, hennes gungande gång, hennes vingslag med armarne, hennes dykande med nacken.⁴⁸

“If I had sought after the secret in the young girl exuding grace, it lay more in the movements than her form; and her rhythmic movements seemed to sync with his music, truly, it seemed as if he were composing to her beat, her dancing step, her swinging gait, the beats of her wings, the diving of her neck.”

Here, the woman’s recorded and markedly angelic movements, synched to the immediacy of the composer’s piano playing, exude a secret, which one might well read along the lines proposed by Linda Rugg: the secret is the gesture’s self-explanation, meaning’s presence unto itself, a contained symbolic world. Indeed, a mother-child relationship which is shortly after described as imbued with a nearly all-encompassing white⁴⁹ roots the scene in an almost Biblical context; the narrator articulates a messianism of gestural meaning, whose inaccessibility is the precondition of its promise. In this sense, the narrator must always preclude himself from complete access to the realm of self-contained meaning he desires.

One might note that this kind of messianism resonates strongly with Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism*, in which she argues that the often-unfulfilled promise of a future 'good life' has served to undermine the actual material conditions of the present. Berlant's conception helps to highlight the extent to which Strindberg's messianism was equally torturous as it was hopeful; Strindberg and his protagonists offer themselves unattainable promises whose fulfillment are continually refreshed, often by the continually shifting circumstances of his environment. Strindberg's closing scene, for instance, demonstrates the tantalizing allure of multimedia environments, that is, environments whose energetic currents are provided from multiple channels; multimedia environments are, in short, imbued with a messianism that promise yet deny the narrator access to the immediate space of mediation at all. What remains for the narrator, the ever-faithful electrical apparatus, is belief, his *lokalbatteri*, which continually remains receptive and ready to register new currents, new modes of thinking. Maybe these media, Strindberg and his narrators think, will allow relief from a highly mediated environment.

Underlying this both religious and secular messianism and, further, constitutive of it is an affective motor of belief; belief searches for, refuses and thereby intensifies the tantalizing sense of possibility for closure. This belief, part and parcel of a technical infrastructure as a *lokalbatteri* unsettles any humanistic framework; belief becomes technical, a part of an apparatus, a functional element in a technical vicious circle. Indeed, the affective circuit between signifier and signified, embedded within a material sensorial environment, spirals on. It is important to stress here that Strindberg offers a different theoretical model than that of Crary or Asendorf, two scholars who use Strindberg to argue for what I have called their "closed-circuit" models of hegemonic power. Both are quick to recognize yet limit their focus to a unidirectionality of power. A technical system of media is hegemonic in its power; it functionalizes subjects in regimes of attention or electrical processing and here is where the story ends. The system dictates, the subject performs, and the circuit is complete – such is the closed-circuit model. By contrast, Strindberg, in a highly self-conscious and reflective mode, models what I call an open-circuit model, in which affect is a relational, that is, co-constitutive mode of a subject's being within these interpellating media environments. To be clear: Strindberg does not term this model as such; nevertheless, the closing scene of *Ensam* with a historical context of electricity allows for a meta-theoretical meditation on what it means to be a part of the functionalizing systems Crary and Asendorf identify. For Strindberg, the spiral never closes and thereby is neither total imprisonment nor absolute freedom; articulating the relationship between this looping form and Strindberg's electrified visual culture will be the final step of this reading.

To repeat, the spiral as the shape of my meta-theoretical open circuit is embedded within, that is, arises from a particular narrativized media situation as well as a wider historical media landscape. It is therefore important to note how the window's role in this scene is, in essence, a kind of visual screen, a surface of projection onto and through which the narrator casts his gaze. It is the barrier to the viewed object; it separates and indeed fragments the viewer from the viewed. Yet this very barrier's conditions of silence and distance allow for the narrator's projection and, ultimately, insertion of belief. Disconnect allows for mediation through the *lokalbatteri* of belief; connection is made possible by a lack thereof.

The belief in connection – that one might hopefully gain fuller and fuller access to that from which one is distanced – ultimately resonates with both the formal viewing practices as well as discourses surrounding silent cinema. After all, the scene, which features a silent pantomime accompanied by the composer's accompaniment, is largely reminiscent of early silent cinema. Already in Stockholm on October 22, 1901, over 100,000 people bore witness to

Sweden's first major cinema exhibition, entitled "Den odödliga teatern" ("The immortal theater").⁵⁰ The name resonated with other descriptive terms for early cinema in Swedish, such as "living picture" ("levande bilder"⁵¹), all of which emphasized the image's relationship to life and death. Indeed, themes of immortality beyond the physical body permeate discussions of early silent cinema, according to film historian Bengt Liljenberg's citation of an unnamed visionary author in turn-of-the-century Sweden:

Later on, one may see and hear the long since departed musical and theatrical greats perform their hits with the grace and strength of youth, without having to fear indisposition, flu, nervousness, jealousy, or other fatalities, and only then can one begin to seriously talk about 'the immortality of art,' for with the aids we already has and those we will no doubt receive further on, the most exceptional occurrences can be stored and reproduced indefinitely. Notably, early moving picture media were understood as rescuing its subjects not only from death; it rescued its subjects from the fatal ailments that plagued the physical body, including, as it so happens, nervousness.⁵²

The commentary above also highlights early cinema's reception as *an assemblage of media*; cinema evolved in partnership with the other arts and, indeed, this was apparent in cinema's mobilization primarily at fairground and variety shows.⁵³ Music, theater, and moving images formed, quite literally, a circus, whose contours and programs were anything but stable. In other words, there was no single institutionalized cinema at the turn of the century, but rather a set of media and viewing practices scattered across a variety of optical devices and venues.⁵⁴

In 1903, music synched to moving images was by no means a stable practice either. The strangeness and fascination exhibited by Strindberg's narrator towards the silent woman and child accompanied by a musical score thereby registers the novel emergence and gradual codification of such multimedia practices. The narrator crystalizes this experience in the following passage: "That I *saw* her singing without hearing it as my little accompanist played along seemed to me so secretive – I thought he accompanied her, or ought to. I was in both rooms at the same time – but mostly across the street – and I formed a kind of bridge between the two."⁵⁵ First, the passage emphasizes a literal, spatial suspension of perception; it describes an affective state that actively participates in a spatial environment yet lies beyond a singular agential power. And this is achieved, moreover, by a multimedia mode whose access to an ethereal Real across the way is heightened; the narrator's drive to access the self-contained, closed circuit of the real resonates with the historical perception of music's relationship to the moving image. Indeed, musical accompaniment in early silent cinema practices often were perceived as highlighting an ontological quality of reality rather than simply subjective emotion awoken within the spectator's psychology.⁵⁶ Whether or not sound effects or music synched with movements on the screen, the sound was understood as adhering to the reality of the depicted world; the music was the image's emanating excess of the real.

In one sense, the historical reception of these practices resonates well with the composer's metaphorical and eventually literal wedding to the image; the mysterious combination of music and image serves as an access point to another meaningful level of reality. Yet to *view* this situation – as the narrator does in observing this wedding – is to retain a kind of distance, to maintain the alluring messianism unto which the narrator might be delivered. In this way, Strindberg stages the reality-enhancing music to be rooted in the affect of belief rather than ontological certainty; music intensifies the *experience* of the real, without ever coming that much closer to it. Indeed, the textured – that is, multimedia, multisensorial, layered – gaze is an open-ended circuit born of the environment and operated through the intensification of belief.

Despite such close affinities to early silent cinema, it is equally important to highlight the discrepancies between the depicted scene and its comparative counterpoint; the scene is precisely *not* a recording, but an enactment of recording's repetitious form. For instance, the decorative chrysanthemums on the table in *Ensam* change color with each repeated viewing, while the rest of the scene plays out in the same fashion: "chrysanthemums, which were nevertheless changed, so that the third was a different color but the two white ones always formed the basic tone."⁵⁷ While life in the scene below repeats in form, the content – the third chrysanthemum, for instance – continually undermines the notion that the scene might be a faithful recording. In this sense, the mechanically prescribed loop of film is disrupted by the scene's singular changes, which the narrator registers, narrativizes, and remobilizes in gradually intensifying allure. In other words, if Strindberg locates the condition of deferral through intermedial metaphors, he is highlighting, too, the hope of such a metaphor – the vicious circle of belief.⁵⁸ In the last "screening" of the familial scene, the narrator visits the composer's house, only to find it empty as he walks in the room:

It was a strange moment, for I fell right back into my youth; felt the whole unknown future pressing and secretly lying in wait for me; experienced this self-intoxication in hope and pretension; certainty of victory and resilience; overestimating the power and misunderstanding my own abilities.

I sat down in a chair without lighting a candle, because the streetlamp, the same street lamp that shone on my misery, threw in a sparse light and drew on the wallpaper the shadows of the window frame's cross.⁵⁹

The narrator, left alone and set apart from the happy scene across the street, is left to linger within the room. Most significant here is the reversal of projection's directionality. While much of the scene consists of the narrator watching the scene below by virtue of the window – through the screen, as it were – this last moment demonstrates interiority itself to be a projection from the outside. The metaphor might read as such: the lamppost (the projector flame) projects the window frame (the celluloid strip) onto the apartment's interior (the screen). If the inner space of the apartment can be read metaphorically for interiority in general, then interiority is a product of the outside world's projection; a sense of self is dependent on a public source of illumination.⁶⁰

As a result, any presented "loop" is anything but closed and two-dimensional. Still more tantalizing, the repeated scene should be understood as a spiral, a folding in and out of the spectator of the scene; just as the viewer seeks to impose control on the scene below, so, too, does the scene and its articulation fold back in on the narrator's space, and the two evolve and progress together, rather than remaining in a static equilibrium or, in other words, a closed-circuit model. There emerges a tenuous mixture of repetitious stability and unexpected change, which illuminates the enmeshment of nervous, perceptual apparatuses within a larger, open-ended circuit of mixed media. Strindberg's text ultimately points to intermediality as both the cause of and even potential solution to a vicious spiral, to the subject's mediation and enmeshment within a system of media effects.

Despite the dissolution of the subject's autonomy, prompted by this reversal of projection's directionality, it should nevertheless be noted how Strindberg mobilizes a Christian framework in the hopes of retaining or saving the subject seemingly lost to such open looping – the open-ended circuit. In the moment the windowpanes' divider projects a cross into the room's interior, the narrator – the isolated self that documents the conditions of this looping – is cast as a martyr, a figure whose salvation from this nervous-perceptual, multimedia purgatory depends on a greater transcendent framework.⁶¹ The temporal problem of deferral ultimately becomes a

problem of space and directionality. The desire is for the space of projection, for a divine light that secures the individual. Ultimately, as I will show below, such a realization is dependent on the strategy of looping, repetitious viewing, during which the physical body is more or less secure and fixed in a particular spectatorial position.

An Author's (Dys)function

The reading of *Alone's* closing scene is meant to demonstrate Strindberg's prolonged efforts, across time and media, to establish a secure circuit, that is, an understanding of cause and effect without the subjugation of the subject to a technical system's potentially hegemonic (or closed-circuit) power. To achieve this, in short, would be to understand, experience, and transcend the modern world in its nervous conditioning forces, to escape the nervous fabric that renders the human body vulnerable to interpellation. While, on the one hand, many of Strindberg's literary attempts at securing this position might be understood as a negotiation of discourses and their respective powers, I argue that they also index a post-hermeneutical position between media's inscription and their registered and aesthetically redeployed effects. This dynamic, as this section argues, can be best understood through the role of melancholy in *Ensam*. Rather than articulating melancholy as a kind of inescapable trapping, the novel's closing scene, I argue, articulates it as a nervous disorder and, more to the point, a *participatory* affect in the media situation I've outlined above; neurasthenic melancholy becomes the affect by which a vicious spiral of dysfunction can be articulated. The scene's dynamic ultimately illuminates the relationship between dysfunction and functionality as collapsible dichotomy in which a body's nervous breakdown is shown to be productive in and as a system of mediated effects.

Alone's closing scene has been read across scholarship as primarily melancholic; despite the messianism, it seems that deferral nearly always wins out for scholars' interpretations. The scene, alongside the novel's diversity of similar voyeur scenes, has been understood only as a failure to attain some kind of longed-for value or experience. Each scene is treated by scholarship as only individual and isolated episodes that somewhat statically describe a kind of terminal breakdown, a neurasthenic aporia. What if these episodes are not necessarily *only* episodic, however disjointed they might appear on the surface? Recalling Freud's comparison of neurasthenia's treatment to a serial newspaper – whose conclusion is always deferred by a *To be continued...* – the novel's pervasive melancholy might better be cast in terms of a productive neurasthenia, or, in the time's parlance, a kind of or *vitiosus circulus* or vicious spiral as Jamieson would later articulate. Such a frame casts each of the novel's vignettes – and its closing scene in particular – as a node in the neurasthenic loop through which nervous exhaustion would lead to maladapted narrativization and, in turn, to disordered affect, after which the loop would continue unabated. Taken as a whole, the loop – and, by extension, the novel as a whole – appears as a recursive *disorder*, one which identified a juncture between media, nervous inscription, and mobilizations of affect.

In short, the novel's closing scene, though its references to “nervousness” are fewer than in Strindberg's preceding works, casts the preceding voyeuristic episodes as cyclical evolutions of the neurasthenic loop. As a result, the looping structure of the novel emphasizes more strongly a *continuity* impelled by the fundamental causal and effectual melancholy that both precedes and follows each voyeuristic scene. Melancholia is both formal cause *and* effect, it is the narrative's constitutive fundament that continually deepens itself through its recursive narrativization. Melancholic neurasthenia, in other words, registers inscriptions as much as it inscribes, shapes, and participates in the onslaught of stimulation of modern media situations; the dysfunction

functions. No longer the aporia of a set of social, economic, or political values, the episodic “failures” of self-presence – the sustained neurasthenic breakdown – are understood as the continually revisited starting points of narrative production at all; they demonstrate the evolutionary *in media res* of a technical system of media; more than just descriptive or diagnostic, they are productive and prognostic. In short, the closing scene’s exploration of a tenuous textured gaze is but one cyclical repetition, the series of which locates the breakdown as a site of becoming, a site of continuous refunctionalization into modernity’s technical circuits; to become in technical modernity is to be neither completely imprisoned nor free, neither completely functional nor nonfunctional, but a perplexing and irresolvable mix of the two.

Throughout my analysis of these three works, neurasthenic breakdown – overstimulation within primarily urban environments – has been conceived as spirals; rather than a two-dimensional, “closed” circuit, Strindberg’s mid-career aesthetic experimentations stage the tension between repetition, intensification, and change as features of an at least partially desubjectivized modern environment. As I have argued, these explorations were conducted through metaphors of technology, electricity, and projection media, all of which emphasized mediatization in its enervating capacities. By employing the spiral loop as an aesthetic form, Strindberg conceptualizes neurasthenia as a feedback loop that extends beyond the boundaries of an autonomous subjectivity.

If *Inferno* represents the formless onslaught of stimulations and a contentious struggle with electrical currents, *To Damascus* and *Alone* explore what it means to simultaneously participate in and watch the circuit as it unfolds; post-breakdown, the protagonists adjust their dispositions toward a more receptive function. *Ensam*, in contrast to the “panoramic” model of *ol Damascus*, challenges pure receptivity and complete absorption. Compared to the ambiguously hopeful ending of *To Damascus*, *Alone* ends with an apprehensive reflection on the *effects* of watching where the narrator is both resigned and reinvigorated through the act of participating as a spectator in a proto-silent cinematic scene. Returning to the beginning of this chapter, Strindberg’s *A Blue Book* no longer appears to be an isolated collection of vignettes; they, too, participate in the open-ended spiral of Strindberg’s larger oeuvre.

Strindberg’s work marks a turning point in literary, theatrical, and visual experimentation. Often understood as one of the first major Expressionists – a figure to which many of the German Modernist writers of the early 20th century owe a great deal – Strindberg challenges the fin-de-siècle’s perceived fatigue of both aesthetics and culture in general; he opens-up, in short, an otherwise perceived dead-end, offering in its place a never-ending becoming. As the following chapters will demonstrate, Strindberg’s experimentation intensifies if not inaugurates a mode of thinking that challenges the strict dichotomy between function and dysfunction in an increasingly technical and electrical system of media; his engagement with both electrical and nervous discourses sowed the seeds for an array of meta-theoretical meditations on functionality and nonfunctionality within modern systems of media – that is, on the category of breakdown as such.

Chapter Two: Media, Light, and the Circuits of War in Georg Kaiser's *Von morgens bis mitternachts*

“Es ist ein Kurzschuß in der Leitung” – this pronouncement serves as the epitaph for the failed, renegade cashier who, at the end of Georg Kaiser's *Von morgens bis mitternachts* (1912), shoots himself in the chest. Transforming the omnipresent light of Strindberg's arc lamps and dynamos, *Von morgens bis mitternachts* explicitly features this hardware's breakdown as an underlying logic in both its written form and its later filmic adaptation by Karlheinz Martin. Surprisingly, the themes of circuits, electricity and circularity have only ever been given a cursory glance by most scholarship; this chapter addresses this gap.

The play is split into two parts: in the first part, a cashier – the Kassierer – commits an act of fraud by stealing from his employer – a local bank – to seduce and elope with an Italian woman, who ultimately rebuffs him. This failure leads to many more in the play's second half as the cashier travels from institution to institution, hoping that his ill-won fortune might be a means to attain meaning in an otherwise bureaucratically oppressive life. This second half consists of four stations – the family home, a sports palace, a private room attached to a ballroom, and the local chapter of the Salvation Army –, the last of which serves as the aporia to the cashier's quest. It is here, after abandoning hearth and home and discovering no satisfying replacement in a hedonist Wilhelmine landscape, that the forever nameless anti-hero commits suicide before the police can detain him.

The late Germanist Walther Huder offers a germane reading of the text in the afterword to the play's 1964 Reclam edition: “The basis is the question of money's purchasing power. Can one exchange money for the essence of life? The age of capitalism is condensed into a ball and thrown down the bowling alley of a single day.”¹ In this interpretation, the play is seen as something of a test-case: “Against the background of this array of questions, the teller suddenly morphs from a bureaucratic conductor of money transfers to a masterful tester of money's substance.”² The ability to master money is the key to a meaningful modern experience – and it will, throughout the play, end in failure. Using Huder's words, modern existence – as it is conditioned and offered to both the cashier and the figures around him – amounts to nothing more than that of a bureaucratic *Kondukteur*; the trials are dead-ends.

Conduction – of money, electricity, and, ultimately, a sense of sweaty impotence – constitutes the play's core. Indeed, the play's depiction of a hedonist Wilhelmine Germany abounds with both explicit and more subtle allusions to electrical terminology. The cashier will call a woman, with whom he is drinking and presumably canoodling, a *Motte* (“moth”), fluttering around the aura of a financially endowed benefactor. In response to her incessant demands of “Sekt!”, he remarks: “Batterien aufgefahren und Entladungen vorbereitet” (“Batteries loaded and discharges at the ready.”)³ In just a short aside, the play evokes military artillery and electricity through *Batterien* and their implicitly sexual *Entladungen* (“discharges”). Electrical energy, stimulation, and a simultaneously militaristic and hedonist Wilhelminian culture all intermingle within the same conceptual nexus and permeate the play's frenetic unfolding and, as will be shown, permeate its theoretical underpinnings.

Circularity became an increasingly provocative formal device in turn-of-the-century Europe aesthetic. Building on Huder's conceptualization of the play as a critique of bureaucratic capitalism, Göttler writes in his essay “Mann ist Mann – *Von morgens bis mitternachts*” within the release booklet for the remastered 2010 edition of the film: “Kaiser's cashier comes directly from the petit bourgeoisie, he is a victim of circulation – societal, economic, and sensorial. The

hysteria he embodies – which is enhanced through the kinematograph’s silence – grows out of a circular movement to which he feels himself beholden.”⁴ Curiously enough the connection between bureaucratic circulation has only been connected to the question of nervous disorders. As I argue throughout this dissertation, circulation and nervousness would be better read against the background of electrical engineering and the renegotiation of a subject’s boundaries within networked environments; the attempt to gain an unaffected visual distance to this renegotiation provoked circular narrative forms across media. The impotence in watching the vicious circle of neurasthenic breakdown became a kind of self-perpetuating practice in failure, one in which affect, visual observation, and technical media reshaped each other and continually prompted new articulations of an ever-evolving subject position. I argue that Kaiser’s play should be read as the individual’s attempt to gain distance to modernity’s vicious circles, to escape the processes of (re)functionalization and becoming as they are determined by larger technical networks. Yet in contrast to the conventional understanding of Expressionism as employing surreal or oneiric situations as a means to gain critical distance and, ultimately, articulate a new model of subjecthood and subjectivity,⁵ I argue that *Von morgens bis mitternachts* is, in its attempt to transcend, a self-admitted failure, predicated on keeping the possibility of escape alive; to hope for a critical position unaffected by energetic currents was to doom oneself to a perpetual flight from the constrictions of networked modernity.

The Limits of Light

Von morgens bis mitternachts belongs to the tradition of the station drama revitalized by August Strindberg’s *To Damascus* (1898) and *A Dream Play* (1901).⁶ In its early modern forms, the station drama allowed for the viewer and participant to take part in the Christian story of deliverance from earthly pain and of a return to God. As a modern rearticulation and frustrated secularization of a practice that remembers Christ’s crucifixion, Kaiser’s play consists of disparate scenes, each of which represents a station on the way to a final sacrifice and (presumably) salvation.⁷ With Kaiser as with Strindberg, the form highlights, in contradistinction to its historical use, the inability of the human subject to satisfyingly follow this path; the modern Stationendrama was about the ineptitude of the individual subject, the failure to reach a point of spiritual catharsis if not transcendent experience.⁸ Its deployment often ends with the frictions of modernity unresolved. *Von morgens bis mitternachts* is no exception to the genre.

What, then, constitutes this path to nowhere? The play’s second station, coming on the heels of the clerk’s fraudulent act, offers a clue in its stage-setting opening lines: “*Sportpalast. Sechstagerennen. Bogenlampenlicht*” (“Sports palace. Six-day race. Arc lamp lighting”).⁹ One-word descriptors such as these resonate strongly with both Expressionism’s so-called *Telegrammstil* as well as Kaiser’s later disparagingly articulated *Kinoismus*¹⁰; both styles were mobilized to communicate the stripped-down, bare essence of language – not only in its semantic meaning, but in the violent, stimulating, or disruptive effects it could engender.¹¹ At its core, the style aligned language with the technical media network in which it participated. Kaiser’s descriptors might then well be understood as *Drahtwörter* or *Drahtnachrichten* – to use the parlance of the time – which couch the spaces as signals of a network. Indeed, the *shape* and *form* of these spaces – even before they are presented to the eye of the live audience viewer as physical manifestations – are understood on the level of the text as technical, mass communicative, and, with the invocation of *Bogenlampenlicht*, electric. This place is haunted by an electrical network, an elsewhere that infects the spaces’ descriptions with abstraction; the

physicality of the space is superseded by its abstract positioning within a larger network of electric media.¹²

The cashier arrives at a *Sechstagerennen* with little to no knowledge of the event's proceedings. He soon discovers that the event involves teams made up of two cyclists each. Each cyclist switches off as each completes laps around the track of a velodrome. The cashier deliberately ignores the physical toll exacted upon these bodies as he offers increasingly generous amounts from his fraudulent fortune. When pressed for a reason for his donations – made despite his lack of knowledge and emotional investment in the event itself – the cashier reveals that his main intention is to innervate the spectating masses into a Dionysian spectacle through the increasingly incredible sums of prize money. The masses – the true spectacle of the scene – represent for the cashier one potential avenue for an individualist financial mastery and autonomy; by acting as a 'tester,' as Huder characterizes the role, the cashier attempts to put spatial and financial distance between himself and the increasingly agitated masses, whose social and political boundaries slowly begin to dissolve in nervous furor.

Before examining the scene in further detail, it is helpful to note the historical status of the six-day race. In his memoir *Das war mein Leben! Erinnerungen*, journalist Curt Riess notes a particular fascination with transformation – ultimately of both the audience and the riders who pushed themselves beyond their normal capacities: "What excited me was the thrill that the sport – not in and of itself, but rather as an event, a sport embodied – unleashed. A thrill that transformed a person."¹³ In the same vein, Fredy Budzinski, a Berlin sports reporter in the early 20th century, writes:

Six-day race? What is that? Is it a sport, a game, a miracle or madness, a necessity, an evil or a necessary evil? Perhaps a bit of each in its basic form – in any case, it is a mirror of the battle we consciously and unconsciously wage in daily life. All that we, in our existence, experience of good and evil, of rise and fall, of hope and disappointment, of fulfillment and release plays out in a race, which, spanning a workweek, demands the very last from those who want to remain victorious in this struggle against the others, against fatigue, against the serpent of failure and despair.¹⁴

Both writers are ultimately interested in the energetic intensification of life under late capitalism; to survive the race is to survive and fundamentally adapt to the repetitive – and cyclical – work week in all its tensions, demands, and nervous oscillations. (Multiple reports surrounding the event point to the riders' widespread use of doping, simply to withstand the incredible physical exhaustion brought about by these events; instead of the more niche performance enhancers today, substances nervous stimulants like caffeine and cocaine were used).¹⁵ With such a focus on the energetic reconstructions of a "conventional" subject under arduous conditions, Budzinski's commentary strikes at the core of this cultural fascination by characterizing the event as a mirror of social struggle, a miracle and a madness, the transcendence and the breakdown of the individual's body and mind. Each moment of modern existence contains a kernel of fused oppositions.¹⁶

This tension between transcendence – a freedom from compulsion in the form of unfettered electrical flow – and breakdown is encapsulated by the peak of the Kassierer's attempt to stimulate the masses:

K a s s i e r e r (*beiseite stehend, kopfnickend*). Das wird es. Daher sträubt es sich empor. Das sind Erfüllungen. Menschheitsstrom. Entkettet – frei. Vorhänge hoch – Vorwände nieder. Menschheit. Freie Menschheit. Hoch und tief – Mensch. Keine Ringe – keine

Schichten – keine Klassen. Ins Unendliche schweifende Entlassenheit aus Fron und Lohn in Leidenschaft. Rein nicht – doch frei! – Das wird der Erlös für meine Keckheit.¹⁷
C a s h i e r (*standing to the side, nodding his head*). It will be so. Hence the upstir. Those are fulfillments. Humanity's current. Unfettered – free. Curtains up – smokescreens down. Humanity. Free humanity. High and low – human. No circles – no castes – no classes. Infinitely sweeping deliverance from duty and reward, to passion. Pure, no – but free! – that will be the proceeds of my pertness.

The ideal spectacle, in the Kassierer's words, is a *Menschheitsstrom* – a current of humanity – in which all societal and economic classes – the “Ringe” as the cashier calls them – are conducted into one anonymous and amorphous mass of current.¹⁸ As may be recalled from the introduction, Christoph Asendorf's *Ströme und Strahlen* offers an explanation for Kaiser's terminology; within the era of intense electrical development, at least two cultural positions emerged: first, an embrace of if not ascent to the level of energetic flow and, second, the more distanced regulator, the *rheostat* in Strindberg's terms, of that energy.¹⁹ This second station mobilizes these positions in full force: the masses become the *Menschheitsstrom*, the renegade cashier the regulatory apparatus. If these positions were as prominent in society's logic as Asendorf would suggest, *Von morgens bis mitternachts* was firing on all cylinders in its search for an articulation of an appropriate modern subject; how could one transcend the socioeconomic *Ringe* of modernity and come to touch the posthuman and unfettered flow of capital itself?

Sovereign Breakdowns

Even despite the mobilization of these figural saving graces, the scene as an attempt fails. This failure is most readily attributable to the arrival of “seine Hoheit” (“His Excellency”) to the arena, which causes the masses to suddenly fall silent in a deep respect for authority. Torsten Haselbauer notes in his 2011 taz article “100 Jahre Sechstagerrennen: Ein runde Sache” that the first major European competition in 1909 was indeed visited by Kronprinz Wilhelm for three of the six days. An uncited report from the Berliner Presse ostensibly credited the sudden popularity of the sport – which the report is to have called a “Zirkus des Irrsinns” (“Circus of insanity”) – to Wilhelm's presence; with the stamp of governmental approval, the sport became a cultural event available to and enjoyed by all classes.²⁰

There is a resonance and yet a striking tension between the historical course of events and Georg Kaiser's negatively tinged depiction thereof. One way to account for this discrepancy is to consider not the *actual* effects of the Kaiser's presence; instead, it suffices to note the crown prince's role in the abstract, that is, *as* an authoritative stamp of approval; though there is a diametrically opposed difference in the history and its depiction, both are concerned with the political and cultural power that the authoritative position of the crown prince contained. The cashier's failed attempt at transcendence therefore argues that any apparent restoration of autonomy by means of financial capital is thwarted by the hierarchies of political power in which that capital takes part. Failure is not the result of some mythic or ‘pure’ capitalism, but of capitalism *as* a political economy; because capital is inextricably intertwined with political structures, the commercial space of the sports arena is ultimately subject to the mobilization of political institutions' representative power. The singular, conditioned and conditioning figure mediates the unconditional flow of capital and energetic current.

With the appearance of “seine Hoheit” (“His Excellency”) one might read the play as offering only one kind of valid sovereignty. Such a reading would, however, ignore the implicit power of the other figures over and against the sovereign. For instance, the cashier's fundamental

characterization, as one who has defrauded a financial institution, is an outlaw, a figure who stands in direct tension with a sovereign's jurisdiction. Indeed, the outlaw is the figure that escapes the spatial control of a sovereign state. In this way, the outlaw is a fleeting figure who continually threatens to undo the political autonomy of the crown prince. Still further, the masses themselves are always threatening to overwhelm the individual. After all, the cashier's fascination with the nervous stimulation of the masses is accompanied by a childlike marveling at an individual who falls from one balcony to a lower one, only to be trampled to death. Indeed, each figure – the *Menschheitsstrom* (“the current of humanity”), the regulatory and productive human *Dynamo*, or the apparent political authority – all only ever come into an unresolved and ultimately unsatisfactory tension with one another. There is no space of extradition from which to view the whole, no hope for an individual gaze untouched by outside influence (even the emperor's authority is undermined by the cashier's outlaw status). Instead, the play's spectator is left only with singular figures perpetually conditioning and being conditioned by each other.

The interplay of these figures is set against the backdrop of the spectacularized light of the six-day race and, by extension, the elsewhere of an expansive electrical grid. And up until now, some may have objected to my reading of electrical light; does it go too far, for instance, in treating the *Bogenlampenlicht* as metonymic for the system in which it participates? Wolfgang Schivelbusch's by now seminal work *Disenchanted Light* offers the beginnings of a response by linking the early twentieth century's development of electrical infrastructure with the emergence of monopoly capitalism: “The transformation of free competition into corporate monopoly capitalism confirmed in economic terms what electrification had anticipated technically: the end of individual enterprise and an autonomous energy supply. [. . .] The concentration and centralization of energy in high-capacity power stations corresponded to the concentration of economic power in the big banks.”²¹ With this observation, Schivelbusch shows the correlation in formal development of capitalism, on the one hand, and energy management and distribution on the other. A byproduct of this development was the erosion of individual autonomy. No longer fully in charge of energy production, the modern subject earns its moniker by being subjected *to* a larger economy of energy distribution. One response to the concern listed above is therefore to embrace turn-of-the-century Europe's cultural logic of dissatisfying metonymies; the incomplete autonomy and lacking epistemological value of singular figures serve as indices of a concentration and distribution of power that escapes adequate knowing. Whether an arc lamp, a cashier, a sovereign ruler, a figure can intimate but never encapsulate the conditions of its articulation.

What, then, does it mean to *stage* this tension? After all, the Kaiser's appearance, if anything, might well be understood as a performative *Auftreten*, to use the German theatrical vocabulary. What does it mean that these figures are *performative*? On the one hand, Georg Kaiser's use of figures makes visible the ways in which power is embodied, mobilized, and enacted through their singularity. It seemingly offers the spectator a certain amount of distance *to* these cultural positions, thereby hinting at the promise of a critical position. On the other hand, the spectator is still a participant in the logic of theatric, electric and spectacular power; critical distance is an oscillating spectatorial loop. As I will continue to show throughout this chapter, Kaiser's focus on the individual embodiment of power is only a means of intimating a larger system in which these figures circulate. The play asks the theatergoer to grapple with the media forms that allow for these embodiments.

Here we can mark a working hypothesis: the play indicts its own medium and its increasingly electrical means, particularly as a larger governing cultural logic, in which power is

only ever able to be conceived in terms of an individual and performative embodiment. That is, the play self-consciously participates in making attempts at circumscribing expansive technical networks frustratingly figural and singular; the play leaves us with an embodiment that denies *disembodiment* and presents an aporia in delineating the network in which we participate. We will circle back to this scene as it later relates to silent cinema's evolution; for now, let us attend to the unfolding of the play's protagonist within networked space.

Staging Where One Isn't

To acknowledge the spatially limited body within an otherwise interconnected grid is encapsulated by the play's last, desperate scene, in which the cashier comes close to repenting for his fraudulent act at the local chapter of the Salvation Army. In a long speech in which he decries money's mediative power ("Das Geld verhüllt das Echte"²² ["Money conceals reality"]), he begins to throw his ill-begotten money out into the audience, which, in turn, shifts their attention from redemption to monetary greed. The crowd disappears and the cashier is ultimately left with the figure of his guilty conscience – a little girl who represents and collects alms for the Salvation Army at many of the cashier's episodic stations. The cashier notes:

You stand by me – you always stand by me! (*He notices the deserted timpani, takes two mallets.*) Onward. (*Short drumroll.*) From station to station. (*Individual timpani hits after sentence groupings.*) The shoals of people left back. Bustle drained away. Expanse of emptiness. Space begotten. Space. Space! (*Drumroll.*) A girl stands there. From the flood's aftermath – erect – persisting! (*Drumroll.*) Girl and man. Immemorial gardens unlocked. Skies cleared of clouds. Voice from the stillness of treetops. Good will. (*Drumroll.*) Girl and man – eternal endurance. Girl and man – abundance in the void. Girl and man – completed beginning. Girl and man – seed and crown. Girl and man – sense and goal and purpose. (*Timpani hit after hit, now an endless drumroll concludes.*)²³

Space serves as the primary concern in this passage – which makes it all the more surprising that scholarship has largely left its significant role in the play untouched. Indeed, space as a category takes on Biblical proportions alongside the cashier's repeated emphasis on "girl and man," "immemorial gardens," "seed and crown," and, crucially, "completed beginning." The modern subject, centered around the masculine figure of the cashier, has overcome the biblical Fall of nervous modernity; by coming full circle, as it were, the cashier intimates – indeed, only through the paradoxical "abundance in the void" – an experience of ecstatic catharsis, a transcendence of determined space.

Ultimately, this declaration proves to be emptied of its promise. Its overwrought performativity is undermined in three ways. First, the young girl with whom the cashier seemingly overcomes the Fall of Adam and Eve immediately disappears, only to reappear with the police in an act of betrayal; an escape from modern disciplinary apparatuses and the media systems with which they are intertwined is thwarted once again. Second, the play's text translates the tension of space into sensorial experience; the cashier's *Wirbel* ("drumrolls") – a word whose alternative meaning of "vortex" certainly suits an era of vertiginous nervous breakdowns – is simultaneously endless yet conclusive; the drumroll continues as much as it ends, highlighting the central spatial paradox – an abundance in the void. As such, the senses themselves become the site of confusion or potential transcendence, of both a definitive determination or resolution and an endless reverberation in space; the vicious swirling eddy of mediatization, of sensorial experience in the age of technical media, narratively and literally sets the stage for the cashier's downfall. What remains is the vicious circle, at once finished and open-ended.

A brief note to this last point would be to mark its resonance with Strindberg's frustrated transcendence in the closing scene of *Ensam*, during which he spectates the angelic woman and child across the way. To recap, the scene marks a kind of paradoxical suspension, a spectatorial yet participatory act on part of the viewer, such that Strindberg's narrator goes so far as to describe himself as a bridge between the spectatorial position (i.e. that which watches) and the spectated position (i.e. that which is watched). This position of the *textured gaze* might well, then, be applied to the abundant void of Kaiser's endlessly echoing drumroll, even after its cessation; a sensorial excess has been produced both from and beyond the visual-temporal registration of the event; energy is discharged into space yet cannot be accounted for through a linear-visual model.

These two points should be read against the third undermining element of the scene: the stage set, the theatric *a priori* of any utterance or declaration made. What precedes the cashier's betrayal and, ultimately, death is a set description that includes a ceiling of "chandelier with snarls of wires for electric lights."²⁴ If electric light belongs to the realm of nervous spectacle, then salvation through recompense and repentance can predictably be understood as damned to a markedly performative or, perhaps more fittingly, *mediatized* mode. To be sure, electrical light gradually gains the status of a structuring component of modern life; as in the six-day race's set description, it is the *a priori* which comes to the fore and through which the cashier's quest for transcendence is always and continually filtered. In this way, electric light becomes the determining prognosis for a mediatized state within networked modernity; it is the technical apparatus through which a *Wirbel* ("drumroll") is sounded and perpetually echoed in a deepening vortex. Sensorial experience against the backdrop of an abundant void, of a distanced yet present network of electricity is the principal concern of Kaiser's play.

Ecce Homo: The Short Circuit

The above passage and the cashier's subsequent pronouncements are, in essence, soliloquies, a hyper-individualized form addressed to everyone and no one. Beyond just the soliloquy form's repetition throughout the play, which reinforces the individual's lack of assimilation in modernity's electrical networks, its use in this ending scene highlights precisely an ambiguous spatial dimension, in which neither the positionality nor the recipient of the address is clearly defined. In the ruins of autonomy, the soliloquy is shown to be a simultaneously private and public form of address. The cashier speaks – to himself, to the audience, to no one – yet these words' articulation remains perpetually at a communicative distance to any of these subjects.²⁵ In such a light, the cashier's earlier Edenic proclamation of "Raum geschaffen" ("Space begotten") comes to express a claustrophobic porousness of the individual's spatial boundaries and constitution. The soliloquy form encapsulates precisely the tension wrought by emergent electrical grids and their encroachment on and, ultimately, constitution of daily life. What remains and remains unresolved is a disorientation of space, of the borders between the individual and the network into which the individual is continually being drawn and subsumed. Directly following his betrayal, the dismayed and disgraced cashier says:

Here I stand. I stand above. Two is too many. Space has space for one. Loneliness is space. Space is loneliness. The cold is the sun. The sun is the cold. Feverishly, the body bleeds. Fields bleak. Blooming ice. Who escapes? Where is the exit?²⁶

This passage's shift in tone contains a formal parallel to the previous speech's descriptions of an Edenic paradise. Each passage's described spaces are highly distorted and lay beyond the conventionally understood physical space of the set; each space is visionary in its articulation, as

if they were themselves set descriptions of an elsewhere yet to be reconciled with the immediate *here* of the cashier. Moreover, the two mimic the description of the sports arena; all the descriptions – whether dialogue or strictly written text – are articulated in a punctuated style reminiscent of *Telegrammstil*. They attempt to perform the conditions of their articulation, highlighting just how unresolved the experience of space in modernity was felt to be.

This markedly more resigned passage further demonstrates a collapse of poetic dichotomies. Warmth, cold, stasis, movement – all these elements come to be encompassed in singular images. The cashier’s remark that “Zwei sind zuviel” (“Two is too many”) might then not only refer to the Edenic personages of the cashier and the girl; his pronouncement demonstrates an irresolvable tension in which disparate parts are stubbornly collapsed into a ruinous union. Rather than ascend to a reconciled Hegelian third, the two elements descend deeper into the tension wrought by a technical landscape. Fittingly, this descent is couched primarily in spatial terms, in those of the *here* and the *elsewhere* of the networked body; “Here I stand. I stand above. [. . .] Space has space for one,” the cashier remarks. The corporeal body is stretched like a putty across the networks by which it is determined, yet it has and cannot have an epistemologically total experience thereof. The body is here, there, and both – a vertiginous state that leads, ultimately, to the cashier’s final soliloquy, replicated here in full:

(Bis auf eine Lampe verlöscht der Kronleuchter. Die Lampe beleuchtet nun die hellen Drähte der Krone derart, daß sie ein menschliches Gerippe zu bilden scheinen.)

K a s s i e r e r *(linke Hand in der Brusttasche vergrabend, mit der rechten eine Posaune ergreifend und gegen den Kronleuchter blasend)*. Entdeckt! *(Posaunenstoß.)* In schneelastenden Zweigen verlacht – jetzt im Drahtgewirr des Kronleuchters bewillkommt! *(Posaunenstöße.)* Ich melde dir meine Ankunft! *(Posaunenstoß.)* Ich habe den Weg hinter mir. In steilen Kurven steigend keuch ich herauf. Ich habe meine Kräfte gebraucht. Ich habe mich nicht geschont! [. . .] Ein Fünkchen Erleuchtung hätte mir geholfen und mir die Strapazen erspart. Es gehört ja so lächerlich wenig Verstand dazu! *(Posaunenstoß.)* Warum stieg ich nieder? Warum lief ich den Weg? Wohin laufe ich noch? *(Posaunenstöße.)* Zuerst sitzt er da – knochennackt! Zuletzt sitzt er da – knochennackt! Von morgens bis mitternachts rase ich im Kreise – nun zeigt sein fingerhergewinktes Zeichen den Ausweg – – – wohin?! *(Er zerschießt die Antwort in seine Hemdbrust. Die Posaune stirbt mit dünner werdendem Ton an seinem Mund hin.)*

S c h u t z m a n n Drehen Sie das Licht wieder an.

M ä d c h e n *(tut es. Im selben Augenblick explodieren knallend alle Lampen.)*

K a s s i e r e r *(ist mit ausgebreiteten Armen gegen das aufgenähte Kreuz des Vorhangs gesunken. Sein Ächzen hüstelt wie eine Ecce – sein Hauchen surrt wie ein Homo.)*

S c h u t z m a n n Es ist ein Kurzschluß in der Leitung.

*(Es ist ganz dunkel.)*²⁷

(The chandelier is extinguished, save one lamp. Now, the lamp illuminates the incandescent wires of the chandelier such that they look like a human skeleton.)

C a s h i e r *(burying his left hand in his breast pocket, grabbing a trumpet with his right, blowing it towards the chandelier)*. Discovered! *(Trumpet blast.)* Ridiculed amidst snow-laden branches – now welcomed in a chandelier’s nest of wires! *(Trumpet blasts.)* I announce my arrival! *(Trumpet blast.)* The path is behind me. I scramble up steep ascendent circles. I have used up my strength. I gave it my all! [. . .] A small spark of illumination would have helped and spared me the tribulations. There is so laughably little reason to it! *(Trumpet blast.)* Why did I descend? Why did I take the path? Where

will I still go? (*Trumpet blasts.*) At the beginning, he sits there – bone-bare! At the end, he sits there – bone-bare! From morning to midnight I race around in circles – now with finger-beckoning sign he shows the exit – – – but where to?! (*He fires the answer into his chest. The trumpet at his mouth dies with a thinning sound.*)

P o l i c e Turn the lights back on.

G i r l (*Does so. At the same moment, all the lamps explode with a bang.*)

C a s h i e r (*Has sunken against the curtain's pin-up cross with outstretched arms. His moans rasp something like an Ecce – his breath buzzes something like a Homo.*)

P o l i c e There is a short circuit in the line.

(*It is completely dark.*)

It is a well-worn observation that the play's ending, let alone entire conceit, is a response to Nietzschean philosophy.²⁸ The scene's last words – *Ecce Homo* – are a thinly veiled reference to Nietzsche's final work *Ecce Homo. Wie man wird, was man ist*, which was written in 1888 (a short time before Nietzsche's own nervous breakdown) and published in 1908 (just years before Kaiser's play).²⁹ In a rough sketch, Nietzsche's treatise and overall oeuvre is an attempt to overcome what Nietzsche understood as a Christian morality that pervaded and enslaved humanity even long after the waning of Christianity's dominance as a religious institution. Ultimately, Nietzsche champions the figure of the *Übermensch*, a Dionysian hero focused on the creative destruction of the organizational and disciplinary structures constructed in and left over from the Enlightenment period. To become what one is, in Nietzsche's words, is to undo a long history of enslavement in favor of a radical individuality that lays beyond the burdens of conventional social obligation; *Ecce Homo* argued for the possibility of dismantling and moving beyond the constructions and constrictions of Western modernity and history.

Kaiser's invocation of *Ecce Homo* is a lamentation of this project's failure; transcendence is not a possibility, apparent in the link between the book and the cashier's suicide. Kaiser's play identifies this failure as a product of technical modernity. The Dionysian figure spins around in circles; the figure's escape is coopted by technical vocabulary. And yet, the contour of this technical infrastructure only ever remains at a remove. The sound of the cashier's breath, for instance, hums *like* the word *Homo* ("human"). This fatal *wie* highlights the humming – the *surren* – of a technical apparatus that takes precedence over and against any produced expression of humanity; underneath the heightened existential angst and emotions of human life lies the constant *noise* of modernity's electrical networks, rather than its defined shape.

Still further and perhaps more apparently, the cashier's suicide is immediately followed by an explosion of the stage's lamps – a so-called 'short circuit,' whose conceptual purchase was as poignant as it was still under negotiation in the early teens. For one, newspaper clippings describing accidental fires, locomotive breakdowns, and/or general electrical discharge from urban infrastructure abound as sensational reports of an almost omnipresent threat of short circuits; the dangers of modernity were encapsulated by the term.³⁰ Unsurprisingly, these panicked reports are accompanied, too, by theoretical considerations for the very *cause* of these electrical breakdowns as the energy grid develops.³¹ Indeed, both the postmortem analyses as well as the theoretical anticipations of the short circuit became the predominant forms of grappling with short circuit accidents. Hence it becomes easier to account for Breuer and Freud's use of the term when describing therapeutic processes as a kind of technical or mechanical act of repair; the nervous system, the psyche, the individual with its psychoanalytic shadows were all entwined in a discourse that both panicked over and attempted to domesticate the wild and dangerous short circuits of modernity.³²

In this way, the failure of the individual – or the failure of individuality as such – amounts only to the minor (and as Huder notes in his afterword, “reparable”³³) breakdown of a larger technical system monitored by modern disciplinary apparatuses (the police, in this instance). In this light, Kaiser’s response to Nietzsche is an undermining of any possibility of Dionysian deconstruction; the individual is powerless in the context of a network – both amid and *as* that network’s temporary breakdown. As such, the breakdown has lost its critical edge; no longer does the breakdown afford an “outside,” or an “elsewhere” to a system, but is part and parcel, that is, embedded within a functionally dysfunctional system itself.

This breakdown of space is finally best understood through the cashier’s final posture as a Christ figure – “against the curtain’s pin-up cross with outstretched arms.”³⁴ Here, the *Ecce homo* turns literal, i.e., this is mankind. On the face of it, Christ is a transcendent figure, one that secures the suffering of all bodies through an act of martyrdom; just as Christ dies for the sins of humanity, so, too, does the cashier die for its mediatization. In such a light, Kaiser’s invocation of Christ coupled with that of Nietzsche’s *Ecce Homo* might at first glance seem like a positive reaffirmation of Christian logic; Christian logic wins over and against the *Übermensch* in its viability within modernity. In this sense, the individual must die for the benefit of all. Yet the etymology of the word “martyrdom” ultimately undermines a strictly positive evaluation of this role. As Gervase Phillips notes in a summary of the concept’s history, “The word martyr itself derives from the Greek for “witness”, originally applied to the apostles who had witnessed Christ’s life and resurrection.”³⁵ Phillips goes on to note that religious martyrdom was often meant to secure the afterlife of an individual and thereby became often voluntary and elective – a purposeful witnessing of a perceived truth, often accompanied by bodily suffering or torture. A martyr is a mode of elective visibility, a position that says, ‘I will see’ and, in a hailing of the martyr’s potential audience into a circuit of belief and visibility, ‘I will be seen.’

Martyrdom as a mode of visibility maps on well to the spatial issues at stake in Kaiser’s work and ultimately nuances the relationship between the breakdown and critical thinking. Kaiser’s somewhat fatalistic message undergirding the play denies any sort of electivity; moreover, by the end of the play an epistemologically secure ‘I will see’ is all but impossible. One only climbs the vicious spirals of modernity in perpetuity. Indeed, if, as I have argued, the play takes issue precisely with the visual effectiveness of representative logic – that is, with the ability of a staged figure to deliver a satisfying epistemological perspective from which to understand the modern networked condition – then this invocation of Christ must be read in precisely the same way. Christ, as the exemplary example, is the aporia of a failed epistemology. The apparent victory of Christian logic over that of the *Übermensch* is only the persistence of a dissatisfying eschatological framework, in which the horizon of transcendence is always deferred and always present in its evocation of an elsewhere.

Light Shows

To return to one of the central questions: what does it mean to watch this breakdown? If breakdown is, as I have explored throughout this dissertation, a *liminal* position in which the tensions of contradictions of modernity are able to be articulated or seen, then Kaiser’s play fits the bill. Yet at stake is a way to gain or regain a critical position, while recognizing an incontrovertible embeddedness of the body and its visual capabilities within a larger communicative network. So far, I have suggested that the *spatiality* of an embedded critical thinking – that is, the literal critical position – is constituted by a larger media system whose contours can only ever be intimated. As is the case in Kaiser’s play, one is left with only a

performative logic, one constrained to the particularity of the example – to the tangibility of the here as it is constituted and undone by the there. To watch the breakdown, as this section will show, was to become aware of visibility's very limits in apprehending an individual's situatedness; to be enmeshed in and as the breakdown is to be subject to an aural, visual and literary field of stimulation.

Breakdown, electrical or nervous, was a product of environment; to circumscribe these environments, to make sense of the emergent technical network against which stormy affects and crumbling individualities reigned unfettered – visibility was pinned as a promising mode. If one, so the cultural logic went, could *observe* cause and effect, the individual's boundaries might be reasserted after all. As I have shown, Kaiser's play certainly grapples with visual observation's limitations, its situatedness. To what extent, then, could this problematic be seen in the play's radical adaptation for film – a medium overwhelmingly dependent on the electrical grid?

The quintessentially Expressionist film *Von morgens bis mitternachts* was released in 1920, eight years after the play had been written in 1912 and five years after the play's theatrical premiere in 1917.³⁶ As Cynthia Walk has noted in an article on the work's multimodality, the play was filmic even as a work of theater; the stations of the play might well be read as analogous to early silent cinema programs, which often consisted of ten short, incoherently cobbled-together films.³⁷ The films, as with the play's stations, could drastically vary in genre and mood, and would often lack any sort of spatial or temporal cohesion³⁸; the discontinuity of the film program, Walk argues, should be understood alongside, if not directly as an impact on the structure of Kaiser's play.³⁹

Supporting this reading of Kaiser's play, scholar Andrea Haller fills out the play's media context; more than just resonating with the loosely affiliated structure of the station drama, the film program and its theorists (in this case Simmel) shared considerable overlap with the nervousness discourse: "the mode of perception to which the early cinema programme catered, with its diverse and seemingly unrelated stimuli, [. . .] represented the everyday experience of the metropolitan flâneur, whose state of mind was described by contemporaries with physiological concepts such as 'shock,' 'excitation' and 'overstimulation.'"⁴⁰ In this light, the station drama is modernized through forms unique to the experience of urbanity – and notably, in this case, of film. Against this discursive backdrop, Kaiser's play was indeed already filmic at the time it was written, insofar as it incorporated other medias' practices as well as their shared discourses into its structure; inundated by new forms of motion picture media, the play set the stage for its filmic adaptation.

This adaptation was in many ways an early avant-garde experiment in silent cinema⁴¹; the geometric lines, the depersonalized figures, and the high levels of contrast between shadow and light – a near diachronic juxtaposition between the screen's stark black and white – lent a sense of immateriality and abstraction to the figures depicted on screen.⁴² With this understanding, one can observe how Kaiser's preoccupation with electrical energy expresses itself in the film through manipulations and distortions of light, such that the depicted spaces become just as oneiric and disorienting as the play's *Telegrammstil* description of its sets; both play and film are acutely aware of their technical means of representation and point to the conditions and infrastructures of modernity that make their articulation possible at all.

After having illuminated the play's logic as borne of an emergent electrical system, let us circle back to the six-day race; here, the transference between play and film as facilitated by concerns of electricity is on full display. For one, the six-day race as an event already aligned with the emergent space of silent cinema. Both spaces were objects of fear and fascination in

precisely the same ways; a shift away from the individual toward the masses, the mixing of classes, and the purported nervous rejuvenation (or deadening) wrought by stimulation were all common elements that became the objects of critical ire over the early to late teens.⁴³ Between 1910 and 1913, for instance, Jakob van Hoddis' cycle of poems entitled "Variété" – whose closing poem is "Schluss: Der Kinematograph" –, Kurt Tucholsky's poem "Kino," and Robert Walser's short piece "Kino" all emphasized the simultaneously innervating and enervating qualities of cinema as a medium *and* as a chaotic space; both cinema and the six-day-race were intensifications of urban modernity. The nonstop barrage of stimulation – a hallmark of modern urban experience – undergirds each space; the produced nervous and electrical energies of these spaces were in turn seen as disruptive to social hierarchies, for better and worse, and essential in the formation of the anonymous masses.⁴⁴ Cinema and the six-day race were sites at which the individual subject was disappearing in favor of new configurations – whether as the masses or cogs of a machine.

To show that the spaces of silent cinema or six-day races as disorienting was only part of Kaiser's project; still further, this disorientation was in large part intertwined with electricity and, more specifically, the emergent electrical grid with all of its stops, starts and sputters. In the case of the six-day race, one might immediately object to connecting cycling and electricity in such a fundamental way; to be sure, cycling is not always existentially bound to electricity. Nevertheless, cycling was, at that time and now, discursively understood as a *producer* of electricity or, at the very least, energy. One need to look no further than a French invention in 1922: Le cinécycle Gaumont, a bicycle film projector run on the electricity produced by pedaling.⁴⁵

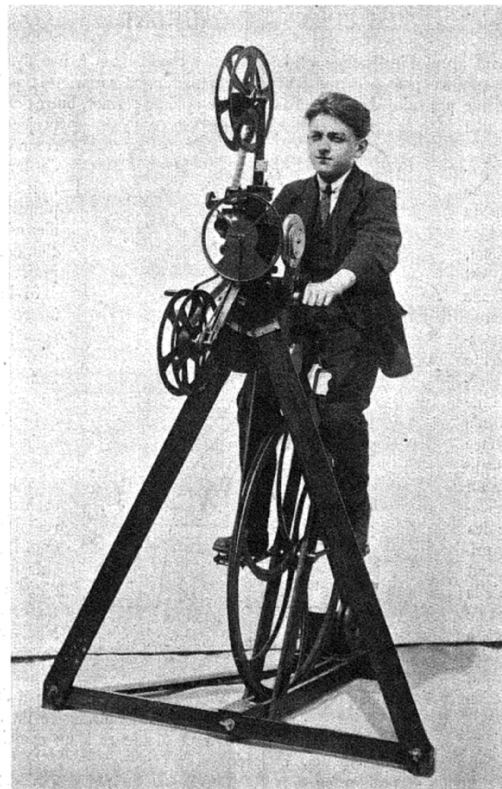


Fig. 2. — Le cinécycle Gaumont en fonctionnement.

Fig. 1 (Weiss, The Gaumont Cinécycle)

That such an invention would arise so quickly on the heels of both the theatric and filmic iterations of *Von morgens bis mitternachts* is a testament to the strong link between cycling, electricity, film, and the production of spectacle; the six-day race was proto-filmic through and through, not least due to its discursive connection to energy production and distribution.

Finally, a more subtle resonance that accompanied the spaces of early silent cinema and the six-day race was a concern for the *repetitiveness* of the spectacle; just as a spectacle might have invigorated an audience, so, too, did cinema in the early teens witness a codification of melodramatic and serial forms, wherein the stimulating effect was both asked to be reproduced and, if necessary, tweaked in degree and representation. Melodramatic films and serials were constantly pushing for invigoration by both adhering to and reconfiguring a titillating form. There emerged, in other words, a kind of feedback loop, a vicious circle, in which stimulation and its narrative forms and techniques beget the need for ever more novel experiences.⁴⁶

The eventual translation of *Von morgens bis mitternachts* into silent cinema marks this repetition in such a way as to draw attention to the tedious repetition of nervous spectacle. In the film's depiction of the six-day race, two similar yet minutely different shots, whose manipulation of light distort the cyclist's movement around the track, are interchangeably repeated, without any variation, a total of twelve times in a sequence lasting about ten minutes. For much of the rest of the sequence, one merely watches the spinning heads of both spectators and judges alike as they exaggeratedly follow the spectacle in circles and their own faces become increasingly alien and blurred into an amorphous mass.⁴⁷ Spotlights move back and forth across their bodies yet remain curiously out of sync with their synchronized head movements; one is never sure whether the lights are meant to represent the bikes themselves or the arena's spectacle. The effect is one of disorientation, in which viewer fascination and spectacular light are definitively yet chaotically in relationship with one another.

How to make sense of this chaos? The inadequate but seemingly sole way put forth by both the play and the film is through dizzying circularity. The spectators' circuitous viewing – already implicit in the rehearsal of the station drama – is both the content and form of these works in the attempt to make explicit modern viewing situations and environments. As discussed in the previous sections, the exploration of the illuminated sports arena is subject to the power and influence of a spectacular culture *enabled* by a larger electrical energy grid – much like the spaces of silent cinema; these spaces of early twentieth century modernity were always conditioned by an elsewhere, whose access points were tantalizingly close yet forever removed for visual modes of observation. Presciently drawing attention to the visual stakes of the play and its later filmic adaptation, the cashier calls out: “Vorhänge hoch – Vorwände nieder”⁴⁸ (“curtains up – smokescreens down”). What is at stake is a moving *beyond* the curtains and smokescreens, to penetrate a reality that lies beyond the technical mediation of space. The cashier's failure to transcend points to the persistent yet unattainable “elsewhere” of the works' own means of representation and their situatedness within networked modernity.

Though its environment may have contributed to the play's radicality, Cynthia Walk ultimately cautions against the full embrace of the play-turned-film solely as an avant-garde experiment. Though Brecht would later draw inspiration directly from Kaiser's alienating techniques, the filmic adaptation of Kaiser's play nevertheless employs dissolves and more perspectival shots that seem to call out for viewer sympathy, if not identification.⁴⁹ The film, in short, does not allow for a complete extradition of the viewer to a critical position at a remove; a critical distance might well only turn out to be another media effect among many embedded

within a technical network. One might well further Walk's observation by understanding this supposed shortcoming as a critical feature of the film; rather than viewing the film as *inadequately* avant-garde, a perhaps more generous and productive reading would be to understand its use of conventional technique as part of its critical project. A completely critical viewing position, one totally unaffected by the media and bodies it observes, is unattainable; a critical viewing position admits its inadequacy, its failures.

Failure is no endpoint; it spurs the next attempt in a vicious circularity. The invocations of circularity – from the racetrack, to the lighting, to the repeated metaphors of electrical discharge – signal how the cashier's "breakdown" offers two options: continue tracing the circuit – breaking free from constriction only to be continually pursued and roped back in – or attempt to opt out altogether through suicide (which, it should be noted, is labeled as a "short circuit" and therefore once again coopted by the inescapable electrical discourse). Opting for the former through the work's primarily visual mode – watching the breakdown, in short – is ultimately not to gain an understanding of cause and effect in electrical modernity (i.e., to identify what causes the breakdown); to watch the breakdown is to reckon with a perpetually unsatisfied state of spatial disorientation induced by modernity's networks.

Enlightened Conflicts?

How does this transformation from play to film, replete with intimations of an electrical network, stack up against its politically and socially turbulent conditions? The work, after all, spans the pre- and post-World War I, an era of technical innovation and devastating destruction. This section examines how the concerns for electricity and individuality within both the play and the film were more than just a matter of spatial disorientation; they signaled a prolonged concern for functionality and nonfunctionality within the wartime experience.

World War I was bookended by, on the one hand, an intoxication with the possibility for cultural and political renewal and, on the other hand, the traumatized individual and collective psyches of war participants.⁵⁰ In this light, the progression of the war was not unlike that of psychophysiology's reception at the turn of the century; the goal of an ecstatic experience was quickly overpowered and supplanted by the disastrous effects of its means. Though the promise of ecstatic experience – one type of transformation – had been deferred, the nervous body had nevertheless undergone another, more violent, and more disorienting refunctionalization during the Great War.

Kaiser's work fits curiously within this narrative. On the one hand, it bears out this pre- and post-traumatic structure – after all, the filmic adaptation of the cashier's failed transcendence is a product of post-war culture, one that recognizes *that* a trauma has occurred. Such a reading of the work's apparent continued relevance to German society would fit the conventional narrative proposed by most scholarship on early Weimar film: cultural filmic production during this time often reflected a shattered and shell-shocked society attempting to come to grips with the traumas of WWI. It should, however, be noted that the film was *not* well-received in Germany, nor in any European nation for that matter. Instead, the film supposedly found a receptive audience only in Japan.⁵¹ This reception might therefore nuance the scholarly narrative, insofar as the processing of cultural trauma did not occur solely through successful cultural products. What, then, does the production and reception of *Von morgens bis mitternachts* reveal about the nature of the breakdown? Why was its specific portrayal of psychic breakdown less successful than, say, *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, an equally vexing and vertiginous film?

This concluding section proposes that the lack of enthusiasm around this reception is precisely because the war-as-breakdown characterization is undermined by the same moment it is mobilized; breakdown, in both the film and the play, is the product of a technical network, the exact delineation of which continually falls short. The work provides only a reinforced notion of vertiginous circularity in which the continual undoing of the individual occurs not by the hand of any one figure – be that a Dr. Caligari or a Dr. Mabuse – but by a spatial disorientation wrought by an electrical and, importantly, militarized infrastructure. On the one hand, then, the cashier’s forever unsatisfied existential dread cannot be pinned on a singular cause and, on the other, the numerous technological causes of societal woe, whether as threads in the fabric of everyday life or as active contributors to wartime traumas, provide neither solace nor escape though they might instantiate those very hopes. The cashier and his audiences are left only to reckon with the haunting power of an ambiguous, torturous technological network.

While the play stages electrical infrastructure as more of an *a priori* – explicit mentions of electrical wires are only ever in the set descriptions or the culminating scene – the filmic adaptation draws attention to electrical infrastructure through direct depictions. One such shot occurs just as the police are informed of the cashier’s fraudulent act. The camera cuts to an artificially drawn telegraph pole, yet it is, by nature of the illustration, unclear whether the pole is connected to wires or is meant to reference emergent wireless technology.⁵² Employing a stop-motion technique, the words “Kassierer” and “Cashier” are gradually spelled out along the disconnected lines on the left side of the pole, while “Flüchtig,” “Flying,” and an admittedly hard-to-decipher word – a guess would be a misspelled “fugitiv” – are simultaneously spelled out on the right. After these words are spelled out, the shot becomes fluid as the letters are seemingly blown off their lines, becoming jumbled, confused, and indecipherable.



Fig. 1 Fugitive Words⁵³

The stop-motion spelling of the words is reminiscent of a typewriter or telegraph, both electrical innovations that became increasingly prevalent in early 20th century European societies. Employing a Kittlerian approach, one might do well to consider the transmission’s depiction not in terms of its hermeneutic meaning, but as a pointing towards the material transference of data and information at all. (After all, the shot’s equivalence between “flüchtig” and “flying” could

well be considered an affront to any translator with adequate knowledge in both English and German). The mix of languages – and even a perhaps purposefully hard-to-decipher or misspelled word – only highlights the importance of the communication system’s proper functioning over and against the actual hermeneutical meanings transmitted by that technology; electrical infrastructure serves as the a priori to any construction of meaning. Moreover, the simultaneity of the message’s spelling – both the left side (“Cashier/Kassierer”) and the right side (“Flying/Fugitiv/Flüchtig”) highlight the perplexing temporality of information exchange altogether. On the one hand, the accumulation of hermeneutical meaning is linear; the spectator is left to decipher the gradual spelling out of each word and to ultimately connect them as if one were reading a literary text from left to right. On the other hand, the messages appear simultaneously on both sides of the cipher, thereby highlighting a perception of electrical technology as an immediate material imprinting; the hermeneutical deciphering of the message is secondary to the message’s transmission.

It is, of course, all the more curious that these letters are then cast to the wind. The medium turns out to be the message insofar as the ephemerality of the cashier is shaped by the apparent ephemerality of networked communication. Such an understanding might come into tension with a strict Kittlerian interpretation of the scene, as the durable material impressions and transference of data is quickly revealed to be as ephemeral as the object about which it seeks to hermeneutically communicate. The actual storage of information is depicted here as negligible. The question here concerns the directionality of this depiction’s interpretation: would the depiction warrant the interpretation that the medium copies, that is, embodies the cashier’s flight? Or are the cashier and his flight determined by the apparent ephemerality of the electrical communication itself?

This tension need not be resolved. In fact, keeping it in place can highlight the classic chicken-and-the-egg paradox – a vicious circle by its own right – at the heart of this depiction. To leave this tension intact is to take seriously the equivalence between the fleeting message and the actual body of the cashier – the element-at-flight within its techno-disciplinary system. In this way, we might rejoin Kittler and note one of his main theoretical contributions: to understand the body as a nervous surface onto which messages are imprinted, however violently or impersonally. The development of a radically new media landscape – enabled by the introduction of a pervasive electrical infrastructure – enlists the body into its regime; the body is a medium among media, at once something that determines and is determined by its environment. Within this theoretical context concerning technical apparatuses and the body, the cashier’s quest for financial autonomy and freedom from modernity’s constricting bureaucracies reaches an aporia; the cashier’s fugitive body continually pushes against the contours of its determining environment yet fails to fully extricate itself from the latter’s forces. The body becomes but does not transcend, entangled as it is in the throes of continued electrical interpellation.

It must be noted that the film’s depiction of electrical communication is a departure from the play; the play does not concern itself with the transmission of data between disciplinary institutions (the police, in this instance). One reason for this might well be because such infrastructure was heavily developed and mobilized during WWI, a context that ultimately cinches the interpretation of the becoming body as a problem of functionality; a closer look at the wartime period unveils how functionality and dysfunctionality coevolved in a two-step dance, often ensnaring the soldier’s body all the while. *Netze des Krieges*, a collection of essays and archival material, aids in capturing this dynamic by documenting how questions of electrical industrialization were increasingly framed in terms of their wartime efficacy. Telling of the

centrality of technological networks during the war is the fact that the conductive lining of Germany's network would amount to six million kilometers by the war's end – more than double the network's size in 1913 pre-war Germany.⁵⁴ The Great War was as much a war of technical communication as it was of industrial-era weaponry.

Nevertheless, the unprecedented wartime experience – the military maneuvers, the extremely confined space within the trenches, the debilitatingly unpracticed ability to communicate long distance at the warfront – undermined any certain and efficient mobilization of an electrical communicative network.⁵⁵ At the front, the technology's expansion entailed a steep learning curve and vulnerability to both attack and malfunction; its technologies were subject to both the landscapes and the chaotic environments of war in which they were deployed. Such vulnerability could prove devastating for soldiers and machinic operations alike as miscommunication or a failure to communicate at all could easily result in standstills – a signature feature of trench warfare – and further death.⁵⁶

At the so-called Homefront, such inadequacies became apparent in daily life. As if destined to fulfill the play's final lines – “Es ist ein Kurzschluss in der Leitung” – energy reserved for daily life in metropolitan areas was diverted to wartime efforts, leaving the streets of Berlin, for example, utterly in the dark by the war's end.⁵⁷ By 1917, public streets were, as cultural historian Frances Guerin expresses it, “returned to the pitch black of the pre-1900s. Thus, all the complexities of light production and dissemination that were set in motion in the prewar years were significantly retarded by Germany's involvement in the Great War.”⁵⁸

However, the potentially linear understanding of electrical development – namely that the war *delayed* progress (as if progress had a timed telos) – risks obscuring the pivotal, that is, transformative role the dysfunctions of machines at the trenches and the nonfunctionality of public lighting at home played in both wartime efforts and postwar life. Guerin herself cites an illuminating 1925 speech given by Prof. Dr. Joachim Teichmüller, the founder of the Lichttechnische Institut der Technischen Hochschule in Karlsruhe in 1922: “Germany's dive into darkness during the war years also motivated a postwar aesthetic of light in public spaces beyond the apparent crudity and wastefulness of early examples.”⁵⁹ A lack of sufficient lighting, in other words, prompted German film makers during and after the war to do with what they had; the efficacy and efficiency of lighting – in both meager and massive capacities, depending on the year – were of primary concern for German society. Such a concern was ultimately demonstrated twofold. On the one hand, postwar German Expressionist film, if one can delineate the genre by any metric, is marked primarily by an abundance of shadow. The lack of light that had originated as a wartime woe became a productive marker in cultural aesthetic output. On the other hand, the lack of light during the war also prompted the film industry and larger industrial German society to invest heavily in technological advancement for lighting.⁶⁰

And therein lies a peculiar tension that escapes Kittler's gaze: the dysfunction, the nonfunction, or the unintended functions of a machine could easily feed into another pattern or system's functionality: failing machines and their incompetent users could perpetuate the horrifying consequences of war; they could incentivize efficient use of lighting or innovation therein; they could shape an entire cultural aesthetic which would eventually prove to be a lasting, internationally renowned, and economically successful enterprise. The breakdown of a medium – that is, the transgression of its determined and determining structure – ultimately was part and parcel of another pattern. As General Rudolf Schmidt of the Nazi party would eventually write in his contribution “Die Nachrichtenmittel” (“The means of communication”) in the rightwing nationalist collection *Der Weltkampf um Ehre und Recht* (“The Worldwide

Struggle for Honor and Justice”): “Everything was still in the early stages of transformation when the war began. [. . .] The war began with a cessation of all connection.”⁶¹ Transfiguration and breakdown, becoming and dissolution, were essential to the war; the perpetually transforming chaos of technical infrastructure – its dysfunction – was the ground from which the war and its brood could articulate themselves.

An overt depiction of technical communication in the filmic adaptation of *Von morgens bis mitternachts* should be read against this historical cultural context. For one, the film’s exaggeration of black and white, shadow and light, should not be understood merely as a detached formal experiment of the avant-garde; instead, it unabashedly indexes its means of representation *within* a system of energy distribution. With this kind of critical premise, the film’s depiction of the simultaneous and progressive spelling of sent and received messages might highlight more than just the centuries-long fascination with media’s ability to bridge time and space; instead, the scene demonstrates an a priori of electrical infrastructure *and* the perceived mess and disorientation of communication within such a system. Ultimately dissipating in a literal flurry, the harried messages display a concern for the chaos and – given the historical context – potentially destructive system of transmission. The film’s primary interest lies in the *effects* of data transmission and, from a critical standpoint, the (infra)structures that allows for those effects.

Electrical modernity’s temporal and spatial disorientation might well be read through the evolution of the work, from play to film. How does the film’s depiction of chaotic communication shape its theatrical forerunner? After all, the play, written a few short years before the onset of war, abounds with militaristic metaphors. During the six-day race, for instance, the girl of the Salvation Army attempts to sell war propaganda to the cashier just as he is about to put out his highest bid:

M ä d c h e n. Der Kriegsruf, mein Herr.
 K a s s i e r e r. Was verhökern Sie da für ein Kümmelblättchen?
 M ä d c h e n. Der Kriegsruf, mein Herr.
 K a s s i e r e r. Sie treten verspätet auf. Hier ist die Schlacht in vollem Betrieb.
 M ä d c h e n (*mit der Blechbüchse*). Zehn Pfennig, mein Herr.
 K a s s i e r e r. Für zehn Pfennig wollen Sie Krieg entfachen?
 M ä d c h e n. Zehn Pfennig, mein Herr.
 K a s s i e r e r. Ich bezahle hier Kriegskosten mit fünfzigtausend.⁶²
 G i r l. The Call of War, sir.
 C a s h i e r. What kind of con game are you hawking there?
 G i r l. The Call of War, sir.
 C a s h i e r. You’ve arrived too late. The battle is already in full operation.
 G i r l (*with the tin box*). Ten pennies, sir.
 C a s h i e r. I’m paying here fifty thousand for war expenditures.

Given the preceding analyses of this chapter, the cashier’s metaphoric use of “Krieg” “Schlacht in vollem Betrieb,” and “Kriegskosten” should be read in tandem with his position as a regulatory apparatus of network energy. That a battle or slaughter (“Schlacht”) might run with all cylinders firing (“in vollem Betrieb”) poignantly highlights, for one, the proximity of military and industrial discourses and, still further, contextualizes the cashier’s attempt to move toward a posthuman plural subject as one related to industrial, energetic development and deployment; Kaiser *anticipates* the horrific practices of World War I, in which individual lives were made meaningless in the face of mechanized warfare. The true war was already understood, even

before its 'real' onset, as being fought primarily by and through technology, on and off the battlefield.⁶³ Ultimately, the play's posited quest for political power and autonomy – whether that be the individual's or the sovereign state's – can therefore be understood as a response to preexisting discourses shaped by electrical infrastructures. To transcend, then, is to use and ascend to the level of a system's structuring means to *overcome* and supersede that system, to escape if not master the slaughter in full swing.

In the scene above, it is doubly important to note that *both* presented positions display their own metaphorical understanding of war: the Salvation Army wages a war against poverty in the name of Christ while the cashier wages a war against the technologized condition of the modern subject. In essence, then, both view war as something already underway; war is neither finished nor to come, but always already here, a perpetual struggle of modernity. The scene's embrace of war goes beyond a demonstration of that logic's pervasiveness and support in pre-WWI German culture; still further, it articulates, within the work's wider historical context and transformations, precisely the temporality of the circuitous breakdown.

Indeed, the play might be read *against* its context of wartime enthusiasm insofar as it demonstrates that there is nothing toward which one should look forward; there is no eschatological horizon that *secures* a transcendent arrival; there is no apocalypse that lays the ground for a pristine renewal of humanity. Instead, what remains is the persistent technological network that produces and is accompanied by *Von morgens bis mitternachts* various iterations. To watch the breakdown happen extends beyond recognizing the bodily limits of visibility and the concomitant spatial disorientation wrought by the networks; it means to recognize a sort of atemporality *to* this spatial dimension, a temporality that can only be circumscribed and described through the continuous vicious circles of human experience.

Chapter 3: Collapse and Closure in Robert Reinert's *Nerven*

In Robert Reinert's *Nerven*, a doctor specializing in nervous illness provides an unsettling picture of modern Germany. They come in the form of a series of intertitles: "Diese Menschen hier machen alle einen gesunden Eindruck, sind aber doch schwer krank. Und die Ursachen? Die fortschreitende Zivilisation, der Kampf ums Dasein, Angst und Schrecken des Krieges, die Sünden der Eltern . ." ("All of these people here seem healthy but are in fact gravely sick. And the causes? The advancing civilization, the fight for existence, the fear and horrors of war, the sins of the parents. . .").¹ As became increasingly clear over the nervousness discourse's decades-long life, damaged nerves were the result of plural causes; nerves came to symbolize and articulate modernity and its discontents, years before Sigmund Freud would reorient the discourse towards the more mythic drives of the psyche in *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (1929/1930). For all the causes the "nerve" seemed to identify in its stimulation, so, too, could one find a corresponding cultural discursive position; advancing civilization, a primordial struggle, a war, moral or sexual sins – each of these can well be read as a prominent diagnostic position, be that of the French Alienists who traced crime and corruption to nervous constitution; of Max Nordau's *Entartung*, which saw a degradation of nervous constitution over generations; of the German Kaiser's 1910 proclamation that WWI would be decided by nervous constitution; or of a more general pre-war fanaticism and, indeed, messianism explored in the earlier chapters of this dissertation.

Nerven is the culmination of nervous discourse; it embraces both the pessimistic cultural criticism and the optimistic romanticism that have time and again cropped up throughout this dissertation. Nevertheless, the film's representation of these positions is anything but sober; the opening title sets the fevered and frenzied tone: "Nerven, Ihr geheimnisvollen Wege der Seele, Ihr Sendboten höchster Lust und tiefsten Leides! Zum Tier wird der Mensch, wenn Ihr versagt, Nerven, seid Ihr nicht selbst die Seele?" ("Nerves, you mysterious avenues of the soul, you messengers of highest desire and deepest suffering. If you fail, man is but animal. Nerves, are you not the soul itself?").² Nerves are defined as mediators between wildly oscillatory dichotomies, between civilization and its undergirding abyss of animality, between pleasure and suffering, between inside and outside worlds. Indeed, they are "Sendboten" – messengers, emissaries, representatives – that carry and deliver, register, and produce the messages of modern life. In understanding nerves as medial figures, the film is not the illustration or exploration of one discursive argument concerning nervous life; instead, the film itself comes to embody the nerves it describes. The very enunciation of a discursive position is always already a performance of modernity's chaotic nervous condition. As a result, the film implicitly challenges any possibility for a *sober* understanding of nervous mediation; deeply desired yet always out of reach was a critical position removed from modernity's energetic currents.

The film's main concern, as the introductory intertitle states, is when the nerves *versagen* – that is, when they fail to operate according to their energetic capacity. Reminiscent of the 1895 *Studien über Hysterie*, the film is much more than a description of nervousness; the film is about breakdown, the overextension of a system's energetic capacities. This chapter explores this nervous *Versagen* – not just as a failed registration of cause and effect in modernity, but as an essentially productive mode. Breakdown, in other words, functions as an *a priori* category of expression; it registers and produces itself in its articulation. I argue that this registration, production, and dissemination of the category of the nervous breakdown is observable in both the film's content and form; the film embodies the condition of breakdown in both its narrative

treatment of stimulation as well as its own cyclical, melodramatic, and, indeed, stimulating form run amok. With nerves – those “Sendboten höchster Lust und tiefsten Leides” – in mind, I read the film’s engagement with nervous breakdown as articulating and embodying the open-ended circuits running through a networked modernity.

In service of this broader argument, this chapter will take three steps. First, I recapitulate the film’s recent scholarly interpretations, which predominantly understand it as a reflection of post-war trauma and threatened gender identities. Building off these scholars, I draw attention to the film’s direct, yet overlooked historical context of post-war revolution within Germany; I argue that the film’s engagement with nervous breakdown extends beyond just traumatized and emasculated soldiers to the specific strife in Bavaria. Second, I show how the film proceeds to situate this nexus within discourses of energy production and dissemination. In this step, I argue that the film implicates its own viewers in the social situations it describes by drawing attention to two fundamentals of cinema – vision and electricity. With the spectator’s viewing condition drawn into the nervous breakdowns of the film, the third and final step of this chapter takes aim at the film’s melodramatic structure; in registering the functional dysfunction of energy networks, the film performs a melodramatic mode run amok in a deluge of rote gesture and unsatisfying resolutions. Ultimately, each of these steps taken together highlights the extent to which breakdown was by no means an exception instigated by the traumas of WWI; the nervous breakdown as a site of open-ended struggle between function and dysfunction was a defining category of early 20th century modernity.

Interpretations of Filmic Nervousness

The film’s chaotic plot directly depicts the melodramatic ebb and flow of post-WWI Germany. Marja, the sister to the wealth capitalist industrialist Roloff, is unhappily set to marry Richard Graf von Colonna; caught in tortured desire, Marja secretly pines for the teacher Johannes, who, as fate would have it, serves as the vanguard to the masses striking against Roloff’s failing industry. Out of guilt and a deeply Christian repression of sexual desire, Johannes spurns Marja’s love, in response to which Marja accuses the former of sexual assault. While Marja will later revise her accusation to be that of spiritual occupation rather than outright rape, the industrialist Roloff, Marja’s brother, convinces himself to have seen the rape occur; Johannes is tried and found guilty. Once Marja confesses to Roloff what she has done, Roloff begins a steady descent into madness; unsure of what he has seen and burdened by guilt, Roloff suffers a markedly *nervous* breakdown: “An meinen eigenen Nerven erkenne ich die Nerven der Welt; Die Nerven der Welt sind krank” (“In my own nerves I see the nerves of the world; the nerves of the world are sick”).³ Indeed, these diseased nerves spell the demise of many of the characters: Roloff commits suicide to escape the images that haunt him; Roloff’s wife, for whom Johannes harbors a secret desire, accidentally kills Johannes’ blind sister in a fire and subsequently joins a convent; the masses of working men are thrown into the passion of revolution and commit violent acts arbitrarily. When all seems lost, a speedy and contrived “Nachspiel” reunites and reconciles Johannes and Sister Marja in a montage of pastoral, mythic scenes interspliced with the following intertitles: “Stammeln eines neuen, glücklichen Geschlechts werden” (“To become progenitors of a new, happy lineage”); “Zurück zur Natur! Arbeite!” (“Back to nature! Work!”); “Neue Nerven – Neue Menschen!” (New nerves – new people!).⁴

If the description here seems uncontained, it is because the plot itself is precisely that. In his compelling *Shell Shock Cinema: Weimar Culture and the Wounds of War*, Anton Kaes understands this chaos – the proliferation of guilt among the characters, the arbitrary and

unexpected turns of plot and moments of violence, the epidemic of hallucinatory images – as an articulation of modernity’s constitutive nervousness and, additionally, a wider cultural shellshock that pervaded post-war Germany. Kaes writes: “War and revolution were symptoms of a larger malaise: a collective neurasthenia in response to a belated but frenzied modernization and urbanization.”⁵ In this characterization of WWI as an intensification of rather than a radical break with the conditions of modernity, Kaes situates the film as both a more psychoanalytically oriented symptom of wartime trauma *and* a reflection of modernity more broadly. In the “digressive and fragmentary”⁶ film, both its plot and cinematic techniques could reflect, for Kaes, the torn psyche of the German nation, the fast and chaotic pace of intense urbanization and industrialization, or, as is the most likely case, a troublesome mixture of the two.

Kaes’ deeply compelling stance towards the film is borne out by both its historical reception and later restoration. For one, any interpretation of the film must be approached carefully; the film’s contemporary reconstruction is a patchwork of found footage, once scattered across various archives, and subjected to varying degrees of solarization. The introductory note makes clear that the placement and configuration of some scene sequences and stills from the film are only a best guess as to the original film’s intention. To make matters more difficult, the popular release of the film in 1920 was significantly pared down from its 1919 version; it is neither known how much nor what, at all, was stricken from the film’s institutional first draft. The film’s “digressive and fragmentary nature,” as Kaes calls it, is partly due to both historical censorship and reconstruction, both of which are important interpretive cautions when dealing with the film.

Nevertheless, the film’s fragmentation might not have been only a product of happenstance. Though still only viewing an already censored product, much of the public responded enthusiastically to Reinert’s more avantgarde techniques. As one instance, an anonymous review in *Der Kinematograph* on December 31, 1919 celebrates the film’s exploration of more unconventional approaches: “Wir haben es hier mit einem bahnbrechen Neuem zu tun, mit einem wohlgelungenen Versuch, neue Möglichkeiten zu schaffen und sie auszunützen. Reinert eröffnet der Filmerei neue Wege und führt die Technik zu ungeahnten Problemen” (“We are dealing here with something groundbreakingly new, with a greatly successful attempt to create and make the most of new possibilities. Reinert opens new paths for film and leads technique to unexpected problems”).⁷ Though the context would suggest a translation of “Technik” in the artistic sense of the word (e.g., “artistic technique”), it is nevertheless interesting to note the alternative, namely, the technological or engineering connotations: *Technik* was something aesthetic (and therefore perhaps more popularly understood as spiritual) as well as markedly industrial and technological (and therefore perhaps more popularly understood as material and pragmatic). Spirit and energy were conceptual bedfellows and Reinert’s film attempted to break both open.

A similar review by a writer “P—I” appears shortly thereafter in *Der Film*: “Mit der Phraseologie der Zwischentitel kann ich mich nicht befreunden, auch nicht mit ihren z. T. unklaren symbolischen Umrahmungen. Doch betätigen letztere sowohl als auch die Darstellung des Verfolgungswahnsinns und verschiedene andere Versuche und Neuerungen, daß noch lange nicht alle filmtechnischen Möglichkeiten erschöpft sind, ja, daß man vermutlich auch in Bälde von einem expressionistischen Film reden können” (“I don’t like the phraseology of the intertitles, particularly with their somewhat vague, symbolic decorative frames. But the latter, alongside both the depiction of persecution mania as well as other diverse experiments and innovations, attest that not all film-technical possibilities have been exhausted, indeed, that one

presumably will soon be able to speak of an expressionist film”).⁸ This reviewer understood *Nerven* as both breaking free from conventional cinematic technique and genre *as well as* establishing the rules for a particular genre of cinema. Interestingly, such a radical “break” with cinema was, in fact, a renewal of other media forms’ exploration of Expressionism; Reinert’s film might well be read as performing the kind of open-circuit structure at stake in this dissertation, in which the breakdown of one set of regulations feed into a new and emergent – though potentially no less constrictive – set. Ultimately, the film’s fragmentary and jarring nature was understood by its contemporaries as fundamentally *avant-garde*, that is, leading the way.

Where to? Perhaps this is the fundamental tension at the heart of *Nerven*, a film so dedicated to the documentation of failing nervous constitutions: until its three-minute mythic epilogue, the film predominantly looks backwards at a Benjaminian pile-up of nervous catastrophes. Reinert himself highlights this position: “Wenn sie mich fragen, was ich in „Nerven“ schildern werde, so muß ich verraten, daß ich einen ganz modernen Stoff behandle: den nervösen Zündstoff, den Krieg und Not im Menschen erzeugt und der vielfach politisch ausgelöst wurde. Ich schildere darin sozusagen die nervöse Epidemie, die die Menschen befallen hat und zu allerhand Taten und Schuld treibt. Nerven sind Seele, Gehirn ist Seele, -- und ich will eine gesunde Seele im Menschen anstreben” (“When they ask me, what I will depict in *Nerven*, I have to reveal that I’m working with completely modern material: the nervous kindling that produces war and misery in people, that was caused by a variety of political events. I depict in it, so to speak, the nervous epidemic that has befallen people and driven them to all kinds of deeds and culpabilities. Nerves are the soul, the brain is the soul, -- and I want to pursue a healthy human soul”).⁹ A healthy soul is Reinert’s goal; a markedly aestheticized documentation of nervous affliction are his means.

Even more curious, then, that this documentation is so *avant-garde*. After all, many of Reinert’s contemporaries are even quick to note the affective dimensions of their reception. The reviewer Heinz Schmid-Dimsch writes, for instance: “Was Reinert in seinem Werke schildert, ist in kurzen Worten nicht zu sagen. Es ist mit Worten überhaupt nicht auszudrücken, es muß empfunden werden” (“What Reinert depicts in his work cannot be simply stated in words. It cannot be expressed through words at all, it has to be felt”).¹⁰ In a summary for the popular newspaper *8 Uhr-Abendblatt*, an anonymous reviewer states: “Die Handlung, stellenweise gewollt sprunghaft, reißt mit Gewalt an den Nerven der Zuschauer, sie spannt auf die Folter, quält” (“The plot, in part intentionally erratic, violently tears at the spectators’ nerves, keeps up the suspense, torments”).¹¹ Indeed, the effect of the film was rumored to be so great as to send some of its viewers themselves to a *Nervenlinik*: ““It must have been 1921 [. . .] when a film called ‘Nerves’ played in Munich, and something extraordinary happened. The film was – in my opinion at the time – very good. However, there were some people who saw the film and were delivered to a Nervenlinik. Afterwards the film was banned.””¹² Whether *Nerven* was, in fact, so nerve-racking can only be a matter of speculation; more telling is that popular discourse had readily understood it as such. The film straddled the line between documenting societies woes and provoking the very nervous effects it sought to depict. In the grand scheme, at least some of the film’s fragments were to be understood as a self-conscious gesture; fragments described as much as they perpetuated the nervous fractures throughout the post-war German populace.

Anton Kaes’ reading of this fragmentation is given only a glance. Scholars like Philip Stiasny, David Bordwell, Steve Choe, and Barbara Hales have devoted articles and/or much larger chapters to the film, all of which highlight an interpretive perspective from which to view the film’s fractious qualities. Philip Stiasny, in a similar vein as Anton Kaes, argues that the film

mobilizes genres and tropes from wartime cinema as it processes mass post-war trauma; David Bordwell focuses on the cinematography's penchant for extreme and claustrophobic close-ups, in which "characters assail us with their overheated expressions and gestures"¹³; Steve Choe and Barbara Hales, both of whom are more directly tied in intention to my project, highlight the film's implicit concerns for the hysteric – and therefore emasculated – men returning from war. Choe's argument, which builds off of Hales, ultimately views Roloff and Johannes as two model outcomes for masculinity in war-torn Germany – the choice was between paranoid delusion and postwar recuperation through a patriarchal, if not outright authoritarian approach to labor.¹⁴ Suffice it to say, the film's fragmentation did more than excite nervous energies; still more potent, it expressed broader cultural concerns specific to postwar German culture and, by extension, cinema.

Though each of these accounts differ in their own ways, they all devote at least some attention to one of the central melodramatic hinges of the film: Marja's alleged rape and Roloff's contrived (and ultimately maddening) corroboration. After Roloff swears in Johannes' trial that he had witnessed the rape, acts two through four of the six-act film zero in on Roloff's hallucinations and disintegrating sense of reality; each "Ich habe es gesehen!" – whether as an accusation or reckoning with the revealed fiction thereof – is directly accompanied by an exactly repeated shot in which Johannes assaults Marja. Such repetition highlights a disregard for the veracity of the image; front and center is the direct *effect* of an image upon its viewer. Kaes offers a pithy summation of this scene's interpretive centrality when he writes: "The film, then, suggests that it, too, could render things merely imagined real and that those imagined realities could have a traumatizing effect".¹⁵ The danger of these hallucinations lies, in other words, in their nervous effects as they play out across German culture and politics.

And what kind of threat did they pose? Certainly, a perceived emasculation, that is, an imagined loss of a once virile prewar masculinity was an ever-present threat, as Choe, Hales, and, to a certain extent, Kaes have argued. From another angle, Kaes and Stiasny have also highlighted the film's inheritance of broader wartime categories, such as the influenza epidemic in the closing years of the war. Ultimately, these accounts zoom out and understand the film as a generalized response to the manifold traumas that pervaded postwar Germany. Exemplary of this move, Stiasny understands the film as a sweeping metaphor for societal collapse: "The collapse of [Roloff's] old factories through an unexpected explosion, the experience of shock followed by his disturbance, is a powerful metaphor for Germany's defeat in the war and the collapse of an empire".¹⁶ Nervous agitation and collapse seemed to fit well together; cultural breakdown was understood through the notoriously malleable concept of the nerve-racked body.

An understanding of the film as reflecting societal collapse is necessarily achieved through a broad interpretive lens. It is thus not entirely surprising the acutely specific historical events have gone unexamined in interpretations of *Nerven*; it has been much easier to view the film as an expression of generalized German national trauma rather than a more focused mirroring of the conflict between The People's State of Bavaria and its rival government, the Bavarian Soviet Republic. A foray into the details of this strife will ultimately reveal a tension both in the historical as well as scholarly reception of Germany's collapse: how does one account for specific and localizable, that is, *distant* dysfunction of a broader network, political, electrical, or otherwise?

It is hard to impart the devastating yet disparate effects that the war had on the nation; to speak of a national trauma runs the risk of erasing how that trauma manifests within particular sectors of society. In the context of WWI, this well-worn risk is understandable. Germany alone

lost an estimated 2,037,000 soldiers to trench warfare and about 760,000 civilians to influenza and famine.¹⁷ As Kaes points out, many of the soldiers who *had* died for intents and purposes just *disappeared*¹⁸; proper burials were few and far between, as around 35 percent of a generation of those born between 1892 and 1895 fell victim to the war and its mass slaughter.¹⁹ The impact of loss, disease, and hunger make it difficult to grasp just how fractured society was.

Yet there were certainly markers of fracture. One of the earlier stirrings of impending societal collapse was the 1918 *Januarstreik* (Jan. 25th – February 1st), during which around 400,000 workers in Berlin munitions and metal plants broadly protested the seemingly never-ending war and its concomitant food and wage shortages. Led by members of the antiwar social democrats – otherwise known as the *Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (USPD) –, the strike spread through Germany’s cities, particularly those more heavily involved with furthering the war effort.²⁰ Though the strikes were stamped out – many of the protests’ leaders were, in fact, sent to the front shortly thereafter as punishment – its underpinning Marxist and socialist ideals soon found themselves carried through and interwoven with the *Kieler Matrosenaufstand* (Nov. 3rd-4th, 1918) and the resulting *Novemberrevolution* (Nov. 9th-10th, 1918), during which sailors and eventually the broader German populace openly revolted against orders and broader initiatives to prolong a by-then losing war. These events would ultimately precipitate Emperor Wilhelm II’s escape of the throne, the declaration of Germany as a republic, and, eventually, the introduction of the Weimar Republic’s parliamentary democracy.

Most narratives of postwar German film stop here; it suffices for much scholarship to note that broader societal order had gradually decayed to a state of untenability. Yet *Nerven* – as I will follow Stiasny here²¹ – had its proverbial finger on the frantic pulse of the nervous political body; its characters and narrative arcs align closely with the events that had occurred in Munich between the 1918 November revolutions and later political unrest of March, April and May the following year; even a more cursory review of these events illuminates a hitherto underexplored subtext of the film. Contrary to the contemporary image it possesses today, the city of Munich was, in the years leading up to Germany’s political turmoil of 1917-1918, a hub of “anarchic bohemianism and political radicalism in an otherwise predominantly Roman Catholic rural sea of small towns.”²² In an environment ripe for upheaval, Kurt Eisner, a middle-class Jew who had both sympathies and concerns with Marxist ideologies of the day,²³ took advantage of the chaos of the *Novemberrevolution* and, having amassed a fair amount of political capital among the USPD and protesting workers, declared Bavaria a free state and introduced what were radical reforms for the time: “separation of church and state, [. . .] [women’s suffrage], social welfare and worker representation, and [an end to] Sunday labor.”²⁴

For all the popular reforms that Eisner had introduced, eventually as the first Minister-President of the socialist *Volksstaat Bayern* (the People’s State of Bavaria), he was promptly voted out of office in January 1919, owing to a mix of factors, including his government’s inability to provide basic infrastructural services, a more widespread and rural suspicion of his Jewish heritage, and his apologies for Germany’s supposed instigating role in WWI.²⁵ On his way to abdicate power in February, Eisner was assassinated by the rightwing and antisemitic conspiracy theorist and nationalist Anton Graf von Arco auf Valley. Rumors began to circulate that Erhard Auer, a member of the rival SPD, had been the one to kill Eisner; they led to a retaliatory attempt on Auer’s life in parliament by the leftwing Alois Linder, just as Auer had just begun to give a eulogy for Eisner. The attempt unleashed a flurry of commotion, stray bullets, and one further death, which resulted in both the dissolution of any stable Bavarian government as well as the nervous breakdowns of two Bavarian state cabinet ministers.²⁶

In both postwar history and Reinert's aestheticization thereof, nervous breakdown and political disarray were intimate bedfellows. Yet the similarities continue: the *Volkstaat Bayern*'s month of political turmoil following Eisner's assassination ultimately led to the election of a new leader among the Socialists, Johannes Hoffmann. Like his filmic counterparts, Johannes Hoffmann was a former schoolteacher whose antiwar stance and democratic sensibilities enabled him to craft a tenuous coalition government – for about a month. First, Expressionist playwright Ernst Toller, alongside a group of energized communists and anarchists, led a coup, instating a separate Soviet Republic in Bavaria – the *Münchner Räterepublik*. With Hoffmann having fled to Bamberg, where the existence of *Volkstaat Bayern* managed to persist, Toller's government lasted for about a week before Russian Bolsheviks led yet another coup and instated Eugen Leviné as head of state. The communist-run *Münchner Räterepublik* and Johannes Hoffmann's *Volkstaat Bayern* became antagonist rivals and would be locked in a series of fierce skirmishes over control of Munich and the larger Bayern region.

In the struggle for the region, Johannes Hoffmann, whose government was stationed in Bamberg and crafting the constitution for the new Bavarian state, would eventually defeat the insurrectionary forces in May 1919 by enlisting the help of the paramilitary *Freikorps*. Though conventionally understood as a precursor to later Nazi paramilitary units, the *Freikorps* was, in fact, primarily made up of soldiers unable to readjust to the demands and conditions of postwar society; unable to find a home upon their return, these young men turned to the *Freikorps* for the continued sense of identity, community, and purpose they had found at the warfront.²⁷ The *Freikorps* ultimately allowed for both an expression of a hardened, unaffected, and militaristic masculinity as well as the opportunity to enact retribution on pacifists, Jews, socialists, and communists – tout court, those responsible for Germany's loss, according to the infamous stabbed-in-the-back myth.²⁸ Indeed, some scholars, such as Paul Lerner, have even suggested that the group's fixation on redeeming masculinity through militaristic means was at least in part a response to modern psychiatry's continually applied and emasculating diagnosis of hysteria – a nervous condition, it will be remembered, that had often been reserved for women throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries.²⁹ Soldiers' nervous constitutions were threatened by a feminine disorder; the *Freikorps* offered one way to discipline, redeem and save a war-torn masculinity in the face of modernity's purportedly emasculating forces and politics.

This need to reassert masculinity is not innocuous in the context of *Nerven*. Both Choe and Hales have pointed to the film's promotion of the schoolteacher Johannes as a masculine ideal, impervious to the innervating and enervating currents that stream through the body politic. Alongside Bavaria's history as a fractured state, *Nerven* can be understood to be citing Johannes as a nervously secure figure, capable of directing and ultimately harnessing the rebellious, violent masses – the *Freikorps*, say – in service of a more stable politics, a resuscitated national economy, and (ultimately mythical) system of labor.³⁰ Reinert's film, in other words, referenced and focused on what had been understood, even at that time, as deeply *nervous*.

Still further, one can well read the proximity of Reinert's film to the actual historical events of 1917-1919 Bavaria on a metadiscursive level. First, we can recall Kaes' observation: the film does not differentiate between Roloff's delusion and reality; by simply showing what Roloff has accused of Johannes, "the film, then, suggests that it, too, could render things merely imagined real and that those imagined realities could have a traumatizing effect."³¹ Fact, fiction, and film's responsibility, let alone ability at all, to distinguish between the two are all thrown into doubt. If, as I have outlined, *Nerven* is a much more concerted engagement with historical events, Kaes' conclusion needs to be extended: Reinert and his film draw the purportedly

objective proceedings of that tumultuous period of political regime change into the aesthetic sphere, where it is to revel indefinitely in nervous agitation. Reinert's film, then, exposes a breakdown, not just in political stability more broadly, but in the ability to trust the veracity of an image within a particularly violent and affectively charged historical period.

Seeing is believing, as the saying goes. Yet Reinert's time, as this section has argued, was marked by both dogmatic and militaristic assertions of ideology, as well as a disintegration of a cohesive social fabric; seeing was believing and believing was wrought with uncertainty. If *Nerven* was, as historical newspaper excerpts above have claimed, an innovative step towards something that would come to be identified as Expressionist cinema, it is perhaps largely in part due to the film's doubting disposition toward an image's indexical fidelity. An image could cloud and obfuscate the truth as much as it could illuminate it; the tension was ultimately a deep well of nervous energy production. Reinert's solution to these blurred lines will be an embrace of a mythic visionary mode – but not before a torturous exploration of the relationship between vision, electricity, and functional dysfunction.

Vision's Nervous Currents

In the beginning of the film's main plot, Roloff attends a gala event, celebrating his success as an industrialist and thinly veiled symbol of a pre-war German national vitality. The festivities are suddenly thrown into a frenzied disarray, as the factory begins to explode. Roloff exclaims, "Behaltet eure Nerven – wie ich – sonst ist alles verloren" ("Steel your nerves – like me – otherwise, all is lost"). Roloff's prediction is immediately confirmed by the second intertitle and the illustration of industrial collapse: "Die Maschine explodiert und zerstört die Fabrik" ("The machine explodes and destroys the factory"). The images that follow offer their own narrative; with a dark red tint, the sequence is filled with jump cuts between shots of smokestacks falling, the opaque light of an all-consuming, dynamic curtain of smoke, and, as a kind of cruel offering of some kind of concrete visual anchor amid the chaos, unfettered crowds spilling out into view.



Fig. 1-4 (Martin, Left to right, top to bottom: Factory, Smokestack, Crowd, Smoke)

The images begin moderately clear and, as the cuts begin to pick up speed, grow increasingly obscure; even if some images of the crowd are more identifiable than others, their lack of open space coupled with the quick jump cuts to unidentifiable images, roots them firmly as part of the flood rather than safety therefrom. The shots of the crowd, too, often begin with a frame half-filled with smoke and people, respectively. The camera then tilts downward to focus in on the only identifiable element of the image – a vast, anonymous mob of people running from perceived danger. Such camera movement might well suggest a causality in the caustic, smoke-filled atmosphere; the obscurity of the image itself is the source out of which spills the panic of a *Volk*, a nation in disarray. Unable to identify anything else in the impenetrable fog, the camera is left to zero in on the effects.

This focus on effects emanating from a somewhat unsatisfyingly identifiable cause – an amorphous cloud – should sound familiar against the backdrop of Strindberg and Kaiser; as the camera shifts between distanced yet nevertheless claustrophobic shots of crowds and incomprehensible close-ups of smoke, it demonstrates its own embeddedness in the chaos itself, its inability to offer the uncrowded distance of critical comprehension. What it *can* offer is a rearticulation of chaotic effects, a registration and reproduction of panic. For as much as Roloff – the Kaiser figure whose industry was meant to lead to “Weltbeherrschung” – tries to calm an unruly crowd, the camera itself resists these pleas; it belongs to a *Volkspanik* as a mass medium and conduit of nervous energy. The camera is the technical machine, as panicked as its people.

The explosion of industrial machinery itself – its breakdown – is the starting point of articulation for the film’s narrative as a whole; it unleashes a storm of mass protest, which serves as the backdrop to the bourgeois protagonists’ unfurling dramas. While the nervous breakdown offered Modernists and Neoromantics the promise of a critical position – a tortuous promise, as these chapters have shown –, *Nerven*’s plot is predicated on a pessimism of inextricability; a critical angle is always already embedded within a larger field of malfunctioning industrial machinery. Asendorf’s pessimistic view of the metaphoric (and, in instances, literal) capitalist machine as a closed circuit is exploded from the film’s start. The system is not, as Asendorf would have it, functional through *successful* function; its production and distribution of energy is occasioned by its *improper* or *failed* functionality. Indeed, the functionality of systemic innervation is predicated precisely on the *dys-* or *non*functionality of its hardware; the nervous illness of individual psychology within the film is ultimately couched as a consequence of an original dysfunction within industrial civilization. This section explores precisely what kind of dysfunction is at stake in *Nerven* and ultimately reveals an intimate relationship between visuality, electricity, and the maintenance of societal order.

First, why should a machine’s explosion be understood as functional dysfunction? What allows for such a conceptualization beyond the not unreasonable charge of rhetorical abstraction? After all, an explosion might be nothing more than a (re)enactment of war trauma; with WWI’s proliferation of unprecedented and industrial weaponry – such as machine guns, flame throwers, and long-distance artillery guns – explosions from all their various sources proved to be originators of psychic trauma across society. The suggestion that an exploding machine should serve as an index for WWI’s literally shellshocked soldiers is certainly plausible.

However, the previous chapter’s investigation of the subject’s displacement in favor of industrial machinery and electrical communication during the war should prompt us to go deeper; more than just an indiscriminate explosion, it is precisely the *machine* that explodes; the demise of the machine, whose *raison d’être* is based entirely around its functionality should be understood as an explosion of the dichotomy between functionality and non-functionality.

Recalling Hauptmann Rudolf Schmidt's Nazi retrospective cited in the previous chapter: "Alles war noch im Anfang der Umgestaltung, als der Krieg began. [. . .] Der Krieg began damit, daß die Verbindungen aufhörten."³² A beginning was a cessation; the melodrama of modernity, according to *Nerven*, was heralded by technical modernity's malfunction. The intertitle "Die Maschine explodiert" is by no means an innocuous narrative motor; at the heart of the film's narrative production lies an original dys- or nonfunctionality, a disruptive excess running counter to a kind of business as usual. Industrial machinery, electrical networks, and communicative media all had the potential to stray from their prescription or to be undercut by the energetic excesses they ultimately generated. Thus, any closed loop of energy production and dissemination was burst open; uncontained energy fed into the breakdown's power.

Once again, what I have called the closed- and open-circuits prove to be helpful theoretical terms, implied by these early twentieth century historical contexts. This was seen, too, in the medical field, where electricity and (re)functionalization were operative terms in the diagnosis and treatment of hysteria. As Kaes is careful to document in his book, most returning male soldiers of the era were understood as neurasthenics or even effeminized hysterics.³³ In referencing historical court cases, newspaper editorials, and written testimony by Sigmund Freud himself, Kaes demonstrates how one of the central traumas of WWI was, in fact, a kind of retraumatization of soldiers seeking relief from symptoms of shellshock; electrotherapy was often used with the intent of quickly rehabilitating soldiers for the warfront – a systemic refunctionalization, if there ever was one.³⁴ Electricity was a means of revitalizing the supposedly depleted reservoirs of nervous energy; electroshock therapy sought to regain control over an energetically disrupted body. Ironically, such an attempt at control ultimately produced its own traumatic excess; even the gesture of refunctionalization produces energy beyond its intended use.

In a more sinister light, the painful and torturous technique was also applied as a deterrent from potential desertion; far better to be at the front than at the mercy of repeated shocks, whose current would be increased "in order to deprive war neurotics of the advantage they gained from their illness."³⁵ While Kaes offers this context as a justificatory reading for the period's mass cultural suspicion of the medical profession, it illuminates a different narrative as well: it shows the extent to which electricity was at the center of the tension between function and dysfunction. Rather than offer a cure, electricity was a means for intensifying dysfunction to the point that its subjects were more closely aligned with another set of societal goals and desires. Dysfunction became an integral part of becoming functional for the wartime effort; electricity and hysteria were caught in feedback loops without a return to nervous equilibrium, without the reestablishment of an individual or societal status quo.

The above examples alone demonstrate the highly suspicious nature of the hysteria diagnosis. The strong version of this suspicion – one for which I advocate here – is that the diagnosis of hysteria *produced* the disease.³⁶ In effect, the diagnosis participated in the refunctionalizing of the (ex)soldier's nervous body; it was thereby transformed into a terrain over which control and power and to continually be reasserted (and, in this diagnostic feedback loop, often *because* of the excesses produced by that very power). The (ex)soldier became an always-becoming, a repurposed body, a perpetual refunctionalization.

Yet even this refunctionalization was by no means secure. For as much as properly functioning electrical apparatuses posed a threat to the traumatized soldier, so, too, did a lack of electricity; the difficulties of a networked communicative infrastructure at the beginning of the war were repeating themselves in postwar Weimar. Indeed, stable energy distribution and costs

were not a given, despite the surge in arc lamp usage.³⁷ In a 1918 issue of *Die Film Welt*, in which one of the earliest promotional announcements for Reinert's *Nerven* already appears, an anonymous author for the film journal writes: "Aus den Kreisen unserer Industrie mehren sich die Klagen über völlig ungenügende Stromzuweisung in neuerer Zeit ganz außerordentlich" ("Within our industry's circles, complaints about our recent, fully insufficient electrical distribution are proliferating at an exceedingly high rate.")³⁸ The film industry, in other words, was experiencing a dramatic failure in efficient and sufficient electrical distribution; machines did not meet demand and, as such, were the cause for at least some of societal unrest. The author also draws an explicit connection between the postwar period, the traumatized soldier, and film:

Wie soll die deutsche Filmindustrie unter solchen Verhältnissen wohl ihrer Ehrenpflicht nachkommen, die heimkehrenden Krieger wieder in ihre alten Stellungen einzusetzen! Wie soll sie die Arbeitslosigkeit mindern helfen, wenn sie zwar Arbeitsgelegenheit zu vergeben hätte, eine Arbeitsmöglichkeit aber infolge jener Strombeschränkungsmaßnahmen nicht besitzt.³⁹

How should the German film industry fulfill under these conditions its duty of honor to reinstate returning warriors in their old jobs! How should it help reduce unemployment when it cannot provide otherwise available job opportunities due to restrictive measures for electricity?

The film industry cites electricity shortages for the failures of absorbing soldiers from the warfront; the electrical grid becomes the scapegoat, a rhetorical positioning that runs afoul the theories posited by the scholars Asendorf and Crary. Instead of the unilateral power enacted by a technocapitalist system, the postwar German film industry conversely decries the *lack* of a homogenous system, the *lack* of a functioning capitalist machine in both the literal and more metaphorical sense. The electrical network thereby straddled two conflicting positions: a functional and dominant organizational system of labor à la Crary and Asendorf, on the one hand, and a fallible and dysfunctional infrastructure, inadequate in absorbing the traumatic excesses generated by war. These excesses – in this case, the unemployed and traumatized soldiers – floated through postwar Germany, ready to be mobilized again – and indeed sometimes *were* remobilized, whether in the People's State of Bavaria or later Nazi Germany. Soldiers were, in the film industry and society more broadly, sites of refunctionalization, loci of competing systemic interests.

Nervous dysfunction – be that via failing infrastructure or torturous cures to hysteria – ultimately came to be refigured through the notion of a self-propagating feeling of inadequacy. Considering both Germany's loss in the war as well as the diagnosis's historical focus on primarily women's bodies, many perhaps more conservative cultural commentators became fixated on the idea of emasculation; Germany had been emasculated for losing the war and the proof was found in return en masse of hysteric soldiers. A figure of the vicious circle appears in the 1922 treatise *Über die Nervosität im deutschen Charakter: Entwurf zu einer Analyse der deutschen Volksseele von der Reichsgründung bis zum Zusammenbruch*. In exploring the reasons for Germany's military defeat as well as the nervous epidemic that seemed to pervade every corner of German society, the anonymous author named "Observator" suggests a German inferiority complex:

Doch liegt es in der Natur des Minderwertigkeitsgefühls, daß es die an ihm erkrankten Menschen zu Handlungen treibt, die nun ihrerseits wieder dazu beitragen, das Minderwertigkeitsgefühl in ihnen zu verstärken, somit ein geschlossener Ring ineinandergreifender Kettenglieder entsteht, deren erstes herauszufinden abgesehen

davon schwierig ist, daß es oft mehrere Faktoren sind, die krankheitsfördernd zusammenwirken.⁴⁰

Yet it is the nature of the feeling of inadequacy that those suffering from it are driven to actions that in turn contribute to an intensification of that feeling, such that a closed ring of interlocking links arises; as it turns out after difficult deliberation, there are often multiple factors contributing to the disease.

Observer's exemplary discussion of Germany's feelings of inferiority post-WWI is, notably, couched as both a disease as well as a self-perpetuating loop; one could well replace "feeling of inadequacy" with "nervousness" and Observer's passage would perfectly mimic cultural discourse around the nervous breakdown. Thus, Observer makes visible the conceptual slippage between inferiority and nervousness, as both employ a vicious circle in which the perceived disease deepens and intensifies without end. The conceptual overlap does not end there; interestingly enough, Observer bursts open his own proposed "geschlossener Ring" by acknowledging that there exist "mehrere Faktoren" contributing to the emasculation (re: nervous debilitation) of the nation's men. Rather than offer a singular cause (e.g., women, Jews, Communists, etc.), Observer expresses the almost insurmountable difficulty in accounting for all the possible factors that might contribute to the disease; just as nerves were agitated from all directions, so, too, were the feelings of inadequacy and emasculating hysteria.

Thus, Observer puts his finger on the figure of the vicious spiral, the open circuit. As if anticipating Observer's brief dismay at the inability to identify a singular cause to the epidemic plaguing society, *Nerven* attempts to conceptualize societal chaos through electrical discourse – which proves only to highlight Observer's confounding and seemingly inescapable "mehrere Faktoren" that constitute the perpetual condition of nervous breakdown. As will become clear in the following reading of *Nerven*'s dialogue and characters, the central questions of the film were: how can societal collapse be observed, if there are multiple elemental and invisible causes? And how is resolution possible when the visual observation of societal collapse is vulnerable to the electrical and nervous currents it seeks to describe?

First, an analysis of Marja and Johannes' blind sister reveal the relationship between visuality and electricity as central to the question of nervousness. On the one hand, Marja is a figure of an insatiable scopophilic drive. Her opening lines of dialogue pithily summarize her role within the narrative: "Fühlst Du nicht, wie der geheimnisvolle Strom die Luft durchzittert" ("Do you not feel how the hidden current trembles through the air"); "Wie die Erde unter etwas unerhörtem, Ungeheurem bebt; Ich muß das sehen" ("As the earth shakes beneath something unheard-of, monstrous; I must see it"). As previous chapters have shown, words like "Strom" and "durchzittern" are anything but innocuous; they are the very essence of nervousness and the hinge upon which concerns about electrical networks are pinned. Indeed, Marja's foreboding mysticism could easily be mistaken as a direct citation of Strindberg's later works; electrical current and its effects were understood as both dependent on the hardware that produced and distributed it, and, at the same time, ethereal and atmospheric.⁴¹

At stake for Marja and, through a meta-interpretation, the filmgoer herself, was an unleashed and unharnessed elemental energy that permeated society's bodies and, therefore, the stability of a predominantly *visual* order. With Marja on hand, the question posed in the paragraphs above might be recast as such: How can one make invisible currents visible? How does one articulate the electrical currents that cause hard-nosed industrialists to hallucinate, ordinary citizens to commit murder, angry mobs to form, sexual guilt to proliferate through bourgeois society? Alluring questions for both Marja and the filmgoer.⁴²

While the film might itself mourn the limitations of visibility alongside Marja, it nevertheless condemns her and the women who seek to transcend or control it as part of their insatiable scopic drives. Indeed, Marja's compulsion – "Ich muß das sehen" ("I have to see it") – is eventually tinted with Marja's later guilt-ridden sexual desires and false accusations of rape, which escalate if not in part *beget* the male protagonists' downfall. The compulsion to *see* the electrical currents that affect the body politic becomes destructive; Marja's nerve-agitating lie can well be read as an attempt to align herself with the innervating and epistemologically convincing image. Marja briefly harnesses the innervating power of electrical media, and thereby threatens the subjugation of nervous, male bodies. Like one reviewer describes: "Und im Mittelpunkt steht ein nervenstarker gesunder Mensch, der ruhig nimmt, was diese nervenzerrütteten Menschen um ihn zusammentragen. Nutzlos ist sein Versuch, sich gegen diesen Strom zu stemmen; da findet er den Weg aus dieser Wirrnis: zurück zur Natur!" ("And in the center stands a strong-nerved, healthy man who calmly takes that which these nerve-wrecked people around him collectively amass. Futile is his attempt to brace himself against this current; so he finds a way out of this chaos: back to nature!").⁴³

Marja, it should be noted, is not secure in the "Strom" she senses, and with which briefly aligns; she converges with it, only to be sent into her own guilt-ridden, nervous spiral for which she attempts to atone through revolutionary action and participation by film's end. That Marja is no less protected from the dramas occasioned by technical imagery and their maddening innervations reveals her own powerlessness in the face of larger forces. Rather than view her compulsion to see through a psychoanalytic lens, tempting as the prospect might be, it is more interesting here to understand it as produced *by* the electrical currents, in turn inaugurated by exploding machines. In this lens, chaotically stimulated vision begets the doomed desire to see its source; seeking complete visual control at the level of a technical infrastructure run amok spells nervous disaster. The film's original breakdown only intensifies through the desire to understand in visually as the images themselves (dys)functionally exert their power over the nervous bodies of the film's characters and spectators alike.

If Marja serves as the figural registration of a limited and insatiable visuality within a technical network, Johannes' blind sister serves as Marja's diametrically opposed foil. Throughout the film, she is a paragon of innocence, seemingly immune to the nervousness that courses through the rest of society; she is the ever-calm repository for bourgeois nervousness, the north star in contrast to which society is shown to be led astray. Johannes' struggle with his sexual desire for Elisabeth – depicted through his tortured readings of Biblical passages condemning adultery – is marked by the blind sister's telepathic empathy: "Mein Bruder, ich sehe dich nicht, aber ich fühle wie du leidest." The sister is attuned to empathic currents and, unlike Marja, has no compulsion to see it; she has an innate understanding afforded only to the seemingly desireless and, by extension, innocent figures of society. Her literally blind innocence – to be sure, her caricatural essence – comes to an exaggerated fore just as Johannes is being tried for his alleged rape. A shot of her gropes through the air is interrupted by an intertitle that reads: "Die Blinde fühlt instinktiv einen Zusammenhang zwischen der Bibel und ihrem Bruder." The blind sister – whose identity is solely based on her lack of sight – is afforded an intimate knowledge of the world's interconnectedness; she is the empath who *feels* her context.

Nevertheless, the position crumbles under the weight of a visual society spiraling out of control. Believing to save her brother from judgment, the blind sister brings forth the bible to the court, unable to see that the passage she unknowingly presents will ultimately serve as evidence *for* Johannes' sexual frustration – that is, *for* the plausibility of Marja's rape. An intertitle reads:

“Dieses Kind glaubte ihn zu retten und grub ihm, ohne es zu wollen, selbst das Grab” (“This child believed to save him and unintentionally dug his grave herself”). If the blind sister is the counterpart to an innervating visuality and Marja’s scopic drive – that is, the incessant and unfulfilled desire to visually register energetic currents without or at least at a distance to the stimulating reproductions thereof – she is shown to be, nevertheless, functional in the spiraling demise of the bourgeois protestant male; the figural refusal of visuality is complicit in a larger system of commercial, visual innervation.

Marja and the blind sister thereby represent two poles of femininity within the film: the sister, on the one hand, represents a desexualized innocence through her very blindness; Marja articulates a frustrated and unfulfilled connection between sexual desire and visuality as a kind of postlapsarian visual sin. Ultimately, both figures are never in complete control vis-à-vis the technical system in which they find themselves; I have suggested here that they are best read as coopted vessels for the larger media systems of electrical innervation. In short, both figures are unwillingly refunctionalized as perpetuators of disorienting, systemic stimulations, falling victim to the currents with which they occasionally converge.

My focus on these two women of *Nerven* thereby comes to a similar conclusion as Choe and Hales; if the two women are the foils against which the film’s male figures – Johannes, Roloff, and Marja’s betrothed – crumble, then the film should be read as an expression of masculine anxiety about weakening male autonomy. My analysis nuances the picture by highlighting the ways in which these women are not the end of the line; they, too, are subject to the intangible electrical forces that chaotically permeate societal fabric; they, too, are vectors of nervousness, threatening to undo individuals’ autonomy ad infinitum. Would that there be, the film might have well imagined, an autonomy to wrest us from the continual spiral of breakdown? The film’s inaugural exploding machine, Marja’s opening question – “Fühlst Du nicht, wie der geheimnisvolle Strom die Luft durchzittert” (“Do you not feel how the hidden current trembles through the air”) –, and the historical use of electricity all point to an inescapable dysfunction at the heart of a media system functionality at all.

Escaping Melodrama’s Circuits?

As the figure of Marja demonstrates, the desire to reckon with breakdown and its causes – to *see* the energetic currents unleashed by modernity – produces more sorrow than it resolves; the scopic drive becomes its own intensification through nervous stimulation. Indeed, the circular self-reproduction of this kind of nervous loop is both the film’s problem-to-solve as well as its constitutive form. This form, as I will argue in this section, should be read alongside the proliferation of filmic melodrama; tying together psychoanalytic treatments of melodramatic form with its early historical context, I show how *Nerven*’s mobilization of both melodrama’s tropic gestures and form ultimately illuminates the breakdown’s structure, defined as much by its tragedy as by its open-endedness.

As we come full circle in this final chapter, it is worth citing Freud’s conceptualization of psychophysiological therapies for hysteria – the paradigmatic nervous illness of the 19th and early 20th centuries –, which always seemed to fall flat: ““Vielmehr fällt die Unterbrechung [. . .] oft an die ungeschicktesten Stellen, gerade wo man sich einer Entscheidung nähren könnte, gerade wo ein neues Thema auftaucht. Es sind dieselben Übelstände, die jedem Zeitungsleser die Lektüre des alltäglichen Fragmentes seines Zeitungsromanes verleiden, wenn unmittelbar nach der entscheidenden Rede der Heldin, nach dem Knallen des Schusses u. dgl. zu lesen steht: (Fortsetzung folgt)” (“Rather, the interruption [. . .] often occurs at the most awkward points,

precisely when we might be able to approach a decision or when a new theme arises. These are the same difficulties that spoil anyone's reading of a novel serialized in a daily newspaper, when the heroine's decisive speech or, say, the ringing out of a shot is immediately followed by the words: "To be continued".⁴⁴ Lost in the dendritic maze of nervous cause and effect, in the disorienting moments of psychosomatic conversion between nervous stimulation and dysfunctional subjectivity, Freud implicitly invokes a classic structure of commercial melodrama to articulate failures in therapy; serial melodrama comes to embody the failure of closing off the vicious circles of neurasthenia.

The connection between Freud and melodrama does not die with Freud; in his 1977 "Minnelli and Melodrama" – at the height of psychoanalytic textual analysis –, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith conceives of the genre as conversion hysteria, that is, along the markedly similar, psychosomatic lines of thought with which Freud struggles throughout *Studien über Hysterie*. Nowell-Smith views melodrama as primarily an excitation of surplus energy which a given textual authority represses into narrative form; the hysteric excess of feeling at all is rerouted along the dendrites of a narrative's governing ideology. Just as feminine excess was a site of contestation – and, as Didi-Huberman argues, the instantiation for a loop of performance and diagnosis – in psychosomatic treatments of hysteria, so, too, was it the problem evoked and resolved into often patriarchally inflected films. Excess stands at the very core of melodrama and is often couched in terms of a system's recuperation of that which escapes it.⁴⁵

Despite the difficulty in defining the exact contours of a genre, both Ben Singer and Linda Williams provide helpful guidelines in interpreting melodramatic form – historically and more generally. First, Linda Williams, whose scholarship stems from the psychoanalytic tradition of film analysis, offers a concise encapsulation of the melodramatic mode:

[W]e can identify melodrama's pathos of the "too late!" In these fantasies the quest to return to and discover the origin of the self is manifest in the form of the child's fantasy of possessing ideal parents in the Freudian family romance, in the parental fantasy of possessing the child in maternal or paternal melodrama, and even in the lovers' fantasy of possessing one another in romantic weepies. In these fantasies the quest for connection is always tinged with the melancholy of loss.⁴⁶

As Williams understands it, melodrama is the attempt to remedy something that has always already been lost, to reconcile oneself with an irretrievable excess, to try out solutions that might conclude, definitively, modernity's perpetual condition of *to be continued*...

How does *Nerven* and its specific cultural moment line up against melodrama's psychoanalytic treatment? I contend that while the film is certainly a family drama between the factions of the industrialist, Roloff, and the idealist, Johannes, one need not commit to a fully psychoanalytic reading; more interesting is the way in which this filmic object sheds light on the theoretical terminology assumed by psychoanalysis. For one, Marja's too-late confession of her accusation's falsity is a situation explicitly defined by desire and possession. Only after Johannes has been found guilty – too late, to be sure –, Marja cries: "Johannes beherrschte meine Seele. Aber er hat mich nie körperlich besessen" ("Johannes dominated my soul. But he never possessed my body"). Suspending, for a moment, the veracity of the claim, Marja's word choice of "beherrschen" and "besessen" highlights two central categories for Western culture, both of which were threatened by "nervousness": subjective and bodily autonomies.

Nervous science, it will be remembered from this dissertation's introduction, had been fixated on the temporal gap between stimulation and cognitive registration following Hermann von Helmholtz's 1950 experiments on nervous transmission; to understand *that* one had been

stimulated was always an articulation made in retrospect.⁴⁷ One was, in short, always too late in the registration of nervous activity. This delay in registration – a failure of timely knowing – ultimately plagued the notion of autonomy; the asynchronous relationship between subjective experience and physical event meant that subjects were always catching up, left to chance, and, torturously, out of control. To *possess* or *control* the soul and/or body was simultaneously an ideal – the promise to master and ascend, if not transcend, the energetic currents from elsewhere – and a nightmare – that promise’s continual demise via unanticipated influxes of nervous energy and events.

This micro-level gap eventually became the model for Western European culture’s greater concern for the controllability of stimulus and bodily autonomy within interconnected systems; how might one control or regulate the amount of nervous stimulation occurring on a macro-level scale, if one could only ever recognize it after the fact? Thus, nervousness became the code word to describe such fallibility; to be nervous was a sign that one’s possession over both mind and body was actively coopted and even threatened by outside forces.⁴⁸ As such, possession was always a matter of the nervous body, even before the seemingly more immaterial or symbolic psychoanalytic turn. Marja’s retaliatory lie against Johannes and her subsequent confession should therefore be read as at least culturally resonant with this discourse; the dramatic import of the scene might well owe its power to the ubiquity of the nervousness discourse’s concern for bodily possession. Marja’s dialogue and the broader melodramas of the film are ultimately centered around the desire – required or otherwise – to possess a body at all.

If melodrama’s concern for possession, as Williams understands it, should be couched in a pervasive melancholy of always being too late, then the period of nervousness discourse was chronically depressed (or, as the time might have called it, neurasthenic). Indeed, early twentieth century filmic melodrama was, as Ben Singer explores in his *Melodrama and Modernity*, a grand mix of titillation, suspense, wildly oscillating tenors, and battles against time. This volatile brew was due in large part to the genre’s formal structure: early melodrama was both the tortuous exposition of modernity’s rifts as well as the excessive wish-fulfillment that resolved these tensions. Nevertheless, these resolutions were, at best, a secondary concern, to the titillating repetitiousness of modernity’s tensions, the nervous reveling in the frailty of capitalism’s atomized, modern subjects.⁴⁹ Singer’s fourth chapter argues that the relationship between early film and urban modernity was defined by a mutual discursive evolution; the nervousness discourse conditioned and shaped emergent similarities between cinema and urbanity. Within this context, melodrama was particularly well-suited to embody and explore the always tense and tenuous situatedness of a body within the larger networks of modernity.

With this focus on the perpetual exploration of modernity’s tensions, structures and effects, Singer examines the form of *serial* melodrama, in which installments of films – episodes, loosely – would build off each other and spin a larger web of complex narrative development:

The serial’s bare-bones narrative structure [. . .] afforded a sufficiently simple, predictable, and extensible framework on which to hang a series of thrills over fifteen weeks. Like earlier forms of melodrama, serials were distinguished by the simplicity and reliability of their two-stroke narrative engine, the back-and-forth movement of virtue and villainy.⁵⁰

Repetition and a pendulum-like swing between the poles of good and evil constituted the core of melodrama. This structure enabled a chaotic outgrowth of narrative development, much of which only had to be, at best, loosely related. As stimulation and titillation took precedent over cohesion, “an overarching narrative of unmappability [characterized] many serial

melodramas.”⁵¹ In short, serial melodrama was a genre defined by a tension between order and chaos, between a cyclical back-and-forth and arbitrary digression, between the balled-up knots and disorienting strings of Freud’s investigations into hysteria. *To be continued...* was the promise to revel in these tensions in perpetuity.

The crucial difference between Freud’s invocation of commercial melodrama and *Nerven*, however, lies in the time for reflection and diagnostic contemplation. While my previous chapters have illustrated a co-determinative relationship between literature, theater, and film, the last of these uniquely relies on a sense of inescapability from a continuous and compressed onslaught of nervous stimulation; the failed contemplative mode of the modern *Stationendrama* begins to give way to melodramatic film’s markedly unreflective mode. *Nerven* exposes this evolution; while, as Singer notes, the melodrama film was vastly more popular than its theatrical counterpart due to the former’s compressed action, manipulation of time, and freedom from spatial constraints,⁵² *Nerven* pushes this mode to its extreme by compressing what film more generally had already compressed in melodramatic theater. In addition to its exaggerated extreme close-ups, which had become a staple of the melodramatic genre by the time *Nerven* had been released,⁵³ the film’s high-frequency rise and fall of melodramatic events and gestures displays a frenzy of form, evidenced by the wildly oscillating narrative alone.

Still further, the film’s advertising campaigns display a marked attention to melodramatic spectacle. In a series of typical melodramatic tableaux, ranging from bull fights to fancy, high-rolling casino nights, the film journals *Licht – Bild – Bühne* and *Der Film* attempted to pique, indeed, to stimulate public interest in the film – even though these depictions had nothing to do with the narrative itself. One such scene, for instance, displays a train barreling towards an oblivious young girl admiring flowers on the train tracks. An older woman is seen rushing towards the girl, arms out-stretched as if to attempt a rescue before the perilous moment.



Fig. 1 (Fenneker, Train)



Fig. 2 (Lumière, Arrival of a Train)

The poster neatly captures the film's central worry: bodies vulnerable to industry might well be beyond saving. In other words, it *might* already be too late. Yet the image goes a step further: rather than sequester off the scene from daily life, the train threatens to mow down the little girl and continue through the frame – and possibly through the spectator herself. In staging the melodramatic trope in this way, the poster might well be read as citing silent cinema's earlier short films; what Tom Gunning and André Gaudreault have called the cinema of attractions abounds with minute long clips of trains arriving, taken from precarious angles, between the safely distanced bodies and the oncoming threats of industrial modernity (fig. 2). As such, the poster and its predecessor evoke the vulnerability of the spectator's body, the felt danger that an image could, in fact, real, and the resulting thrill. The difference between the poster and, for example, Lumière's early film is now the position of the spectator; *Nerven's* advertising campaign intensifies physical vulnerability by putting the body literally in harm's way; at the time of the film's release, physical safety was no longer a guarantee.

These images, which are only tangentially relevant to the film's narrative, abounded in *Nerven's* advertising campaign. The strategy of its images lay in the image's proximity to the film's message, rather than to the details of its plot. From its depictions of bull fights, casinos, horse races, erotic dances, or even the jagged and disorienting shapes of an Expressionist landscape (Fig. 3-7), *Nerven's* promotional material should be understood as *evocative*; it drew on an archive of familiar melodramatic tropes, scenes and designs in order to further a disjointed yet all-pervasive, *nervous* atmosphere.⁵⁴ Indeed, nervous stimulation was not bound to one medium in particular; energy coursed through the membranes of modernity's grander environment of media. At stake, then, was the innervating power of gesture in both *Nerven's* diegetic and paratextual worlds, in both the film as a provisionally closed unit and its external media environments.



Fig. 3-7 (Fenneker, Bullfight; Casino; Horse Race; Expressionist City)

We might understand this energy unbounded from the limits of one physical body or even technical medium as a historical cultural issue as well. As I have been arguing here, these images should not only be understood as mere depictions of postwar Weimar society; rather than strictly ‘contemporary’ images, each suggests a continuity with the past through the mobilization of historical gestures and tropes. Further still, some images threatened to reveal the traumatic underpinnings of their evocative power. One particularly striking example depicts a body being crushed under the weight of an oversized wheel, whose contours and lines blend into the landscape around it (Fig. 8).



Fig. 8 (Fenneker, Body and Wheel)

Curiously, the image evokes the traumas and tragedies of WWI despite lacking any direct depictions thereof; there are no trenches, no mechanized weaponry, no uniforms, etc. The effect might well be attributed to the poster's citation of other wartime or apocalyptic visions, such as paintings by Otto Dix, or those explored in the second chapter of my project. In other words, the mere presence of multiple suffering figures, of ominous crows, of the threatening weight of machinery (and, more specifically, Strindbergian wheels that continue to brutally churn up nervous bodies) – all of these suggest an archive of imagery ready to be remobilized with a whole host of (traumatic) connotations. In such a way, the poster once again performs an evocation via the circulation of images already in the public consciousness. *Nerven*, it may therefore be said, is not just about the potentially dangerous and innervating effects of imagery; still further, it is about the effects of an image's *repetition*, its recirculation and remobilization. The wheel of nervous images spins on, churning up bodies as it goes.

The simultaneous recycling and intensification of these images forms the vicious spiral about which, it will be remembered from this dissertation's introduction, Hurry Jamieson warned in his 1915 *The Vicious Circle of Neurasthenia and their Treatment*; *Nerven*'s images become implicated in nervous illness, in its "successive loops" which "represent the increment of the several factors."⁵⁵ Indeed, the vicious spiral is, for Jamieson, for Observer, a composite of various effects from elsewhere, much in the same way the poster images draw on pictorial archives in evoking and producing a nervous atmosphere. There are a literally overwhelming number of nervous stimulants in modernity; the circle offered a way to make sense of these cause and effects yet could not escape the condition of being *affected*. With this interpretive lens, we might recast one review from a 1920 issue of *B.Z. am Mittag* which notes an opposite effect of

the film's gratuitous excesses: "Ein großer Film war uns angekündigt worden, aber er ist bloß lang. Eine Handlung von wüster Sinnlosigkeit schleppt sich endlos weiter" ("We were promised a great film, but it is just long. A plot of desolate meaningless slogs along without end.")⁵⁶ On the one hand invigorating to the point of fainting and, on the other hand, boring and full of desolate meaninglessness, *Nerven* was received in its both innervating and enervating capacities. The film was, in a word, a breakdown, encompassing both the frantic hysteria and the burned-out neurasthenia of postwar Germany. Reinert's film thereby makes apparent how film in its commercially melodramatic mode was a quintessentially productive and destructive force on nervous bodies.

How better to understand, for instance, the doctor's diagnoses which opened this chapter? His list of causes – "advancing civilization, the fight for existence, the fear and horrors of war, the sins of the parents. . ." – amounts to little more than an impotent attempt to halt the melodramatic spiral of Roloff's madness; any critical position that the doctor supposedly enjoys (one which is itself later undermined through the Weimarian trope of the mad scientist) is essentially powerless to the continued digressions of *Nerven*'s narrative, which only ever promises the perpetuation of the innervating consequences it seeks to resolve. Indeed, the curative diagnosis ultimately amounts to just another one-minute segment in the middle of a disoriented and disorienting melodrama.⁵⁷

By staging the futility of the doctor's enumerative list of nervous causes, the film might still be understood as offering a critical position; the film's frenzied mobilization of melodramatic tropes and gestures begs for a critical eye, an outside to the torrent of nervous stimulation. The film's solution, however, is not a recapturing of the sober critical position. It relies instead on a biblical, mythic mode, explored through a third feminine figure: Roloff's wife, Elisabeth. After the other figures meet their respective demises – Roloff's insanity, Marja's eventual suicide, the accidental death of Johannes' sister – Elisabeth and Johannes return to an Edenic and pastoral landscape, thereby staging a scene of renewal and rebirth from the ashes of bourgeois, decadent society; innocence is restored in their union, the problem of nervousness seemingly resolved. The serially produced and rehearsed problem of urbanity's nervousness is resolved through a return to a 'natural' mode of labor amidst ineffable landscapes and free from exploding industrial machinery. The postlapsarian condition – the torturous rise, fall and ever widening concentric circles of decadent urbanity's stimulations – comes full circle through a return to a pre-industrial Eden. Indeed, *Nerven* closes the circuit by moving past the technology and infrastructure that opened it; the film's proposed closed-loop is one that rhetorically situates industry as a stage – a station, perhaps – on the return path to Eden.

Interestingly, this three-minute epilogue is inaugurated by an intertitle reading "Das Wiedersehen." Taken literally, the intertitle centers vision as a central component to the two figures' union; they see each other again or, perhaps further still, are redelivered to a prelapsarian mode of vision, unperturbed by technological modernity's nervous currents. Robert Reinert's hope is, throughout the film, to find a way to see through and past vicious, melodramatic loops. Yet such a solution cannot be understood as anything other than a tension; the sweetness of nature contends with the bitterness of its means of representation. In short, the film proposes to return to a preindustrial era through the means of that industry's electrical technology. In such a light, the abrupt and mythic ending contains a frailty in its message, whose assuredness is undermined by precisely its means of representation. One reading of the film is to therefore understand the ending as, unfulfilled; rather than a sincere or wholehearted embrace of the back-to-nature movement, the film exposes the difficulty in transcending the technical infrastructure

of daily life. Eden is only ever a promise to transcend the electrical infrastructure from which it was born – a projection on the horizon, or, dare I say, the screen of cultural imagination, as titillating of the nerves as anything else throughout the film.

In such a light, “Das Wiedersehen” raises for the spectator herself the uncanny spectrality of melodramatic repetition; the sense of wholeness is undermined by precisely the repetition of reunion as a typical melodramatic ending. Melodramatic reunions have been seen and seen again only to produce the need to continue seeing them. “Das Wiedersehen” is both the closing and opening up of this loop. The machine has exploded; its functional dysfunction and the vicious circle of neurasthenic spectacle continues to invade the body and, therefore, provoke a fundamental too-lateness of sight, self-control and, indeed, self-possession. We are rejoined with Freud’s ironic note: *To be continued...*

This section has outlined *Nerven*’s metadiscursive commentary on the form of melodrama; the film implicates the genre and practices of melodrama as a product and perpetuator of modernity’s energetic currents, whether nervous, electrical or an unsettling mixture of the two. As much as the film wishes to close the circuit, in which visuality, nervousness and electricity feed on each other in unending loops, I have, in these last paragraphs, offered a way to read the film against itself, despite any comfort it may offer. Ultimately, visual fascination – a position that promised critical remove just as it was being drawn in – was well-suited for the commercial melodrama; indeed, melodrama came to embody modernity’s functional dysfunction, and *Nerven* threatens to let this form spiral on and on in an ever deepening and ever productive breakdown, be that hysteric or neurasthenic. As my analysis of the film has shown, the very desire to visually understand – to observationally close the vicious spiral – was what allowed it to continue, open-endedly, always a threat to its spectators and, crucially, itself. If the modern breakdown – as hysteria, neurasthenia, or a more general “Zusammenbruch” – coincided with the emergence of electrical networks, *Nerven* demonstrates the extent to which this network’s dysfunction was what allowed it to function at all.

This chapter has shown that the paradox between function and dysfunction extended to the very act of spectatorship itself. To spectate was understood as formal, arising from and producing the nervous effects it articulated. Spectatorship was environmental; it was embedded – affecting and affected by – a field of energetic currents. The nervous breakdown, as *Nerven* demonstrates, was the starting point at which nervousness had to be understood at all; a critical understanding of the breakdown had to recognize it as a point from which its contours were articulated. As the logic *Nerven* argues, the security of such position was woefully vulnerable and left few options – either succumb to the tangled network of causes and effects or embrace an explicitly mythical worldview that sought to transcend modernity’s technical infrastructures. And between these poles of despair and hope, the film’s melodrama teeters in a quest to observe with certainty those nerves – “Ihr Sendboten höchster Lust und tiefsten Leides!”

Conclusion

Let us return to the beginning: Jerry Useem's 2021 article for *The Atlantic*, one which sought to provide a refunctionalization to the nervous body in terms of its labor, might at first glance seem like a diagnosis of a broader contemporary age, beginning sometime alongside the advent of email, social media, or any other novel technology that contributed to the pervasiveness of work and, by extension, the energetic tax on individuals' nervous systems. Yet the release date for his article might offer a more nuanced story; just one year after worldwide lockdowns began due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Useem's argument for rest for labor's sake arrived a moment in which work itself was undergoing an intense reevaluation; essential workers were asked to carry out their traditional duties with added stipulations, often resulting in added risk to their own physical or mental wellbeing; more 'non-essential' workers were told to do their same duties from home; some workers were laid off or had quit due to insurmountable obstacles at the workplace, which resulted in the so-called "Great Resignation" from 2020-2021 (Chugh, "What is 'The Great Resignation'?"). Useem's reevaluation of "nervousness" as a historically situated diagnosis coincides with the immediate contemporary's reevaluation of work and labor.

Even with this contextualization of Useem's article, the chapters of this dissertation implicitly ask for a deeper look; as they have argued, the problem of nervous energy extended beyond just a relationship between the body and labor, as scholars like Michael Cowan, Christoph Asendorf, and Jonathan Crary have insisted; nervous energy was a question of mediatization, of contending with the spatial situatedness of the physical body within a grander media landscape and technical network. These artists' works, in other words, demonstrate an *impossibility* of rest, in a kind of relief or reprieve from the onslaught of nervous energy and stimulation; the body is always already enmeshed within a technical network, simultaneously always viewing itself and, in that very act of viewing, producing excesses beyond its control.

To be sure, this media angle is not lost on the contemporary as a whole; by framing Useem's argument as a commentary on an intensely *digital* era, during which remote work and even social connection is only ever facilitated by digital and electric technologies, it becomes clear that the problems the preceding chapters laid out have not left us. Indeed, we are asked to contend with their legacies, contend with the staged failures and attempts at regaining autonomy. They prompt us to question the value of autonomy, the torturous optimism for autonomy within the electrotechnical, let alone digital age. And perhaps most importantly, they ask us to turn our gaze away from the conveyor belt of journalistic think-pieces and cultural commentaries and towards more overtly aesthetic projects and attempts at making sense of the network and its subjects.

One such piece is Bo Burnham's *Inside* – an immensely popular comedy special released by Netflix at the height of the pandemic, which has been hailed as encapsulating a kind of *Zeitgeist*. Throughout the special, Burnham stages himself as a kind of content creator, albeit one trapped inside a backyard accessory dwelling unit (ADU). As the special unfolds, Burnham stages a variety of situations not unfamiliar to many who have spent time on the internet and, more specifically, social media – including live streaming, reaction videos, Instagram selfies, etc. Yet with each sardonic musical number poking fun at our era's inanities, we witness Burnham's staged self slide deeper into a state of debilitating anxiety – Burnham's *Inside* stages the mental breakdown for and of those whose lives were or are predominantly online. Burnham registered

as much as he produced a kind of nervous anxiety mixed in with the labors and media of content creation.

Why, one might ask, should one pay any attention to Bo Burnham, particularly in the conclusion to a scholarly engagement with early 20th century Northern European visual arts? For one, the seemingly tangential work belies the persistence of the “breakdown” as a salient cultural category. Still further, it signals that its cultural currency arises from a concern for media and media effects within a larger interconnected yet simultaneously isolating network. Burnham’s constant production of content, an act of public-facing labor that has infiltrated the claustrophobic interior of his studio, illuminates the extent to which the functionality of a larger network depends on the increasing dysfunction of its subjects.

The most poignant demonstration of this tension, which I have traced throughout this dissertation as a primary concern of the early twentieth century, is the comedy special’s closing scene. After the closing musical number, which ends with a naked and abject Bo Burnham surrounded his recording and, fortuitously for this dissertation’s subject, audio looping equipment, the camera shifts to Burnham sitting in a completely bare room with a door cracked open. A light shines through the slit, inviting an escape to the outside, which the special denies showing throughout the preceding arc. Here, we are faced with an optimism that there might be an escape from the condition of isolation, from the blurred lines between labor and leisure, from increasingly dysfunctional bodies’ functionalizations within a media ecosystem demanding the production and consumption of content. Though Burnham begins to tentatively move toward this light, the camera stays zeroed in on his face in extreme close-ups; the claustrophobic confines of the camera, much like in *Nerven*, develop a sense of encroachment and danger all the while instigating a desire to see more. The accompanying soundtrack of children playing and birds singing only serves to heighten the sense that maybe this time a deliverance from isolation might just be within reach.

In a medium length shot, the camera then shows Burnham standing in a spotlight in front of a house that looks very much like a set design. After a brief moment of silence, there is a round of applause from an invisible audience. Burnham gingerly tries to open the door from which he just emerged but fails to do so; the increasing desperation of his attempts to open the door match the rising intensity of a laugh track. The quality of both the camera and audio then suddenly shift; it is as if one were watching a home video with slightly bleached colors and a tinny sound. The camera begins to slowly zoom out and shows that we have not, in fact, escaped to the outside; the at first hopeful, then nightmarish scene is shown to be projected on the interior wall of Burnham’s studio. With the laugh track still running, the camera then shifts to a close-up of Burnham’s face with the projector beam behind him; Burnham has both produced and now watches his cycle of optimism and desperation. In the last seconds of the film, the stoic face of spectator Burnham suddenly betrays a smirk as he begins to join in the laughter.¹

On the face of it, the sequence is about performativity in the age of social media; Burnham’s ironic satire across all his comedy specials is fixedly aimed at the self-importance of performers, the tortured relationship between performer and spectator, and the mental taxation such labor ultimately takes. All of this can certainly serve as a valid interpretive framework. For instance, one might note that while Burnham’s earlier stand-up specials were filmed in front of a live audience, whereby the use of the spotlight feels conventional if not natural, this sequence estranges the audience to the notion of performativity; perhaps there is indeed hope in the distance gained from a “live” situation; perhaps recordings allow for a perpetual replaying that affords the ability to laugh at one’s own demise; perhaps one can disembodiment oneself and join in

the artificial laugh track whose source remains hidden. Recording media, and, in this case, are where such hopes are pinned.

Nevertheless, it is, I contend, a mistake to simply leave the interpretation here. The use and, indeed, the *staging* of light in this sequence should not be mere markers of a performative mode; instead, light marks a *history* of performativity, a legacy enabled by electrical technology altogether. On the one hand, one might well read this closing sequences use of light against the dizzying spotlights of the velodrome in *Von morgens bis mitternachts*. Both sequences display light's power in fixing its spectators and performers; light poses a threat even to the performer, who supposedly holds the audience in the palm of their hand. If such a threat, as I have argued throughout the preceding chapters, was originally owed primarily to the (dys)functions of a technical network, *Inside* shows the staying power of the electrical legacy in the digital era.

On the other hand, *Inside*'s staging of light differs from the spectacle of the velodrome, insofar as the latter shows light to be just that – a spectacle, a special event, an opportunity amidst the mundanity of petit bourgeois life to ascend to the status of a kind of Nietzschean *Übermensch*. *Inside*, by contrast, shows light to be, as Strindberg noted even from the electrical grid's coming-of-age, invasive and ubiquitous. The spotlight's stasis alongside the mise-en-abyme of projection technology demonstrate that a logic of electrical light undergirds even purportedly non-projective digital media, whereby light emanates from the spectacle itself. By referencing digital technology's predecessors, Burnham attempts to gain distance at least to the contemporary moment by inviting a critical understanding of it as a cyclical dynamic rooted in the history of technical modernity. The spectator watches their own demise; the very act of watching contributes to the intensification of the observed affects. Breakdown becomes cyclical – Burnham's laugh casts the end of the special in ambiguous light. Is he laughing because he's achieved satisfactory distance in watching himself? Or is he laughing because there is no hope given the long history of this cycle? And if the latter, does a laugh at hopelessness itself signal its own kind of satisfying distance?

These have been the questions at the heart of this dissertation, which has examined works arising during the emergence of both a widespread electrical grid as well as the institution of silent cinema. All the chapters have shown how the cyclical dynamic at stake (also in *Inside*) ultimately relate to a discourse surrounding technical and/or psychological function and dysfunction in machines and humans alike. The first chapter details the ways in which Strindberg – mad author extraordinaire – not only stages his mental breakdown for the public in his later works; he demonstrates the extent to which his acts of observation are part and parcel of a spiraling madness. The analysis of both *To Damascus* and *Alone* have demonstrated that this embeddedness is about the observer's physiological participation, hence Strindberg's metaphors of fabrics and weaving throughout his plays. *Alone* takes these fabrics as the premise, as his narrator wistfully wanders through the urban environment of downtown Stockholm. Markedly less oneiric than *A Dream Play*, *To Damascus*, or even *Inferno*, *Alone* sets out a slew of voyeuristic or spectatorial scenes, in which the narrator contends with his body's simultaneous isolation and involvement with that which he observes. As the novel progresses, so too does the narrator's ebb and flow of hope, disappointment, optimism, and melancholy. This cycle of deepening melancholy ultimately reaches something of an open-ended aporia, wherein a viewing situation strongly reminiscent of silent cinema marks the hope and torture of a modern technical era. Strindberg's breakdown in *Inferno* seemingly levels out in an ebb-and-flow rhythm of intensifying clinical melancholy and hope, which feed into each other like a snake biting its tail;

As the following chapter shows, Georg Kaiser's *Von morgens bis mitternachts* carries forth a Strindbergian logic, insofar as it pays close attention to the evolving structural power of the electrical network. Indeed, far more than just a development of Strindberg's revitalized *Stationendrama*, far more than a redeployment of an anti-hero sensibility, Kaiser and his contemporaries draw a critical attention toward the spiraling (dys)functionality of the electrical era. They show the extent to which the autonomy of the male modern subject becomes ensnared in the wires that promise a variety of different kinds of transcendence – whether through money, through ecstatic participation in the masses, through sex and pleasure, through a convergence with energy itself. Kaiser's *Von morgens bis mitternachts*, in other words, continues a form of what I called Strindberg's *textured gaze*, whereby the linguistic registration of energy imparts its own electrical charge on its surrounding environment. Yet in contrast to Strindberg, Kaiser's play-turned-film demonstrates a slow but certain transition in emphasis; the affective charge of the image begins to outpace the verbalization of its effects. Strindberg's melancholic and, indeed, nearly contemplative musings in *Alone* give way to the speed of a visual onslaught in both Kaiser's film and in film technology more generally.

Kaiser's work also marks a critical turn toward a military-industrial complex rooted in the wider historical context of WWI; in the critical attention paid to the work and its iterations, a pre- and post-war delineation remains unexamined – and not without reason. After all, the play, written in 1912, more apparently takes aim at a specifically *pre-war* fanaticism and the pervasiveness of a militaristic discourse in various spheres of urban life. The 1920 filmic adaptation, by contrast, is said to display a post-war traumatic mode, in which the images' shocks are registered as nervous and electrical disruptions akin to both the shelling during the war as well as the extreme political instabilities immediately following. As my chapter takes care to note, this pre- and post-war structure glosses over the fact that the militaristic discourse and even historical contexts are inextricably intertwined with both a nervousness and electrical discourse; at stake was the processing of energy in the macro-spectacles of urbanity as well as the micro-tremors of the individual body. With this systemic perspective, Kaiser's play and its filmic adaptation should be understood as a continuous examination of modernity's medial relationship between bodies, electrical infrastructure, and military complexes – not a dramatic rupture or departure, as the significance of WWI might seem to initially suggest. As such, this relationship marks a central tension of modernity that persists across time; the coevolution between human, machine, and society – whose effects on one another are as observable as they are formative of those observations – deconstruct a binary between function and dysfunction in the larger context of electrical modernity.

Kaiser's play and its later filmic adaptation do not just straddle and dissolve conventional pre- and post-war demarcations; they usher in an era of Expressionist experimentation within film, in which the filmic techniques of the early teens are simultaneously continued yet exaggerated, inherited yet transformed. A paradigmatic, yet often overlooked example of early Expressionist film, *Von morgens bis mitternachts* draws explicit attention to shadow and light as electrical means of representation that transform both its observers and producers; the electrical grid's relationship to space, time, and the bodies that occupy these is all but inescapable. Robert Reinert's *Nerven*, the subject of my final chapter, demonstrates this inheritance. Understood by most scholarship as a classic post-traumatic narrative, in which both the plot development and filmic techniques seem to suggest discontinuous ruptures and electrical shocks, *Nerven* is a film born directly of and even still amidst the chaos of WWI and its fallout. As my chapter suggests in contrast to this scholarship, the film's preoccupation with urban and industrial dysfunction

carries forth a strand of thought beginning in Strindberg; the autonomy of the (often male) bourgeois subject is contested by the unprecedented speed of industrial and electrical development. In this sense, one might go so far as to say this subject was understood as *under siege* – not simply by other countries or political parties, but by the technical infrastructures that allowed for the formation and articulation of these parties’ capabilities and identities. With a technical apparatus in mind, the attack on this subject was not a result of the war; it would be more fitting to understand it as the war’s conditions of possibility.

Nerven stages the attempts to register the magnitude of this suggestion by questioning the drive to see at all within electrical modernity. The industrial, electrical network, whose currents underlie the political tumult of postwar Germany, always remains at a frustrating remove, such that truth and fiction begin to lose their distinction and insanity looms at the borders of the seeable. The film suggests that one sees too much and too close yet always not enough, which is in turn reflected in the film’s advertising campaigns; melodrama has run amok, the development of the last decades of silent cinema in the electrical era has reached a fever pitch whereby the desire to see and understand the totality of a story, a narrative, a country, a network is provoked on every street corner. *Nerven*’s mythic return to Eden, an ultimate looping back to a paradoxically naïve and markedly heterosexual, patriarchal position, might well be read as picking up Breuer and Freud’s similarly misogynistic attempts to understand, to penetrate female hysteria; its dissatisfying ending leaves the spectator less with an answer and more with the unsettling feeling that, indeed, *Fortsetzung folgt* (“To be continued...”).

By articulating the connective tissue of failure from Strindberg to Reinert – indeed, the failure to escape electrical network’s ensnarement – I have shown how the nervous breakdown was an irresolvable tension within electrical modernity; rather than understanding the category as an exception to the rule, this dissertation understands it *as the rule* of this particular era. As electrical infrastructure developed with its sparks and sputters, so, too, did a never quite extricable male observer. Each work suggests a critical lens beyond its failure, a kind of transcendent understanding always out of reach, but tantalizingly close. Burnham’s work ultimately shows the persistence of this male subject through to the digital era, where the legacy of electrical media looms large. The repetition of this theme demonstrates that the loop has not yet been closed; the nervous breakdown remains as salient, open-ended, and productive a category as it ever was.

The exploration of this dynamic leaves open questions, with which this dissertation will now “end.” What, after all, does the critical articulation of this dynamic miss? And is there a position from which to ask these questions – not from the position of a subject, desperately holding onto the dream of a historically masculine model of autonomy? What are the alternatives to “escaping” a network’s effects? And how might this alternative renegotiate the relationship between seeing, energy, and the notion of understanding at all? What lies beyond functional dysfunction, in both subject and structure? *Fortsetzung folgt*.

Endnotes

Introduction

¹ It should be noted that the word “Zusammenbruch” and its Germanic equivalents were in circulation long before 1901; one might amend Useem’s claim to say that this is the first book dedicated solely and explicitly to the phenomenon as we use it today.

² The term “system,” as it is employed in this instance, is admittedly somewhat abstract; its contours will come into clearer relief depending on the discursive context or aesthetic work. For now, it suffices to note that “system” is often employed as short-hand for a technocapitalist organization of relationships between individuals and institutions.

³ “Et les nerfs? Partout!” August Strindberg, “Sensations detraquées,” in *Samlade Verk*, ed. Gunnel Engwall and Per Stam, vol. 34 (Stockholm: Norstedts, 2010), 235.

⁴ “Suis-je sur le point de faire peau neuve, et devenir moderne?” Ibid., 228.

⁵ “eine nervöse Romantik”; “eine Mystik der Nerven.” Hermann Bahr, *Die Überwindung des Naturalismus*, in *Kritische Schriften II*, ed. Claus Pias (VDG Weimar, 2004), 131.

⁶ Christoph Asendorf, *Batteries of Life: On the History of Things and Their Perception in Modernity*, trans. Don Renau (University of California Press, 1993), 155.

⁷ Michael Cowan, *Cult of the Will. Nervousness and German. Modernity* (The Pennsylvania University State Press, 2008), 13. See also Willy Hellpach, *Nervosität und Kultur*, (Berlin: Verlag von Johannes Råde, 1902), 67.

⁸ Ernst Mach, *The Analysis of Sensations, and the Relation of the Physical to the Psychical*, trans. C.M. Williams (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 1914), 27.

“Spreche ich von meinen Empfindungen, so sind dieselben nicht räumlich in meinem Kopfe, sondern mein „Kopf“ teilt vielmehr mit ihnen dasselbe räumliche Feld.” Ernst Mach, *Analyse der Empfindungen und das Verhältnis des Physischen zum Psychischen* (Jena: Verlag von Gustav Fischer, 1922), 22.

⁹ Faraday was by no means the only major figure of note here. Already in the early 1920s, H. C. Ørsted had begun to articulate his own theory of electromagnetism by conceiving of material phenomena as products of *forces* or “Kraft.” Both Ørsted and Faraday are essential early contributors to the 20th century’s conceptualization of nerves as autonomous nodes in an energetic field. For more on Ørsted’s contributions and his theory’s affinity with the arts, see Andrew D. Wilson, “The Unity of Physic and Poetry: Ørsted and the Aesthetics of Force,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69, no. 4 (Oct. 2008), pp. 627-646, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40208082>.

¹⁰ William Hayt, *Engineering Electromagnetics* (McGraw-Hill, 1989), 312.

¹¹ Cf. Schivelbusch, *Disenchanted Night: The Industrialization of Light in the Nineteenth Century* (University of California Press, 1995).

¹² Klaus Bürgel, “Die Anfänge,” in *Kraftwerke in Berlin: Das Erbe der Elektropolis* (Berlin: Jovis, 2003), 10.

¹³ Richard Birkefeld and Martina Jung, *Die Stadt, der Lärm und das Licht* (Hannover: Kallmeyersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1994), as cited by Frances Guerin, *A Culture of Light: Cinema and Technology in 1920s Germany* (University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 2.

¹⁴ Guerin, *A Culture of Light*, 3. For more on the history of German streetlighting, see Liman, *Mehr Licht*.

¹⁵ Conrad Matschoß and Erich Schulz, *50 Jahre Berliner Elektrizitätswerke, 1884-1934*, (Berlin: VDI Verla, 1934), as cited in Guerin, *A Culture of Light*, 3.

¹⁶ Andreas Killen, *Berlin Electropolis. Shock, Nerves, and Germany Modernity* (University of California Press, 2006), 15.

¹⁷ Cf. Friedrich Kittler, “The History of Communication Media,” CTheory, accessed March 18 2022, <https://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/ctheory/article/view/14325/5101>.

¹⁸ Bürgel, “Die Anfänge,” 11.

¹⁹ Cf., for example, Erik Born, *Sparks to Signals: Literature, Science, and Wireless Technology, 1800-1930* (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2016), 78-80; Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Duke University Press, 2000).

²⁰ Jens Jäger, *Das vernetzte Kaiserreich. Die Anfänge von Modernisierung und Globalisierung in Deutschland* (Ditzingen: Philipp Reclam jun. Verlag GmbH, 2020), 101.

²¹ As cited by James Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 160.

²² Cf. Gustaf Robert Dahlander, *Elektricitetens nyaste framsteg på teknikens område* (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1888).

²³ Bo Andersson, *Essays on the Swedish Electricity Market* (PhD diss., Stockholm School of Economics, 1997), 10.

²⁴ It is only later in 1996 that Sweden divides energy production and energy distribution as two separate categories, thereby attempting to open up the energy market.

²⁵ Cf. Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Disenchanted Night. The Industrialization of Light in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Angela Davies (University of California Press, 1995), 74-76. Schivelbusch sees a correlation between “the concentration and centralization of energy in high-capacity power stations” and “the concentration of economic power in the big banks.” *Ibid.*, 74. This notion will be of greater interest in my chapter on Georg Kaiser’s *Von morgens bis mitternachts*.

²⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*; and Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Urizen Books (University of California Press, 1986).

²⁷ James Carey, “Technology and Ideology,” 120. For a broader history of telegraphy and wired (and wireless) communication, see, for example, Born, *Sparks to Signals*; E. A. Marland, *Early Electrical Communication* (London: Abelard-Schuman Ltd, 1964); Roland Wenzlhuemer, “The Development of Telegraphy, 1870-1900: A European Perspective on a World History Challenge,” *History Compass* 5, no. 5 (July 2007), pp. 1720-1742, doi:[10.1111/j.1478-0542.2007.00461.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-0542.2007.00461.x).

²⁸ For the relationship between these tensions and telegraphy, see Sconce, *Haunted Media*. Also see Robert Cox, *Body and Soul. A Sympathetic History of American Spiritualism* (Charlotte and London: University of Virginia Press, 2003). Cox characterizes emergent spiritualism in Antebellum America as a correlation if not result of telegraph technology.

²⁹ The original German title is *Batterien der Lebenskraft. Zur Geschichte der Dinge und ihrer Wahrnehmung im 19. Jahrhundert*.

³⁰ Christoph Asendorf, *Batteries of Life: On the History of Things and Their Perception in Modernity*, trans. Don Renau (University of California Press, 1993), 153.

³¹ Asendorf lists, for example, Georg Simmel’s *Philosophy of Money* (1900), Werner Sombart’s *Modern Capitalism* (1902), and Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904/1905) as works that are interested precisely in the ways capitalist culture arises from yet in turn mediates and arguably governs the individual subject.

³² Asendorf, *Batteries of Life*, 176-7.

³³ “[D]er Mensch ist jetzt ein informationsverarbeitendes System. [. . .] Die Trennung zwischen der Versorgung mit Elektrizität und dem mit ihr Versorgten ist hinfällig geworden; das nervöse System und das der elektrischen Versorgung sind Teile eines Gesamtsystems.” Christoph Asendorf, *Ströme und Strahlen: Das langsame Verschwinden der Materie um 1900* (Anabas-Verlag, 1989), 73. My use of “system is similar to Asendorf’s; we both understand “system” to be a set of power relationships within a technocapitalist society. As will become clear, we offer different articulations of how that power is enacted and perpetuated.

³⁴ “Ziel war eine Ökonomie der Arbeitskraft.” *Ibid.*, 80.

³⁵ “die Verteilung egalitärer Energien.” *Ibid.*, 58.

³⁶ “[D]ie zentrale Wasserversorgung bedingt die Dezentrierung der Benutzer, die nicht mehr zum Wasser kommen, wo dieses zu ihnen kommt.” *Ibid.*, 59.

³⁷ “Wir stellen uns vor, dass durch den Draht eine unwägbare Flüssigkeit, die Elektrizität, strömt; immer im Kreise herum, vom einen Pol durch den Draht zu anderen, durch das Element hindurch wieder zum ersten und fortwährend so weiter, ähnlich dem Blutumlauf im Organismus, wo das Herz das Element, die Quelle des Flüssigkeitsstromes, darstellt.” F. Braun, *Über elektrische Kraftübertragung insbesondere über Drehstrom. Ein gemeinverständlicher Experimentalvortrag* (Tübingen: Verlag der H. Laupp’schen Buchhandlung, 1892), 4.

³⁸ “Mit den Versorgungsadern des künstlichen Körpers der Stadt sind die Menschen in dieser technizistischen Utopie an einen ewigen Kreislauf angeschlossen. [. . .] Die Stadtwerke bieten den geschlossenen Kreislauf. [. . .] [I]m System der Zirkulation gibt es keine Unterbrechung, sie zeugt sich fort bis in alle Ewigkeit.” Asendorf, *Ströme und Strahlen*, 61-2.

³⁹ Cf. Cowan, *Cult of the Will*, 11.

⁴⁰ “Fremdkörper.” Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, *Studien über Hysterie*, Second Edition (Leipzig and Vienna: Franz Deuticke, 1909), 4; Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, *Studies in Hysteria*, trans. Nicola Luckhurst (London and New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 10.

⁴¹ Breuer and Freud, *Studien über Hysterie*, 169.

⁴² Breuer and Freud, *Studies in Hysteria*, 197.

⁴³ Bürgel, “Die Anfänge,” 12.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ David E. Wellbery, foreword to *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, by Friedrich Kittler, trans. Michael Metteer, with Chris Cullens (University of California Press, 1990), xiv.

⁴⁶ It should be recognized that the very term “network” was also coming into fashion across many of Western European discourses, including the neuroscientific research investigating cell growth and constitution. One notable and recent work of scholarship is Jens Jäger, *Das vernetzte Kaiserreich. Die Anfänge von Modernisierung und Globalisierung in Deutschland* (Ditzingen: Philipp Reclam jun. Verlag GmbH, 2020). Here, Jäger devotes a chapter to a variety of “network” phenomena, including industrial transportation, new media such as film and phonography, and international trade. Ultimately, Jäger argues that the German national project developed as a response to the increasing interconnectedness of its populations within and beyond its borders. In short, national identity was simultaneously strengthened and threatened by networked infrastructures.

⁴⁷ Breuer and Freud, *Studies in Hysteria*, 253.

“Ich möchte den Vergleich mit einer elektrischen Anlage nicht zu Tode hetzen; bei der fundamentalen Verschiedenartigkeit der Verhältnisse kann er ja die Vorgänge im Nervensysteme kaum illustrieren und gewiß nicht erklären. Aber hier mag noch an den Fall erinnert werden, daß durch hohe Spannung die Isolation der Leitung einer Beleuchtungsanlage gelitten habe und an einer Stelle ein "kurzer Schluß" hergestellt sei. Treten nun an dieser Stelle elektrische Phänomene auf (Erwärmung, z.B. kurze Funken o. dgl.), so leuchtet die Lampe nicht, zu welcher die Leitung führt; wie der Affekt nicht entsteht, wenn die Erregung als abnormer Reflex abströmt, in ein somatisches Phänomen konvertiert wird.” Breuer and Freud, *Studien über Hysterie*, 181.

⁴⁸ That the case studies of *Studien über Hysterie* present themselves more as repeating and recurring melodramas highlights the persistent need to *reveal* a moment that makes sense of a body’s relationship to its extended environment.

⁴⁹ Breuer and Freud, *Studies in Hysteria*, 299.

“Vielmehr fällt die Unterbrechung [. . .] oft an die ungeschicktesten Stellen, gerade wo man sich einer Entscheidung nähren könnte, gerade wo ein neues Thema auftaucht. Es sind dieselben Übelstände, die jedem Zeitungsleser die Lektüre des alltäglichen Fragmentes seines Zeitungsromanes verleiden, wenn unmittelbar nach der entscheidenden Rede der Heldin, nach dem Knallen des Schusses u. dgl. Zu lesen steht: (Fortsetzung folgt).” Breuer and Freud, *Studien über Hysterie*, 262.

⁵⁰ This book was a supplement to Beard’s 1880 *A Practical Treatise on Nervous Exhaustion (Neurasthenia)*. By the time of these publications, it should be noted, Beard will already have been engaged with the relationship between electricity and neurasthenia since at least his 1869 “Neurasthenia, or Nervous Exhaustion” For an extensive list of Beard’s works, see Philip P. Wiener, “G. M. Beard and Freud on American Nervousness,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 17, no. 2 (April 1956): 269-70, doi: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2707747>.

⁵¹ George Beard, *American Nervousness: Its Causes and Consequences. A Supplement to Nervous Exhaustion (Neurasthenia)* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1881), vi, as cited in Wiener, “G. M. Beard and Freud,” 271.

⁵² As translated in Hurry B. Jamieson, *The Vicious Circle of Neurasthenia and their Treatment* (London: J. & A. Churchill, 1915), 4.

“Einerseits ist der Arbeitsvorrat an sich verringert; auf anlangende Reize antwortet die centrale Nervenzelle einseitig mit einer Beschleunigung und Vermehrung der positiven Arbeitsleistung. Es wird ein größerer Teil von „Erregungsarbeit“ geleistet und dadurch der vorhandene Arbeitsvorrat rascher verbraucht. Andererseits aber ist die Fähigkeit, negative Arbeit zu leisten, verringert, d.h. die Restitutionsprozess verlangsamt und unvollkommen. Der Endeffekt muß ein völliges Darniederliegen der Arbeitsleistungen sein.” Otto Binswanger, *Die Pathologie und Therapie der Neurasthenie. Vorlesungen für Studierende und Aerzte* (Jena: Verlag von Gustav Fischer, 1896), 23.

⁵³ Jamieson, *The Vicious Circle*, xv.

⁵⁴ See, for example, Braun, *Über elektrische Kraftübertragung*, 18; Dahlander, *Elektricitetens nyaste framsteg*, 48. Both of their works served as popular scientific treatises addressed to technicians and lay people alike.

⁵⁵ Braun, *Über elektrische Kraftübertragung*, 18.

⁵⁶ Diedrich Diederichsen, *Eigenblutdoping: Selbstverwertung, Künstlerromantik, Partizipation* (Kiepenheuer & Witsch GmbH, 2008), 25.

⁵⁷ Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, “Crisis, Crisis, Crisis, or Sovereignty and Networks,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 28, no. 6 (2011): 92, doi: 10.1177/0263276411418490.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception. Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999), 4.

⁶⁰ Cf. Asendorf, *Ströme und Strahlen*, esp. 33-44.

⁶¹ Doron, Galili, *Seeing by Electricity. The Emergence of Television 1878-1939* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020), 11.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 55-6.

⁶³ “Seeing by Electricity,” *Coventry Herald*, March 14, 1890, 7.

- ⁶⁴ Heinrich Herz, "Identity of Light and Electricity, Sept. 1889," *Electrical Review*, Dec., 1889, 7, as cited by Galili, *Seeing by Electricity*, 127.
- ⁶⁵ Galili, *Seeing by Electricity*, 48.
- ⁶⁶ The lecture was, coincidentally, delivered during Warburg's stay at a mental institution as proof of his sanity.
- ⁶⁷ "[D]ie Schlangenfigur am Himmel [. . .] wird zur mathematischen Umfangsbestimmung gebraucht, die glänzenden Punkte werden eingefangen durch ein irdisches Bild, um die Unendlichkeit überhaupt begreifen zu können [. . .]. Der Andachtsraum entsteht." Aby Warburg, "Bilder aus dem Gebiet der Pueblo-Indianer in Nord-Amerika" in *Werke in einem Band*, ed. Tremel and Sigrid Weigl (Berlin Suhrkamp, 2010), 554.
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 559.
- ⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 561.
- ⁷⁰ Cf. Sabine Hake, "Expressionism and Cinema: Reflections on a Phantasmagoria of Film History" in *Companion to the Literature of German Expressionism*, ed. Beil H. Donahue (Camden House, 2005), 29; Bengt Liljenberg, *Filmen kommer till Sverige* (Malmö: Förlag Kolibri AB, 2002), 14.
- ⁷¹ Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1963), 38.
- ⁷² Denmark, which embraced cinema early on and served as a gateway to other Scandinavian countries, tellingly labeled the phenomenon as "elektriske lysbilleder." Liljenberg, *Filmen kommer till Sverige*, 14.
- ⁷³ Cf. Ernst Jünger "Über die Gefahr" in *Der gefährliche Augenblick. Eine Sammlung von Bildern und Berichten*, ed. Ferdinand Bucholtz (Berlin: Junker and Dunhaupt, 1931), pp. 11-16; Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit." For more on their affinities, differences, and direct debate with one another concerning the political role of an innervating cinema, see Carsten Strathausen, "The Return of the Gaze: Stereoscopic Vision in Jünger and Benjamin," in *New German Critique*, no. 8 (Spring and Summer, 2000), pp. 125-148.
- ⁷⁴ For more on film and its scientific contexts, see, for example: Janina Wellman (ed.), "Cinematography, Seriality and the Sciences" in *Science in Context* 24, no. 3 (2011); Ramon Reichert, *Im Kino der Humanwissenschaften* (Bielefeld 2007); Christian Bonah and Anja Laukötter "Visual Media and the Healthy Self in the 20th Century: An Introduction" in *Body, Capital, and Screens. Visual Media and the Healthy Self in the 20th Century*, ed. Christian Bonah and Anja Laukötter (Amsterdam University Press 2020), pp. 13-40.
- ⁷⁵ Liljenberg, *Filmen kommer till Sverige*, 14.
- ⁷⁶ W. K. L and Antonia Dickson, *History of the Kinetograph, Kinetoscope and Kinetophonograph* (New York: Albert Bunn, 1895), 6.
- ⁷⁷ Corinna Müller, *Frühe deutsche Kinematographie. Formale, wirtschaftliche und kulturelle Entwicklungen* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1994), 20.
- ⁷⁸ Cf. Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Cinema, Its Spectator and the Avant Garde," in *Early Cinema: Space Frame Narrative*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (London: BFI, 1990), 56-62; and "'Now You See It, Now You Don't': The Temporality of the Cinema of Attractions," in *Silent Film*, ed. Richard Abel (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 71-84.
- ⁷⁹ Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 102-4.
- ⁸⁰ Opponents of this argument, like David Bordwell have challenged the thesis by pointing out that cinema does not *continue* to present itself as a fractured art form. Cf. David Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style* (Harvard University Press, 1997). The causal relationship between film as a medium and modernity as its context is therefore a matter of debate.
- ⁸¹ Anton Kaes, "The Debate about Cinema: Charting a Controversy (1909-1929)," *New German Critique*, no. 40 (Winter 1987), 7.
- ⁸² For a thorough study of film's impact on primarily English modernist literature at the beginning of the twentieth century, see Laura Marcus, *The Tenth Muse. Writing About Cinema in the Modernist Period* (Oxford University Press, 2007).
- ⁸³ It should, however, be made clear that the theoretical considerations that emerge from these chapters is by no means a top-down application of Deleuze's theories upon the work; rather, the aesthetic works and their historical discourses and context give voice to theoretical considerations that are resonant with Deleuze's own thought.
- ⁸⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Zone Books, 1992) 67.
- ⁸⁵ Gilles Deleuze, "The Fold," *Yale French Studies*, no. 80, trans. Jonathan Strauss (1991), 242.
- ⁸⁶ Deleuze might well be read as inverting the hierarchy of mind over body by showing the emergence of the former from the latter. Cf. Antonio Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020), 325-6.

Chapter 1

¹ Evert Sprinchorn, *Strindberg as Dramatist* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982), 82.

² Ulf Olsson, "Strindberg Goes to Frankfurt: Critical Theory and the Reactionary Writer," *Scandinavian Studies* 84, no. 3 (Fall 2012), 266.

³ For a theoretical grappling with the act of interpreting Inferno, see C. A. Falgas-Ravry, "The Riddle of Inferno: Strindberg, Madness, and the Problem of Interpretation," *The Modern Language Review* 106, no. 4 (October 2011).

⁴ Olsson, "Strindberg Goes to Frankfurt," 269-70.

⁵ Olsson, "Strindberg Goes to Frankfurt," 258.

⁶ "Der Begriff des Fortschritts ist in der Idee der Katastrophe zu fundieren. Daß es 'so weiter' geht, ist die Katastrophe... Strindbergs Gedanke: die Hölle ist nichts, was uns bevorstünde – sondern *dieses Leben hier*." Walter Benjamin, "Zentralpark," in *Walter Benjamin Gesammelte Schriften I*, part 2, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974), 683, as quoted in Olsson, "Strindberg Goes to Frankfurt," 259.

⁷ English translations of *En Blå Bok* are from Claud Field's 1913 reprinting (and retitled) *Zones of the Spirit. A Book of Thoughts*.

⁸ August Strindberg, *Zones of the Spirit. A Book of Thoughts*, trans. Claud Field (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1913), 106.

"Ritade tokroliga karikatyrer om ingenting, förvred allt vackert till fult, allt stort till smått." August Strindberg, *En Blå Bok I*, in *Samlade Verk*, ed. Gunnar Ollén, vol. 65 (Stockholm: Norstedts, 1999), 99.

⁹ August Strindberg, *Zones of the Spirit*, 109.

"Det här är jus om på dårhusen hos oss" (Strindberg, *En Blå Bok* 99); "Och logik finns där i neurasthenin alldeles som där!" August Strindberg, *En Blå Bok I*, 99.

¹⁰ Swedenborg introduces this concept in his *Heaven and Hell* in which he describes different planes of existence and beings that mediate experience. The notion experienced a renaissance among artists, spiritualists, and occultists in the 19th and early 20th centuries. For the religiously inclined, "correspondence" provided an emotional and epistemological framework that responded to the atomizing and coarse material forces of modernity and industrialization; "correspondence" meant restored and meaningful interconnection. For the more artistically inclined, the notion offered a way to conceptualize the material and affective forces of form; it might well be seen as the discursive catalyst and predecessor of more overt modernist experimentation with form.

¹¹ August Strindberg, *Zones of the Spirit*, 169.

"På gamla gymnasium indelades man icke i klasser utan ringar, och bänkarne stodo icke i radar utan i ringar. När jag sedan läste Dantes helvete med dess ringar, tänkte jag mig det som gamla gymnasium. Men ute i lifvet återfann jag detta ringsystem. Mänskorna syntes sammanrotade i koncentrisk ringar, som bildade små världssystem af opinioner. [. . .] När jag, som tillhör andra ringar läser en tidning eller bok härledande sig från de andra ringarne, förstår jag endast att de äro galna eller stå på hufvet." August Strindberg, *En Blå Bok I*, 176.

¹² "Elektrizität und Nerven – August Strindbergs *I havsbandet* und eine ästhetische Zentralkategorie des *fin de siècle*"

¹³ Erik Østerud, "Elektrizität und Nerven – August Strindbergs *I havsbandet* und eine ästhetische Zentralkategorie des *fin de siècle*," in *Neruathenie. Die Krankheit der Moderne und die moderne Literatur*, ed. Maximilian Bergengruen, Klaus Müller-Wille, Caroline Pross (Freiburg i.Br./Berlin/Vienna: Rombach Verlag KG, 2010), 218. "In der Traumlandschaft der Allegorie weiß der Wanderer/Pilger nicht genau, ob das, was er beobachtet, zur äußeren Welt gehört oder ob es sich um Projektionen seiner eigenen Phantasie handelt."

¹⁴ Matthew Wilson Smith comes to a similar understanding in a chapter on Strindberg in his *The Nervous Stage*. He argues that the nervous sciences informed a breaking apart of gestural semiotics in 19th century theater; gesture, especially for Strindberg, is increasingly understood through its *effects* rather than hermenutic meaning.

¹⁵ Michael Meyer, "Introduction to The Dance of Death," in *The Plays of Strindberg*, vol. 2 (New York: Random House, Inc., 1976), 374.

¹⁶ Sprinchorn, *Strindberg as Dramatist*, 77.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁹ The significance of the Stationendrama will become of greater focus in the following chapter.

²⁰ August Strindberg, "To Damascus, Part I," in *Strindberg: The Plays*, trans. Michael Meyer, vol. 2 (London: Martin Secker & Warburg Unlimited, 1975), 87.

"Men sedan... ja, så låg jag och såg som i ett panorama hela mitt förflutna liv rullas upp, ifrån barndomen, genom ungdomen ända fram...och när det var slut på rullen, så började det om igen; och under hela tiden hörde jag ett

kvarnverk gå. . . och det hör jag än. . . Ja, nu är det här också!” August Strindberg “Till Damaskus,” in *Samlade Verk*, ed. Gunnar Ollén, vol. 39 (Stockholm: Norstedts, 1991), 115.

²¹ Vreni Hockenjos, *Picturing Dissolving Views: August Strindberg and the Visual Media of His Age* (PhD diss., Stockholm University, 2007), 138.

²² *Ibid.*, 146.

²³ *Ibid.* 137.

²⁴ Strindberg, “To Damascus, Part I,” 58.

“*Damen* Det är ingenting, bara ett handarbete

Den Okände Det ser ut som ett nät av nerver och knutar där dina tankar fixerades; jag föreställer mig, att din hjärna ser ut så där invändigt. . .” Strindberg, *Till Damaskus*, 64.

²⁵ Strindberg, “To Damascus, Part I,” 61.

“*Den Okände* [. . .] [M]en nu ser jag, vet du var? – på din virkning – ett stort kök, vitt, väggarna äro kalkade; det är tre små djupa fönster med galler, och blommor; i vänstra hörnet är spiseln; i högra matbordet med bänkar av furu; och över bordet i hörnet sitter ett svart krucifix; under brinner en lampa. . . men taket är av sotbruna bjälkar! . . . och på väggarna hänga mistlar, något torkade. . .

Damen (förskräckt) Var ser du allt detta? Var?

Den Okände På din virkning. . .” Strindberg, *Till Damaskus*, 69.

²⁶ Strindberg, *Till Damaskus*, 96; 263.

²⁷ For a historical account on the connection between neurasthenia – the deadening of the individual’s nervous system – and melancholia, see Richard von Kraft-Ebing, *Die Melancholie. Eine klinische Studie* (Erlangen: Verlag von Ferdinand Enke, 1874). For scholarly accounts of Kraft-Ebing among other influential psychiatrists and psychophysicologists, see Kenneth Kendler, Kathryn Tabb, and John Wright, “The Emergence of Psychiatry: 1650-1850,” *The American Journal of Psychiatry* 179, no. 5 (March 2022); Kenneth Kendler, “Melancholia as psychalgia: the integration of psychophysiological theory and psychopathologic observation in the mid-19th century,” *Molecular Psychiatry*, no. 28 (2023); and Åsa Jansson, *From Melancholia to Depression. Disordered Mood in Nineteenth Century Psychiatry*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

²⁸ “min ensamhet, mitt arbete och mina strider” August Strindberg, *Ensam*, in *Samlade Verk*, ed. Gunnar Ollén, vol. 52 (Stockholm: Norstedts, 1994), 128.

²⁹ Cf. Tone Selboe, “De andres hjem: August Strindbergs Ensam” in *Edda* 97, no. 1 (2010).

³⁰ Cf. Linda Haverty Rugg, *Picturing Ourselves: Photography and Autobiography*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

³¹ Cf. Olsson, “Strindberg Goes to Frankfurt.”

³² “Men mängden av dikotomier, där beskrivningen gärna fastnar, genereras av en dialektik, vilken Strindberg i *Ensam* bestämmer som “disharmoniernas strömväxlare” or “harmoniernas strömslutare”. Den elektrifierade metaforiken är inte bara ett ytligt sätt att modernisera texten, och göra den samtida, utan är ett återkommande inslag i författarskapet, och därmed också centralt: det handlar om hur kraft genereras. Elektriciteten används, också som litterär metafor, för att producera — och när den fallerar försvinner kraften [. . .]. Så växlar Strindberg strömstyrka, strömmen slås av och på i hans texter — för att de ska bli talande och verksamma.” Ulf Olsson, *Paradoxografi. Strindbergs sena verk*, (Bokförlaget Faethon, 2019), 172.

³³ Strindberg, *Ensam*, 56.

³⁴ “*telegr.* elektriskt batteri som på mottagningsstationen bringas i funktion av linjeströmmen o. därigrm sätter skrivapparaten i rörelse.” Alfred Henrik Fock, *Lärobok I fysiken. För Kongl. atilleri-läroverket å Marieberg och Kongl. teknologiska institutet*, (Stockholm, 1853-55), 623.

³⁵ Strindberg, *Ensam*, 121.

³⁶ It is worth noting that this scene of circuitous voyeurism in which the status of agency and perception are at stake can be found in Søren Kierkegaard’s essays “Repetition” and *The Seducer’s Diary*. Both, and perhaps more so the former, have been noted to be influential to Strindberg’s writings, particularly for *To Damascus*. See Sprinchorn, *Strindberg as Dramatist*, 108.

³⁷ Rugg, *Picturing Ourselves*, 121-2.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 102.

³⁹ Georg Simmel, “Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben,” in *Die Großstadt. Vorträge und Aufsätze zur Städteausstellung*, ed. Th. Petermann, vol. 9 (Dresden: Jahrbuch der Gehe-Stiftung), accessed August 13, 2021, <https://www.socio.ch/sim/verschiedenes/1903/grossstaedte.htm>.

⁴⁰ Georg Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. Kurt H. Wolff (Illinois: The Free Press, 1950), 410.

⁴¹ Rugg, *Picturing Ourselves*, 120.

⁴² See, for example, Dahlander, whose many editions of his works are dedicated to documenting electrical innovations and infrastructural developments in both Germany and Switzerland.

⁴³ Magnus Florin, *Lykttändaren. En Strindbergsstudie*, (Lund: Ellerströms, 2021), 120.

⁴⁴ August Strindberg, "Gatubilder," in *Samlade Verk. Ordalek och småkonst och annan 1900-talslyrik*, ed. Gunnar Ollén, vol. 51 (Stockholm: Norstedts, 1989), 52.

⁴⁵ "En genomförd personification binder samman författarens och maskinens ljusalstrande: dynamon är en "Han" som "sitter i mörkret" och ger människorna ljus. Elverket är författarskapet, litteraturen är en maskin, den skrivande är den transformerande dynamon som förvandlar rörelse till ljus, själv skild från människorna. Personifikationen går ännu ett stycke: dynamons mörka källare har en hals, likt den sjugande Orfeus med sin strupe: "Källarhalsen är båd dörr och fönster --".” Florin, *Lykttändaren*, 110.

⁴⁶ "(Musiken pågick under det jag återsåg hela detta uppträdet, och ostörd fortsatte jag minnas.)” Strindberg, *Ensam* 119.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁵⁰ Rune Waldekranz, *Så föddes filmen: ett massmediums uppkomst och genombrott*, (Stockholm: PAN/Norstedt, 1976), 404.

⁵¹ Hockenjos, *Picturing Dissolving Views*, 49.

⁵² "Längre fram skall man måhända få se och höra längesedan bortgångna musikaliska och sceniska storheter utföra sina glansnummer med ungdomens grace och styrka, utan att behöfva frukta för indisposition, influensa, nervositet, svartsjuka, eller andra fataliteter, och då först kan man börja på allvar tala om 'konstens odödlighet', ty med de hjälpmedel man redan har och säkerligen ytterligare får kan det utmärktaste som förekommer i den vägen magasineras och reproduceras i oändlighet." As cited in Liljenberg, *Filmen kommer till Sverige*, 17.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁵⁴ See theoretical engagements such as Andrea Gaudreault, "Das Erscheinen des Kinematographen," *KINtop. Theorien zum frühen Kino*, vol. 12 (2003).

⁵⁵ "Att jag såg hennes sång utan att höra den, under det min spelman spelade därtill föreföll mig så hemlighetsfullt, men jag tyckte att han ackompanjerade henne, eller att han borde göra det. Jag var i båda rummen samtidigt men mest mitt över gatan och jag bildade liksom bryggan mellan de två." Strindberg, *Ensam*, 122-3.

⁵⁶ Cf. Rick Altman, *Silent Film Sound* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), in particular 77-93.

⁵⁷ "Krysanter, vilka dock förändrades, så att den tredje fick olika färg men de två vita alltid utgjorde grundtonen." Strindberg, *Ensam*, 124.

⁵⁸ If this vicious circle of belief resonates with Lauren Berlant's notion of "cruel optimism," we might well add Crary into the mix. In Crary's account, the (impossible) promise of attentive presence is ultimately what allows for a disciplinary conditioning of the nervous body by media regimes. Strindberg, I argue, is straddling both positions, understanding how the nervous body is a site of contention for media systems, yet remaining stubbornly hopeful in the face of a kind of messianic horizon beyond subjugation. In other words, Strindberg might well be read as registering a cruel optimism of media and mediatization as they offer the *effects* of presence and, paradoxically, *immediacy*.

⁵⁹ "Det var ett underligt ögonblick, ty jag ramlade rakt ner i min ungdom; kände hela den okända framtiden trycka och lura hemskt på mig; erfor detta självrus i förhoppningar och förskottstagande; segervisshet och modstulenhets; överskattande av kraften och misskännande egna förmågan.

Jag satte mig i en stol utan att tända ljus, ty gatlyktan, samma gatlykta som lyst på mitt elände, slungade in ett sparsamt ljus och tecknade fönsterkarmarnes kors i skugga på tapeten." Strindberg, *Ensam*, 127.

⁶⁰ Magnus Florin makes a similar observation: "The streetlight's shine possesses the quality of not only lighting up city space, but also penetrating the home. An invasion and a renegotiation between inside and outside, public and private" ("Gatlyktornas sken besitter egenskapen att inte bara lysa upp stadsrummet utan även tränga in i hemmet. En invasion och en omkastning mellan ute och inne, allmänt och privat"). Florin, *Lykttändaren*, 31.

⁶¹ The cross projected into the room could also be interpreted as a marker of a grave, which points to a kind of suspension between life and death. This interpretation resonates with my reading in a couple ways. First, it nuances the understanding of Crary's "suspension of perception"; the deferral to which Crary is pointing is articulated here specifically in terms of vitality, revitalization, etc. Second, one can understand this suspension between life and death to be discursively resonant with early silent cinema, a medium that bore intense consideration concerning matters of presence, the present and past, memory and forgetting, etc. Special thanks to Stockholm University's 2022 Spring *Högreseminariet* for drawing my attention to this alternative interpretation.

Chapter 2

¹ “Der Ansatz ist die Frage nach der existentiellen Kaufkraft des Geldes. Kann man mit Geld die Essenz des Lebens einhandeln? Das Zeitalter des Kapitalismus wird in eine Kugel zusammengeschmolzen und in die Kegelbahn eines einzigen Tages geworfen.“ Walther Huder, afterword to *Von morgens bis mitternachts*, by Georg Kaiser (Stuttgart: Reclam 1965), 70.

² “Auf dem Hintergrund dieses Fragenkomplexes wird ein Kassierer plötzlich vom bürokratischen Kondukteur des Geldtransfers zum bravourösen Tester der Geldsubstanz.“ Ibid., 71.

³ Georg Kaiser, *Von morgens bis mitternachts* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1965), 40.

⁴ “Kaisers Kassierer kommt direkt aus dem Kleinbürgertum, er ist Opfer der Zirkulation, der gesellschaftlichen, ökonomischen, der des Sinnes. Die Hysterie, die er, gesteigert durch die Stummheit des Kinematographen, verkörpert, erwächst aus der Kreisbewegung, der er sich verpflichtet spürt, dem persönlichen Alltags-Sechstager-Rennen.” Fritz Göttler, “Mann ist Mann – *Von morgens bis mitternachts*,” *Von morgens bis mitternachts*, Edition *filmmuseum* (Berlin: Felix Bloch Erben GmbH & Co., 2010), 4.

⁵ Cf. Guerin, *A Culture of Light*, 37, for instance.

⁶ For a more thorough examination of Strindberg’s influence on the Stationendrama, see Johannes F. Evelein, *August Strindberg und das expressionistische Stationendrama: eine Formstudie* (New York: P. Lang, 1996); Cynthia Walk, “Cross-Media Exchange in Weimar Culture: Von morgens bis mitternachts,” *Monatshefte* 99, no. 2 (Summer 2007), 178.

⁷ For more on the play’s inheritance of the early modern tradition, cf. Groeneveld.

⁸ Interestingly, the modern redeployment of the Stationendrama was seen as “a departure from classical models of theatre toward a new model inflected by the modern entertainment industry” (Walk 180). The modern Stationendrama, was at once a continuation, a rupture, and a reinvention of tradition; its status in the history of theater incidentally demonstrates the kind of circular development at stake in my argument.

⁹ Kaiser, *Von morgens bis mitternachts*, 35.

¹⁰ See Georg Kaiser, “Ein neuer Naturalismus??” in *Werke*, ed. Walther Huder, vol. 4 (Berlin: Propyläen, 1971), 572. Kaiser describes *Kinoismus* as the commercial inheritor of naturalism – a movement against which Expressionism by and large had positioned itself (e.g. see Bahr). *Von morgens bis mitternachts* demonstrates Kaiser’s earlier (and arguably ubiquitous) penchant for the style he decries.

¹¹ Cf. Hake, “Expressionism and Cinema,” 332; Walk, “Cross-Media Exchange,” 177.

¹² For more on the role of abstract space, particularly as it relates to two- and three-dimensionality, see Jürgen Kasten, “Film as Graphic Art: On Karlheinz Martin’s *Von morgens bis mitternachts*,” *Von morgens bis mitternachts*, trans. Eva Viktoria Ballin, Edition *filmmuseum* (Berlin: Felix Bloch Erben GmbH & Co., 2010), 6-14.

¹³ “Was mich erregte, war die Erregung, die der Sport, nicht an sich, sondern als Ereignis, der Sport, in Leben umgesetzt, auslöste. Die Erregung, die den Menschen verwandelte.” Curt Riess, *Das war mein Leben! Erinnerung*, (Frankfurt and Berlin: Ullstein, 1990), 120f. My translation of the passage above has admittedly taken some liberties, but not without reason. The phrase “in Leben umgesetzt” can vary in connotation; it can be a kind of translation or actualization, a performance, or an embodiment of, say, values or teachings. I opt for “embodiment” here as a way of making clear that the *Sechstagerennen* was not something to watch dispassionately or from a distance – as the cashier *attempts* to do. Instead, it made its spectators acutely aware of their immersion in a particular situation.

¹⁴ “Sechstagerennen? Was ist das? Ist es Sport, ist es Spiel, ist es ein Wunder oder ist es ein Wahn, eine Notwendigkeit, ein Übel oder ein notwendiges Übel? Vielleicht von jedem etwas in seiner Grundform, jedenfalls ein Spiegelbild des Kampfes, den wir bewusst und unbewusst im täglichen Leben führen. Alles, was wir in unserem Dasein erfahren an Gutem und Bösem, an Auf und Nieder, an Hoffnungen und Enttäuschungen, an Erfüllung und Erlösung spielt sich im Rahmen eines Rennens ab, das, über eine Arbeitswoche sich hinziehend, das Letzte von dem verlangt, der in diesem Kampf gegen die anderen, gegen die Müdigkeit, gegen die Schlange des Versagens und Verzagens Sieger bleiben will.” As cited in Renate Franz, *Fredy Budzinski. Radsport-Journalist, Sammler, Chronist*, vol. 7 of *Schriftenreihe der Zentral Bibliothek der Sportwissenschaften der Deutschen Sporthochschule Köln* (Cologne: Sportverlag Strauß, 2007), 32.

¹⁵ For historical accounts of doping, cf. Fredy Budzinski, *Das Berliner Sechstagerennen* (Berlin: Selbstverlag, 1909), 20; Andreas Burkert and Porto Vecchio, “100. Tour de France. 1886 der erste Dopingtote,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, June 29, 2013, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/sport/100-tour-de-france-wir-fahren-mit-dynamit-1.1708449-2>; Werner Ruttkus and Wolfgang Schoppe, *Rundenkreisel & Berliner Luft. Auf den Spuren des Berliner Sechstagerennens* (Selbstverlag), 58.

¹⁶ For a theoretical engagement with contemporary doping in cycling, cf. Diederichsen, *Eigenblutdoping*. As briefly explored in this dissertation’s introduction, Diederichsen recasts the traditional Bildungsroman as a purgatorial loop,

in which the modern subject must depart the bourgeois milieu in order to return to it as a fully autonomous bourgeois individual; Diederichsen's postmodern intervention is to emphasize the beginning rather than the teleological goal of such a project. Diederichsen uses, maintains, and ultimately points to the horizon of these dichotomies (beginning and end; departure and arrival; or, in this dissertation's language, functionality and dysfunctionality). As such, Diederichsen can well be read as an inheritor of a critical discourse in which the modern subject is caught and constituted by the literal and metaphorical cycling-through of modernity's dichotomies.

¹⁷ Kaiser, *Von morgens bis mitternachts*, 44.

¹⁸ Here, Kaiser invokes a theme of Modernist literature in the 19th century. Writers like Søren Kierkegaard or Edgar Allan Poe, among others, would write of the masses as energetic baths, in which the constitution of the anonymous flaneur might be restored. Kaiser's exploration of this theme has a more ambivalent valence. Rather than a reverence or even ironic distance, the term *Menschheitsstrom* carries more direct and aggressive connotations. In contrast to restoration or convalescence as the protagonist's goal – as was often the case in 19th century Modernist literatures –, Kaiser's protagonist embodies a nervous mania, spurred on by the hope of escaping or transcending the masses and societal interpellations.

¹⁹ See, for example, Asendorf, *Batteries of Life*, 153. See also Asendorf, *Ströme und Strahlen*, 73.

²⁰ Torsten Haselbauer, "100 Jahre Sechstagerennen. Eine runde Sache," *taz*, January 26, 2011, <https://taz.de/100-Jahre-Sechstagerennen/15127941/>.

²¹ Schivelbusch, *Disenchanted Night*, 74.

²² Kaiser, *Von morgens bis mitternachts*, 64.

²³ Du stehst bei mir – du stehst immer bei mir! (Er bemerkt die verlassenen Pauken, nimmt zwei Schlägel.) Weiter. (Kurzer Wirbel.) Von Station zu Station. (Einzelne Paukenschläge nach Satzgruppen.) Menschenscharen dahinten. Gewimmel verronnen. Ausgebreitete Leere. Raum geschaffen. Raum. Raum! (Wirbel.) Ein Mädchen steht da. Aus verlaufenen Fluten – aufrecht – verharrend! (Wirbel.) Mädchen und Mann. Uralte Gärten aufgeschlossen. Entwölktter Himmel. Stimme aus Baumwipfelstille. Wohlgefallen. (Wirbel.) Mädchen und Mann – ewige Beständigkeit. Mädchen und Mann – Fülle im Leeren. Mädchen und Mann – vollendeter Anfang. Mädchen und Mann – Keim und Krone. Mädchen und Mann – Sinn und Ziel und Zweck. (Paukenschlag nach Paukenschlag, nun beschließt ein endloser Wirbel.) Ibid.

²⁴ "Kronleuchter mit Gewirr von Drähten für elektrische Lampen," Ibid., 54.

²⁵ What I am getting at, in more theoretical terms, is a kind of spatialization of deconstructionism's more temporal linguistic model; the temporal deferral of meaning in language is here translated into terms of space. In other words, the proximity to, if not *infusion* of the body by an a priori network of communication dislodges the individual from a firm sense of placement; the individual is everywhere, nowhere, and always in between.

²⁶ "Hier stehe ich. Oben stehe ich. Zwei sind zuviel. Der Raum faßt nur einen. Einsamkeit ist Raum. Raum ist Einsamkeit. Kälte ist Sonne. Sonne ist Kälte. Fiebernd blutet der Leib. Fiebernd friert der Leib. Felder öde. Eis im Wachsen. Wer entrinnt? Wo ist der Ausgang?" Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 65.

²⁸ See, for instance, Hubert W. Reichert, *Friedrich Nietzsche's Impact on German Literature* (University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 50-72. Reichert, already in the mid 70s, attempts to provide a survey of Nietzschean interpretations of Kaiser's oeuvre.

²⁹ *Ecce homo*, it might well be remarked, was also used in contemplative visual depictions of Christ's crucifixion; the term was the terminus to the rehearsal of the stations of the cross. The term is thereby as much a reference to this tradition as it is to Nietzsche's philosophy outlined in the paragraphs below. In both citations' connotations *Ecce Homo* places a considerable weight on the sensorial experience; the medieval tradition emphasizes the senses in the contemplation of Christ's stations while Nietzsche values the senses over and against the abstract strictures of Christianity.

³⁰ The fear of a short circuit might have been as ubiquitous as the term itself. Across an array of news clippings from the U.K. and the U.S., for instance, short circuits sparked fears of fires, malfunctioning streetcars, and/or train accidents. Cf., to identify just a few, "PANIC ABOARD SUBURBAN CAR," *The Washington Post*, November 17, 1916, 5; "BISMARCK FIRE: GIGANTIC LINER AND "A SHORT CIRCUIT,"" *The Observer*, October 10, 1920, 15; "LONG ISLAND ROAD BLOCKED," *New York Times*, July 18, 1915, 8.

³¹ Cf., for example, Fred Jay Gray, *Theory of Short Circuits in Alternators* (PhD diss., University of Illinois, 1912); "Neue Untersuchungen über die Ursachen des Kurzschlusses," *Illustrierte schweizerische Handwerker-Zeitung: unabhängiges Geschäftsblatt der gesamten Meisterschaft aller Handwerke und Gewerbe* 26, No. 4 (April 1910), 62.

³² In addition to Breuer and Freud's study, the short circuit was used elsewhere in the field of psychiatry, one notable example being Hans Henning's notion of *Reizkreis* – i.e. the process of stimulation as it relates to language processing – and *Kurzschluss* – i.e. a process by which two things become linguistically coupled in the brain. Hans

Henning, *Der Traum. Ein assoziativer Kurzschluss* (Wiesbaden: Verlag von J. F. Bergmann, 1914), 61. In this conception, language and psyche are always – in both waking and dreaming life – bound up in the figure of the short circuit. Once again, the short circuit is shown to be foundational rather than exceptional to a particular heuristic.

³³ Huder, afterword to *Von morgens bis mitternachts*, 76.

³⁴ “mit ausgebreiteten Armen gegen das aufgenähte Kreuz des Vorhangs.” Kaiser, *Von morgens bis mitternachts*, 65.

³⁵ Gervase Phillips, “The violent birth of ‘martyrdom’ – how the ancient concept informs modern religious violence,” *The Conversation*, July 18, 2017, <https://theconversation.com/the-violent-birth-of-martyrdom-how-the-ancient-concept-informs-modern-religious-violence-80989>.

³⁶ In the early years of the war, the play had actually been censored and kept from German stages, as it was seen as potentially demoralizing. Walk, “Cross-Media Exchange,” 183.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 180.

³⁸ Corinna Müller, *Frühe deutsche Kinematographie. Formale, wirtschaftliche und kulturelle Entwicklungen* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1994), 12ff.

³⁹ Walk, “Cross-Media Exchange,” 180.

⁴⁰ Andrea Haller, “Seen Through the Eyes of Simmel: The Cinema Programme as a ‘Modern’ Experience,” in *Film 1900: Technology, Perception, Culture*, eds. Klaus Kreimeier and Annemone Ligensa (Indiana University Press, 2015), 121.

⁴¹ The film’s status as “avant-garde” was more likely applied in retrospect, both by the producers of the film who were rationalizing its commercial failure and contemporary scholars. Cf. Inge Degenhardt, “‘Von morgens bis mitternachts rase ich im Kreise’: Vom expressionistischen Schau-spiel zum filmischen Denk-spiel,” *Code-Wechsel. Texte im Medienvergleich*, ed. Ernest W. B. Hess-Lüttich (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1990).

⁴² “Von morgens bis mitternachts,” *Die ARD*, August 31, 2010, https://programm.ard.de/TV/arte/von-morgens-bis-mitternachts/eid_287245973158319.

⁴³ For more on this reception in cinema, cf. Kaes, *Kinodebatte*; Kaes, “The Debate about Cinema.”

⁴⁴ Tucholsky’s poem, which was published in 1913 (after Kaiser had written his play), even features the Duke of Württemberg (Herzog Albrecht) entering the cinema space in the same manner as the Kaiser enters the six-day race in *Von morgens bis mitternachts*. Tucholsky’s project seems more inclined to undermine the Duke’s entrance by making its resulting affect equivocal with those produced by silent cinema. By contrast, I would submit that Kaiser takes the power of the Kaiser (and the aristocracy) more seriously by recognizing them as organizing and disciplinary forces.

⁴⁵ The purpose of the invention was, in modern parlance, to live off the grid; the bike projector purportedly afforded independence from an electrical network prone to short circuits. E. Weiss, “Le Cinécycle Gaumont,” in *La Nature. Revue des sciences et de leurs applications aux arts et à l’industrie*, no. 2942, January 7, 1922, 171-172.

⁴⁶ Cf. Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity*, 209.

⁴⁷ Both spectators and judges seem to combine, thereby undermining any sort of strict class distinctions that may have been more pronounced in the play. Nevertheless, a focus on the cashier as a singular figure to that on the masses demonstrates how this circularity might well be tied to a flattening of hierarchy for all those below an ultimate position of power. Special thanks to Karin Sanders for this observation.

⁴⁸ Kaiser, *Von morgens bis mitternachts*, 44.

⁴⁹ Walk, “Cross-Media Exchange,” 188.

⁵⁰ It is important to note, however, that at least some of this enthusiasm was myth manufactured by the German government. Cf., for instance, Jeffrey Verhey, *The Spirit of 1914: Militarism, Myth, and Mobilization in Germany* (Cambridge University Press, 2000); Kurt Flasch, *Die geistige Mobilmachung. Die deutschen Intellektuellen und der Erste Weltkrieg* (Alexander Fest Verlag, 2000). This nuance does not impact my reading, though it may raise questions as to what or whom Georg Kaiser’s play was responding.

⁵¹ Rudolf Kurtz, *Expressionismus und Film* (Zürich: Chronos, 2007), 70. Cf. “Von morgens bis mitternachts,” *KinoTV*, <http://www.kinotv.com/page/film.php?filmcode=8798>; Walk, “Cross-Media Exchange,” 188.

⁵² For more on the development of wireless communication and the cultural imaginations that surrounded it, cf. Born, *Sparks to Signals*.

⁵³ Karlheinz Martin, dir., *Von morgens bis mitternachts*, Edition *filmmuseum* (Ilag-Film, 1920), 01:13:00.

⁵⁴ Veit Didczuneit and Thomas Jander, eds., *Netze des Krieges* (Lempertz Edition und Verlagsbuchhandlung, 2014), 20. For more on the accelerated development of electrical infrastructure during the war years, see Richard Birkefeld and Martina Jung, *Die Stadt, der Lärm und das Licht* (Hannover: Kallmeyersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1994), 173-184; Thomas P. Hughes, *Networks of Power: Electrification in Western Society, 1880-1930* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 286-290; Guerin, *A Culture of Light*, 2-10.

⁵⁵ Didczuneit and Jander, *Netze des Krieges*, 17.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 18.

⁵⁷ Guerin, *A Culture of Light*, 18.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 8. See also Hubert Staroste, "Die Bau- und Entwicklungsgeschichte der Berliner Elektrizitätswerke," in *Kraftwerke in Berlin: Das Erbe der Elektropolois* (Berlin: Jovis, 2003), 41.

⁵⁹ Guerin, *A Culture of Light*, 4. Cf. Prof. Dr. Joachim Teichmüller, "Eine Neue Epoche in der Lichttechnik" (lecture, Austrian Technical Light Society, Vienna, April 2, 1925).

. Though the speech is not readily available, Teichmüller was a foundational figure in German and Austrian vocational institutions for electrical engineering.

⁶⁰ Rafal Landau, "Lichteffekt in der Kinematographie," *Der Kinematograph*, no. 1123, July 1, 1928, pp. 23-6, as cited in Guerin, *A Culture of Light*, 10; Lebegott, "Kinematographische Aufnahmen aus der Technik," *Mitteilungen-Siemens und Halske* 1, no. 5 (November 1913), as cited in Guerin, *A Culture of Light*, 8-9.

⁶¹ "Alles war noch im Anfang der Umgestaltung, als der Krieg begann. [. . .] Der Krieg begann damit, daß die Verbindungen aufhörten" Rudolf Schmidt, "Die Nachrichtenmittel," in *Der Weltkampf um Ehre und Recht. Die Erforschung des Krieges in seiner wahren Begebenheit auf amtlichen Urkunden und Akten beruhend*, vol. 6 (Max Schwarte, 1919-1933), 202, 206. Unfortunately, the digitized copy of the volumes, in which Schmidt's chapter appears, is only available through a politically questionable resource *Scriptorium*. Suffice it to say, the rhetoric listed on their website can be read as resonating with far right talking points and discourses that have historically had the potential to bring about acts of extremism and/or terrorism. Because Schmidt's writing nevertheless speaks directly to the more theoretical claims made here, I have decided to leave it here, though not without this caution.

⁶² Kaiser, *Von morgens bis mitternachts*, 43.

⁶³ One can also read Kaiser as a predecessor to Ernst Jünger's more enthusiastic embrace of the militarization of daily life and the recombination of the individual organism into a collective machine. Cf. Junger "Über die Gefahr."

Chapter 3

¹ *Nerven*, directed by Robert Reinert (Monumental-Film, 1919), 1:49:51.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Nerven_\(1919\).webm](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Nerven_(1919).webm).

² Ibid. Film's translation.

³ Ibid. My translation.

⁴ Ibid. Film's translation.

⁵ Anton Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema: Weimar Culture and the Wounds of War* (Princeton University Press, 2009), 43.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ *Der Kinematograph*, no. 677, Düsseldorf, December 31, 1919, 46.

⁸ P—I, "Die neuesten Filme," *Der Film*, no. 4, January 25, 1920, 47.

⁹ Scapinelli, "Bei Robert Reinert!" *Deutsche Lichtspiel-Zeitung*, no. 28, Berlin, July 19, 1919, 8-9.

¹⁰ Heinz Schmid-Dimsch, "Nerven! Monumental-Filmwerk in einem Vorspiel und sechs Akten von Robert Reinert," *Der Film*, no. 52, December 28, 1919, 35-6.

¹¹ As cited in Philipp Stiasny, *Das Kino und der Krieg. Deutschland 1914-1929* (Munich: edition text + kritik im Richard Boorberg Verlag GmbH & Co KG, 2009), 197.

¹² Heim Carlamaria, *Josefa Halbinger, Jahrgang 1900: Lebensgeschichte eines Münchner Arbeitkinds, nach Tonbandaufzeichnungen zusammengestellt und niedergeschrieben* (Munich: Obalski & Astor, 1982), 46, as cited in Steve Choe, *Afterlives. Allegories of Film and Mortality in Early Weimar Germany* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 46.

¹³ David Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), 276.

¹⁴ For another reading of Johannes as an authoritarian leader, cf. Jan Christopher Horak, "Robert Reinert: Film as Metaphor," *Griffithiana* 60/61 (1997), 181-9.

¹⁵ Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema*, 43.

¹⁶ Stiasny, *Das Kino und der Krieg*, 202.

¹⁷ Cf. Robert Weldon Whalen, *Bitter Wounds: German Victims of the Great War, 1914-1939* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1984), 38-40, as cited in Choe, *Afterlives*, 23.

¹⁸ Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema*, 3.

¹⁹ Choe, *Afterlives*, 23.

²⁰ Cf. "The Strikes of January 1918," *ghdi.ghi-dc.org*, German History in Documents and Images, https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=974; Stephen Bailey, "The Berlin Strike of January 1918," *Central European History* 13, no. 2 (1980), 158-174.

²¹ Cf. Stiasny, *Das Kino und der Krieg*, 200.

²² Michael Burleigh, *The Third Reich: A New History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000), 39.

- ²³ Though active and engaged in Marxist thought, particularly through his engagement with the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (SPD), Eisner was ultimately in favor of retaining private property rights, if only to curry favor with less radically oriented parties in Bavaria's later parliamentary democratic system (Evans 158-161).
- ²⁴ Thomas Schuler, "The Unsung Hero: Bavaria's amnesia about the man who abolished the monarchy," *The Atlantic Times* (December 2008), https://web.archive.org/web/20131219082340/http://www.atlantic-times.com/archive_detail.php?recordID=1586.
- ²⁵ Richard J. Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 158-161. Cf. Burleigh, *The Third Reich: A New History*, 40.
- ²⁶ Samuel W. Mitcham, *Why Hitler? The Genesis of the Nazi Reich*, (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1996), eBook, 81.
- ²⁷ Jason Crouthamel, "Homosexuality and Comradship: Destabilizing the Hegemonic Masculine Ideal in Nazi Germany," *Central European History* 51, no. 3, Cambridge University Press (September 2018), 424.
- ²⁸ Cf. Thomas Kühne, "Protean Masculinity, Hegemonic Masculinity: Soldiers in the Third Reich," *Central European History* 51, no. 3, Cambridge University Press (September 2018), 395; Nigel Jones, *A Brief History of the Birth of the Nazis* (London: Robinson, 2004), 268; Klaus Theweleit, *Männerphantasien I. Frauen, Fluten, Körper, Geschichte* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Roter Stern), 1977, 184-191.
- ²⁹ Lerner writes: "The hysteria diagnosis, recast in the 1890s as a tool for pathologizing unproductive behavior, facilitated the labeling of nervous soldiers as unpatriotic, lazy and selfish." Paul Lerner, "Psychiatry and Casualties of War in Germany, 1914-18," *Journal of Contemporary History* 35, no. 1 (January 2000), 22. The aim of psychiatry was, according to Lerner, to therefore reinvigorate the opposite values: patriotism, industriousness, and self-sacrifice.
- ³⁰ Ironically enough, the historical Hoffmann, after having been reinstated in May 1919, would be ousted by the Freikorps in March 1920. James M. Diehl, *Paramilitary Politics in Weimar Germany* (Indiana University Press, 1977), 72-4. No nervous state was built to last, it seems.
- ³¹ Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema*, 43.
- ³² Schmidt, "Die Nachrichtenmittel," 202, 206.
- ³³ For an additional analysis of the long-lasting connection between sexuality and neurasthenia, particularly in pre-war Wilhelmine culture, see Doris Kaufmann, "Neurasthenia in Wilhelmine Germany: Culture, Sexuality, and the Demand of Nature," in *Cultures of Neurasthenia from Beard to the First World War*, ed. Marijke Gisjwijt-Hofstra and Roy Porter (New York: Rodopi, 2001), 161-176. Cf. Theweleit, *Männerphantasien I*, which demonstrates the extent to which femininity more generally was understood as a threat to traumatized soldiers' masculinities. This fear was often articulated through images of water and fluidity – images that, indeed, repeat throughout Roloff's hallucinations.
- ³⁴ Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema*, 46-7.
- ³⁵ K. R. Eissler, *Freud as an Expert Witness: The Discussion of War Neuroses between Freud and Wagner-Jauregg*, trans. Christine Trollope (New York: International Universities Press), 1986, 26.
- ³⁶ One might well recall Didi-Huberman's *Invention of Hysteria* which argues the extent to which the diagnostic lens – the scientific gaze – produced the bodily excesses it continually sought to contain. Diagnosis of hysteria, in other words, captured as much as it impelled a recapturing of the affects that eluded strict codification.
- ³⁷ Cf. Landau, "Lichteffekt," 23-6, as cited in Guerin, *A Culture of Light*, 10. Landau traces how German postwar cinema had developed from the technical innovations in nighttime lighting during the war.
- ³⁸ "Mehr Strom," *Die Film Welt*, no. 50, December 14, 1918 (Berlin), 28.
- ³⁹ Ibid.
- ⁴⁰ Observator, *Über die Nervosität im deutschen Charakter. Entwurf zu einer Analyse der deutschen Volksseele von der Reichsgründung bis zum Zusammenbruch* (Leipzig, 1922), 9.
- ⁴¹ For a thorough account of the relationship between visibility and electrical technologies, see Galili, *Seeing by Electricity*. One example he cites is Oliver Lodge's 1909 *The Ether of Space*, in which Lodge attempts to technologically extend vision through "an electric arrangement which can virtually see intermediate rates of vibration." Oliver Lodge, *The Ether of Space* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1909), 10, as cited in Galili, *Seeing by Electricity*, 53. While Lodge's experiments were more geared towards radio technologies, at stake was precisely the *visibility* of the electromagnetic waves that permeated society. This kind of example abounds in Galili's book, thereby lending a valuable hidden context to Marja's opening lines.
- ⁴² If *Nerven* is, as its critics suggested, a fundament to filmic Expressionism, Marja's compulsion to *see* nervousness – to gain a distance to the energies that flow through the body – might well be understood as the premise for the genre's horror; Reinert's Expressionism voices the horror of inextricability, the falling away of an autonomy primarily reserved for bourgeois male subjects.

⁴³ Schmid-Dimsch, “*Nerven!*”, 35.

⁴⁴ Breuer and Freud, *Studien über Hysterie*, 262; Breuer and Freud, *Studies in Hysteria*, 299.

⁴⁵ Such a conceptualization is also taken up by the by-now seminal yet somewhat dated account by Peter Brooks, who looks at melodrama as what he calls “the moral occult” – an affective excess that resolves modernity’s tensions by revealing a clear moral order. Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination* (Yale University Press, 1976), 5.

⁴⁶ Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” *Film Quarterly* 44, no. 4, University of California Press (Summer 1991), 11.

⁴⁷ Jonathan Crary, “Modernizing Vision,” in *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, ed. Linda Williams (Rutgers University Press), 29. For more on the co-emergence of this temporal gap in psychophysiology with cinema, see: Henning Schmidgen, “Mind, the Gap: The Discovery of Physiological Time,” in *Film 1900: Technology, Perception, Culture*, eds. Klaus Kreimeier and Annemone Ligensa (Indiana University Press, 2015), 53-66.

⁴⁸ Ultimately, the undecidable tension between nightmare and promise lent a great amount of rhetorical power to the alluring figures of early twentieth century popular imagination; figures like the hypnotist, the spiritual medium, the mesmerist, the somnambulist, and the automaton all stemmed precisely from a fascination with the immediacy of nervous activity as it happened – and not as it was then scientifically cleared up in retrospect. At stake, in other words, was the speed at which nerves could be mass-manipulated from afar, through telepathy, by a machine, or through a combination of such elements; I would submit that these figures embodied the cultural concern of bodily possession in a larger network of media and electrical hardware. Cf. Jonathan Crary, “Dr Mabuse and Mr. Edison”, in *Art and Film Since 1945: Hall of Mirrors*, ed. Russel Ferguson (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1996), 263-279. Here Crary situates the trope of mad hypnotist within the context of attention sciences, thereby building off his other manuscripts. Despite the somewhat tangential framing, he nevertheless effectively draws attention to the ways in which nervous science and hypnotism were bound up.

⁴⁹ Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity*, 148.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 209.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Cf. Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity*, especially pp. 149-188.

⁵³ Cf. Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema*, 269-275.

⁵⁴ Stiasny comes to a similar, though crucially different understanding. Stiasny shows how postwar German films had borrowed the practices and techniques of wartime cinema; by contrast, I am proposing that *Nerven* is drawing on a deeper archive of melodramatic gesture and form that extends through silent cinema’s prewar development.

⁵⁵ Jamieson, *The Vicious Circle*, xv

⁵⁶ As cited in Stiasny, *Das Kino und der Krieg*, 197.

⁵⁷ The film, it should be noted, might well be read as pushing against the emergent notion that the medium could be used as a diagnostic tool particularly for nervous illnesses like hysteria. Curt Thomalla, for instance, led the Medical Film Archive of UFA and the main representative of this position. Cf. Killen, *Berlin Electropolis*, 9. Reinert’s film seems to therefore challenge the scientific sobriety of film by highlighting its chaotic innervations.

Conclusion

¹ Regrettably, reproductions of images from this sequence are unable to be provided due to Netflix’s Digital Rights Management (DRM) policy. The timestamp for this sequence is from 1:23:29 – 1:26:24.

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