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Moving, Movies & the Sublime: Modernity and the Alpine Scene in Dorothy Richardson's *Oberland*

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When we think of the sites and scenes of modernism, the Swiss Alps rarely, if ever, spring to mind. Modernist endeavour, we have been told time and again, has found a natural habitat for its curious eye in the urban spaces of the city. Paris, Berlin, Vienna, New York and London - all of these places, at one time or another, held court to the big names in cultural production of the period, or vied for the position of modernist centre in later critical discourse. This essay aims to suggest that the mountain resorts of Switzerland were, like the urban metropolis, sites of technological, commercial, and demographic transformation as well as artistic interest and activity in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. Central to this task will be an account of Dorothy Richardson's modernist rereading of the sublime in *Oberland*, the ninth chapter-novel of her monumental life-work called *Pilgrimage*. In bringing the woman to the mountain I will contend that Richardson dismantles the perceptual conditions of the traditional or male sublime - the static, proprietorial prospect view - making way for a distinctly modernist sublime - one that is governed by the keynote gestures of the age, mobility and speed. Rather than locating Switzerland as the theatre for an arcadian or nostalgic sublime, Richardson positions the Bernese Oberland at the very heart of modernity - as the locus of a sublime thoroughly delineated by two timely forces - rapid transport and mass tourism. *Oberland*, in accordance with popular contemporaneous conceptions, portrays Switzerland as 'the playground of Europe'[1], a place where work and pleasure, leisure and toil are managed to yield sublime feeling via winter sports. I will argue that Richardson's version of the sublime - produced when a mobile body and gaze are subject to what she called 'the spice of danger'[2] - is modernist in that it shares with the cinema and other modern forms of mass entertainment an enthusiastic commitment to the corporeal thrill and fleeting continuity.

Miriam's first glimpse of mountains in *Oberland* comes, not stationed in contemplative stasis above an alpine panorama, but, like the majority of tourists to Switzerland since the Thomas Cook company's first package tour in 1863, whilst jostling inside a speeding train. The traditional sublime scenario - one which demands stillness, focus and duration for the successful cognitive negotiation of the other's inestimable immensity - is upstaged by the sharp zig of the train's rapid movement. The following extract details Miriam's first encounter with mountains in *Oberland*:

The leap of recognition, unknowing between the mountains and herself which was which, made the first sight of them - smooth snow and crinkled rock in unheard-of and unimagined tawny light - seem, even at the moment of seeing, already long ago.

They knew, they smiled joyfully at the glad shock they were, sideways gigantically advancing while she passed as over a bridge across which presently there would be no return, seeing and unseeing, seeing again with the first keen vision.

They closed in upon the train, summitless, their bases gliding by, a

ceaseless tawny cliff throwing its light into the carriage, almost within touch; ... With the sideways climbing of the train the lake dropped away, down and down until presently she stood up to see it below in the distance, a blue pool amidst its encirclement of mountain and of sky: a picture sliding away, soundlessly, hopelessly demanding its perfect world.[3]

The passage begins at the instant of identification between observer and colossal other, Miriam's desire to merge with the mountains - a symptom of sublime feeling - figured kinetically as a spontaneous 'leap'. Her state of rapture is stressed by narratorial aphasia: excessive in their visual wondrousness, the sun-soaked peaks defy description, and so are conjured for the reader in the negative - they are such as have never been known or imagined. At the apex of their powers of astonishment, the mountains revel in their imposing omniscience. Suddenly, Richardson reminds us that Miriam is, in fact, on a train; the stars of the alpine show are quickly ushered out-of-frame and clipped from view. What is called the 'sublime turn' is circumvented - the imposition of reason over the senses does not come - because the train slides nimbly on and through, disallowing the static, distanced reception essential to sublime contemplation. With the stable presentation of the prospect view undone, the train's motion makes viewing a tantalising game of hide-and-seek rather than a mode of calm, meditative and authoritative analysis. Instead of the stasis of the long-shot or panorama, the natural scene viewed from the train window is all a frenzied panning back and forth and zooming in and out, perspective left to ride the rollercoaster rails of the zig-zag. As the train pulls further and further away from the scene with its sideways climbing, distance lends enchantment to the view, the addition of horizontal topographical features such as a river and the sudden blue water of a lake neutralising the immensity of the craggy peaks. The traditional sublime moment thus derailed, Miriam is left with the long-take tracking shot of the mountains sliding away, soundlessly, as if she were watching a silent 'panorama' film.

It comes, of course, as no coincidence that the effects of Miriam's train-ride through the Alps resemble those of the cinema. Whilst the omnivoyant prospect view owes its life to the trompe l'oeil school of landscape painting, Richardson's optical frame of reference is the cinema. Like the new machines of motion, the nascent cinematic apparatus made the human gaze capable of great athletic feats for a small price, permitting previously unthinkable and irreverent points of view. Aboard a railway carriage or ensconced in the dark comfort of a theatre, people of all ages could move closer and further away from things at all sorts of angles with complete impunity, thereby suppressing, to paraphrase Gilles Deleuze, both the anchoring of the subject and the horizon of the world - the two primary conditions of traditional sublime contemplation.[4] In both cases, a large framed scenscape unfolds in front of a seated spectator, transporting them to an imaginary realm where space-time has been radically altered to produce narratives, events, and encounters for the purpose of leisure. Transport and travel came together in the cinema - a union that was exploited to great effect first by what Tom Gunning has dubbed the 'cinema of attractions' and later by the internationally successful panorama films of Arnold Fanck, Luis Trenker and Leni Riefenstahl - in the words of Valentine Cunningham, 'ciné-dramas of snow and ice, pole and mountain, ski and aeroplane'.[5] Together, these apparatuses of speed and perspective took the delay, difficulty, distance and discomfort out of mountain travel, opening sites and scenes usually reserved for the energetic and adventurous to the experience of all.

The railway and the cinema, of course, played a pivotal role in each others' development - a fact Richardson's friend and patron, Winifred Bryher, tacitly acknowledged when she asserted in a review of one of Richardson's later novels, *Dawn's Left Hand*, that all films should start in a railway carriage.[6] Not only were trains (and other modes of transportation such as trams, cablecars, automobiles, gondolas, rollercoasters, chariots and ferris wheels) used by early filmmakers to achieve cinema's first tracking shots, but early film is saturated with images of on-coming locomotives, train robberies, subway romances and railroad collisions - Edison's *The Railway Smash-up* and *Asleep at the Switch* just two of the more obvious examples. One of the first films ever screened was, of course, the Lumiere brothers' now notorious *L'Arrivé*

d'un train: the audience at the Grand Cafe that day, we are told, reacted viscerally to the projected image of the train pulling, front-on, into the platform by shrieking, cowering in their seats, and running fearfully out on to the street. For these early viewers, then, the cinema offered a taste of the sublime, a chance to experience the pleasurable vacillation between belief and doubt, security and destruction, excitement and terror normally the preserve of young wealthy heirs in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when embarked upon their near-obligatory Grand Tour.

Miriam's train journey through the Alps is just one instance in *Oberland* where rapid transport makes a new kind of sublime possible - one constituted by the visceral thrill of astonishment and fear. Here, as elsewhere in the novel, the traditional sublime, achieved by the imposition of mind over the standards of sense, gives way to a sublime achieved by a dash of what Richardson called, in one of three pieces of alpine journalism from 1924, 'the spice of danger'. The safe-risk of the winding, climbing Bernese Oberland railway and the subsequent abrupt chaotic sweep of broken images in and out of frame suggests a sublime attuned to the peaks and valleys of modern urban life. Whilst the train's windowpane and the rail conspire to prevent the prolonged uninterrupted distance essential to traditional sublime contemplation, fear and delight spring from the scopic and corporeal effects of torque and speed. In the age of the aircraft, the assembly line, the bicycle, the car, the Titanic, and the Keystone cops, the old, slow sublime is left behind and modernity offers in its place a sublime completely compatible with a kinetic spectatorship structured around apogees of attention and lulls of distraction. The sublime not only metaphorically but literally moves in modernity.

Like critics such as Lauren Rabinovitz and Leo Charney, I link this new democratised leisure of controlled danger in the cinema to the contemporaneous establishment of the amusement park, to which I add the rise in popularity of winter sports tourism - a phenomenon Richardson depicts for her readers in *Oberland*. Indeed, the novel can be seen as an explicit attempt to tap into the mass frenzy for snow entertainments in order to buoy flagging book sales, as letters to Bryher from both before and after publication indicate:

And if it is at all possible, I do very much want to get *Oberland* done in time for publication next winter. Its [sic], of course, Swiss - and the winter season might help it. I don't quite see how its [sic] to be done. But that is my aim. And it means I shan't do much else.[7]

And of course I want to sell all I can & it seems to me that this particular book has a chance, if it can be displayed during the winter, of selling perhaps better than the others. I feel it might sell at the winter sports centres. ...[W]hat about that bookseller? Don't you think, if he knew what the book is about & how much it is likely to appeal to English winter sports people, he might consent to display it during the season?... To the English library I have sent a marked Duckworth catalogue as a hint![8]

Oberland, certainly, can be read as an extended advertisement for the pleasures of winter sports tourism. It is hard to think of a method of sublime transport Miriam does not rapturously enjoy in the novel: from the moment she steps off the train and into the Swiss kitsch of a tourist sleigh, Miriam rockets through untold alpine vistas on toboggans and skates all-abuzz, a triumphantly throbbing atom of humanity.[9] Miriam's initial impulse to follow the Wordsworthian footprints of landscape appreciation - to trek along some side track alone with the landscape and, in accordance with the methods of the old sublime, find a position of eminence from which to survey the scene - is checked very early in the piece when she encounters a white-haired and immensely muffled couple defying age and the unwritten rules of adult propriety by tobogganing together, side-by-side. Their joyous message sends her off at once to purchase and ride a toboggan for herself. Miriam recognises that to be racing about on a sled was a reckless flouting of the prescribed programme of alpine landscape appreciation: nevertheless, she repeatedly opts for speed over stasis, the bodily thrill of the present rather than a slow, accumulative understanding of the sublime object over time.

Richardson's delineations of the excitement and danger of Miriam's reckless

tobogganing both in *Oberland* and her short story written for *The Saturday Review* called 'Dans La Bise' recall Ernest Hemingway's descriptions of sledding in his dispatches for the *Toronto Star* at about this time - a sport which, with its combination of sheer drops, hairpin turns and extraordinary speed, was enough to give even this infamously macho gent a good scare.[10] For both Richardson and Hemingway, the thrill of winter sports stemmed as much from the terror of a potential collision or fall as from the pleasurable freedom of moving quickly, reminding us of Edmund Burke's definition of the sublime as the delight of threatened but circumvented pain and danger - on the slopes in *Oberland*, achtungs ring out like greetings.[11] In this way, the Alps in *Oberland* are consigned to play the role of speed's handmaiden, facilitating fast, exhilarating descents rather than being objects of prolonged and still contemplation. Landscape is appreciated by Miriam as background and accessory, not as object and other: it is the swift movement of sport rather than the steady assertive eye which confers sublime pleasure - a fact Richardson maintains in her 1924 essay 'The Role of the Background':

The first time I played golf I discovered what has remained for me, the underlying secret of the charm of the game. I discovered it the moment I succeeded in bringing off a long drive.... [O]nly half of my entrancement was the sense of having learned to drive straight and far. The rest was... due to the sudden lift and sweep accompanying my own swift movement, of the quiet sky and the motionless wide landscape.... And while it is perhaps golf that most intimately reveals to the layer the role of the background, there is no game, of all those that set earth and sky in movement about you, that can compare, by reason of its setting, with any kind of winter sport, and no proof of the part played in any and every game by its surroundings more convincing than the spectacle of the English coming out in their thousands, in mid-winter, to the Alps.[12]

Instead of directly inspiring astonishment by virtue of their incredible steepness, mountains are deemed more effectual as background for the body and gaze set in motion than as objects for concentrated looking.

It is certainly the case that *Oberland* is set at a great turning point in the nature of tourism to Switzerland. In the very same year Virginia Woolf declared that in or about December 1910, human character changed, Richardson made the equally grand claim that at or about the turn of the century, the English tourist discovered the Swiss winter.[13] At this time that the summer scenic traveller (usually male) was giving way to the winter sportsperson (quite often female), the steep intransigence of the Alps turning inconvenience and aesthetic instruction to thrill. Rather than supplying a scene of grand solemnity, Switzerland became 'a paradise of winter sports', and 'the play-ground of Europe', a change which old-guard stalwarts like Woolf's father and amateur mountaineer, Leslie Stephen, denounced as 'tantamount to bending the knee to Baal'.[14] Whilst travel to Switzerland was revolutionised by great feats of modern engineering such as the Jungfrau and Rhaetian rail-lines (in most part, planned by two Englishmen), so too were the mountains radically altered by the addition of ski hoists, chair lifts, cable cars, bridges, tunnels, roads and funicular, narrow gauge and cog railways. To conclude, I would like to reassert the link between modernism and the mobile sublime and also suggest that the Alps can be seen as a crucial modernist site and scene. *Oberland*, I want to insist, presents a Switzerland that is very much a playground, a place inscribed by prosthetics of speed. Instead of positioning it as an Arcadian wilderness or bucolic backwater for a kind of nostalgic repose, Richardson locates the Alps at the centre of modern life - a place which resembles more than differs from the busy city. Just as the appeal of the amusement park and the cinema at the beginning of the century stemmed from their ability to replicate, rather than contradict, forms of visual and bodily experience in the real world, so too winter sports' mass appeal was due to its successful recasting of the metropolis' characteristic speed and sensory overstimulation as pure leisure. The mountain world Miriam encounters is not dissimilar to the bustling London world she has left behind: like Freud, whose own rest cure in the Eastern Alps 'to forget medicine and more particularly the neuroses' brings him face to face with the hysterical Katharina, Miriam finds there is more sameness

than strangeness in the Swiss scene.[15] This recognition of similarity rather than difference in the foreign landscape is central, I think, to Richardson's revision of the traditional sublime. Like the whole of *Pilgrimage*, *Oberland* states a radical distrust of the quest's rhetoric of linear mastery. As the eighteenth-century scholars Elizabeth Bohls and Jacqueline Labbe have demonstrated, the static prospect view is intractably aligned to masculinity, property ownership and aestheticism, meaning that the appreciation of the sublime has been historically dependent on having the means, education and luxury of gentlemanly leisure. The modern mobile sublime, I want to suggest, renegotiates the conditions of sublime contemplation such that it depends upon a direct, hands-on interaction with the landscape, one that subverts the prolonged observation of the panoramic whole and, thus, the imposition of reason. This new sublime requires corporeal work - its associated pain and pleasure entrenched in the practical texture of lived experience. One might argue that the Alps were a site of exile and escape for a large number of modernist writers - Joyce, Mansfield, Eliot, Fitzgerald, Lawrence amongst them - that they lived in the modernist consciousness as the antithesis of the city scene; I have argued here that another story of the Alps can be told which locates them at the heart of the modern scene - amidst the pressures, novelties, money, noise, speed and rapid change that characterise and frame the production and consumption of modernist literature.

Endnotes

[1] According to Lynne Withey, this appellation was originally Leslie Stephens' - see *Grand Tours and Cooks Tours: A History of Leisure Travel 1750-1915*, p. 197. [Return to endnote reference.](#)

[2] Richardson, Dorothy, 'The Rôle of the Background: English Visitors to the Swiss Resorts During the Winter Sports Season', *The Sphere*, December 22, 1924, p. 226. [Return to endnote reference.](#)

[3] Richardson, Dorothy, *Pilgrimage*, (London: Virago, 1979) Vol.4, p. 21. [Return to endnote reference.](#)

[4] Deleuze, Gilles, *Cinema 1: the Movement Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: Althone, 1986), p. 57. [Return to endnote reference.](#)

[5] Cunningham, Valentine, *British Writers of the Thirties*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 183. [Return to endnote reference.](#)

[6] Bryher, Winifred, Review of *Dawn's Left Hand* (1931), in James Donald, Anne Friedberg and Laura Marcus eds., *Close Up, 1927-1933: Cinema and Modernism*, (London: Cassell, 1998) p. 209. [Return to endnote reference.](#)

[7] Richardson, Dorothy, Letter to Bryher, Harlyn Padstow [1925], II.52.1913, Dorothy Richardson Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. [Return to endnote reference.](#)

[8] Richardson, Dorothy, *Windows on Modernism: Selected Letters of Dorothy Richardson*, Gloria G. Fromm ed., (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), pp. 143-44. [Return to endnote reference.](#)

[9] Richardson, *Pilgrimage*, Vol.4, p. 85. [Return to endnote reference.](#)

[10] Hemingway wrote, in total, five pieces on winter sports for the *Toronto Star* between 1922 and 1924, including 'Try Bobsledding if you Want Thrills' and 'The Swiss Luge'. [Return to endnote reference.](#)

[11] Richardson, *Pilgrimage*, Vol.4, p. 86. Edmund Burke argues that the passions 'are delightful when we have an idea of pain and danger, without being actually in such circumstances.... Whatever excites this delight, I call sublime.' (Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), pp. 131-32) [Return to endnote reference.](#)

[12] Richardson, Dorothy, 'The Rôle of the Background: English Visitors to the Swiss Resorts During the Winter Sports Season', *The Sphere*, December 22, 1924, p. 226. [Return to endnote reference.](#)

[13] Richardson, 'The Rôle of the Background', p. 226; Woolf, Virginia, 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' in Rachel Bowlby ed., *A Woman's Essays*, (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 70. [Return to endnote reference.](#)

[14] Swinglehurst, Edward, *Cook's Tours: the Story of Popular Travel*, (Poole, Dorset: Blandford Press, 1982), p. 153. [Return to endnote reference.](#)

[15] Freud, Sigmund, 'Katharina' in Peter Gay ed., *The Freud Reader*, (London: Vintage, 1995), p. 79. [Return to endnote reference.](#)

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