

AUTHOR'S TYPESCRIPT – PLEASE CITE PUBLISHED VERSION: Carl Gelderloos (2015) A Review of “Andreas Huyssen. *Miniature Metropolis: Literature in an Age of Photography and Film*”, *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory*, 90:4, 362-365

*Miniature Metropolis: Literature in an Age of Photography and Film*. Andreas Huyssen.

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Between Germany's relatively later processes of urbanization, industrialization, and democratization on the one hand and its more drastic experience of the caesura of war and revolution on the other, “Weimar” has more often lent itself to analysis for thinking about modern German culture than “modernism.” “Weimar” was modern, but it was modern, so the associations go, in the form of film, photography, and radio, avant-garde and reportage, mass culture and mass media. The epithet “literary” seldom springs to mind as one of the first attributes for describing (or, indeed, for teaching) the cultural production of the interwar period in the German language context.

If a fundamental (though implicit) achievement of Huyssen's book is to ask what German language literary modernism was, then the concept of the metropolitan miniature offers him a sophisticated way of answering this question by binding together, in small form, the perceptual and theoretical upheavals induced by new visual media, the experience of the metropolis as “an island of accelerating modernization” (5), and the rise of a mass, consumer culture. Crucially, the miniature—an innovative and critical short prose form that draws upon the ways of seeing found in new media in order to capture the temporalities and fragmented experiences of the modern metropolis—allows him to draw this constellation under the rubric of the literary. In this sense the miniature offers both a loose category of literary forms and a periodizing mechanism for delineating the distinct historical epoch of high modernism. If its first premonition, in Baudelaire's *Le Spleen de Paris*, depended on the twin contexts of the feuilleton of the modern mass press and the modern city, Adorno's *Minima Moralia* registers the end of the miniature as a

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specifically modern form, as the experience of the metropolis became generalized and globalized. The miniature's proper setting is necessarily transitional, its subject the host of perceptual and experiential changes central to modernity as such.

More a form or an approach than a genre and recognizable only after the fact, the concept of the modernist miniature most evidently includes feuilletons, but it also encompasses other short prose forms, whether these find themselves in a novel (Rilke, Keun) or hitherto classified as novellas (Benn), and the idea of the miniature can even involve ways of seeing generated by photomontage, as it too confronted the possibilities and limitations of photography (Höch). The modernist miniature differs from earlier literary representations of the city in that it does not tend to describe or depict in a realist way, but rather integrates the experiential, affective, and conceptual disorientations of the modern metropolis into its very framework; similarly, it works through film and photography not directly but by incorporating their ways of seeing into theirs, by adopting and modifying what film and photography did to vision, time, subjectivity, and embodied experience. Huyssen dubs this process, modifying McLuhan, “remediation in reverse” whereby “an older medium reasserts itself by critically working through what the new medium does and does not do” (8). The concept of literature was changed from within by this dialectical interaction with the image, but it was also able to assert its specificity or *Eigensinn* (Negt and Kluge) vis-à-vis visual media by offering solutions to the perceptual problems they posed.

The miniature's post-facto recognizability and broad scope allow Huyssen to pose the question of the miniature as the question of modernism in a way that accounts for new media and the new social, spatial urban experience, but as formulated and reconfigured within the domain of literature. It is thus a welcome and significant addition to newer scholarship that returns, laden with the insights of decades of work on visual culture and mass urban society, to literary

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questions. Accordingly, the fine-grained analyses within these eight chapters and a coda are rich, especially as they explore the embodiment of perception and urban experience, and the spatial destabilizations and *Durchdringung* (Giedion) of insides and outsides, a model Huyssen usefully links to the dialectical interaction between verbal and visual media.

The first chapter establishes the context for the miniature by considering two ultimately negative literary responses to photography. Baudelaire heralds the new form because his serial miniatures on urban life substituted ways of registering mood, atmosphere, and reflections for depictions of recognizable urban spaces. The metropolis is displaced from content to the form of his miniatures in ways that allow them to compress the multiple competing perspectives and mental states of a nascent urban imaginary. The short entries of Rilke's *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* show how urban anxieties about spatial dislocations and bodily penetrations themselves advance the search for a new kind of subjectivity and a new language that would not be so vulnerable to these jarring ruptures. The second chapter explores how Kafka's *Betrachtung* uses the temporalities and hermeneutic layers available to literary language in order to mediate between cinematic and photographic ways of seeing and thus reflect upon looking as such in an attempt to overcome perceptual instability. While this attempt ultimately fails, Kafka's incorporation of technological modes of perception in his literary prose furthers the evacuation of the classical bourgeois subject, thus constituting the remediation in reverse that the Parisian miniatures of Baudelaire and Rilke were only able to prefigure. Subsequent chapters expand upon the transmedial and interdisciplinary aspects of the modernist miniature, taking up the interplay between discourses such as literature and science (Benn), differing valences of the image (*Bild*) amongst visual forms such as photography, physiognomy, the emblem, and writing (Kracauer and Benjamin), montage as a critical exploration of gendered ways of looking enabled

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by photography and cinema (Höch and Keun), the heterotopic junctures of childhood perception and the urban class landscape (Benjamin and Aragon), the obstinate refusal of photography's challenges in the service of an armored self (Jünger), the confrontation of enlightenment rationality with the destabilizing perceptual *Durchdringung* of human and nonhuman worlds (Musil), and the encounter between the subjective experience of exile and the objective analysis of the culture industry (Adorno).

While the nuanced focus on the literary *Eigensinn* of these miniatures is welcome, this effort is clouded at times by an elision of specific features of the new visual media and the way these were theorized by the writers in this study. This results in part from the methodological decision to treat miniatures as a form that could solve the problems of visual media, which is a rather stronger claim than simply showing how the miniatures remediated film and photography by literary means. Kracauer's miniatures, for example, are read as part of his “go-for-broke game of history” “because as literary texts they could counteract the inherent deficiencies of photography as being too tied to the indexical and to commercial mass media circulation” (125). Yet in constructing a welcome dialectic between Kracauer's literary miniatures and his theory of photography, the argument at this point occludes a central moment of the dialectic within the latter, as it is precisely those deficiencies of photography that suggest for Kracauer its revolutionary potential. Without the circulation of ephemeral visual moments in the commercial mass media, and without the specific differences between the photograph and the memory image, the concept of the *Hauptarchiv*, within which all social arrangements are rendered visibly arbitrary and thus subject to active reconfiguration, no longer makes very much sense.

Setting the miniature up as a kind of competitor to visual media also makes for the occasional straitjacketed chronology. In his chapter on montage in Höch and Keun, Huyssen

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recalls the well-known use of montage techniques in city novels such as *Berlin Alexanderplatz* in order to suggest a priority for the literary miniature as an early trail blazer, followed by photomontage, the techniques of which were then adapted by Döblin et al. (156). Yet surely the fact that Döblin called for a “Kinostil” in a short essay from 1913 that could itself perhaps be considered a modernist metropolitan miniature (“An Romanautoren und ihre Kritiker. Berlin Programm”) complicates this sequence of influence and suggests an even denser *Durchdringung*.

And finally, the possibility that there may be some ambivalence between reading the modernist miniature as the *result* of a particular historical confluence and as a *response* to it—or between the careful consideration of the social, historical, and technological context of modernism and its application as a normative category of inclusion or exclusion based on the satisfactoriness of this response—is indicated by the chapter on Jünger. Building upon his previous work on Jünger (1993), Huyssen here too denies him the status of a major modernist. Huyssen makes a compelling case for reading Jünger as a negative counter-example to the other practitioners of the miniature, and shows how Jünger’s response to photography was less reflective than that of the other figures of this book. Yet it is not always clear why, if the modernist miniature treats both the metropolis and the visual media precisely through their symptomatic absence as objects of depiction, transforming them instead into formal logics of representation, Jünger’s avoidance of the city and his *désinvolture* as a dispassionate mechanical vision should be uniquely pathologized. Indeed, one must instead explore the possibility that Jünger’s appropriation of frameworks from the natural sciences (239)—themselves already heavily invested in the *Durchdringung* of visual, verbal, and conceptual modes of representation<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Daston, Lorraine, and Peter Galison. *Objectivity*. New York: Zone Books, 2010. Print.

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in ways that would continue to resonate into the visual culture of *Neue Sachlichkeit*<sup>2</sup>—is itself a complexly modernist interdisciplinary borrowing rather than a conservative return to an outmoded epistemological framework. Despite the obvious value of the readings of *Das abenteuerliche Herz*, the assessment of Jünger is complicated by the sometimes slippery analogy among political value judgments, somewhat apodictic evaluations of taste and style, and the application of modernism as a normative category of inclusion or exclusion.

Huyssen’s painstaking and important work on this major-minor modernist literary form could forego, in this reader’s opinion, the linear causality suggested by a logic of problem-solving, as well as the occasional bludgeon of modernism as a normative category. For the miniature emerges here as the nexus of an internally diverse, inherently interdisciplinary and transmedial modernism. From his nuanced considerations of the different valences of this loose yet coherent miniature form, several crucial implications for the study of German modernism also become visible. For one thing, it has a distinct existence that arose from specific material, historical, and social conditions. The book insists from the outset that Weimar “was not postmodern” (12) and attends patiently and insightfully to the implications of a specifically modernist crisis of perception. Yet modernism’s distinctness does not render it homogenous either, and Huyssen’s study usefully and forcefully dispels the leveling discourse of crisis that too often attaches to discussions of modernism in the German context. These modern miniaturists are not reducible to registering apparatuses, nor are their texts the anguished cries of lost and fragmented subjects. Convincingly staking out historical boundaries of German

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<sup>2</sup> Kreinik, Juliana. *The Canvas and the Camera in Weimar Germany: A New Objectivity in Painting and Photography of the 1920s*. Diss. New York University, 2008. Ann Arbor: UMI, 2008. AAT 3310549.

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modernism while being able to account for the rich diversity of its practitioners, modes, means, and concerns is a signal accomplishment of this study.

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