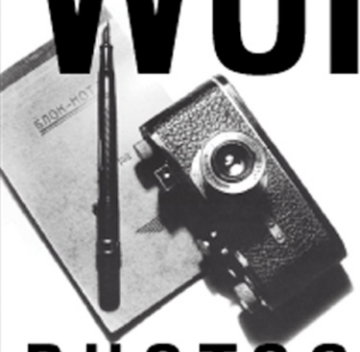
CAMERA WORKS



MICHAEL NORTH

PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY WORD

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Photography and the Twentieth-Century Word

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PREFACE

That there should be some significant relation between aesthetic modernism and new media seems true almost by definition. Modernism, after all, stakes its initial claim to fame on new modes and new methods, innovations so drastic they seem not just to change the old arts but to invent new and unrecognizable ones. But the sheer impossibility of remaining new has most definitely caught up with innovations like free verse and pictorial abstraction, which retain very little of their original challenge in a time when the new media include hypertext novels and on-line simulations.

As Lev Manovich has shown, however, the conceptual basis of the most current new media can only be strengthened by reference to the times in which the very concept of new media first arose.[1] The checkered history of the electronic book, for example, ought certainly to include the Readies of Bob Brown, conceived in the late 1920s, a time even more gullibly fascinated by new means of transmission than our own. Brown's reading machine managed in some ways to make literature even more linear than did the conventional codex, and thus it remained light years away from hypertext, but the excitement and the doubts it inspired both seem almost uncannily familiar in the early twenty-first century. In other words, many of the issues current in discussions of the new media predate the personal computer; some arise as early as the invention of mechanical recording in the nineteenth century.

Of course, that invention has inspired a tremendous amount of commentary, but astonishingly little of it concentrates on the fact of mechanical recording itself. “The photograph,” as Patrick Maynard

calls it, using quotation marks to designate a popular idealization, is imagined primarily as a picture, and its influence in histories of the arts thus remains limited to technical issues such as perspective and to philosophical debates about mimesis.[2] Even the notion of mechanical reproducibility made so influential by Walter Benjamin has generally led to a concentration on the dissemination of images, not on the means by which they are originally produced. That a photograph is a method of mechanically rearranging, codifying, storing, and perhaps producing sense impressions now seems a great deal more significant in the presence of so many electronic methods of doing the same. Understanding of the photograph, that is to say, should not stop at the surface of the image itself, any more than understanding of the computer could stop with the monitor.

One of the preliminary claims of this book, then, is that the wholesale reorganization of human knowledge that we think of as arriving with the computer actually begins with mechanical recording. Perceptions that have not and could not have been experienced by any human observer have been relatively familiar since Eadweard Muybridge set up his line of cameras at Leland Stanford's farm. The interposition of "machine languages" between the mind and physical phenomena began when James Watt first invented a primitive gauge to measure pressure variations in his steam engine. Saying so, however, is not meant to diminish the emphasis currently placed on new media. On the contrary, the purpose of historical connections of this kind is to extend the discussion so that it has less to do with the particular powers and limitations of the computer and more to do with the whole issue of mechanical mediation in general, an issue we should understand at least a bit since it has been with us for so long.

Some of that understanding is encoded in the works of literary and artistic modernism, which can largely be defined, I think, by the influence of mechanical mediation on the old media. Of course, anything so complicated and various as an aesthetic movement must be the result of innumerable influences, some of them too obscure, some too near to be visible. But if modernism is to serve as a general term at all, if it is to remain serviceable in all the disciplines that use it while still defining its subject in historical and formal terms, then I think it must take very seriously the significant formal innovations provided by material history itself, especially those provided by the new media that followed the photograph. This does not mean, at least to me, that the nature of human experience changed at some point in time, influenced by speed, industrial organization, or the mechanization of the senses. I agree with

skeptics who feel that something as fundamental as eyesight or hearing does not change decade by decade, much less year by year. On the contrary, mechanized sense impressions could hardly have presented the challenge they did if they had not conflicted so obviously with what had come to be accepted as unmediated experience. The revelations that arise from that conflict seem to me to provide much of what still lives in modern literature and art, on which a general theory of the aesthetics of modernity might still be constructed.

None of this would be very interesting, however, if it did not also help us understand particular works of art. There is not much point in providing historical background merely for its own sake or simply to confirm received opinion about familiar works. For me, in fact, this project began with particular works, some of them utterly unread, like the Readies of Bob Brown, some of them securely canonized but little read, like Dos Passos's *U.S.A.*, and some of them, most obviously including *The Great Gatsby*, almost painfully familiar. I cannot say that the works ultimately considered here make up an exhaustive or inevitable list, but I do hope that the mix of unknown and familiar works will at least pose a significant test for the ideas proposed here, which should, if they have any relevance at all, shed the sort of light that makes obscure works seem interesting and common touchstones look a little different.

The chapters that follow are therefore organized in three parts. There is a general introduction, the purpose of which is to determine the formal and historical significance of mechanical recording for the modern arts. For at least two different reasons, the next three chapters focus on little magazines rather than individuals. A good deal of recent research in literary modernism has shown how useful investigations of little magazines can be, in part because a magazine is very much like a movement. The problem of accounting for a collective product like a magazine is therefore much like the problem of accounting for modernism itself: inevitably it involves including various individuals, works, and positions within a general effort. The policies of these magazines also allow us to see literary modernism in its practical relations with photography, film, and the visual arts, relations that often had to be worked out in a very immediate way, as illustrations were included with written text and text attempted to evoke visual materials. These three chapters are also arranged to follow the association of literature with the new media as it developed from an initial fascination through a series of more complex and difficult interactions.

Though most of the individuals considered in these chapters were

born in the United States, the magazines themselves—*Camera Work, transition, Close Up*—were international in scope, and so there is extended discussion here as well of the way the new media were thought to provide new global languages, appropriate to a movement that saw itself as transatlantic. The next four chapters are more conventionally focused on individual American writers. My purpose here is to question not just the commonplace association of photography with American literary realism but received opinion generally where these writers are concerned. I would like, for example, to use Fitzgerald to challenge some commonly accepted ideas about the status of the visual within literary modernism, as well as to use this discussion of modernism to demonstrate how certain writers, not usually considered technically adventurous, might be included within that movement. Finally, these writers have a great deal to tell us about the social implications of the new media, particularly about the complex relationship of technological change and social progress. Accordingly, the final two chapters move away from the camera itself to more general issues raised by a spectatorial society. The steps by which spectatorship leaves its original position at the eyepiece of the camera and becomes a general practice, even something of an occupation, can be traced throughout these chapters, most especially in the interesting case of Ernest Hemingway, whose work, in my opinion, is one extended attempt to make looking seem as active and involved as doing. The theory of language that arises in the process is not as obviously insurrectionary as that advertised in the pages of *transition*, nor is it as closely associated with the camera itself, but it is just as thoroughly marked by the conditions of modern visuality and in some ways even more relevant to the current state of media society.

Earlier versions of several of these chapters have been delivered as lectures, and I am happy to have benefited from the questions they have prompted. Chapter 2 was first presented in rather different form at the Material Modernisms conference held in the summer of 2001 at the University of British Columbia. Chapter 3 was originally presented, also in an earlier form, at the second Modernist Studies Conference, held in the fall of 2000. I would like to thank the organizers and participants of both conferences. Chapter 2 has since appeared in *Modernism/Modernity 9* (April 2002) as "Words in Motion: The Movies, the Readies, and the Revolution of the Word," and Chapter 3 has appeared in *Literature and Visual Technologies* (Palgrave 2003), as "International Media, International Modernism and the Struggle with Sound." I thank the publishers for permission to reprint these essays.

I would also like to thank Erin Templeton, for her help in preparing the index, and the staff of Special Collections, Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles, for unstinting help of various kinds, not least in agreeing to catalogue the Bob Brown Papers, heretofore in a state of disarray just a hair's breadth from total chaos.

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> We need the twentieth century word. We need the word of movement, the word expressive of the great new forces around us.
> Eugene Jolas, *transition*, 1929

Introduction

Mechanical Recording and the Modern Arts

In historical terms, at least, photography is the first of the modern arts. The very existence of a modern period, broken away from the time before, is to some extent the creation of photography, which has made all time since the 1840s simultaneously available in a way that makes the years before seem that much more remote. As Carlo Rim maintains, "the advent of modern times dates from the moment the first daguerreotype appeared on the scene. … Thanks to the photograph, yesterday is no more than an endless today."[1] In this most basic sense, art and literature have had to emulate the modernity of the photograph, attempting in their various ways to achieve the instantaneous newness that photography first brought to the cultural scene.

Photography and the modern arts are linked in a number of other ways as well, as several recent studies have shown. Whenever the issue of faithful mimesis is raised, the example of photography is apt to be influential, in a positive or a negative way.[2] It is also clear that the habit of seeing photographically has affected modern experience to such an extent that certain oddities of the camera, especially its tendency to frame particular points of view and to isolate one moment from another, have become second nature for human observers as well. Recent studies of photography and literature have therefore shown in some detail how camera vision affects the motives and perhaps even the perceptions of influential modern writers.[3]

In showing how the camera has affected modern writing, however, scholars may have missed the more fundamental fact that photography is itself a kind of modern writing. One of the most revolutionary effects of the new medium was in offering hope of new methods of representation,

neither linguistic nor pictorial but hovering in a kind of Utopian space between, where the informational utility of writing meets the immediacy of sight. If, as Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss have long maintained, it is the mutual interference of the linguistic and the optical that makes modern art distinctive, then perhaps the common beginning of modernism in literature and the arts is to be found in the recording technologies that brought the whole relationship of word, sound, and image into doubt.[4]

Photography began to trouble this relationship from the very beginning, from the 1839 diary entry in which Fox Talbot jotted down the phrase "Words of Light." Talbot was working out the technical problems of a new procedure he was still calling "photogenic drawing," but the neologism caused much dissatisfaction, and the happy metaphor "words of light" inevitably provided what became the accepted name for the new medium.[5] Talbot's metaphor has been dead for so long that no one looking at a photograph today thinks of it as "light drawing," much less "light writing," but in fact the oldest of Talbot's photographs to survive is a picture of his own handwriting, tracing out the alphabet.[6] And though this particular subject was most probably necessitated by the practical limitations of Talbot's early method, it is the case that photography was originally promoted as a replacement for writing as well as a rival to painting. The famous bill placed before the French Chamber of Deputies in 1839 t o secure Daguerre's invention for the state actually listed the reproduction of graphic notes as one of the new mediums primary uses.[7] Talbot offered his invention as a superior means of copying written documents, but even when it bypassed writing it could be used, he suggested, for keeping inventories, as a system of notation superior to writing but playing much the same role of information storage and retrieval.[8] In these early days, the sense that the "graph" in "photograph" pertained to writing rather than drawing was so strong that Elizabeth Eastlake could say the medium offered a "new form of communication … neither letter, message, *nor picture.*"[9]

The sense remained strong throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth that photography provided a sort of notation suspended somehow between letters and pictures, a new alphabet, as it were. Impressed by Nadar's photographs of nineteenth-century Paris, Mallarmé exclaimed that light had become "photography's own form of 'writing.'"[10] In the next century, even as the new, more purely optical style of "straight" photography took hold, an underlying belief remained, as Sadakichi Hartmann put it, that "photographic illustration has become a new kind of writing."[11] Thus photography was strongly

associated from its very beginnings with hieroglyphs, another form of writing that, in the popular view, bypassed sound and spoken language to reach the mind directly through the eye.[12] One of the first projects suggested for photography in France was a new expedition to Egypt, where it might record and bring back more Rosetta Stones,[13] but in a sense every photograph was felt to be a Rosetta Stone, decoding every written language by reference to a visual language common to all. Photography, Oliver Wendell Holmes predicted, was to become "the card of introduction to make all mankind acquaintances."[14] The new medium created a hopeful fascination with new forms of notation, revolutions that would also return to an ancient purity and directness, a pre-Babelic unity of word and thing.

In so doing, though, photography was just the first in a series of technologies that promised new and better forms of writing, some of which, like the phonograph, staked out that territory with their very names. Historians of the phonograph often note Edison's surprise that it might be used for music, since his original purpose for it was primarily stenographic.[15] All the early applications for this invention imagined it as a repository of language, reading aloud books and newspapers, recording speeches, taking letters. Even the music critic of the New York *Post*, as Lisa Gitelman notes, imagined phonographic newspapers and not recorded music.[16] This expectation recalled and reinforced the original association of photography with language: the common suggestion that Edison's new invention photographed sound depended on the idea that legible recording had in some way to be visible recording, like writing. Edison himself was mildly obsessed with the idea that phonograph records should be readable, not just by his own machines but by human beings, and he spent many hours with a microscope trying to find the letter *a* impacted in the indentations of a record.[17] Despite his failure, artists began to speculate about the possibility of phonographic writing through direct incision of what Laszlo Moholy-Nagy called "the language of the groove."[18] Among the general public there was widespread speculation about a phonographic alphabet, a set of patterns in the grooves that might be direct and specific yet also regular enough for iteration and recognition, and there was much consternation, popular and legal, when this hope was disappointed, and the idea had to be confronted of a notation, a writing, that could not in fact be read.[19] Thus phonographic inscription also came to be associated with hieroglyphs, which had themselves resisted being read for centuries, though they were finally found to be legible.[20] The direct transcription of sound into any visible form, no matter how variable,

seemed to promise a new universal language, or at least a universal alphabet, on which a fully motivated and wholly transparent language might be based.[21]

The rhetoric surrounding these two technologies is so similar because they represent popularly successful versions of an older and far more various project to induce nature to transcribe itself directly and automatically and therefore perfectly. To some extent, this project violates the currently accepted boundary between science and superstition, and to some extent it represents a profound shift in the way science defines and uses signs. The scientific method itself, according to Thomas L. Hankins and Robert J. Silverman, involved a repudiation of language in favor of firsthand sensory observation.[22] The old magical notion that words and things were necessarily linked was replaced by a desire to remove the subjectivity introduced into observation by language. As early as the sixteenth century, however, scientists needed to "observe" phenomena not particularly amenable to the physical senses, objects too small or too far away to be seen with the naked eye. Soon the telescope and the microscope were followed by other instruments, which did not just alter sense data but rather represented it, often in graphical form. Thus the problem of language was reintroduced into the research situation, for these instruments occupied a curiously ambiguous position as indices of physical phenomena that did not always iconically resemble what they were supposed to represent. What were they, then, languages or things? What were products like graphs to be considered to be, pictures or words?[23] New systems of notation, such as the graphs of Edouard-Léon Scott de Martinville, seemed simultaneously to make pictures that were conventional and writing that was somehow motivated. Though the whole purpose of such scientific instrumentation was to codify and thus objectify investigation, it had the curious unintended effect of making observation seem dependent on mediation, while simultaneously presenting the possibility of languages that would, like the old magical languages, be linked necessarily to reality. The whole notion that there are two quite different ways in which human beings relate to reality, immediately through the senses and indirectly by means of symbols, began subtly to alter, with consequences so far-reaching they might be considered fundamental to the modern condition.

Hankins and Silverman place photography and phonography as episodes in a long history, in which science attempts to replace words with graphs, particularly graphs drawn by automatic recording devices. Perhaps the earliest attempts to perfect direct graphical notation are to

be found in eighteenth-century projects for a kind of "traceology," a method of analyzing the gait of horses and human beings by preserving and schematizing the prints they make.[24] The first truly successful technology of this kind—the prototype, therefore, of all subsequent recording media—were the sound figures of Ernst Chladni, produced by vibrating thin plates of glass or metal dusted with sand. Early in the nineteenth century, these figures were celebrated as "the script-like-Ur images of sound," allowing scientists to "re-discover, or else to find the primeval or natural script by means of electricity."[25] At about the same time James Watt perfected an automatic indicator diagram to record variations in the pressure maintained by his steam engine, but this, the first automatic recording instrument, was kept a secret and therefore had little influence.[26] Throughout the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth, experimentalists tinkered with dozens of such machines meant to induce transcriptions directly from nature, many of which occupied the ambiguous territory between entertainment and science.

Perhaps the most commonly remembered of these researchers is Etienne-Jules Marey, now primarily thought of as a major figure in the prehistory of moving pictures. Early in his career, Marey invented a whole series of complex mechanisms designed to transform the muscle contractions of a frog, the flight of a bird, or the walk of a human being directly into graphic notation, "to coax a graphic language directly from living things."[27] To capture more detail, he turned to photography and then film, developing in each case sophisticated techniques to schematize and graph the movements he wanted to study.[28] Marey's followers and assistants expanded his experiments in several directions, attempting to photograph speech or transcribe human locomotion, establishing a new scientific discipline of physiological registration that Francois Dagognet has called "biogrammatology."[29] The unifying aim of all such experiments, no matter what sense they addressed or what medium they exploited, was to induce nature to record itself, to extract from visible objects what Talbot called "self-representations" that would necessarily be encoded, insofar as they were encoded at all, in "nature's own script."[30]

The idea that these experiments in "biogrammatology" had yielded what Marey himself called "a kind of universal language"[31] depended on the apparently automatic connection between the subject and its self-transcription. "The 'trace,'" as Dagognet puts it, "was to be considered nature's own expression, without screen, echo or interference: it was faithful, clear and, above all, universal."[32] Photographers, from the earliest inventors such as Talbot to modern commercial artists such as

Harry Holmes Smith, continued to make such claims for their art through two centuries of change in aesthetic practice and ideological estimation.[33] Even among the avant-garde, who might have been expected to exercise some skepticism about any apparent transparency in a signifying medium, the photograph was celebrated as a triumph of autography: "As a mirror throws back an image without effort, as an echo throws back a voice without asking why, the beauty of matter belongs to no one: from now on it is a product of physics and chemistry."[34] This idea, of a sign system belonging to no one and thus able to leap all boundaries of class, race, and nationality, fueled the most radical projects of the modernist avant-garde, even as it did the pretensions of the most successful film capitalists. Just as D. W. Griffith defended *Birth of a Nation* by contending that the language of film is by nature universal, Dziga Vertov introduced *The Man with the Movie Camera* as an "experimental work … creating a truly international absolute language of cinema based on its total separation from the language of theater and literature."[35]

Recording technologies such as film and phonography thus provided their users with a vastly more powerful, more extensive indexical sign, a kind of trace previously produced only by nature and then only in special circumstances, as in the case of footprints. These new media seemed to bridge the gap between language and visible phenomena by making a language *of* visible phenomena, a language impossibly more flexible and more various than any of the written languages. At one stroke, it would seem, the invention of photography "converted all things that emit, reflect, or otherwise modulate light, into potential tools,"[36] first for making images and then, since those images were also conceived as implicitly alphabetical, for writing. In other words, the very concept of "nature's own script" suggests that nature is already a script, that it is inhabited by, perhaps even constituted by language. However, this collapse of the distinction between sign and world, though it might in one way serve to substantiate the sign, could just as easily destabilize the world, or at least all possible perceptions of it. When all potential sense perceptions became implicitly recordable, according to James Lastra, they were

"inhabited" by writing in the sense that, even if understood as ontologically identical to "normal" perceptions, they could be cited and repeated, linked to new contexts, and forced to signify in ways contradictory to their original meanings. In short, they confronted the world with a form of *experience as written*—as

enabled and endangered by the possibilities of writing as described in philosophy.[37]

Instead of attaching to itself all the liveliness of nature, writing transfers all its belatedness, its artificiality, to nature itself, which thus becomes the "gigantic photographic machine" that Benjamin found predicted in the work of Blanqui, endlessly taking its own self-portrait.[38]

This is the paradox peculiar to photography, as Krauss suggests, "the paradox of reality constituted as sign—or presence transformed into absence, into representation, into spacing, into writing."[39] It is due to this paradox that the very technologies that were supposed to achieve a perfectly symmetrical and transparent relationship between reality and a renewed system of notation have also brought about a century of skepticism about reality itself, or at least about human perceptions of it. As Martin Jay has argued, "the invention of the camera … helped ultimately to undermine confidence in the very sense it so extended."[40] First of all, the claim of the camera, and of the other recording media after it, to complete objectivity was only too easy to dispute. In the beginning, of course, photographs could not even reproduce color, and the distortions introduced by lenses, lighting, and the variable photosensitivity of the necessary chemicals were abundantly obvious. Even so, acceptance of this inevitable fallibility occasioned some anxiety: "Can the sun lie?" asked the *Photographic News* in 1885.[41] Having put such great emphasis on recording as an automatic and therefore impartial transcription of the real, apologists for the new technologies were faced with the threatening idea that the distortions obvious in their recordings revealed an inherent instability in the relationship of human perception to reality.

Even when the recording media extended and perfected human perception, however, they had the ironic effect of undermining confidence in it. No matter how distorted camera vision might be, it does nonetheless take in a great deal more of any particular scene than any human observer can. Viewers of the first photographs were at first captivated and then disconcerted by the new medium's power to capture every detail, no matter how trivial. Art critics complained that there was "too much infinitesimal and often meaningless detail" in photographs, which they found dense and busy in comparison to painting.[42] In the same way, phonograph recordings picked up every sound within their range, regardless of meaning, so that elaborate systems of damping had to be invented that could distinguish desired sounds amid the ambient noise. Very early on, photographers also proposed the same sort

of damping, purposely sacrificing detail to tone so as to make their photographs look more like paintings, or, as it was also argued, to make them truer to actual vision, which inevitably sacrificed inessential, fleeting details in favor of overall impressions.[43] As Moholy-Nagy put it, "it is said that 'the camera does not lie,' and this is true in the objective sense … but it does lie constantly in the subjective sense, because it cannot separate what is important from what is quite unimportant."[44]

Unfortunately, the same formula suggests that the eye also constantly lies in giving the important its due prominence. By recording levels of detail usually ignored and moments in processes usually perceived as fluid wholes, photography exposed the unnoticedfilteringand processing that transforms phenomena into useful perceptions. As Patrick Maynard says, "a feature that struck people initially about photographic processes, and continues to impress (or oppress) them, is how easily they record that unattended background of perceptual experience, and what effort it requires to *filter* or *suppress* that record or to keep it down *as* background."[45] Perhaps the most famous formulation of this idea is Benjamin's:

> Whereas it is a commonplace that, for example, we have some idea of what is involved in the act of walking (if only in general terms), we have no idea at all of what happens during the fraction of a second when a person actually takes a step. Photography, with its devices of slow motion and enlargement, reveals the secret. It is through photography that we first discover the existence of this optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis.[46]

As the parallel to psychoanalysis would suggest, the knowledge of what happens during that fraction of a step is actually suppressed, since paying attention to every second of every process is a psychological and not a physiological impossibility. If vision actually takes place as much in the mind as in the eye, then that means that the eye is subject to all the mind's powers of reasoning and to its rationalizations as well, so that vision can be thought of as purposely formalized, much as a language is, and also as subjective, opinionated, and opaque to itself.[47]

For many artists, however, the peculiar power of photography lay precisely in its differences from ordinary vision, which gave it the ability to expose the irrational underside of what had come to be accepted as reality. Vertov, perhaps most famously of all, imagined a "kino-eye" that "has the possibility of making the invisible visible, the unclear clear, the hidden manifest, the disguised overt, the acted non-

acted; making falsehood into truth."[48] Moholy-Nagy once listed eight types of photographic vision, each of which exceeded ordinary vision in a particular way: "abstract seeing, rapid seeing, slow seeing, intensified seeing, penetrative seeing (radiography), simultaneous seeing, and distorted seeing."[49] And it was a commonplace of the earliest intellectual enthusiasm about film that it shared some essential techniques with psychoanalysis, "making the invisible visible, the familiar unfamiliar, the distant proximate."[50] But this meant that the same medium that had come to represent the possibility of an ideal language, transparent to reality and intelligible to all, was also associated with the most opaque and distorted activities of the mind and that the artistic products of this enthusiasm, from Moholy-Nagy's photomontages to Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*, resembled fantasies or nightmares more than they did everyday eyesight.

Thus the camera, celebrated from the first as objectivity incarnate, also came to serve as one of modernity's most powerful emblems of the subjectivity of perception and of knowledge. Once it became clear that eyesight is selective, it was also inescapably obvious that patterns of selectivity vary according to place and time: "the separation between what is significant *(signifiani)* and what is merely noise is not absolute, but depends on the situation."[51] It even began to seem that in certain significant ways vision itself is a kind of writing, selecting as it does from the welter of visual experience those elements that are usably intelligible because they match patterns recognized from the past. As Berkeley had argued two centuries before, whatever the eye receives the mind perceives as sign and not as immediate reality.

What this meant for the modern arts, however, is that there are all sorts of possible new languages held in potential within the optical unconscious. Photography came to be admired and emulated, not so much for what it revealed directly about reality but for what it implied about the ignored and unexpected within ordinary perception. Machine vision appealed to many modern artists and writers, to be sure, because it seemed to perfect the human senses, but it appealed to the more radical because it showed the rich possibilities left to art by the very imperfection of our sensory filters. Thus the twentieth century developed what Patrick Maynard has called "an aesthetic of visual noise"[52] very much like the more literal aesthetic of noise to be found in music. But in both cases the noise is meant to become information at another level, intelligible communication about the unused potential of the human senses.[53]

Beginning with photography, then, the recording media pose a

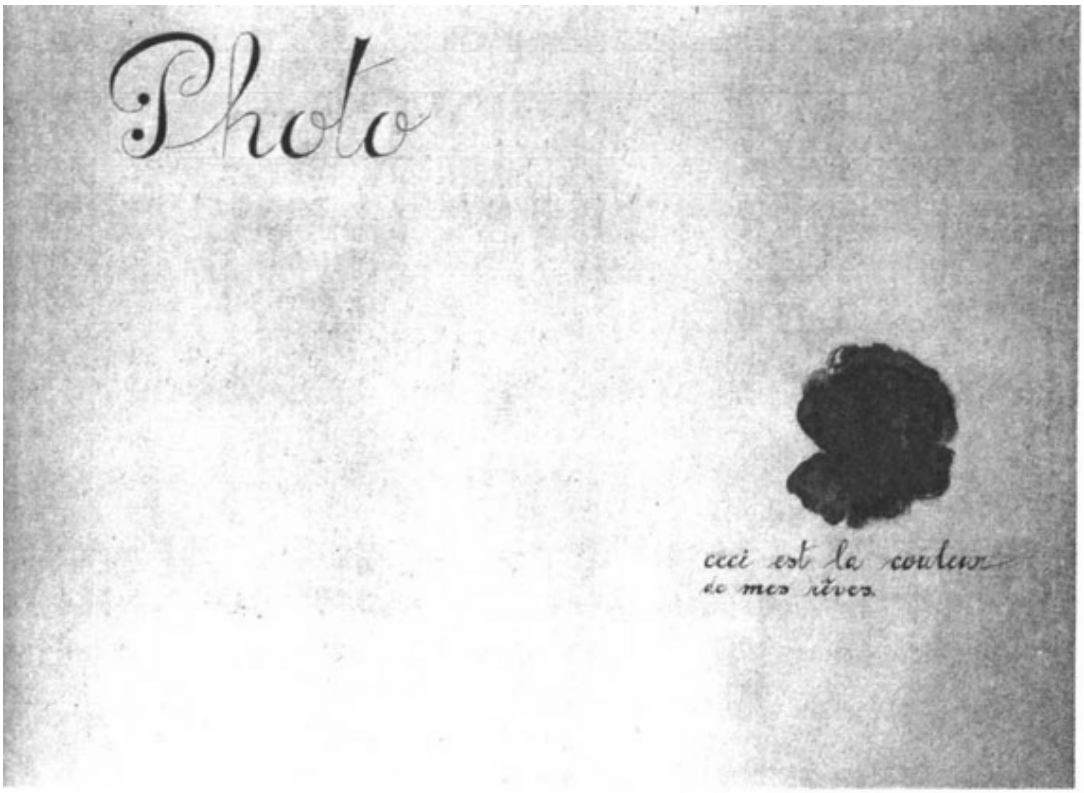
fundamental challenge to literature and the arts, confusing writing and images by confounding the seemingly elementary distinction between language and perception. Many of the most radical formal experiments of the twentieth century can be traced back to the new association of word and image suggested by the photograph. In fact, it would not be too far wrong to say that modernism itself, as a panartistic movement, begins with the critical interrogation of the relationship between text and image, brought equally into literature and the visual arts by mechanical recording. This is not to say, of course, that any such history of modernism could account for all that is new in the art and literature of the twentieth century or that attention to new media should entirely displace other topics in aesthetics, psychology, sociology, or history. However, the new media did influence modern art and literature at a very basic and material level, as alternate methods of inscription, and for this reason they offered to modernism a formal model and not just another type of subject matter. The influence of that model can be seen first in the fundamental renovations of the visual arts that took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

One of the most notable developments in the art of the early twentieth century was the introduction into it of alphabetic signs, sometimes mere numerals or simple letter forms, sometimes slogans, sometimes whole columns of type appropriated from newspapers or magazines. For the catalogue of a 1989 exhibition of the Dada and Surrealist word-image, Judi Freeman and John Welchman assembled a wealth of information about this extraordinary introduction of writing into the artistic projects of the avant-garde. Still, despite careful study, this eruption of alphabetical signs and written messages remains for them something of a mystery, almost a religious one: "And suddenly there was the word."[54] But a quick look at the artwork chosen as frontispiece to the catalogue provides at least a possible clue to one source of this new practice: it is a 1925 painting by Joan Miró entitled *Photo: Ceci est la couleur de mes rêves* (fig. 1).[55]

This work consists of the title, inscribed elegantly in the upper left corner of a white canvas, and the subtitle, inscribed in the same hand in the lower right, just below a single loose rosette of blue paint. Presumably the subtitle functions as a caption for the paint, designating blue as the color of the artists dreams, but then again if the word *ceci* is taken as referring to itself, then the subtitle suggests that the artist dreams in black and white, the color of print and also, not incidentally, of photographs.

In comparison to the incontestable blue of the paint, the word *couleur* seems impossibly narrow and inadequate, and yet in comparison

Figure 1. Joan Miro, *Photo: Ceci est la couleur de mes rêves* (1925). (©2004 Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York / AD AGP, Paris)



to the simple blueness of the paint, *couleur* contains all sorts of possibilities within its visual black and white. The artwork thus poses a serious question as to whether it is language or visual imagery that affords the imagination a greater freedom. Is blue or black and white *la couleur de mes rêves?* Yet the whole debate between word and paint takes place under the sponsorship of another form, designated by the title, which suggests with weird discursivity that this work *is* a photograph. The whole competition of word and image, the title suggests, takes place within the boundaries of the photograph, which is as visual as the patch of paint and as black and white as the print. The appearance of the title as script within the artwork itself suggests the dual role the photograph plays as both representation and reference, as simultaneous icon and symbol. And Miró's choice of this particular term as both subject and title of his work suggests that the explanation for the otherwise rather mysterious introduction of the word-image may be found in what Rosalind Krauss called some twenty years ago "the paradoxical writing of the photograph."[56]

The idea that photography might play such a role would have been hard to imagine in the nineteenth century. Though the birth of photography coincided with the very earliest years of what would come to be called modernism, the earliest representative of that movement, Charles Baudelaire, disdained photography as slavishly realistic.[57] For Baudelaire, the camera merely captured facts, whereas the artist of modern life was a collector of signs, as much a reader of the cityscape as an observer of it. Even in making this distinction, however, Baudelaire defined a peculiarly modern form of perception that would later come to seem essentially photographic. By the time Benjamin came to revise Baudelaire, it was the camera that was best suited to reveal "the literarization of the conditions of life," the transformation of everyday details into inscriptions demanding to be read.[58] When Benjamin repeats the old saw that "the illiteracy of the future will be ignorance … of photography," he does not mean that photographs will necessarily replace writing as a method of communication but rather that photography, having made everything into a potential inscription, has made modern experience itself into a kind of literacy to be learned.

It is certainly true that the first and most obvious impact of photography on painting was to correct certain habits of composition that turned out to be visual conventions and not accurate transcriptions of reality. Thus Degas, Meissonier, Eakins, and Remington all used Eadweard Muybridge's motion studies as guides in correctly portraying human and animal locomotion.[59] However, even painters whom Baudelaire would have considered above mere mimesis took easily to photography as a visual aid. Delacroix, for example, took lessons in the daguerreotype and kept albums of photographic studies, as did Moreau and Rodin.[60] The impact of photography on the established visual arts was, however, only temporarily in the direction of a greater realism. Even straightforward emulation of the look and feel of early photographs had the effect of removing modulations of tone and value from paintings such as Manet's *Olympia*, producing the flattened, highly contrasted shapes that seemed both artificial and roughly unfinished to early viewers. As Michael Fried has argued, these unmodulated shapes give Manet's paintings the look of having been stamped, not painted, much the way Japanese woodblock prints are stamped, but the comparison suggests that what photography produced in Manet's work is stylization of a very particular kind, inseparable from the fact that photographs and woodblock prints are both techniques of reproduction.[61] Evoking the flat, stamped-out quality of a print or photograph is deliberately to mimic the reproducibility of the other media, even to suggest

that what painting should represent is the new way so much experience comes to individual viewers in reproduced forms. This is perhaps what Thierry de Duve means in asking: "Was it not Manet who let the simulation of the photographic simulacrum infect painting from within?"[62] In his most recent book, *Suspensions of Perception*, Jonathan Crary has posed the same question in regard to a series of modern painters, from Manet to Cézanne. What Crary calls "the modernization of the observer" has attuned these painters and their audience to "a world in which artifice has preempted the memory of the 'natural' and vision is fully attuned to the subtleties and textures of this perpetually modernized present."[63]

A very particular aspect of this modernized visual texture was the indiscriminate mixture in it of text and image. Though it has been true for centuries that a great deal of writing is meant to be read from vertical surfaces, as inscriptions, broadsides, and signboards, there was a noticeable increase in the mid—nineteenth century in the amount of type on display. Though Benjamin exaggerates when he says, "the letter and the word which have rested for centuries in the flat bed of the book's horizontal pages have been wrenched from their position and have been erected on vertical scaffolds in the streets," he is nonetheless faithfully representing a predominant feeling of his time.[64] Many visual artists and writers from Mallarmé to the Lettrists were inspired by the newly visual role in which modern advertising put writing. Type meant to catch a great many eyes from a distance had to appeal first to visual qualities quite independent of discursive sense, and type mixed with pictures naturally revealed its own purely pictorial qualities. At the same time, the introduction of photolithographic methods of printing brought pictures down from the vertical to the horizontal plane previously reserved for reading. Thus one of the most striking things about photography to many modern artists was its constant association with type. "New objects," as Salvador Dali put it in 1927, "photographed amidst the agile typography of advertisements!"[65] Even if photography had not been presented as an alternative form of inscription from the beginning, its close association with type in the twentieth century would have established an affinity, as the constant presentation of photographs in newspapers and books suggested that photographs, like type, might be read.

The photography with the greatest influence on the visual arts, then, was not necessarily the photography that aspired to that status but rather die vernacular photography that went into advertisements, illustrated magazines, and, ultimately, cinema. It was certainly the convergence of

these that contributed to what many felt was the rediscovery of photography in the years immediately after World War I.[66] Krauss has commented in regard to surrealist photography that "throughout Europe in the 1920s there was the experience of something supplemental added to reality,"[67] and this experience was so strong and so widespread as to inspire almost immediate backlash. Thus *bauhaus* magazine published in 1929 a dry commentary on "photo-inflation": "a jubilant transformation of photography as the only visual experience conducive to human happiness."[68] Backlash notwithstanding, the situation of the avant-garde at this time was still what Osip Brik called "an eclectic, artistic-cum-photographic culture that has mixed up all the old painterly clichés and the new experiments in photo-cinematographic creativity."[69]

Photography, in this extended sense, was much more than a medium. It was the context, simultaneously technical, social, and aesthetic, within which both writers and artists in the avant-garde worked out their ideas about representation. Because it had long been considered a new alphabet as well as a new visual medium, because its most timely manifestations—in advertisements, magazines, and in silent film—occurred in close association with type, it was easy to exploit photography so as to stage a confrontation between radically different methods of representation and thus to question anew that difference. Particularly in Dada and Surrealism, but also generally in art movements across Europe, works of art were "hybrids searching for a language in the very clash of languages,"[70] combinations of writing, sound, film, photography, gesture, painting, and action, in which photography and film enjoyed a priority because they linked the avant-garde, technological modernity, and mass culture.[71]

The artistic prototypes for all such work were the *papiers collés* that Picasso and Braque began to produce in 1912. Among the printed materials pasted into these revolutionary works were the announcements for two programs at the Tivoli Cinema, which opened at Sorgues in 1913.[72] Though there is no actual evidence that Braque or Picasso actually attended any showings of these films, the most substantial of which was entitled *La Petite Fifi*, they had been followers of film in general from at least 1904.[73] It is entirely possible that the primary attraction of these early films for Picasso and his friends lay in their subject matter: cowboys, comedians, cops and robbers; but Natasha Staller has suggested that the films of Georges Méliès, at least, provided an important aesthetic model as well, partly with dizzying shifts of perspective and scale, partly by fragmenting and distorting the human body, and partly by inserting into filmed performance alphanumeric characters, sometimes as