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**ANDY BIRTWISTLE**

**Photographic Sound Art and the Silent Modernity of Walter Ruttmann's  
*Weekend* (1930)**

**ABSTRACT**

*This article examines Walter Ruttmann's Weekend, a twelve-minute programme made for German radio in 1930. Recorded and edited using Tri-Ergon optical film sound technology, it was described by Ruttmann in the following terms: 'Weekend is a study in sound montage. I used the film strip to record the sound exclusively, yielding what amounts to a blind film'. The programme is often referenced in histories of sonic art, since Ruttmann's 'cinematic' use of montage seems to have prefigured the developments that took place in musique concrète over a decade later. However, despite being a well-known piece of work, Weekend remains critically neglected: a footnote to Ruttmann's better-known work in cinema. The article aims to revisit and reappraise Weekend as a radical modernist work by considering not only its status as a pioneering piece of sonic art, and but also its intermediality. Ruttmann's deployment of filmic techniques within a radiophonic context can be seen to radically challenge the differentiation of art forms and media that has been seen to define modernism, and by situating Weekend within the context of Ruttmann's broader project as an artist, the article examines how the relationship the programme forges between cinema and radio might be understood within in a history of radical modernism.*

**KEYWORDS**

Ruttmann

radio

cinema

film

sound

Modernism

intermediality

*musique concrète*

electroacoustic

On the 15<sup>th</sup> of May 1930 Berlin Radio premiered a twelve-minute experimental radio programme made by the filmmaker Walter Ruttmann. Entitled *Weekend*, the piece was to be Ruttmann's only venture into radio production. While the programme might now be classified as a radio documentary or feature, it was described by Ruttmann at the time as a 'photographic radio play' (*photographische Hörspiel*) (Eisner 1930) – a description that, in part, signalled the fact that it was produced using optical film sound technology rather than one of the disc-based systems that had become the mainstay of sound recording technology at this time. According to Michel Chion, Ruttmann also referred to *Weekend* as an 'imageless film' (1994: 143), and indeed following its broadcast on radio, the piece was presented at the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Congress of Independent Film in Brussels as an example of German avant-garde cinema. Thus, located as it is within and between both radio and film, Ruttmann's experiment in radio production is marked by a clearly signalled, yet rarely discussed, intermedial dynamic.

*Weekend* is frequently referenced in histories of sonic art, primarily because Ruttmann's 'cinematic' approach to the organisation of recorded sound seems to have prefigured what later became known within the field of art music as electroacoustic composition. Hence one account of the early beginnings of electroacoustic art states that, 'Walter Ruttmann's *Weekend* is a sound film without images that is sometimes considered to be the first work of 'musique concrète'' (Concordia Archival Project 2008). Similarly, Seth Kim-Cohen has proposed that, '[Pierre] Schaeffer was not the first to organize 'concrete' sounds into a formal, artistic composition. That distinction may belong to Walter Ruttmann' (Kim-Cohen 2009: 10). One consequence of the focus placed on *Weekend*'s status as pioneering piece of electroacoustic art is that consideration of its radical modernity tends to hinge on the issue of primacy: that is, the fact that Ruttmann seems to have created a form of *musique concrète* years before composers such as John Cage and Jack Ellitt proposed the use of recorded sounds in musical composition, and almost two decades before Pierre Schaeffer first coined the term for his own musical articulation of real-world 'concrete' sounds.

Outside of this context, the critical perspectives offered on *Weekend* are few. With some notable exceptions, including Daniel Gilfillan's book *Pieces of Sound: German Experimental Radio* (2009) and Virginia M. Madsen's research on the development of the radio documentary-feature (2010), there has been very little

critical engagement with the programme within a radiophonic context. At the same time, as a piece made specifically for radio, *Weekend* has received scant attention within the field of film studies, in which most of the scholarship on Ruttmann is located. The programme is examined briefly in Carolyn Birdsall's study of the 'city films' of the 1920s - which considers the ways in which sound was used within early documentary cinema to represent the urban (2015) - but is rarely mentioned in other analyses of Ruttmann's work in film. Outside film studies, Birdsall's focus on the representation of urban experience is shared by the work of Jesse Shapins, whose unpublished research on Ruttmann, undertaken within the field of architectural studies, contains what is perhaps the most sustained critical analysis of *Weekend* to date (Shapins 2012). Thus despite being a relatively well-known and commonly referenced piece of work, *Weekend* nevertheless remains somewhat critically neglected.

If the programme has been treated largely as an interesting footnote to Ruttmann's better-known work in cinema, this is perhaps only understandable. *Berlin: Symphony of a great city* (1927), arguably Ruttmann's best known film, is considered a seminal work in the history of documentary cinema, and one of the founding texts of the 'city symphony' genre. Similarly, the four abstract animated films that comprise the *Opus* series, made by Ruttmann between 1921 and 1925, locate the director as a key figure in the development of early avant-garde film. Consequently, when situated in relation to Ruttmann's achievements as a filmmaker, *Weekend* is easily positioned as a minor piece of work: an interesting but isolated experiment in radiophonic art created by an artist whose reputation rests squarely on his contribution to cinema.

In what follows, my aim is to address this critical neglect by revisiting and reappraising *Weekend* as a radical modernist work. In addition to addressing the programme's status as a pioneering piece of sonic art representing early 20<sup>th</sup> century urban experience, I also wish to consider the programme's intermedial use of cinematic techniques and cinematic modes of articulation within a radiophonic context. This intermediality has been acknowledged briefly by Shapins (2008) and Michael Cowan (2014), and is of course clearly signalled in descriptions of the programme that rework Ruttmann's own formulation of *Weekend* as a 'photographic radio play'<sup>1</sup>. However, while the programme's intermedial status may have been

identified as a feature of the work, to date little has been done within the scholarship on Ruttmann to evaluate its significance.

The intermedial dynamic of *Weekend*, I would argue, is a key element of its radical modernity, but one which has been somewhat neglected – or even silenced – as a result of the ways in which dominant forms of art history and criticism have constructed modernist poetics. The significance of *Weekend*'s intermediality can however be better appreciated and understood if the programme is situated within Ruttmann's broader project as an artist. Hence, when thinking through *Weekend*'s radical qualities as an experimental radio programme, my aim is to position the piece within a critical framework informed by consideration of Ruttmann's development as an artist working across and within different forms of media, before then moving to consider how this intermedial practice might be understood within the broader context of modernism.

### ***Weekend* and Modernism**

Ruttmann's early films, *Opus I-IV* and *Berlin: Symphony of a great city*, are all firmly located within the modernist tradition, with each representing a radical alternative to the popular forms of narrative cinema that had come to dominate film production in Germany, and most other countries, by the 1920s. *Berlin* earned the praise of Ezra Pound, who described the film as a work of cinema that was 'on parity with the printed page' (1928: 115) and 'a film that will take serious aesthetic criticism' (1928: 114). In part, the impact and reputation of *Berlin* derived from Ruttmann's innovative use of montage, which both drew on and contributed to the development of an entirely new cinematic language, thereby aligning the film with other major works of modernist cinema produced by contemporaries such as Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov. At the same time, *Berlin* identifies itself as a modernist text through its examination of the conditions of modernity, documenting modern urban experience through a 'symphonic' portrayal of the spaces and rhythms of the city.

Produced prior to *Berlin*, the four films of the *Opus* series reject representational photographic imagery entirely, aligning themselves within early twentieth century modernism through Ruttmann's use of painterly abstraction. Each film draws on the visual vocabulary of abstract painting, with the series moving from the use of anthropomorphic forms in *Opus I* (1921) to the geometric abstraction of *Opus IV* (1925). In each of the four films the movement and temporal development of

Ruttmann's animated abstract forms are organised by the structural model of music, clearly signalled in the choice of *Opus* as a title for the pieces; and hence the films are recognised as pioneering works within avant-garde cinema's visual music tradition.

If the *Opus* films and *Berlin* identify Ruttmann as a vanguard artist responding and contributing to the development of European modernism, how then might *Weekend* compare to Ruttmann's cinematic work in terms of its representation of modernity or the development of radical aesthetics? Like *Berlin*, *Weekend* seeks to portray the experience of modern urban life, and indeed can be thought of as a sonic companion-piece to the film. *Berlin* foregrounds the temporal experience of modernity through its five act documentation of a single day in the life of the city, beginning with the arrival of workers in the early morning, and ending with the leisure time activities of the evening. As Nezar AlSayyad has pointed out, the division of *Berlin* into five acts, each dealing with a segment of the working day, points to 'the new awareness of time, which is now an inextricable aspect of urban modernity' (2006: 26). This concern with new modes of temporal experience is shared by *Weekend*, which focuses primarily on the leisure time of Berlin urbanities: the programme opening with the end of the working week and concluding with the return to work on Monday morning. In documenting the movement from work to free time and back again, *Weekend* foregrounds the separation of labour and leisure that became a defining feature of industrial modernity as workers adapted to their new role as consumers of leisure. As with *Berlin*, Ruttmann structures *Weekend* in sections, each dealing with a specific aspect of work or leisure, situated within the unifying temporal structure of the whole. The programme is divided into six 'scenes', and is bookended by two highly dynamic sound montages entitled *Jazz der Arbeit / Jazz of Work*, in which the sounds of the workplace are rearticulated as a form of *musique concrète*. Between these opening and closing sections Ruttmann plots the movement between work and leisure over the course of a weekend through four further scenes: *Feierabend / Closing time*, *Fahrt ins Freie / Journey into the Open*, *Pastorale* and *Wiederbeginn Der Arbeit / Return to Work*.

Much of the material for the programme was recorded in factories, U-Bahn stations, railway sidings and at other locations in and around Berlin using a mobile recording van. These recordings were then supplemented with others made at the Tri-Ergon Music Company's studio in the Berlin suburb of Mariendorf. Ruttmann's commitment to recording on location, his interest in documenting the experience of

modern urban life, and the structural organisation of the project, all align *Weekend* very closely with *Berlin* in terms of both form and content. Similarly, in relation to the development of modernist aesthetics, *Weekend* also stands comparison with Ruttmann's earlier work in film: in particular, his use of montage, developed visually in cinema and then transposed to sound, proposes an entirely new way of organising recorded sound within a radiophonic context. As stated earlier, Ruttmann's description of the programme as a 'photographic' radio play points to the fact it was recorded and edited using the Tri-Ergon optical sound-on-film system, which had originally been developed for use in the film industry. Patented in 1919 by the German inventors Josef Engel, Hans Vogt and Joseph Massolle, the Tri-Ergon system enabled Ruttmann to transfer the cinematic techniques he had developed while editing films directly to radio production. That is, since Tri-Ergon technology recorded sound optically on a strip of film, Ruttmann could cut and splice sound material in exactly the same way he had been able to edit picture.

Guiding Ruttmann's radiophonic use of film sound technology was a commitment to montage as a structuring principle. This is confirmed by Lotte H. Eisner who, reporting on the project for the daily film newspaper *Film-Kurier* wrote, 'With amateurs rather than professional actors; he recorded words, phrases, snatches of conversation, songs, and rhymes spoken and sung by people whom he brought in from their workplaces' (Eisner 1930). This description of Ruttmann's approach to radio production not only signals the documentary aspect of the programme, but also confirms the fact that Ruttmann had conceived of *Weekend* in terms of montage, working with fragments and samples of recorded sound rather than attempting to create of a seamless continuum of sonic material. It is undoubtedly this use of montage that gives *Weekend* much of its dynamism and energy, and which distinguishes Ruttmann's work from the radiophonic forms of music, speech and drama that were to become the staples of mainstream broadcasting, not only in Germany, but across the globe.

The originality of Ruttmann's approach to the organisation of recorded sound is most evident in the two *Jazz der Arbeit* montages, in which recordings of typewriters, telephones, cash registers, hammers, saws, files, forges, office dictation, verbal commands and various machines, are edited in what Ruttmann described as 'strong rhythmic counterpoint' (*Film-Kurier* 1930). While these sounds remain representational - clearly signalling the activities that take place in workshops,

factories, schools, shops and offices during the working day - the individual recordings are edited in such a way that their rhythmic and tonal qualities are foregrounded. In particular, rhythm invests the montage with a strong musical quality, not only through the selection of sounds that possess a clear internal rhythm, but also through Ruttmann's metrical organisation of the source recordings. In this way rhythmic sounds such as hammering, sawing and filing are sequenced in a rhythmic structure through Ruttmann's use of montage editing. In addition, when used in the form of short samples, recordings like that of a circular saw cutting through wood lend specific tonal qualities to the montage. At the same time, the montage structure stresses the timbre of selected sounds through the audible inscription of difference. If the source recordings were not edited in this way, but rather were left to play for more extended periods of time - as happens in other 'scenes' in the programme - qualities of tone and timbre would become less evident. This is because the tonal values of non-musical 'worldly' or 'concrete' sounds tend to modulate over time, often becoming lost in the complex textures of a dynamic sound event, or ignored and forgotten as the significative and narrative elements of a sound recording begin to dominate the listener's attention. Ruttmann also emphasises the musicality of concrete sound by occasionally recording in the studio rather than on location. This allows him to foreground the tonal, timbral and rhythmic qualities of particular sounds - for example, of metal being filed - by isolating them from the complex soundscapes in which they would normally be heard.

### ***Weekend and musique concrète***

It is undoubtedly this musicalisation of recorded worldly sound that has been celebrated when *Weekend* is identified as an early form of electroacoustic composition. Such declarations would appear to be founded on readily observed textual similarities between Ruttmann's work and that of other electroacoustic pioneers composing with recorded sound. Most obviously, the rhythmic editing evident in *Weekend's Jazz der Arbeit* sequences seems to prefigure certain elements of Pierre Schaeffer's landmark piece of *musique concrète*, *Étude aux chemins de fer* (1948), in which recordings of various sounds made by trains are articulated as musical resources through the application of a montage structure. However, the parallels between Ruttmann's piece and those by composers working within the field of art music extend beyond the morphological similarity of their respective



compositions. Importantly, the conceptual framework that informed the development of *Weekend*, and the ways in which Ruttmann addressed the creative possibilities of new technology, serve to link his own ideas on an art of recorded sound with those proposed later in the 1930s by avant-garde composers such as Jack Ellitt and John Cage.

Both Ellitt and Cage recorded their thoughts on the creative potential of sound recording and editing technology in personal manifestos: Ellitt in the article *On Sound*, published in 1935; and Cage in his talk *The Future of Music: Credo*, first presented in 1937, and later published the book *Silence* (Cage 1999). Crucially, what these two composers heard in the technology of sound recording was a means by which the range of sounds available to the composer could be extended. Thus Cage proposed a new form of music that would include recorded worldly sound:

The sound of a truck at fifty miles per hour. Static between the stations. Rain. We want to capture and control these sounds, to use them not as sound effects but as musical instruments. Every film studio has a library of 'sound effects' recorded on film... Given four film phonographs, we can compose and perform a quartet for explosive motor, wind, heartbeat, and landslide. (Cage 1999: 3)

Two years prior to this, thinking through the creative opportunities afforded by recent developments in sound technology, Ellitt had written:

The possibilities for experiment with recorded sound are as unlimited as are the possible varieties of experiments with mechanical contrivances. Not only can one record anything which may be produced by acoustic or electro-acoustic means, but all world sounds of interest now come within a sphere of creative control which may be termed Sound-Construction. (Ellitt 1935: 182)

Both Cage and Ellitt's proposals for a new art of sound echo ideas formulated by Ruttmann in a 1929 article entitled 'A New Approach to Sound Film and Radio, Programme for a photographic Sound Art'. Published only a few months before work began on *Weekend*, here Ruttmann proposed:

Everything audible in the world becomes material. This endless material can now be brought together and given new meaning in accordance with the laws of time and space. This new sound art will not only make use of rhythm and dynamics; it will also utilize space with the whole wide range of sound variations produced by that space. Thus, the way is open for an entirely new sound art – new in terms of both means and effect.  
(Ruttman 1929a)

While Ellitt makes no specific reference to film sound technology, commenting only that ‘respect and discrimination in the use of sound is occasionally seen in sound-films’ (1935: 182), it is clear that both Cage and Ruttman’s conceptualisations of a new art of organised sound were informed by their knowledge of the technical capabilities of sound film. What recommended this technology was not simply the fact it allowed access to the creative use of real-world sound, but also that it provided the means by which recorded sound could be manipulated and organised in new ways. The creative potential of this technology is demonstrated within the first few seconds of *Weekend*, when Ruttman reverses recordings of a drum roll and a gong being struck, generating new sonic material from familiar instrumental sounds. Alongside cutting and splicing, this technique, referred to as retrograding, was later to become one of the key forms of sound manipulation employed by composers working in *musique concrète*.

Although, unlike Ruttman, Cage did not have practical experience of working with sound film technology, his manifesto, *The Future of Music: Credo*, nevertheless demonstrated a clear understanding of the forms of sonic manipulation that film sound might offer the composer: ‘With a film phonograph it is now possible to control the amplitude and frequency of any one of these sounds and to give to it rhythms within or beyond the reach of the imagination’ (1999: 3). The degree of control offered by this technology enabled Cage to imagine a new temporal domain for music, measured in fractions of a second. Before the development of optical film recording and editing, it had not been possible to isolate, combine or separate sounds of very short duration with any degree of control. However, optical sound film offered exactly the same facility for precision editing that had been enjoyed by film editors working with images. Thus Cage proposes:

The composer (organizer of sound) will be faced not only with the entire field of sound but also with the entire field of time. The 'frame' or fraction of a second, following established film technique, will probably be the basic unit in the measurement of time. No rhythm will be beyond the composer's reach. (Cage 1999: 5)

While not addressing this particular area of creative control in detail, the notion that optical sound technology opened up the microsonic domain as a field of artistic activity is implied in a brief but significant comment made by Ruttmann when he was interviewed by Lotte H. Eisner during post-production on *Weekend*. After describing the process by which Ruttmann collected the material for the programme, Eisner turns her attention to the editing process:

And now the real work begins: cutting and montage. Cutting here is entirely different than for visual film, where the image already exists. With practice, it is possible to recognise what sound is represented by the dashes that make up the sound image. But a montage of the individual sounds has to be far more precise than with images. Ruttmann says, 'With sound montage one-fifth of a second counts.' (Eisner 1930)

Ruttmann's comment must have struck Eisner as being particularly significant, since it is referenced in the first subheading of the article ('Tonmontage auf 1/5 Sekunde'). Here the article implies that, drawing on the techniques and technology of film editing, Ruttmann is exploring uncharted territory; discovering that a distinction can be drawn between his experiment in sound editing for radio and his experience of editing images for cinema. Here *Weekend* is tacitly positioned as a new form of sonic art, intimate with cinema yet distinct from it, a product of new technology, and radically innovative in its exploration of a new temporal domain for art practice measured in fractions of a second.

Beyond the morphological features that might indeed situate *Weekend* as a pioneering piece of *musique concrète* – perhaps even the first – there is thus some evidence to suggest that Ruttmann's formulation of a new art of sound was closely aligned with the thinking of avant-garde composers who would later propose and

develop a form of music dependent on the organisation and manipulation of recorded sound. In this way both the programme's form, and the artistic discourses within which it might be situated and from which it emerges, identify *Weekend* as an early example of electroacoustic composition. However, while the consideration of primacy has value – for example, in challenging those histories of electroacoustic composition that focus only on developments taking place within the field of art music – it is not the only context within which the radical modernity of Ruttmann's work might be considered. So, for example, the stress placed by both Ruttmann and Eisner on temporal precision might reasonably locate *Weekend* in relation to modernism's fascination with the relationship between technology and new modes of artistic expression, or indeed its concern with new modes of temporal experience. At the same time, the figure of technology returns us to the project's intermedial dynamic, and it is this, I will argue, that also locates *Weekend* as a radical work within the modernist tradition.

### **Music – Painting – Film – Radio**

In order to understand the significance of the intermedial dynamic of *Weekend*, it is important to situate the programme within Ruttmann's larger body of work, and also in relation to the ideas that informed it. Most biographical accounts of Ruttmann's life mention the fact that prior to embarking on a career as a filmmaker, he had studied both painting and architecture, and that before making his first film was active as an artist and graphic designer. In addition, Ruttmann also had musical training, evidenced by the fact that he himself accompanied screenings of *Opus I* on the cello (Cowan 2014: 11). Paintings, drawings and prints produced between 1911 and 1920 show that as a young artist Ruttmann experimented with a wide range of different styles and approaches. However, work produced from about 1918 onwards displays an increasing engagement with abstraction, resulting in purely abstract works that point the way to the imagery employed in the early *Opus* films. The transition from canvas to celluloid appears to have been motivated by a concern with the limitations of painting with regards to its capacity to represent time and movement. This was a concern that Ruttmann shared with other modernist artists of the time, including the painter Léopold Survage, who in 1914 had written:

Painting, having liberated itself from the conventional forms of objects in the exterior world, has conquered the terrain of abstract forms. It must get rid of the last and principle shackle – immobility – so as to become as supple and rich a means of expressing our emotions as music is.

(Survage 1914)

In relation to understanding Ruttmann's development as an artist, Survage's comment is significant for two reasons: not only does it identify movement as a pictorial problem, but it also offers music as a model for abstract painting. Techniques of pictorial fragmentation, such as those employed by Marcel Duchamp in *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* (1912), and by the Italian Futurist Giacomo Balla in works such as *Dynamism of A Dog on a Leash* (1912), provided one means by which artists could introduce a kinetic or temporal dimension into their paintings. In these particular works both movement and the passage of time are implied by a series of separate or sometimes overlapping images. An alternative to this approach, developed in abstract canvases by the Swedish artist and animator Viking Eggeling, was to paint separate images in series, with each image representing a point of transition in a developmental sequence. Like these artists, Ruttmann had also experimented with finding a means to express movement within a pictorial context. This is evidenced by an untitled lithograph, produced by Ruttmann in 1919, in which an abstracted female nude, occupying the centre of the composition, is surrounded by echo images of various parts of the body<sup>2</sup>. The style developed by Ruttmann here is very much reminiscent of the mode of representation employed by both Duchamp and Balla in the above named works. However, it is clear from Ruttmann's writing, and subsequent adoption of film as his medium of choice, that he felt dissatisfied with this particular solution to the problem of movement and painting.

Ruttmann's concern with movement forms the central thread of an unpublished manifesto on art, written in 1919 or 1920, just as he was making the transition to film. 'Painting with Time'<sup>3</sup>, which remained unpublished during Ruttmann's lifetime, is an important document not only because it locates his ideas squarely within the frame of modernism, but also because it begins to articulate a set of fundamental concepts and values that can be seen to inform the radical experimentation of later works, including *Weekend*. The manifesto positions Ruttmann within the modernist avant-garde, in part by arguing that existing ways of

practicing and conceptualising art are out of step with what he terms ‘the special structure which characterises the spirit of our time’ (Ruttman 1919). Thus Ruttman points to the inability of painting to express movement as evidence of a disjuncture between modern experience and established modes of painterly expression:

‘Observation which, in intellectual matters, is being forced more and more to the contemplation of a transient event, does not know where to begin with the rigid, abstracted, timeless rules of painting’ (Ruttman 1919). Ruttman’s solution to this problem is to propose the development of a new art form that, while being visual, is time-based:

Art for the eye, which is distinguished from painting in so far as it is based on time (like music), and that the emphasis of the artistic quality should not lie (as in painting) in the reduction of a (real or formal) process to one moment, but precisely in the temporal development of the formal. (Ruttman 1919)

Significantly, what Ruttman proposes as ‘a wholly new type of art’ inhabits the interzone between more than one art form:

As this type of art evolves temporally, one of its most important elements is the time-rhythm of the optical event. There will appear therefore a wholly new type of artist, who has lain dormant till now and who stands roughly in the centre between painting and music. (Ruttman 1919)

Thus what we see communicated in ‘Painting with Time’ is more than simply a solution to contemporary pictorial problems: importantly, it also evidences a world-view that values combination over separation. For Ruttman, the path to creating ‘a wholly new type of art’ lies not in differentiation and autonomy, but rather in combining forms of expression, in order to engage with the changing modes of experience that define modernity: ‘It is not a question of a new style or anything like that, but rather of producing a variety of possibilities of expression for all the known arts, a totally new feeling of life in artistic form’ (Ruttman 1919).

The ideas proposed in 'Painting with Time' seem rightly to herald the four abstract animated films that Ruttmann produced between 1921 and 1925: *Lichtspiel opus I, Opus II, Opus III* and *Opus IV*. What is significant about these films in relation to Ruttmann's manifesto, is not only that they effectively introduce movement into painting, but also that they fuse painterly and musical modes of expression. These films explore what Ruttmann described as 'the music of light' (Ruttmann n.d.), articulating abstract imagery through a 'musical' use of variation and repetition, and through the deployment of rhythm. Hence Malcolm LeGrice has suggested that the films display 'quite a highly developed musical form. This lies not only in the rhythm and pace of the forms themselves, as they grow, move and transform, but the sequences themselves repeat, as melodic units in a musical structure' (Le Grice 1977: 27). The relationship with musical form was perhaps rendered most explicit when the films were screened with live musical accompaniment. *Opus I*, which premiered at the Marmorhaus Cinema in Berlin on 27<sup>th</sup> April 1921, was accompanied by a synchronised score written by composer Max Butting, while *Opus III*, which premiered at Berlin's Ufa-Theater am Kurfürstendamm on 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1925, was accompanied by a score written by Hanns Eisler.

The intermedial status of Ruttmann's work, negotiating as it did a territory between painting and music, was not lost on critics of the time. In April 1921, in a piece for the *Berliner Tageblatt* entitled 'The Filmed Symphony', Leonhard Adelt expressed the view that while some art forms were able to achieve the effects of other art forms, the fine arts were unable to represent the effects of music, since 'fine arts remain closely tied to frozen form'. He continues, 'Music, however, as a rhythmical sequence of sound, is movement, so that these two media are mutually exclusive. This antithesis is now bridged through the moving picture of the music-painter Ruttmann' (Adelt 1921). The crossing of boundaries observed in the *Opus* films is not, though, limited to Ruttmann's adoption of music as the temporal structure for his new art form. That is, the *Opus* series represents not only a fusion of music and painting, but also a fusion of cinema and painting. As Ruttmann himself explained, when describing his move to Berlin to embark on a career in cinema, 'I left my hometown of Frankfurt / Main feeling the urge to make lifeless images move, and this is how I came to make *painted films*' (Ruttmann n.d.).

While Ruttmann did not pursue the use of painterly abstraction beyond the four films of the *Opus* series, his subsequent work in documentary does reveal a

continuing concern with forms of intermediality. A. L. Rees, perceiving a fundamental break between Ruttmann's experiments in visual music and his work in documentary, has suggested of *Berlin* that, 'Only the film's subtitle – "Symphony of a City" – harks back to the musical aspiration of pure abstract film' (Rees 2011: 40). However, Ruttmann's own description of the film suggests that music, once again, served as an important influence on the formal qualities of the film:

In this film I gave the image the floor – only the image, the absolute image, seen and developed as an abstraction from a filmic standpoint. I set visual motifs to a rhythm and enabled them to 'act' without a plot and that allowed contrasts to arise on their own. (Ruttmann n.d.)

In its references to motifs and rhythm, this is a clear statement that in *Berlin* Ruttmann had replaced narrative with the model of music as the film's central organisational logic. What can therefore be seen and heard in Ruttmann's work prior to *Weekend* is a desire to work across the boundaries that have traditionally separated various art forms and their associated media. That Ruttmann then transferred this approach to his use of sound film technology is evidenced by his 1929 article 'Sound Films ? - !', in which he writes:

The sound film does not permit the obsessive, narcissistic pursuit of a one-track talent. The person who has a gift only for music or painting or poetry is no longer able to impress. There is no longer a separation of specific gifts; since today's art is made for human beings, and since human beings have eyes *and ears and brains*, there arises the need for a corresponding universal type of artist ... the sound film will be able to free us from the confines of a specialistic art (Ruttmann 1929b).

For Ruttmann the advent of film sound technology represented not simply a technological advance in filmmaking, but rather the means by which a radical transformation could take place within the arts. In sound film technology Ruttmann saw and heard the means by which the traditional boundaries separating the arts might be dissolved, generating intermedial forms of art practice more attuned to the lived experience of modernity than modes of artistic expression limited to a single medium.



### ***Weekend* and intermedial folding**

Given Ruttmann's open resistance to the differentiation of art forms and to medium specificity, what then of *Weekend*? Ruttmann's own comments on the programme demonstrate that the project was conceived from the first as an intermedial experiment, in which techniques developed in cinema were to be applied within a radiophonic context:

*Weekend* is a study in sound montage. I used the film strip to record the sound exclusively, yielding what amounts to a blind film. My research aimed at revealing overarching rules that govern the sequencing and combining of sound elements in an organic whole, an approach akin to what we used to do with visual elements in silent film. (Ruttmann n.d.)

In taking the model of montage developed in 'silent' cinema, and applying this to the creation of a radio programme, Ruttmann begins to blur the distinction between radio and cinema. However, his concept of cinema was already refracted through the models of music and painting, and so the influence of music presents itself in the way in which *Weekend* is organised and documented. Ruttmann appears to have created a graphic score for the programme<sup>4</sup>, part of which shows various sounds and fragments of speech plotted on a musical stave. The score is divided into bars, includes a time signature, and individual sounds and words from the programme are notated in simple musical form to give an indication of both the tonal value of each sound and their place within the temporal structure of the sequence as a whole. Ruttmann's investment in musical paradigms is also indicated by the use of the term 'jazz' to characterise the two lively montage sequences, referred to as *Jazz der Arbeit*, that open and close the programme. Here it is perhaps worth pointing out that Ruttmann's careful choice of terminology does more than signal the use of a musical model for the project's articulation of wordly sound. In choosing to describe his montages of sounds of the workplace as 'jazz', Ruttmann consciously positions *Weekend* in relation to the soundscape of the twentieth century. In this respect, jazz not only signifies urban modernity but might also be understood to represent the sound of the machine age. Although in later decades jazz would come to serve largely as a symbol of free expression, for earlier generations it conveyed a range of other potential

meanings. Among these was the notion that jazz articulated something of the qualities of mechanisation. Thus for the architect Le Corbusier, jazz not only signified urban modernity - 'Manhattan is hot jazz in stone and steel' (Le Corbusier 1947: 161) - but did so in part because it was machine-like: 'the Negroes of the USA have breathed into jazz the song, the rhythm and the sound of machines' (Le Corbusier 1947: 164). And it is perhaps this complex of meanings that is conveyed in Ruttmann's proto-musique concrete *Jazz der Arbeit* montages.

Although Ruttmann was clear that the model of music underpinned the experimentation of *Weekend*, commenting 'Clearly the photographic sound play obeys similar rules to music' (Eisner 1930), this privileging of musical paradigms needs to be understood within the context of his broader project as an artist. In drawing on the model of music, Ruttmann's aim was not to create a new musical form, but rather to combine and blend art forms in the creation of new possibilities for artistic expression. This is in part evidenced by the fact that his musical sensibilities were never wholly separated from cinematic concerns. In his article 'A New Approach to Sound Film and Radio...', Ruttmann proposes combining elements of musical expression with spatial dynamics more commonly associated with cinema:

Everything audible in the world becomes material. This endless material can now be brought together and given new meaning in accordance with the laws of time and space. This new sound art will not only make use of rhythm and dynamics; it will also utilize space with the whole wide range of sound variations produced by that space. Thus, the way is open for an entirely new sound art – new in terms of both means and effect.

(Ruttmann 1929a)

Here Ruttmann seems to counterpoint musical terms (rhythm and dynamics) with the notion of space. Certainly, cinematic modes of articulation, which commonly construct or analyse space through a series of shots, foreground a mobile and dynamic notion of spatiality – in contrast, perhaps, to the much more limited spatial dynamics of the dominant musical forms of the period. What this particular folding of cinematic and musical qualities points to is the fact that, although *Weekend* might indeed be seen as an early piece of *musique concrète*, it emerges from Ruttmann's intention to

combine musical and cinematic modes of representation as a way of creating new possibilities for *radio*.

### **Silent modernity**

What we hear in *Weekend* is a form of intermedial folding that is entirely consistent with Ruttmann's view of what would constitute a progressive, modern work of art. But how might we address the significance of the piece outside its immediate authorial context? Art history has made much of the drive towards medium specificity that has been seen to have informed a great deal of avant-garde art practice in the first half of the twentieth century. That is, some of the key developments in modernist painting, sculpture, literature, cinema and the other arts, are widely held to have been underwritten by a creative engagement with each art form's own potentialities, its own unique properties. Thus in the field of early avant-garde film we witness the pursuit of a specifically cinematic aesthetic and an attempt to establish cinema as an independent art form, resulting in film practice that endeavoured to reduce or eradicate non-cinematic modes of expression. For a number of Ruttmann's fellow vanguard filmmakers of the 1920s it was essential that cinema be removed from the gravitational fields of other art forms. Hence in 1922, using the neologism *kinochestvo* to signal an entirely new form of cinema, Vertov proclaimed: 'We are cleaning *kinochestvo* of foreign matter – of music, literature, and theatre; we seek our own rhythm, one lifted from nowhere else' (Vertov 1922). Seven years later, in the opening titles of *Man with a Movie Camera*, Vertov reasserted this aim, stating 'This experimental work aims at creating a truly international absolute language of cinema based on its total separation from the language of theatre and literature'. The drive towards medium differentiation expressed in Vertov's work is also reflected in the ontological pursuit of medium specificity that accounts, in part, for the privileged status accorded to montage by many of the vanguard filmmakers of the period. Thus for Eisenstein, montage was identified as, and proclaimed to be, the essence of cinema: 'to determine the nature of montage is to solve the specific problem of cinema' (Eisenstein 1977: 48). This drive towards medium differentiation and specificity was not limited to cinema, however, and we see exactly the same issues being discussed in relation to radio. In the 1920s, the French radio pioneer Paul Deharme argued that radio should be thought of as a medium of oral communication, with its own unique formal qualities, different from those of either theatre or film.

Deharme's thoughts on medium specificity are clearly articulated in his 1928 article 'Proposition for a Radiophonic Art', which opens with the line, 'Since the appearance of the wireless, everyone has predicted ... the rise of a truly radiophonic literature and dramatic art' (Deharme 2009: 406).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the blurring, blending and folding of art forms that we witness in Ruttmann's work gets a bad press from some of the key figures in modernist poetics. In relation to the discourse around medium specificity Vertov writes, 'We protest against that mixing of the arts which many call synthesis. The mixture of bad colors, even those ideally selected from the spectrum, produces not white, but mud' (Vertov 1922). In a similar vein, Bertolt Brecht declared that, 'so long as the arts are supposed to be 'fused' together, the various elements will all be equally degraded' (Brecht 1964: 37).

These views on art practice have subsequently been enshrined in art history. Retrospectively surveying modernism in a 1960 radio broadcast, the American art critic Clement Greenberg famously stated:

It quickly emerged that the unique and proper area of competence of each art coincided with all that was unique to the nature of the medium. The task of self-criticism became to eliminate from the effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art. Thereby each art would be rendered 'pure', and in its 'purity' find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence. (Greenberg 2003: 775)

The concern with medium specificity and medium differentiation thus becomes a key theoretical and critical frame of reference by means of which we understand, interpret and value individual works of art located within what has become a widely accepted historical account of modernism. As a consequence, work that does not conform to this paradigm struggles to find a place, becoming marginalised or simply neglected. In Ruttmann's *Weekend*, what we witness is not an ontological pursuit of radiophonic essence, but rather a folding of art forms, one into another. It is not until the advent of the discourses around postmodernism that strategies of blurring, blending, combining, fusing and extending are given their due; but of course it makes no sense to describe Ruttmann's work as 'postmodern', since it

is located at the very heart of the modernist project. What the intermediality of *Weekend* represents, then, is a strand of radical modernist practice that has been neglected – or even silenced – as a result of the ways in which dominant forms of art history and criticism have constructed modernist poetics. The radical modernity of Ruttmann's *Weekend* thus lies not only in the fact that it seems to have anticipated the developments that were to take place in electroacoustic music after World War Two, but also in the way in which it actively sought to combine cinematic and musical modes of expression within a radiophonic context.

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<sup>1</sup> Thus the French record label Metakine, who released a recording of *Weekend* in 1994, describe it both as 'cinema for the ear' and 'a sound film without images'. See Walter Ruttmann, *Weekend*.

Metmakine, MKCD010. 1994

<sup>2</sup> See Goergen, Jeanpaul (1989) *Walter Ruttmann: Eine Dokumentation*. Berlin: Freunde der Deutschen Kinemathek, p.8.

<sup>3</sup> This untitled essay was published under the title 'Malerei mit Zeit' in Hein, Birgit and Herzogenrath, Wulf eds. (1977) *Film als Film: 1910 bis heute* (Stuttgart: Hatje Verlag) and was published untitled in *Film as Film: formal experiment in film 1910-1975* (London: Hayward Gallery, 1979) in the translation used here.

<sup>4</sup> Part of the score appears in Goergen, Jeanpaul (1989) *Walter Ruttmann: Eine Dokumentation*. Berlin: Freunde der Deutschen Kinemathek, pp. 130-131; and Goergen, Jeanpaul (1994) *Walter Ruttmanns Tonmontagen als Ars Acustica*. Siegen: Universität Gesthochschule Siegen, p. 1. The score can also be viewed online at: <http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/weekend/>

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