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## Precisionism and its Involvement with Sociological Matters during the Machine Age

### Charles Sheeler's *American Landscape* and *Classic Landscape*\*

Precisionist paintings are often seen as positive commentary, in contrast to negative feelings associated with society's modernization<sup>1</sup>. They mainly survey urban and architectural landscapes, but their repertoire also encompasses portrayals of the vernacular and interior. Precisionism captivates the viewer's interest through meticulously precise renderings of the depicted<sup>2</sup>.

This essay will examine Precisionism as the critical voice in a modern though delicate American society. The main question addressed is how shifting social, technological and economic environments find visual transfer into the art of Charles Sheeler. This reconstruction will reveal the ambiguity of Precisionism by showing how it propagates progress' achievements, its strive for efficiency, and how the artist manages to illustrate the reverse of a profit-driven process. Focus will be on Sheeler's paintings *American Landscape* (1930) and *Classic Landscape* (1931)<sup>3</sup>.

#### The Precisionist approach

During the 1980s and 1990s academic research rediscovered Precisionism, but the majority of scholars followed in the footsteps of Michael Friedman's affirmative approach, which he described in his 1960 discourse "The Precisionist View"<sup>4</sup>. They mostly continued to read a positivist notion toward technology and the machine into Sheeler's work, especially those works that emerged out of his commission for the Ford Motor Company<sup>5</sup>. Nevertheless, scholars like Karen Lucic, Carol Troyen, Erica E. Hirshler, Miles Orvell or Sharon L. Corwin have proposed a more nuanced approach and perspective on Sheeler's art, perceiving indications of uneasiness, ambivalence and anxiety<sup>6</sup>. These authors examined the artist's interrelation to technological progress within his time and unveiled an apparent dichotomy, especially with the obvious attraction to industry and technology and the absence of the human being in Sheeler's work.

Nevertheless, they only scratched the surface, so a comprehensive examination of this aspect of Sheeler's work is yet to be delivered. A recent publication by renowned technology historian David E. Nye continues the afore mentioned affirmative approach, claiming that "Sheeler's aesthetic not only embraced the Ford factories but linked them to a developing American taste for the vernacular tradition [...] Sheeler deemphasized the assembly line itself, for mass production was a radical break with craft tradition"<sup>7</sup>. Despite the research that has so far been done, approaching Sheeler's oeuvre with regard to a glorification of technology rather than seeing its dehumanizing and disruptive notions is still a common way to evaluate his work and even Precisionism altogether.

I want to propose a more nuanced perspective, working out the complicated perception that Sheeler had of industry and its working methods. Sheeler's approach is multidimensional and I argue he offers us two possible views on the Machine Age that can cohabitate.

Those of his paintings and photographs which originated during the Great Depression, do more than simply illustrate depictions of historic, economic and political turmoil. They bear witness to the achievements of progress. They are contemporary witnesses that give account of progress' ambiguity. On the one hand they refer to the fascination toward all that has technically been achieved and created by mankind, but they much more strongly also call to mind the lack of the human element in Sheeler's work. His paintings of the Machine Age therefore reveal advancement's negative side effects for human existence. They explicitly deal with man's role in this automated world and do not merely function as documents of glorification and fascination<sup>8</sup>. Describing a technology- and socio-critical involvement, these art works demand a cultural scientific survey of the portrayal

and non-portrayal of technologies' self-destructive potential and their consequences for human beings. Claiming that Precisionism merely documents the mechanization of work processes would add a one-dimensionality that fails to do justice to this much more complex and multi-faceted artistic style, as Precisionism pre-formulates the social and societal consequences of a modern society which depends on technology. Artists like Charles Sheeler do not solely propagate and idealize the industrial system, nor do they merely use their artistic sensibility to document its production methods and processes. Rather, he also reveals the problems caused by a forced mechanical autonomy – the desensitization caused by the standardization of mass production, the marginalization of the human workforce and its emphasis on maximizing efficiency. I argue that Sheeler used his art as an instrument to expose these negative effects and to comment on the human workforce's dispensability, with its de-qualification and anonymity. Furthermore, it is worthwhile mentioning why it is still so difficult to properly evaluate and understand the work of Sheeler. Part of this owes to the fact that the photographs he took for the Ford commission served as basis for his most famous works *Classic Landscape* and *American Landscape*<sup>9</sup>. In these paintings Sheeler dealt with what he had experienced and seen at the plant. They were painted four, respectively five years after the commission:

*I was out there on a mission of photography. Period. And I got there, I took a chance on opening the other eye and so then I thought maybe some pictures could be pulled out. But I had to come home, and it was several years later that they had really digested, and they started coming out; there were four pictures eventually*<sup>10</sup>.

Even though these images were not part of the contract, it is probable that he did not intend to openly offend his commissioners, therefore applying a rather subtle and not easily decoded way of criticism to reveal his own socio- and techno-critical approach<sup>11</sup>. These two paintings portray Henry Ford's famous River Rouge Plant. He painted those oil works amidst the gloomy years of the Great Depression. This Plant was one of the most innovative and modern

complexes of its time – a self-sufficient functioning environment of its own:

*Occupying over eleven hundred acres, with twenty-three main buildings and dozens of subsidiary structures, ninety-three miles of railroad track, and twenty-seven miles of conveyors moving raw materials, the Rouge employed about seventy-five thousand people*<sup>12</sup>.

The plant enabled Henry Ford to create his visionary city of efficiency, cleanliness, order and progress. But it also was a place of dullness, repetition, deskilling, observation and spying, with a lot of mental and time pressure put on the individual worker<sup>13</sup>.

This article will show that the dehumanizing factors are still frequently overlooked, but nevertheless subtly portrayed. An immanent examination will reveal that Sheeler's critical commentary is visually transported through the rhetorical devices of oversubscription and omission.

### **On American Landscape**

This painting is based on Sheeler's photograph *Ford Plant, River Rouge, Canal with Salvage Ship* (1927)<sup>14</sup>. Whereas the photo had a vertical format, Sheeler chose a horizontal picture size for his oil painting. The latter is divided into fore-, middle- and background, with its focus being on "the Rouge's boat slip and the cement plant on its eastern shore [...]"<sup>15</sup>. The picture is harshly cropped at its edges, with the viewer realizing that this world of manufactured technology expands indefinitely – thus strengthening the River Rouge's vastness and greatness. The extreme wide angle Sheeler applied results in a panoramic impression that may at first evoke memories of the vast landscapes of the Luminists. Images like Martin Johnson Heade's *Summer Showers* (1865–70) or James Augustus Suydam's *Paradise Rocks, Newport* (1860) come to mind<sup>16</sup>. But it would belie Precisionist images to simply read them as reminiscences of the American artistic past.

The observer's viewpoint is undetermined; he seems to be hovering in the air. The structure of the painting changes between linear and planar: Whereas more painterly depicted portrayals of elements such as water, sky and earth are characterized by no sharply defined edges, architectural and technical

parts such as building components and mechanic devices have been modeled more clearly with each showing a carefully rendered border. This contrast results in two differing pictorial elements. Rather randomly appearing 'natural' elements are opposed to strict, clear and tidied architectural and technical portions, and it is the pictorial manner of these 'natural' parts that assures the viewer to be dealing with a painting. Still, no brushstrokes can be discovered. The image's overall stasis is interrupted by elements such as the smooth flow of the artificially tamed stream, the wafting piece of cloth, the small figure walking along the tracks, or the billows of smoke which all bring in a notion of temporality.

When comparing the photograph to the painting it becomes obvious that Sheeler cropped the latter significantly. He left out all the debris and untidiness in the foreground, instead focusing on the smokestack, the cement plant, the waiting train, and the crane. A comparison between the two makes it obvious that the focus has shifted: Whereas in the photograph Sheeler concentrated on the routines of work and processing, allowing an insight into the dirty and tough work of the Ford employees, he completely blanks out this part in his painting, instead revealing a more different and ambiguous aspect of work at Ford's. It is the dark and massively depicted foreground that is left out, whereas the photograph's delicately rendered, though contrasty background becomes the painting's chief subject and focus.

Sheeler did not simply transfer elements from the photograph to the painting; instead he chose to make three important additions to it, namely the small walking figure, the billows of smoke and the steam locomotive. The bug-like worker walking between the wagons and away from work is a frequently overlooked addition to the painted image. He is rendered in a blurry manner; distinct features are not recognizable. The worker seems isolated, lonely within this vast technical autonomy. Sheeler does not picture the dull, alienating and deskilling work at Ford's famous assembly line<sup>17</sup>, but rather a lonesome worker idly trotting along the railway without any special task to perform. By focusing on the cement plant and smokestacks, Sheeler put major emphasis on the machines, their mass, power, and force. The steam locomotive's

massiveness symbolizes the perfection of mechanical power. It furthermore portrays an age characterized by the obsession with largeness, productivity and time pressure, therefore enhancing the notion of a disruptive and dehumanizing technology. Additionally, he applied several modifications: the white cloth that is attached to the crane is not static anymore but blows in the wind, adding a feeling of movement and change. The sky is much more distinct and dissected, massive fumes polluting the atmosphere. The water's flow is smoother in the middle of the stream, giving an almost static reflection of the smokestack. Furthermore, the two rightmost wheels of the crane are placed off the tracks, adding an aspect of fragility to the entire scene. The painting's overall impression is one of immaculateness, especially along the shore. This obvious and peculiar cleanliness brings an artificial notion to the entire scene, giving the impression that Sheeler wants the viewer to carefully reflect on what we see – and to eventually also reflect on what is being left out.

Within the plant's centerpiece man has become secondary, even anonymous, as workforce. Sheeler shows us the status of the worker under Taylorism and Fordism: It owes to the growing automatization that machines have taken over labor's major part and that the workers are either the machines' extension or not needed anymore altogether. *American Landscape* conveys such a machine-controlled world in which an overtly gigantic and comprehensive process of mechanization and automatization has left man dispensable and dwarfed to insignificance. Whereas Taylorism aimed at analyzing, systematizing, and optimizing certain work processes – famously remembered from Frank Gilbreth's time and motion studies –, Fordism rationalized work, with man having to execute the same repetitive movements for hours<sup>18</sup>. Both systems were geared towards ensuring an increased productivity along with a growing efficiency<sup>19</sup>: Frederick Winslow Taylor stated that "The Gorilla types are no more needed"<sup>20</sup>. Rather, reification is the magic word: People had to endure dullness, repetition and monotony, in turn being 'rewarded' outstanding wages<sup>21</sup>.

Looking at this deserted image it is hard to imagine that 75,000 people worked at the Rouge<sup>22</sup>. The

absence of human workforce within such an impressive industrial environment can be read as both a positive and negative statement. On the one hand it glorifies mankind's ability to create machines that are able to work without much human support at all. On the other hand it gives evidence of the ambivalent notion that machines are able to perform their assignments without man's help, leaving human workforce with only numbing, repetitive tasks. Nevertheless, we see man's power is being expanded, since he is – little as he may be – indeed able to create, control and operate those massive machines. Looming in the wake of this statement, however, belies a question: how long will man be in control at all<sup>23</sup>? The more power he puts into the hands of machines, the more they develop an independent existence and the less controllable the entire situation becomes for man himself and his role as workforce. Contemporaries like writer Sherwood Anderson or journalist Paul Rosenfeld distinctly expressed such concerns. Anderson gives a very crisp summary of man's intimidation by machines when writing:

*The machines are beautiful with a cold kind of classic beauty, but they are beautiful. In motion they become gorgeous things. I have stood sometimes for two or three hours in some big factory looking at the machines in motion. As I stand looking at them my body begins to tremble. The machines make me feel small. They are too complex and beautiful for me. My manhood cannot stand up against them yet. They do things too well. They do too much<sup>24</sup>.*

In 1921 Paul Rosenfeld expressed his growing doubts regarding the leading impact of machines by summarizing his experience living in the Machine Age as servility and as the destituteness of humanity<sup>25</sup>. He even went as far as to compare them with Frankenstein monsters that have turned against their creators:

*For a century, the machines have been enslaving the race. For a century, they have been impoverishing the experience of humanity. Like great Frankenstein monsters, invented by the brain of human beings to serve them, these vast creatures have suddenly turned on their masters, and made them their prey<sup>26</sup>.*

By putting the painting's focus on the mechanical autonomy and eventually on its impact and bearing for the workers, Sheeler adds meaning to the painting: Man is not striking attention anymore within this autonomy – a fact that the artist emphasizes through the worker's size and unrecognizable portrayal. Moreover, a growing mechanization and automatization permits machines to cast aside their human operators. Sheeler enhances this by letting the worker walk away from the scene – he is not needed anymore.

Various other factors encode the painting with a critical notion – the differentiated and contrary handling of pictorial elements, e. g. landscape versus architecture, the zooming in of a former background part and the depiction of human workforce. What is striking is that the plant's function is not revealed: this could be any factory, since there are no traces of automobile parts, the assembly line or even cars. Sheeler did add three tiny Ford logos on the waiting train wagons, though, but he applied them in a way rather difficult to decipher and he furthermore did not place them prominently. Interestingly enough, many contemporary critics did not recognize Ford's River Rouge Plant in the painting. A critic of the *San Francisco, Cal. Examiner* in 1931 noted: "His subjects are two industrial plants, possibly in the Middle West"<sup>27</sup>. Another journalist of *The New York Sun* stressed this impression by writing: "Anyway, the scene looks precisely the sort of thing you see when motoring between here and Newark"<sup>28</sup>. With this in mind it can be assumed that Sheeler wanted to raise awareness about the impact of Taylorism and Fordism within the entire American industry, not solely within the Ford Motor Company. The introduction of Fordism and Taylorism involved great parts of the industrial sector and hypothesize that Sheeler had an ambivalent attitude toward the system and its consequences for human workforce. As early as 1924 did Charles Reitell comment on this problem in an article entitled *Machinery and Its Effect upon the Workers in the Automotive Industry*. He lists the significant changes that have evolved due to increased mechanization and automatization. Since so many processes have been standardized, fewer and fewer experienced or qualified workers are needed. For

instance, the untrained workforce is being sought after who can be taught simple work tasks within only a few hours:

*The recent development of machinery in American industry has wrought definite changes in the nature of productive effort required of the workers. So pronounced have been the changes that they record definite influences upon the worker's wages, upon his mental actions and reactions, upon his physical being, and upon the whole social and industrial fabric of which he is a part. [...] But there is a backfire to all of this mechanical achievement. The workers by the millions in mills and factories are being shaped to meet the demands of these rigid machines<sup>29</sup>.*

This raising awareness is further enhanced by the painting's format: the length of the boat slip evokes associations of Henry Ford's famous assembly line which is characterized by processuality. Furthermore, the assembly line is not only characterized by the concept of standardization and repetition, it also reveals the worker's negligence and weakness immediately: "The worker soon realizes that he is not only being measured but that this work is a link in a long chain of operations, which link, if it does not function properly, is quickly noticed by management and by other workers"<sup>30</sup>. This malfunctioning is not only detected immediately but the worker also has to bear the consequences, such as becoming an interchangeable part of the workforce and therefore disposable.

How did Sheeler manage to give the painting this critical notion? At first glance, it seems that Sheeler shows the observer a perfectly functioning, visionary industrial city: Dirt and labor are left out with the entire scene being portrayed in clearly outlined shapes – this resulting in a transmission of the depicted onto the real circumstances. American industry is being portrayed as a structured and functional conglomerate, working effectively and cleanly. It is an interaction of various processes – with the final product having these very same characteristics. The observer realizes some discrepancies upon closer inspection, however. There are the two afore-mentioned painting styles. There is an absence of brush strokes, and the worker is sheered off. Under Fordism and Taylorism man is

assigned repetitive and monotonous tasks; he, like the artist, leaves no more visible traces since machines can do what he used to do. Whereas the worker played an active part in the 1927 photograph *Ford Plant, River Rouge, Canal with Salvage Ship*, his role in the 1930 painting is passive. Sheeler's sterile and institutional mode of depiction describes the idealization of an industrial manufacturing plant which does not exist in reality. The artist only shows what is necessary, no abundance or ornamentation.

The only 'natural' elements to be observed are water and sky. They make out about 50% of the image. Landscape as physical occurrence – humanly modified nature – is being completely left out. We do have an arrangement of elements such as water and sky amidst a vastness of industry, but we would not refer to the painting as containing landscape, as significant scenic qualities are missing: no landforms or living components of land cover are visible. Since sky and billows of fume are reflected in the water, Sheeler shows that industry's consequences are everywhere: The river merely is a dead stream, containing no life. Industry exhausts its breath into the atmosphere, polluting the environment. This emphasizes the notion that industry occupies and intervenes into the last reminiscences of nature that are still there. The painting's division into fore-, middle- and background – added by the observer's indefinable viewpoint – and the strict separation by the river, leaves one with the impression of looking over to a different world: the unornamented, functioning, independent, and automated world of machines. This notion is strengthened by the wall in the painting's foreground, which clearly separates the viewer from the world behind. Nevertheless, the curious are allowed a peek by climbing on the ladder, catching a glimpse of the present modern times.

*American Landscape* is an accumulation of opposites. Sheeler deals critically with the faith that has been put into American industry, not simply portraying what he experienced but appending a critical notion through additions and omissions. In the reflection on what he saw during his photographic commission, he created paintings that subtly criticize the industrial system. Various interfering elements are used to give the paintings their ambiguity. The artist

applies different manners of painting to oppose natural and architectural parts: Elements from nature are rendered very painterly, whereas they contrast with meticulously rendered architectural and technical elements. Sheeler's painting may at first hand seem like an homage to American industry, but it contains a medley of elements that give the depicted a critical notion. This helps to make the image look beautified, smoothed and perfected, but they also make the viewer stumble upon what he sees, forcing him to reflect on the ambivalent meaning of the depicted.

### **On *Classic Landscape***

Many of these ambiguous elements also apply for Sheeler's *Classic Landscape*. The painting shows a typical scene of the modern industrial age, offering the view on the River Rouge Plant from a different angle: The observer hovers somewhere beneath the high line railroad tracks, "looking toward the silos of the cement plant and the irregular form of the slag screen house [...]"<sup>31</sup>. In the tripartite painting no human beings can be made out. Sky, clouds and billows of smoke cover almost 40% of the canvas. Next to the railroad tracks sculpturally shaped moulds of sand and other raw materials wait to be processed. They are too neatly modeled, therefore again bringing the notion of artificiality to the entire scene.

Sheeler again worked with two different painterly methods, linear and planar parts. As in *American Landscape* natural elements find a more painterly depiction whereas all manmade elements are strictly rendered, precisely painted, clear and geometrically pictured. The railroad tracks' strong alignment adds the aspects of dynamics and speed and therefore of temporality to the image. These are further emphasized by the image's harsh cropping in the foreground and on the right side. The notion of temporality is further enhanced by the fumes' directions of movement. As in *American Landscape*, the image lacks any visible brushstrokes. The color palette is reduced to rather warm colors: white, black, violet and various tonalities of ocher. Despite the overall warm atmosphere, the scenery has an eerie and menacing notion to it. This owes to the direction of light, which generates a surreal character: the incising light is too harsh and bright for both the sun and the polluted

sky. Considering the thick layer of clouds and fumes one is astounded that there should be such bright sunshine at all.

This image of the River Rouge Plant offers a static, clean and also ghost-like atmosphere. Silence, alienation and emptiness dominate the scenery. Even though the raising smoke and the waiting train refer to the plant's business, no traces of human beings are to be found. The overall impression is one of organization and sterility; Sheeler's chosen color palette gives it an idyllic and perfectly clean touch that nevertheless is paired with a sense of uneasiness.

*Here is none of the dirt that marks the passage and accumulation of time: no rust is there, nor any moth. It is not industry as industry seems, but [...] the industry of our dreams, in which are mingled Manifest Destiny, the grandeur and loneliness of the prairies, and the old-fashioned immigrant's belief in sidewalks paved with gold*<sup>32</sup>.

Both the dynamics of the railway tracks and the billowing fumes evoke the impression of productivity and rapidity. Just as in *American Landscape* the suppression of dirt and the plant's portrayal in clearly outlined, formulated shapes result in the inaccurate projection of the depicted onto reality. Nevertheless, this painting has interfering elements in it as well: Despite its apparent bustle it is devoid of any human beings, thus leaving the entire scene forlorn and somber. Mankind is represented only through what he has created, namely the architecture and the heaps of raw materials. The concepts that come to mind again are that of the worker's dispensability and technology's supremacy. On the observer's left side a threatening mound of raw material accumulates. It takes up almost half of the painting's height, but in its pyramidal shape it also shows parallels to the billows of fume in the sky – which reach almost as far. More than anything else the painting's gloomy notion is intensified by the overly bright and surreal colored light which enhances the overall unnatural, uneasy, and hostile-to-life impression. The choice of colors gives a romantic impression that implicitly appears genteel, though a rather inhospitable landscape is opposed to that. It is the combination of these two elements that give the painting a sublime notion and the reminiscence of lovely awe or even twilight.

Furthermore, landscape is again being left out, the only visible elements being the sky and heaps of raw materials such as limestone or sand. Whereas industry's exhausts are polluting the sky, the mentioned raw materials have been quarried, waiting to get processed into cement. This final product will then be used to expand construction and building, thus eliminating nature even further. It is a vicious cycle that Sheeler presents to us. The image's somber industrial aesthetic, paired with bits of romanticism, gives it the feeling of ambivalence. The depicted seems to be a forlorn spot, with the hostile-to-life notion being strengthened by the artificial color selection.

### Conclusion

Both *American Landscape* and *Classic Landscape* have disturbing elements. They share that the viewer's path always seems to be barred and impassable: This may be due to a canalized river or to railway tracks. One does not really know where to go since routes are not only blocked but everything also seems dangerous. Furthermore, both images are devoid of nature: what remains has been processed, molded, tamed or polluted. Nature becomes an industrial landscape, an entity dominated by industry. Additionally, both paintings question and address the role of the worker: Whereas in *American Landscape* the bug-like worker idly trots away from the scene, *Classic Landscape* may show traces of human beings but no single individual. The worker is erased and abandoned. Labor is not shown at all; it is represented as a ghost-like performance. Although the viewer is clearly aware that in both pictures working plants are depicted – the billows of smoke are its unequivocal signs.

Sheeler's critical commentary is visually transported through the devices of oversubscription and omission. As shown, oversubscription is expressed through the artificiality of light, pristine tidiness, explicit and extrinsic beauty, immaculateness and the manner of painting. Elided elements are human workforce, dirt and work per se.

Sheeler furthermore brought criticism into his art through his choice of titles: *Classic Landscape* or *American Landscape* are not randomly picked names.

They want the viewer to reflect about and stumble upon them. 'Classic' in the sense of 'perfected' or 'timelessly shaped' are none of the notions that would come to mind when looking at the painting. Impressions could rather be described in terms such as hostile to life and surreal. The depicted appears perfected though the eyes of an architect or industrialist – both from the outside but also concerning the interrelation of automatization, productivity and profit. The description of the other landscape being 'American' is a hint at the transformation that landscape has undergone. Both titles refer to how American landscapes had classically appeared and how drastic the changes have been – not only for the territory itself but also for the changes it brought to the human workforce. The classical image of a landscape is being substituted: Modern industrial complexes replace classical architecture by means of an unornamented, purist functionalism. Smokestacks and cement plants act the part of massive columns. Slag screen houses evoke memories of temples from ages past. What these images share is that their titles anticipate something different than the depicted. Images akin to those of the Hudson River School, for instance Frederic Edwin Church's *Heart of the Andes* (1859), come to mind – the grandeur of a still unspoiled landscape, endless rivers and mountains<sup>33</sup>. Sheeler's images therefore present a shift, foremost has nature been subdued and replaced by industrial complexes. Nevertheless, those complexes are rendered critically: They may partly stand for the great achievements of industrial magnates like Henry Ford, but also warn us of progress' consequences. They illustrate Henry Ford's visionary ideas – but not without questioning if the concepts of efficiency, progress, and functionalism had been fully considered.

It has been shown that Precisionism still offers many aspects worth investigating and that there is a human element to its work. The more facets find examination, the more able art historians will be to finally grant Precisionism's complexity and multifacetedness the credit it deserves.

## Notes

- \* I owe a special debt of gratitude to my friend Jordan N. Kohn who provided valuable comments and critical feedback on this essay.
- See Olaf Peters after Abraham A. Davidson: "The Precisionists were constantly celebrating the America of their time by concentrating on what best typified its power and self-sufficiency: its industrialism." Olaf Peters, *Modern Times: die Darstellung von Industrie und Konsumkultur in den Vereinigten Staaten zwischen 1920 und 1940*, in: Berlin, Deutsches Historisches Museum Berlin, *Kunst und Propaganda im Streit der Nationen 1930–1945*, ed. by Hans-Jörg Czech and Nikola Doll, Dresden 2007, pp. 356–365, p. 358. See also Gail Stavitsky after Lewis Mumford: "Critic and historian Lewis Mumford in 1922 proclaimed the 'promise of a stripped, athletic, classical style [...] which shall embody all that is good in the Machine Age: its precision, its cleanliness, its hard illumination, its unflinching logic.'" Gail Stavitsky, *Reordering reality: precisionist directions in American art, 1915–1941*, in: Montclair, Montclair Art Museum and Sheldon Memorial Gallery, *Precisionism in America 1915–41: reordering reality*, ed. by Gail Stavitsky et al., Montclair 1994, pp. 12–39, p. 15.
  - "The essence of the Precisionist aesthetic was an objective synthesis of abstraction and realism, manifested by hard-edged, static, smoothly brushed, simplified forms rendered in unmodulated colors." See Stavitsky 1994, *Reordering Reality*, p. 35. Also see Sharon Corwin, *Selling „America“: precisionism and the rhetoric of industry, 1916–1939*, PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley 2001, pp. 2–4.
  - Charles Sheeler, *American Landscape*, 1930, oil on canvas, 61 x 78.8 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York, see [http://www.moma.org/collection/browse\\_results.php?object\\_id=79032](http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?object_id=79032), 16 March 2015; Charles Sheeler, *Classic Landscape*, 1931, oil on canvas, 63.5 x 81.9 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C., see <http://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/Collection/art-object-page.105596.html>, 16 March 2015.
  - "In the earliest Sheeler painting or the most recent Crawford, there has been no apparent involvement with serious sociological issues attending the technological transformation of this country. The almost total absence of the human figure in Precisionist paintings is an implicit rejection of such immediate issues. It is an art of "objects," an unpopulated environment [...] While America was living through the agitated Twenties [...], nearly all the Precisionist painters refused to let this disquiet permeate the idealized world of their art. The Precisionist development has never argued for a 'cause,' and this has been a chronic source of irritation to those critics who want their painting well laced with message." See Martin L. Friedman, *The precisionist view*, in: *Art in America*, 48, 1960, pp. 30–37, p. 32–33.
  - For instance see Karen Tsujimoto in: San Francisco, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, *Images of America: precisionist painting and modern photography*, Karen Tsujimoto, Seattle/London 1982, pp. 23, 194: "[...], as exemplified in the paintings of Sheeler, Spencer, and Crawford, the work of the Precisionists is unique in its visual sobriety and acuity. Peopleless and emotionless, their paintings reflect little involvement with the social issues which attended the technological transformations of the day." "Louis Lozowick's work of the twenties, along with that of Charles Sheeler, is highly representative of the concept of technological optimism." Matthew Baigell calls Sheeler "the true artist of corporate capitalism": Matthew Baigell, *American art and national identity: the 1920s*, in: *Arts Magazine*, 61, 1987, pp. 48–55, p. 51.
  - See Karen Lucic, *Charles Sheeler and the cult of the machine*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1991, pp. 12, 14, 76; Boston, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, *Charles Sheeler: paintings and drawings*, ed. by Carol Troyen and Erica E. Hirshler, Boston 1987, pp. 20, 118, 122; Miles Orvell, *Inspired by science and the modern: precisionism and American culture*, in: Montclair, Montclair Art Museum and Sheldon Memorial Gallery, *Precisionism in America 1915–41: reordering reality*, ed. by Gail Stavitsky et al., Montclair 1994, pp. 52–59, p. 55–56; see Corwin 2001, *Selling „America“*, p. 6, 8–11.
  - See David E. Nye, *America's assembly line*, Cambridge (Mass.)/London 2013, pp. 60–61.
  - Asked about his photographs of Chartres Cathedral, Sheeler commented on the role of religion and how religion had been superseded by a more contemporary sense of identification – industry: „Every age manifests itself by some external device. In a period such as ours when only a comparatively few individuals seem to be given to religion, some other form [...] must be found. Industry concerns the greatest numbers – it may be true, [...], that our factories are our substitute for religious expression.“ Constance Rourke, *Charles Sheeler: artist in the American tradition*, New York 1938, p. 130. This utterance has ever since its publication been used to ascribe an adulatory perception of industry to Sheeler, even though it does not solely have a positivist notion to it, but can be read in several ways.
  - It is believed that Sheeler did a total of 32 photographs during this time at the River Rouge Plant in Dearborn, Michigan. The contract implied that Sheeler had to do documentary images, which reflected American industry in an innovative way. These photos were to be published in numerous publications. See Terry Smith: Making the modern: industry, art and design in America*, Chicago/London 1993, p. 129. Also see Boston, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, *Charles Sheeler: the photographs*, ed. by Theodore E. Stebbins and Norman Keyes, Jr., Boston 1987, p. 27.
  - Lilian Dochterman papers, 1960–1968, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
  - Artists were facing quite precarious circumstances after the Great Depression, embracing every contract they could get. Programs like the Federal Art Project (FAP) enabled unemployed artists to find governmental employment.
  - Boston 1987, *Charles Sheeler: the photographs*, p. 25.
  - See Smith 1993, *Making the modern*, p. 40. A photograph like *Ford Plant, River Rouge, Stamping Press* (1927) precisely exemplifies the working conditions at Ford's. Charles Sheeler, *Ford Plant, River Rouge, Stamping Press, 1927, gelatin silver print*, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, *The Lane Collection*.
  - See [http://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/2006/sheeler/fig\\_07.shtm](http://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/2006/sheeler/fig_07.shtm), 16 March 2015. According to secondary sources no such photographic source can be discerned for the painting *Classic Landscape*.
  - Boston 1987, *Charles Sheeler: paintings and drawings*, p. 118.
  - Martin Johnson Heade, *Summer Showers*, 1865–1870, oil on canvas, 33.4 x 66.6 cm, Brooklyn Museum, New York, Dick S. Ramsay Fund, accession no. 47.8, see [http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/946/Summer\\_Showers](http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/946/Summer_Showers), 16 March 2015; James Augustus Suydam, *Paradise Rocks, Newport*, 1860, oil on canvas, 63.82 x 114.62 cm, National Academy Museum, New York, object no. 1226-P, see <http://www.nationalacademy.org/collections/artists/detail/13/#/list/2071>, 16 March 2015.
  - Even though Henry Ford did not invent the assembly line, he transformed the existing order into an optimum. On Ford and the assembly line see Arven P. Mohun, *Labor and technology*, in: *A companion to American technology*, ed. by Carroll Pursell, Malden (Mass.) 2005, pp. 212–230, pp. 219–222.
  - Frank Gilbreth conducted time and motion studies in order to improve sequences of movements, therefore contributing to an optimization of operating cycles.
  - "For a century, the machines have been enslaving the race. For a century, they have been impoverishing the experience of humanity. Like great Frankenstein monsters, invented by the brain of human beings to serve them, these vast creatures have suddenly turned on their masters, and made them their prey." Paul Rosenfeld after Alastair Beddow, see Alastair Beddow, *Manhattan nightmares: John Dos Passos, Charles Sheeler and the distortion of urban space*, in: *Moveable Type*, 6, 2010, pp. 1–12, p. 4.
  - Charles Reitell, *Machinery and its effect upon the workers in the automotive industry*, in: *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 116, 1924, pp. 37–43, p. 43.
  - "[...] these mechanized men have also entered into one of the great Faustian bargains of modernity. In exchange for submitting to the dictates of mechanization, they received the then extraordinary wage of \$5 a day, enabling them to purchase [...] consumer goods that such technological innovation made possible." See Mohun 2005, *Labor and technology*, p. 213.
  - See Lucic 1991, *Charles Sheeler and the cult of the machine*, p. 89–90.
  - As is shown in Charles Chaplin's humoristic exaggerated movie *Modern Times* (USA 1936), the worker seems to be able to handle the machine in his sleep, but he is totally overestimating himself and his power.
  - Sherwood Anderson, *Perhaps women*, New York 1931, p. 45.



25. See Beddow 2010, *Manhattan nightmares*, p. 4.
26. See Beddow 2010, *Manhattan nightmares*, p. 4.
27. W. B. McCormick, *Machine age debunked*, in: *San Francisco, Cal. Examiner*, Dec. 9, 1931, see Downtown Gallery records, 1824-1974, bulk 1926-1969. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Artist Notebooks: Sheeler, Charles, undated, 1904-72, Box Box 50, Reel 5590, Frame 657.
28. Henry McBride, *Paintings by Charles Sheeler: landscapes and stiff life that are unquestionably of the machine age*, in: *The New York Sun*, Saturday, Nov. 21, 1931, see Downtown Gallery records, 1824-1974, bulk 1926-1969. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Artist Notebooks: Sheeler, Charles, undated, 1904-72, Box Box 50, Reel 5590, Frame 660.
29. Reitell 1924, *Machinery and its effect upon the workers in the automotive industry*, p. 37.
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31. Boston 1987, *Charles Sheeler: paintings and drawings*, p. 120.
32. Winslow Ames, *A portrait of American industry*, in: *Worcester Art Annual*, 1936-7, 97, see Downtown Gallery records, 1824-1974, bulk 1926-1969. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Artist Notebooks: Sheeler, Charles, undated, 1904-1972, Box Box 50, Reel 5590, Frame 630.
33. Frederic Edwin Church, *Heart of the Andes*, 1859, oil on canvas, 168 x 302.9 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Arts, New York, accession no. 09.95; see <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/10481>, 16 March 2015.

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**Abstract**

Until today, Precisionism is regarded as an apolitical and asocial art form, relegated to aestheticism. In my research, I explore various themes in Charles Sheeler's commissioned and independent works for the Ford Motor Company. I examine how Sheeler forms a visual rhetoric of the industrial modern age, and how his awareness of changes in the American industrial landscape is conveyed. What messages are implied in his painted works, but extraneous in the photographs? This reconstruction will reveal Precisionism's ambiguity: Sheeler used his art as an instrument to expose the negative effects of an increasingly mechanical autonomy and to comment on the American workforce's dispensability, with an emphasis on its de-qualification and anonymity. In particular, Sheeler's figures play a vital role in his industrial oeuvre, and their depiction demonstrates that the artist is aware of the challenges that the Machine Age bodes for the American workforce, and human labor in general.

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