The Realm of the Earth: Simultaneous Broadcasting and World Politics in Interwar Cinema

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Michael Cowan

University of St Andrews

Abstract

This article discusses intermedial relations between film and new technologies of broadcast—telegraph, radio and television—in interwar Europe, culminating in a reading of Abel Gance’s largely forgotten radio film *La fin du monde* (1931). It argues that efforts to reposition film in relation to the new technologies of broadcast helped to catalyze both new forms of montage and new understandings of film as a medium that might forge political communities on a world scale.

Résumé

Cet article s’interroge sur les relations intermédiales entre le cinéma et les nouvelles technologies de diffusion – télégraphie, radio, télévision – dans l’entre-deux-guerres et comporte notamment une analyse approfondie de *La fin du monde* d’Abel Gance (1931). Il montre que l’effort de positionner le cinéma par rapport aux technologies de diffusion contribua à faire ressortir de nouvelles formes de montage, ainsi que de nouvelles conceptions du film comme médium capable de forger des communautés politiques à l’échelle mondiale.

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¹ With the shift towards intermediality in recent decades, ideas of medium specificity have given way to an understanding of media forms as relational through and through. That is, media are defined less by supposedly intrinsic qualities than by how they *position* themselves in relation to other media. For film historians, this change of focus entails a rethinking of fundamental questions, asking not what cinema is, but rather how the cinema’s changing definitions have become possible in relation to both “older” and “newer” media. Thus Tom Gunning famously examined how the motif of the telephone,

with its promise of overcoming time and space, helped to catalyze the emergence of narrative (parallel) editing, along with a new mode of spectatorship marked by the promise of mastery and fear of impotence. [1] More recently, Lev Manovich has argued that digital media helped to catalyze the incorporation of “database” narrative structures in the non-linear work of filmmakers such as Peter Greenaway (a logic admittedly prefigured by Dziga Vertov). [2] While such intermedial analyses offer insight into the cinema’s elasticity in relation to different media landscapes, we should also remember that the various projects attached to the cinema over its history never exist in the absence of broader contextual (cultural, political or discursive) factors. That is, the understandings of a medium, the spectrum of ideas delimiting its parameters and possible uses, change not only in relation to other media, but also according to historical and cultural context.

² In this article, I want to examine one such moment of historical intermediality in the 1920s. Whereas the telephone could figure as an intermedial corollary for early narrative editing patterns, the period after World War I marks a fascination with media of wireless transmission such as the radio and the television. This is not to assert that images of wireless transmission do not occur in films prior to 1918, nor that the telephone ceased to play an important role in the cinema of the interwar period, where films such as Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927) often conceived of television in the tradition of the picture phone. But the film of the 1920s evinces a particular and, I would submit, qualitatively new preoccupation with broadcast technologies. In what follows, I want to suggest some of the reasons for this change, as well as what it tells us about the way contemporaries were thinking about film and its possibilities. Following some reflections on the cinema’s positioning with relation to other media of simultaneous transmission, I then offer a close reading of one film that attempted to grapple with these transformations at the beginning of the sound era: Abel Gance’s *La fin du monde* (1931).

³ Simultaneous transmission media hardly began in the 1920s of course; telegraphy stretches back into the early 19th century and the first transatlantic radio transmission by Marconi took place in 1901. As William Urricchio has argued, such technologies were bound up with an often-overlooked genealogy of the cinema—one present from the “beginning” in the genre of the actuality film—characterized by efforts to achieve effects of liveness and contemporaneity analogous to

transmission media, as well as a relationship to the daily press. [3] Above all, ideas about television—which preceded the technology’s actual mise-en-place by decades—helped to fashion a horizon of “tevisual expectation” for the cinema understood as a potential dispositif of *simultaneity* rather than an indexical archive, and such a horizon of expectation must be seen as another genealogy of moving images. [4] Alongside the familiar concept of the cinema as a storage medium, capable of “overcoming death” by preserving audiovisual traces, there was no less excitement surrounding the prospect of apparatuses such as the “telectroscope” or “telephonoscope” that promised to realize modernity’s dream of absolute speed by linking distant spaces visually in real time. [5]

Fig. 1 [Voir la liste des figures]

George Du Maurier, fictional illustration of “Edison’s telephonoscope” for *Punch* published on December 9th, 1878.

⁴ This fascination with transmission was not without its influence on early attractions cinema in films such as Méliès’s *La photographie électronique à distance* (1908). [6] After World War I, however, the notion and representation of simultaneous broadcast takes on a new value and new associations for several reasons. The first is technological. At least since the first signal was sent around the world from the Eiffel Tower in 1913, [7] simultaneous broadcast formed a horizon of expectation as important to the experience of new audiovisual technologies as inscription and storage.

The institutionalization of radio is crucial here, as the development of commercial broadcasting began in earnest after World War I. Thus, it is hardly by chance that we find an increased number of representations of radio broadcasts in the films of the period, visualized in iconic images of antennas and animated radio waves as icons of the new geopolitical power of instantaneous worldwide transmission. Above all, two motifs stand out in such representations. First, radio waves appear as *instantaneous*, carrying communications across the world faster than any material means of transport could. For instance, a shot of electromagnetic waves at the beginning of Fritz Lang's *Spione* (*Spies*, 1928) is inserted between shots of a courier on a speeding motorcycle and a man on the telephone to underscore the instantaneity of wireless communication. [8]

Video 1

Excerpt from *Spione* (Fritz Lang, 1928).

Video 2

Excerpt from *Spiel der Wellen* (Lore Leudesdorff and Walter Ruttmann, 1926).

⁵ Secondly, radio waves make a mockery of all attempts to enforce borders. In Walter Ruttmann's advertisement for AEG radio equipment, *Spiel der Wellen* (*Play of the Waves*, 1926), a policeman—the very figure of Weimar authority in films such as *Die Straße* (*The Street*, 1923) and Ruttmann's own *Berlin. Die Sinfonie der Großstadt* (*Berlin. The Symphony of a Metropolis*, 1927)—proves helpless in his efforts to stop the ethereal waves on their journey from Africa into Europe. Radio was—particularly after the development of shortwave—thoroughly bound up with the emergence of a new global geographical imagination, one no longer bound by national borders but consisting of

intercontinental space. [9] Such a concept of space could undergird fantasies of control, and it is hardly a coincidence that European imperial powers raced feverishly to link their colonial territories via radio networks. [10] But such intercontinental space also formed the new arena of borderless criminality in thrillers such as Lang's *Spione* or Maurice Elvey's *High Treason*, where shady groups manipulate the world's airwaves and the stock market to pull off crimes on a global scale. [11]

Video 3

Excerpt from *High Treason* (Maurice Elvey, 1929).

⁶ To be sure, radio was not the only technology to embody a shift in the experience of audiovisual media. It was also discernible in the development of technologies of image transmission in the 1920s, a decade that witnessed the first transatlantic cable transmission of an image by the Bartlane system (1920) and the first transatlantic wireless transmission of an image by Édouard Belin (1921). Belin had already patented his Belinograph in 1913, and the first image sent by radiotelegraphy was published in *Le Journal* in 1914. But it wasn't until the mid-1920s that the infrastructure for image transmission was widely developed. [12] With this shift, “actual” photographs could now be gathered from around the globe and disseminated in the popular illustrated magazines of the period. Television, which was enjoying its first practical demonstrations in the mid-1920s, would add yet another layer to the new kinds of live images that would soon be available for widespread public consumption.

⁷ But it would be a mistake to interpret the newfound interest in technologies of simultaneous transmission in the films of the 1920s only as a result of technological changes. Another factor can be found in the Great War. World War I had occasioned a massive upsurge in the production of propaganda, and it was this context that bestowed a new level of importance to the “actuality” in the form of the wartime newsreel. Although the newsreel existed before 1914, the war lent it a new—and newly politicized—currency both for audiences and for the state agencies controlling the production

and distribution of newsreels, which now saw moving images as a potential means of mass persuasion. [13]

⁸ Finally, the 1920s witnessed a broader shift in the very understanding of art, where art was increasingly seen as a means of intervening in social and political life. The rejection of notions of “disinterested” or contemplative aesthetics by avant-garde artists is well known, but the model of the artist as “expert” was also present in a host of movements and schools of applied art and design. [14] As designer, engineer, reporter or pamphleteer, the new “artist-expert” no longer strove for higher realms of aesthetic contemplation, but rather sought to engage with the actual world: with its cities, its technologies, its politics and—the relevant point for my discussion here—its contemporary events. Within this context, live media such as radio and television gained an obvious appeal. [15]

⁹ In the cinema, these transformations underlay the increasing interest in film as a political medium in the 1920s, one capable of shaping the recipients’ consciousness and above all their sense of community belonging. As is well known, filmmakers and theorists from Griffith to Balázs saw film as a medium for facilitating *l’entente des peuples* after the ravages of World War I. But such ideas about the cinema formed the counterpart to other attempts to use the cinema to promote national or class consciousness. Thus Dziga Vertov, whose concept of *Kino-Pravda* was based on the model of the newsreel, expressed the hope in 1925 that wireless image transmission would fulfill his dream of establishing a universal communist community: “The method of radio broadcasting images, just recently invented, can bring us still closer to our cherished basic goal—to unite all the workers scattered over the earth through a single consciousness, a single bond, a single collective will in the battle for communism.” [16] Writing the same year in Germany, Willi Münzenberg, in his pamphlet *Erobert den Film!* (1925), called on his readers to use film in a manner similar to socialist newspapers as an instrument for framing the reception of current events. [17]

¹⁰ Münzenberg’s evocation of the newspaper points toward a broader genealogy of such conceptions of the cinema as a tool for shaping political consciousness. For as Benedict Anderson long ago argued, it was only with the emergence of a mass press in the 18th century that a broad identification with an “imagined community” of national belonging became possible. Key to Anderson’s argument

about the press's role in nation formation was a sense of simultaneity: not simply the actuality of the current events represented in the newspaper, but above all the “almost precisely simultaneous consumption” of the newspaper, [18] which bound people from distant regions together in a self-conscious community of shared language and shared interests. [19] As we have seen, the cinematic newsreel aspired to a similar value of actuality, and it is thus hardly surprising that the newsreel would appeal to governments wishing to use film to create a sense of national belonging during the two World Wars. But the main successor to the newspaper in the 1920s was once again the radio. From early on, radio was recognized as a medium capable of binding its listeners into a community of ritualized national reception. Thus in January 1924, only some three months after the first German radio broadcast, the journal *Der deutsche Rundfunk* could proudly report: “For the first time in Germany, the Reich Chancellor and party leaders sent out a Christmas message on the first day of Christmas to all Germans wirelessly.” [20] Still, we would be amiss to describe radio in the 1920s as simply nationalist. For as the reach of radio waves increased, radio developed a decidedly international flair. In 1928 the program of Germany's largest national broadcaster the *Deutschlandsender* still included, among its other features, daily broadcasts of foreign language lessons in French, English, Italian and other languages. The very presence of such language instruction underscores the perceived connection between radio and international understanding during the decade after World War I. But it also underscores the limits of radio as an international medium, bound as it was (like sound film) by national languages. Such limitations, however, did not prevent contemporary observers from attaching fantasies of international community to the new broadcast technologies. Vertov, for example, used the term “radio eye” to describe a new kind of audio-visual actuality—one partly represented in his film *Enthusiasm* (1931)—which he hoped would create “the possibility for proletarians of all nations, all countries, to see, hear and understand one another.” [21]

Fig. 2 [Voir la liste des figures]

Still image from *Enthusiasm* (Dziga Vertov, 1931).

¹¹ The sense of internationalism characterizing earlier discourses on the radio would change, of course, with the rise of fascism, when both radio and propaganda film sought to elicit a sense of “total mobilization” for the national project. But even if fascism imposed stricter control on the content of radio programs, those programs were still important on account of their status as media events: rituals designed to include listeners in the “building” of the new Reich. [22] Thus the Nazi radio propagandist, Eugen Hadamovsky, explained in his 1934 book *Der Rundfunk im Dienste der Volkführung* (Radio in the Service of National Leadership): “Without radio, it never would have been possible to encompass an entire nation under a single will.” [23] To this end, Hadamowsky emphasized above all the use of radio to synchronize national ritual so as to create a sense of simultaneous, nation-wide participation in the new state:

Through radio, great national ceremonies, anniversaries of National Socialist uprisings, work holidays and times of commemoration should create and make visible a national community [Volksgemeinschaft] bound together by destiny, when the millions of listeners in all of Germany’s districts parade all at once before the loudspeakers. [24]

¹² Radio could thus make the Volksgemeinschaft “visible” (despite its aural register) for the solitary

listener, turning him into a virtual soldier among other soldiers before the speaker. This is precisely what was visualized in a famous animated advertisement for the Volksempfänger, *Die Schlacht um Miggershausen* (*The Battle for Miggershausen*, 1937), in which an army of radio apparatuses, summoned to action by a central antenna station, marches into the rural town of Miggershausen to order its inhabitants: “Everyone participate in radio!” (“Nimmt Teil am Rundfunk alle!”). And it would find a more popular manifestation in popular films such as *Wunschkonzert* (*Request Concert*, Eduard von Borsody, 1940), where the radio serves to bind the entire nation into the war effort. [25]

Fig. 3 [Voir la liste des figures]

Still image from an animated advertisement for the Volksempfänger, *Die Schlacht um Miggershausen* (1937).

¹³ Although I have focused on the radio here, it is important to remember that radio always existed as one part of a network of dissemination media. Hadamovsky, for example, included an entire chapter on the “Collaboration Between the Press and Radio” (“Zusammenarbeit von Presse und Rundfunk”), and his treatise itself appeared in a publication series entitled *Gestalten und Erscheinungen der politischen Publizistik* (*Forms and Guises of Political Journalism*) alongside other treatises on the newspaper, [26] film [27] and illustrated magazines. [28] As cinema became

politicized in the 1930s, it increasingly had to be situated within such networks of broadcast media. But the idea of inserting film into such networks hardly began in the 1930s. An obvious precursor is offered by the phenomenon of the famous Soviet agit trains. In terms both of their technologies and of the films shown, the revolutionary film trains aspired in every way to generate a sense of the “actual.” As one inspired reporter from Russia described it in 1920:

Thus one train car includes a wireless telegraph station, which receives news from all countries. In this way, rural populations can be kept up to date about the latest events of the day. Another train compartment carries a newspaper printing works, whose press can produce a run of 15 000 newspapers per day, thus offering the region being visited constant updates of the news from Moscow. [29]

¹⁴ Given such an emphasis on simultaneous technologies and current events (“news from all countries”), it should come as no surprise that the cinema projections held in the trains privileged actualities above all else:

[The films] show communist scouts on their journeys, children’s groups in St. Petersburg and similar things. The interior of the train is completed by an electric power station, kitchens and dining halls, a bookstore, and a demonstration room for gramophones, which play revolutionary songs or speeches by Trotsky and Lenin. [...] As soon as the train pulls up in the station, they begin with the cinema projections, the handing out of newspapers, which were already thrown from windows along the way, and the sale of books. [30]

¹⁵ Thus the agit train, although often recalled as a special form of cinema, was also something more: something perhaps better described as an effort to create—in the sense outlined by Anderson—a giant living newspaper. This was a multimedia network of trains, cinemas, newspapers, telegraphs, phonographs, loudspeakers and even paintings (on the trains’ exterior walls), designed not simply to disseminate propaganda content, but to facilitate a political ritual, in which inhabitants from outer regions could feel that they were taking part in the revolution no less than the front lines in Moscow. While this media network included storage media such as the cinema and the phonograph, these forms were reconceptualized here away from notions of archiving and towards values of “actuality.” The

phonograph playing Lenin's speech is important not because it retains Lenin's voice for future generations, but rather because it functions, in tandem with train, to "broadcast" the speech as quickly as possible to other parts of Russia.

Fig. 4 [Voir la liste des figures]

Photograph of the agit-train *October Revolution*.

Courtesy of Austrian Film Museum, Vienna

¹⁶ It is this striving for simultaneity over vast geographical distances that we need to keep in mind when approaching the representations of transmission media in the cinema of the interwar period. Among other things, that desire influenced a certain form of montage unique to the period: a polyphonic montage linking various geographical locations simultaneously. The best-known manifestations of this can be seen in the famous "symphony" films of the late 1920s with their cross-sectional montage of simultaneous actions occurring all over the city, the nation or the world. It is, moreover, surely no coincidence that films such as Ruttmann's *Berlin. Die Sinfonie der Großstadt* and Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) frequently feature shots of switchboard operators.

Whereas parallel editing found its corollary in two-way telephone conversations, the new polyphonic montage forms of the 1920s, connecting a vast network of different locations, looked to the figure of the switchboard operator, furiously connecting dozens of voices simultaneously.

Fig. 5 [Voir la liste des figures]

Still image from *Berlin. Die Sinfonie der Großstadt* (Walter Ruttmann, 1937).

¹⁷ In narrative films of the period, such polyphonic montage is often associated with representations of broadcast technologies. A good example can be seen in the opening of Yakov Protazanov's science fiction film *Aelita* (1924). After an intertitle stating that a mysterious message has been captured by “toutes les radios de la terre,” we see a montage of telegraphic and radio stations receiving the message in Japan, the Middle East and Moscow. The message—“anti odeli uta”—will turn out to be the commercial slogan of a New York tire company. But its worldwide influence is anything but harmless, as it causes the film's protagonist—Los, a Russian engineer—to shirk his duties to the new Soviet state while dreaming of an aristocratic Martian kingdom disposing over fantastical televisual technologies. Los's vision of Mars is dominated by motifs of wireless communication; the constructivist costumes and sets by Aleksandra Ekster repeatedly evoke the wires of antennas, and the

center of the Martians' power resides in a kind of electronic telescope through which they gaze at the earth (in "world montage" sequences similar to that of the film's opening). Thus even as *Aelita* partakes of the fantasy of connecting with distant worlds via broadcast media, it also underscores the potential threat of such media as pathways for the infiltration of capitalist seductions into the still fragile political space of the young Soviet Union, where the hardships of the New Economic Policy were testing the ability of citizens to adhere to the identities offered by the new state. [31]

¹⁸ A rather different, imperialist, version of such "world montage" can be seen in a French film from the same year: Marcel L'Herbier's *L'Inhumaine* (1924). There, the engineer Einar invents an audiovisual device that allows him to broadcast, via a giant radio tower, the voice of the concert singer Claire Lescot "à travers la terre," while simultaneously capturing live images of Claire's listeners. Einar's apparatus kills two birds with stone: while allowing him to contain and immobilize the femme fatale Claire, it also allows him to control the colonial territories of the French empire via radio broadcast; as Claire sings, we see a montage of listeners from around the empire—turbaned Arabs, an African woman in the bush, a Parisian crowd, an explorer in the jungle, etc.—all enraptured before the receiver.

¹⁹ All of these examples point to the increasing importance of *globalsimultaneity* in 1920s media fantasies, a figure linked to new conceptions of global space and global politics in the wake of World War I, and one around which film sought to reposition itself. If the consolidation of simultaneous broadcasting technologies helped to catalyze the politicization of film in the 1920s, it also made possible new forms of "world montage." In the second part of this article, I want to examine more closely one film that attempted to work through this repositioning of cinema within the new arena of international radio and simultaneous broadcasting: Abel Gance's *La fin du monde*.

²⁰ If Gance's film is remembered at all today, it is generally as a monumental failure, a mammoth undertaking that, like Stroheim's *Greed* (1925), was cut down to a fragment of its intended state (from three hours to a hundred minutes) by unscrupulous backers and distributors. [32] But when the surviving film is examined together with Gance's 1929 screenplay, [33]*La fin du monde* nonetheless offers a fascinating allegory of late 1920s thinking about the cinema, storage and simultaneity in

relation to interwar politics. Adapting Camille Flammarion's 1894 novel of the same title, Gance's film stages the story of an averted catastrophe after a comet is discovered on a collision course with the earth. Such a scenario offered ample opportunities for Gance to create larger-than-life characters and effects, and his screenplay makes clear that he went to great lengths to surpass the grandiose aspects of *Napoléon* (1927). [34] But what really interested Gance in the scenario of global catastrophe was the possibility it offered of dramatizing debates around nationalism and internationalism that marked the political and cultural life of the late 1920s. To this end (and in distinction to Flammarion), he centers his narrative on a struggle between the villain Schomburg and the brothers Jean and Martial Novalic. While the conflict plays out on the dramatic level as a rivalry for the love of the beautiful Geneviève de Murcie, the two camps also embody conflicting political visions: whereas the ruthless speculator Schomburg attempts to foment nationalism and warfare in order to profit from weapons sales on the stock market, the poet Jean Novalic and his scientist brother Martial (who will continue the struggle after Jean's loses his reason) seek to use the impending global threat to end war once and for all by rallying humanity to a new form of cooperative international government. [35]

Fig. 6 [Voir la liste des figures]

La fin du monde (Abel Gance, 1931) production still (1930).

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²¹ In recent writing on *La fin du monde*, this heavy-handed plot has received less attention than Gance's experiments with sound in the film, for which he attempted to construct a perspectival "surround sound" *avant la lettre*. [36] In order to facilitate the sound takes for the film, Gance went out of his way to hire Walter Ruttmann, who had just finished the first long sound film in Germany with *Melodie der Welt* (1929). Gance clearly considered Ruttmann his most important collaborator, bestowing on him the titles of "régisseur adjoint" and "premier collaborateur artistique." [37] While it is unclear what role Ruttmann played in Gance's project for perspectival sound, *La fin du Monde* and *Melodie der Welt* do share another crucial trait: the use of multiple languages on the soundtrack. Ruttmann's film, a cross-sectional documentary of the world's cultures commissioned by the Hapag shipping company, included one section entitled "Sprachen der Welt" in which we hear characters speaking—sometimes all at once—in English, German, French, Japanese, Hindou and several other

languages. Similarly, Gance insisted on the use of multiple languages, particularly in the sequences detailing the formation of the new international government at the end of the film.

Fig. 7 [Voir la liste des figures]

Still image from *La fin du monde*.

²² Needless to say, the question of language was a central issue during this transitional period of early sound film, when studios tried out various solutions—including multiple versions of the same story filmed in different languages and “polyglot” films such as *Allo Berlin, ici Paris!* (Julien Duvivier, 1932) and *Niemandsländ* (Victor Trivas, 1931)—to reach international audiences. [38] But the inclusion of multiple languages in *Melodie der Welt* and *La Fin du monde* also points beyond the question of sound to a broader issue. For as their titles indicate, these were *world films*, which set their action on a global scale and strove to make viewers attentive to the simultaneity of global events. Indeed, perhaps no other film featured the kinds of “world montage” described above as consistently as Ruttmann’s *Melodie der Welt*. Remixing footage shot by the Hapag film crew, Ruttmann transformed a linear travel account into an extended “cross-sectional” montage offering a catalogue of cultural forms, rituals and gestures from around the world. [39] In so doing, the film

proposed to promote “the spirit of commonality between peoples” (“dem Geiste der Gemeinsamkeit unter den Völkern”) and increase “understanding for the variety of forms of human life” (“das Verständnis für die mannigfachen Formen menschlichen Lebens”) by showing the commonalities between the world’s various peoples engaged in sports, labor, religious ceremonies, musical performance, household chores, etc.

Fig. 8 and 9 [Voir la liste des figures]

Stills from *Melodie der Welt* (Walter Ruttmann, 1929).

²³ Although a feature fiction film rather than a documentary, *La fin du monde* nonetheless includes numerous sequences of Ruttmannesque global montage, more often than not connected to the presence of broadcast technologies. In the longest surviving sequence of this sort, we see one of Martial’s assistants read off a telegram stating that the appearance of the comet has unleashed “des phénomènes étranges, dans toute la nature et dans toutes les parties du monde,” followed by a montage of clouds, seagulls, windswept trees, crowded squares, a priest announcing the catastrophe, a mosque with a singing Muezzin and kneeling worshippers, the Egyptian sphinx, African tribes cowering in fear, penguins amassing on the rocks, “Laplanders” racing on dogsleds, [40] crashing waves, agitated fish, a windy metropolis, blowing palm trees, etc.—all of it interspersed with shots of the comet in the sky. A glance at the film’s original screenplays, moreover, reveals that these remaining cross-sectional images represent only a small (and jumbled) fraction of the many thematic “world montage” sequences that Gance had planned to include in the film, including montages of world stock markets, observatories, forms of religious life, weapons manufacturers, animals and other salient motifs. [41]

Above all, he sought to include montage sequences of communications media spreading the news of the comet's impending impact around the earth: newspaper presses and vendors in Berlin, Paris, London and New York; [42] telephones and loudspeakers in Berlin, London, New York, Bombay and Petrograd; [43] and radio receivers in Russia, Italy, Spain, China, Turkey, England and India—all of them featuring a cacophony of languages. [44]

²⁴ Coming in the midst of a narrative film about an impending cataclysm, such cross-sectional sequences recall not only Ruttman, but also several projects for “global” films that Gance himself had conceived in the 1920s. At least since *J'accuse* (1919), Gance understood his filmmaking in large part as an answer to the ravages of World War I and sought (like Ruttman) to promote world peace by underscoring the commonalities between peoples. One of Gance's unrealized projects, which would have emphasized the underlying unity of the world's religions, [45] found its montage-equivalent in *La fin du monde* in the sequences comparing religious reactions to the comet around the world. Gance describes one such sequence in the screenplay significantly as a “simultanéisme de croyants”: “Renchainé sur simultanéisme de croyants : Flash de figures extasiées: Une croix—un chrétien. Un bouddha—un chinois. Un dieu fétiche—un nègre. Races différentes, dieux différents, mais la même foi, montrant que ce qui est encore le plus divin ce n'est pas Dieu, c'est la foi elle-même.” [46] Within the framework of the film's plot, this religious universalism is associated with a very specific political project: the creation of a multinational world government. Gance had, in fact, long been interested in the League of Nations. He made plans for films entitled *La Société des nations* and *Le Royaume de la terre*, [47] and he also wrote a letter to League's delegates proposing the creation of “La section cinématographique de la S.D.N.” which would assist the League's influence via the mass media of cinema and—significantly—radio. [48] Although none of these projects came to fruition, all of the themes show up centrally in *La fin du monde* in connection with the film's two heroes. Jean, as we learn in one scene, has penned a book entitled *Le Royaume de la terre*, and Martial's main mission—after Jean's breakdown—will be to found a “universal republic,” in direct opposition to the nationalism and war-mongering of Schomburg.

Video 4

Excerpt from *La fin du monde* (Abel Gance, 1931).

²⁵ Crucially, both Schomburg and Martial enlist broadcast media—newspaper, telegraph and above all radio—as the main weapons within their political struggle. Already in one of the earliest surviving descriptions of the film’s planned scenario from March 1929, Gance planned for the radio to stand at the centre of the film:

[L]a radiophonie jouera dans l’oeuvre un rôle extrêmement important. La Tour Eiffel, centre d’émission des nouvelles de Novalic, deviendra insensiblement une sorte de personnage synthétique, centre visuel du drame, et nous assisterons, dans chaque capitale, dans chaque petite ville, dans chaque hameau des coins les plus reculés du monde, aux réactions que l’annonce de la fin du monde peut provoquer. [49]

²⁶ Such a perspective, comparing various listeners from around the world, is clearly that of the Novalics’ internationalism. But the film in fact presents the radio, along with other simultaneous media, as the object of a struggle over competing imaginaries—one nationalist, the other internationalist—of political communities. After Jean’s demise, the story transforms into a veritable war of antennas, in which Schomburg broadcasts his nationalist message from the Eiffel Tower while Martial constructs a separate broadcasting facility—replete with telegrams, telephones, printing press and radio transmitters—to transmit his internationalist message and scramble the waves coming from the Eiffel Tower. The police eventually destroy Martial’s radio station at Schomburg’s behest, but Martial himself also resorts to guerilla warfare to bomb Schomburg’s installation in the Eiffel Tower (killing Schomburg and nearly killing Geneviève in the process). [50] Clearly, it is *radio* that holds the key to political power in *La fin du monde*, and it does so precisely in its capacity as a powerful broadcast medium with a nationwide and worldwide reach. [51]

²⁷ Within this configuration, Gance’s film rehearses all of the contradictions surrounding simultaneous broadcasting and politics that I outlined above. In his attempt to use radio to forge a

nationalist listenership, Schomburg must still contend with the inability to stop radio waves at the border; no matter how hard he tries to shut down Martial's operations, the latter still manages to get Jean's message to a world-wide audience and bring the presence of the world to the French airwaves. But Martial, for his part, still has to contend, as did early sound film generally, with the problem of linguistic barriers. Thus one of Gance's planned sequences, set at the height of the panic unleashed by the comet, was to convey the Babel-like cacophony of languages through an audio-visual collage of simultaneous voices:

Confusion cacophonique indescriptible. Hall d'un journal renchaine sur pavillon d'un haut parleur. Même confusion plus accentuée. Tour de Babel sonore. Toutes les langues se trouvent enchevêtrées dans un pot pourri incroyable par cette volubilité inutile qui s'annihile partout, partout. [52]

²⁸ As Gance knew well, there was only a thin line separating the heroic *Société des Nations* that radio was supposed to help construct from this cacophony of confused voices. [53]

²⁹ Gance's film was thus an exploration of the political power of simultaneous broadcast, which finds several emblems in the film. First, there is the obvious figure of the antenna, represented paradigmatically by the iron structure of the Eiffel tower. In one sequence we see the Eiffel tower surrounded by spinning radio waves and superimposed over various geographical locations as a radio announcer cries out "32 heures à vivre!" on the soundtrack. Like the strange metal architecture of the Martians in *Aelita* or Tatlin's famous tower (itself crowned by a radio transmitter), the Eiffel Tower appears in *La Fin du monde* essentially as a giant antenna, paradigmatically embodying the power of electromagnetic wave transmission to make and unmake political communities.

Video 5

Excerpt from *La fin du monde*.

But the radio's ability to bind distant locales simultaneously is also associated, in the film, with another, less obvious instrument: the telescope. It is Martial, the scientist, who first identifies the comet when looking through his telescope in his observatory, and the film will repeatedly emphasize his ability to observe the activity of heavenly bodies over great distances. Moreover, the battle between Martial and Schomburg for the radio is foreshadowed by a battle over telescopes, when Schomburg promises Geneviève's father early in the film that he will build a "plus belle observatoire que celui de Martial." Beyond introducing the rivalry between Schombrug and Martial for Geneviève, this plot device serves above all to introduce their rivalry over the command of simultaneous technologies. Like the telescope in *Aelita*, with its ambiguous status as a television broadcast device, the telescopes in *La fin du monde* embody the power of technology to overcome space and perceive distant locals in real time: the power of *tele*-vision and *tele*-audition. [54]

Fig. 10 [Voir la liste des figures]

La fin du monde production still (1930).

© L'écran d'art

³¹ Finally, simultaneous broadcast is visualized in *La fin du monde* in the figure of the comet itself. Within the film's plot, it is only the threat of a global catastrophe that makes the establishment of a world community possible. Jean asserts early in the film that certain epochs necessitate a veritable "cataclysm" in order to reform humanity as a whole, and Martial never ceases to repeat that nationalist conflicts will melt away as soon as people learn of the impending global cataclysm. [55] That visibility, moreover, is precisely what vouches for the simultaneity of the events shown in Gance's global montage. Recurring throughout these montage sequences like a leitmotif, the image of the comet on the sky, presumably visible from all points of the earth, functions to bind the figures shown diegetically into a world community, existing self-consciously beneath the comet's shadow. More than the agent of destruction, Gance's comet serves to facilitate a simultaneous global

reception. It thus stands as a metaphor for broadcast media in their capacity to forge a worldwide public aware of their commonalities.

Fig. 11 [\[Voir la liste des figures\]](#)

Still image from *La fin du monde*.

³² The opposition between the nationalist and internationalist uses of such technologies in *La Fin du monde* would appear to govern a series of other structuring oppositions in the film, including not only war and peace, but also the more abstract themes of decline and renewal, materialism and idealism, and the profane and the sacred. Again and again, the film depicts Jean and Martial Novalic as cultural reformers fighting to restore “idealism” [\[56\]](#) in place of material values and overcome the “decadence” [\[57\]](#) embodied by the figure of Schomburg and his insistence on war and profiteering. Above all, the heroes are associated with the restoration of a sacred dimension, not only in the montages of world religions, but also in a pervasive Christian allegory. Like Freder in Fritz Lang’s

Metropolis, Jean is constantly likened to the figure of Christ; the film begins with a scene of a passion play in which Jean plays the role of Jesus, and his subsequent loss of reason is presented as a form of martyrdom for the cause of internationality. But Jean is also referred to as a “prophet”; he is the first one to foresee the cataclysmic events, and he clearly resembles his namesake, the biblical St. Jean, in his visions—here again recalling *Metropolis*—of the apocalyptic end of the world. [58]

Fig. 12 [Voir la liste des figures]

La fin du monde production still (1930).

© L'écran d'art

³³ After Jean's mental demise, this apocalyptic dimension will come to the fore as the world's inhabitants—again fulfilling Jean's prophecy—appear divided into two camps. [59] One side, represented by the religious figures and the delegates to the new world government, responds to the threat of the comet with penitence and reverence. The other, represented paradigmatically by the visitors to an aristocratic ball, attempts to forget itself in Dionysian revelry. [60] This apocalyptic logic finds its culmination at the end of the film when, despite the fact that the comet ends up missing

the earth, the revelers all perish, while the reverent and penitent members of humanity survive to form the new world government. Thus while Flammarion's comet was the object of a detailed scientific representation, Gance's comet leaves the terrain of science for that of religion: like the angel of the apocalypse, the comet functions to "cleanse" modernity of its (nationalist) sins.

Fig. 13 [Voir la liste des figures]

La fin du monde production still (1930).

© L'écran d'art

³⁴ This apocalyptic logic also extends to the representation of tele-technologies when Gance represents Martial and Schomburg's fight for control of the airwaves as a veritable battle of good and evil. In the screenplay, Schomburg is repeatedly compared to Satan. In one sequence that never made it into the final film, Martial has a vision of Schomburg, the Eiffel Tower and Satan rolled into one:

[Martial] regarde La Tour Eiffel au loin avec haine. Il la voit peu à peu s'envelopper de brumes rouges, un énorme brasier à sa base, Paris qui brûle, et l'ombre de la Tour dans le ciel rouge devient un gigantesque Schomburg, véritable Satan, qui semble parler à l'oreille de la cathédrale de fer. Des milliers de mains sortant du brasier applaudissent à la base de la Tour les paroles du Prince des Ténébres. [61]

³⁵ Clearly the masses in Martial's vision represent the masses of Schomburg's listeners, absorbing his message of war broadcast from the Eiffel Tower. Martial, on the other hand, in his use of tele-technologies to broadcast Jean's words, is likened to a kind of church father, sending his disciples—an international and multilingual team called the "Conseil des Dix" in Gance's screenplay—into the world to spread Jean's message via radio: "Les Dix, sur les instructions de Martial, s'étaient emparés sans coup férir de tous les grands postes d'émission du monde, et tandis que la Tour leur distribuait secrètement la marche à suivre, il dirigeait l'opinion dans l'esprit de Jean Novalic." [62] Thus the *poste de radio* becomes, quite literally, the object of an apocalyptic battle: a tool for satanic temptation, but also for spreading the "good news" of the new internationalism.

³⁶ At this point, we can come back to the question raised at the outset of this article and ask how *film* fits into Gance's representation of tele-technologies. How does Gance attempt to position his own medium with respect to the new configuration of simultaneous broadcasting that it thematizes? One hypothesis might be that, given the power attributed to tele-technologies, film—understood as a storage medium—appears as a thing of the past. We do, in fact, find representations of film and other storage media in *La fin du monde*, and all of them are associated squarely with the sickly figure of Jean Novalic. Not only is Jean presented as an author, but he also elects, upon learning of his impending demise, to make a series of mechanical inscriptions of his image and voice both for his loved ones and for the future international government. Indeed, although this is not entirely clear in the surviving print of *La fin du monde*, what Jean prepares for his family and friends is in fact a series of *sound films*. The screenplay describes lengthy sequences of Jean visiting a sound film studio and literally pouring the last forces of his soul into the wax of the record and the celluloid of the filmstrip. [63] Later, Jean will offer up these medial inscriptions to his brother, his mother and Geneviève in order to aid and console them after his disappearance:

“Si tu as besoin de mes écrits...” Flash—Il montre ses livres. Titre : “Si tu as besoin de mes paroles...” Flash—Il montre ses disques de phonographe que Martial regarde étonné. Titre : “Si tu as besoin de mon image...” Flash—Il montre des films. Martial déroule quelques mètres de films et reste saisi de voir que, souci émouvant, Jean a prévu ainsi son action par delà la mort même. Jean ajoute : Titre—“La mort ou la folie ne prendra plus en moi qu’un corps vide de sa lumière. Avec tout ceci je vais rester vivant parmi vous.” [64]

³⁷ Associated as it is with the demise of the artist and the passing of the torch to the scientist and radio operator Martial, the cinema might thus appear, in *La Fin du monde*, as a remnant of bygone era, of more lyrical times destined to give way before the brave new world of tele-technologies and political struggles.

³⁸ But things are not quite so simple. For Jean’s recordings themselves play a crucial role in Martial’s battle. As Gance’s screenplay makes clear, Jean creates his sound films not only for his loved ones, but also—in multiple language versions—for Martial and his army in their battle for world government. [65] As we learn later, it is Jean’s films and records that the “Conseil des dix” will carry out to distribute to an international audience like the multi-version sound films of the day:

Martial donne à chacun d’eux des films et des disques. On peut lire, texte en toutes langues : Appel aux énergies espagnoles. Appel aux énergies anglo-saxonnes. On comprend que Novalic prophète a pensé à tous les peuples et qu’il s’est exprimé dans leur idiome directement, de façon à ce que son influence après sa mort puisse être internationale. [66]

³⁹ Like the word of God stored in the pages of a sacred book, Jean’s “immortalized” recordings continue to act after his death, spurring his followers on to create a universal government.

⁴⁰ Thus on closer examination, we find that storage media and tele-technologies, far from being opposed in the film, are—like the two brothers—allied with one another. But this alliance follows a rigid division of labor: where tele-technologies represent the principle modus of worldly power, it is storage media that guarantee the “spiritual” dimension. Jean’s use of storage media to “overcome death” was a familiar motif for audiences of the 1920s. As one writer described it in 1912:

The cinema and the gramophone represent the practical realization of the *mechanization of immortality*. What theology cannot persuasively teach us [...] technology brings to our senses in all of its visible, audible, and graspable reality. Once recorded, human speech and human song survive the speaker or the singer. Long after he has departed this life, he speaks to all future generations. [67]

⁴¹ Recording technology had thus long been associated with religious longings, and it is precisely this association that *La Fin du monde* seizes upon. It is these media of inscription that store Jean's prophecy for the future, and it is they that will allow him to rise, like Christ, after his death to fulfill that prophecy at a later date.

⁴² This dual temporal structure surrounding storage media differs decisively from the dream of presence associated with simultaneous broadcast. In the media discourses of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, storage media always seemed to point to either the past or the future. From the perspective of the sender, their appeal resided in their ability to record sounds or images for future spectators or listeners, thus preserving a trace of the present long after the speaker's demise. For the receiver, on the other hand, they pointed backwards in their power to recall (and, it was hoped, revive) the past through their indexical inscriptions. [68] In a similar manner, the Christ-like Jean in *La fin du monde* appears to exist exclusively *for other times*. While alive, he spends his time prophesizing the future and recording his likeness for future generations. After his death, his image and voice remain, like holy relics, as remnants from the past to be "revived" on future occasions.

⁴³ It is above all this double temporal structure that the film associates with the sacred. Like the monks who burst into the orgy towards the end of the film, Jean admonishes his listeners to be mindful of other times, to remember past sacrifices and work towards a future fulfillment. [69] Indeed, Jean's entire power resides precisely in his non-coincidence with the present, as can be seen in an epilogue that Gance had planned for the film (although it was ultimately cut from the shortened version). There, after the danger of the comet has receded, Jean regains his reason and returns home to rejoin his friends and family, only to find that he has come too late; as he arrives in his cell to greet Martial and Genevieve, he perceives the two of them in an embrace through the window and decides not to reveal

his presence. But this melodramatic “too late” is recuperated within a religious framework when Jean realizes, once again, that it is precisely his destiny to suffer in a very precise sense: i.e., *never to enjoy life in the present*. [70] And this spiritual discourse overlaps with storage media when Jean then wanders into an arena where he finds the masses watching the sound films that he had made from his prison cell:

Jean va bondir pour leur crier: « Je suis là, vivant. Je puis vous parler moi-même. Écoutez-moi... » mais il se retient. Leur apparaître. Pourquoi? Pour modifier peut-être l’admirable esprit que sa disparition leur laisse; s’il parle, il va tuer le mystère qui s’attache à son nom. Jean Novalic parle dans le film sonore. [71]

⁴⁴ Like Christ, Jean thus elects to remain absent, an image and voice without a body; for it is precisely this absence of the lost referent that guarantees the “mystère” that will continue to motivate the crowd’s newfound reverence. Only storage media, with their reference to an absent past and future, are capable of generating such a reverent disposition. Where these media pointed forward to a future fulfillment in earlier scenes, here—at the end of the film—they point back, like the relics of a saint, to a past worthy of commemoration. More than melodrama, Jean’s refusal to reveal himself—he disappears into the crowd as an anonymous beggar at the end of the film—serves precisely to guarantee the spiritual effect of temporal media, their ability to make audience’s mindful of past sacrifices and future fulfillments.

⁴⁵ Thus while Gance’s narrative of Jean’s demise might seem to suggest an allegory of the overcoming of cinema by broadcast media at the end of the 1920s, the tale of the two brothers in fact constructs a different argument: one for the alliance between broadcast media and the media of inscription, or more specifically an *informing* of one by the other. While simultaneous technologies figure as the agents of worldly power in their ability to overcome space, inscription technologies embody religious longings in their ability to carry the traces of another time. Where simultaneous media can gather the masses into a community of listeners or spectators, only storage media can encourage those recipients to remain mindful of past sacrifices and work towards future fulfillments

⁴⁶ It is *this* opposition—an opposition between forgetting and remembrance—that governs the

discourse on decadence and renewal in *La fin du monde*. In bringing the conflict to its (apocalyptic) conclusion, the approach of the comet also brings about the triumph of one form of simultaneity over another: the sacred simultaneity of a community informed by the “engraving” power of collective memory over forgetful simultaneity characterizing mass orgies and the operations stock market (that worldwide network of instantaneous monetary transactions). In this sense, *La fin du monde* functions less to depict the replacement of cinema by broadcast technologies than to call for a new kind of cinema that would combine—not unlike Gance’s planned “Section cinématographique de la S.D.N.”—the two potentials: the worldly power of geographical broadcast informed by the sacred and prophetic time of storage media. Only such an alliance between the “new” technologies of broadcast and the “old” technology of inscription could guarantee the “sacred law” pronounced by Martial at the end of the film: a law that binds together the world community of nations in remembrance of past wars and a prophecy of future peace.

Note biographique

Michael Cowan is Reader in Film Studies at St Andrews University. His work on film history has been published widely in journals such as *Screen*, *October* and *Art History*. His latest book, *Walter Ruttmann and the Cinema of Multiplicity* (2014), was the winner of the 2014 Willy Haas Award for the best book on German film, a runner-up for the BAFTSS book award, and a finalist for the Kraszna-Krausz award.

Notes

[1] Tom Gunning, “Heard over the Phone: *The Lonely Villa* and the De Lorde Tradition of the Terrors of Technology,” *Screen*, vol. 32, n° 2, 1991, p. 184-196. The author refers especially to p. 187.

[2] Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 2001, p. 205-212.

[3] William Urricchio, “Storage, Simultaneity, and the Media Technologies of Modernity,” in John Fullerton and Jan Olsson (eds.), *Allegories of Communication. Intermedial Concerns from Cinema*

to the Digital, Eastleigh, John Libbey Publishing, 2004, p. 123-138. The author refers especially to p. 125-127.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 135.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 127-130.

[6] On the Méliès film, see Trond Lundemo, “The Dissected Image: The Movement of the Video,” in John Fullerton and Jan Olsson (eds.), *Allegories of Communication. Intermedial Concerns from Cinema to the Digital*, Eastleigh, John Libbey Publishing, 2004, p. 110.

[7] See Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2003, p. 14.

[8] A similar motif occurs toward the beginning of Maurice Elvey’s *High Treason* (1929), where the shot of a giant radio tower emitting animated circular waves also contains a speeding airplane (and the image of the tower is followed by a scene of London now brimming with high-speed air travel). I am grateful to Paul Dobryden for pointing me to the image in *Spione*.

[9] As one German radio theorist would later put it: “Als eines der hervorstechendsten Merkmale des Rundfunks stellte sich seine Grenzenlosigkeit heraus. Ursprünglich waren die Sendungen des Rundfunks jedoch rein national abgestimmt. [...] Unter dem Einfluß der Kurzwellenentwicklung kann dieser Rundfunkraum heute selbst interkontinentale Ausmaße haben [One of the most prominent characteristics of radio turned out to be its boundlessness. The first radio broadcasts were, however, organized according to strict national boundaries. [...] Today, with the development of short wave, the reach of radio can attain intercontinental dimensions”]. Gerhart Eckert, *Der Rundfunk als Führungsmittel*, Heidelberg, K. Vowinckel, 1941, p. 250. My translation.

[10] France had established an empire-wide radio network by 1925, and Great Britain would two years later with a shortwave network linking the BBC to its entire empire. See Daniel R. Headrick, *The Invisible Weapon. Telecommunications and International Politics 1851-1945*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 187, 204.

[11] Thus in the latter film, just after the shot of the iconic radio tower, we see a world map with dots scattered across the continents and a title reading: “Secret forces are driving the great continents into war as surely as they did in 1914.” The film will repeatedly return to the shady meeting room of these “secret forces,” who seem to exist nowhere and act on all continents.

[12] Françoise Denoyelle, *La lumière de Paris: Les usages de la photographie 1919-1939*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 1997, p. 55.

[13] See Uli Jung and Wolfgang Mühl-Benninghaus, “Wochenschau als Propagandamedium,” in Uli Jung and Martin Loiperdinger (eds.), *Geschichte des dokumentarischen Films in Deutschland*, vol. 1, *Kaiserreich*, Stuttgart, Reclam, 2005, p. 397-406.

[14] See Frederic J. Schwartz, “The Eye of the Expert: Walter Benjamin and the Avant Garde,” *Art History*, vol. 24, n° 3, June 2001), p. 401-444.

[15] Interestingly, Nazi television theorists would later attempt to reverse this association by insisting on realigning television spectatorship with “disinterested” aesthetics. See Laura Heins, “The ‘Experiential Community’: Early German Television and Media Theory,” *Screen*, vol. 52, n° 1, spring 2011), p. 58-59.

[16] Dziga Vertov, “The Essence of Kino-Eye,” in Annette Michelson (ed.), *Kino-Eye. The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984, p. 49-50.

[17] Willi Münzenberg, *Erobert den Film! Winke aus der Praxis für die Praxis proletarischer Filmpropaganda*, Berlin, Neuer Deutscher Verlag, 1925).

[18] Benedict Andersen, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London, Verso, 1983, p. 35.

[19] “Each communicant,” Anderson explained, “is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others,” *ibid.*

[20] “Zum ersten Male in Deutschland haben am ersten Weihnachtsfeiertage Reichskanzler und

Parteiführer drahtlos eine Weihnachtsbotschaft an alle Deutschen gerichtet.” “Die Weihnachtsfunkrede des Reichskanzlers,” *Der deutsche Rundfunk*, 1924, n° 1, p. 6. My translation. The article goes on to lament that the radio signal was not strong enough to be heard “in den entferntesten deutschen Orten und im Auslande.”

[21] Dziga Vertov, “First Steps,” [1931] in Annette Michelson (ed.), *Kino-Eye. The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984, p. 112.

[22] On the notion of media events, see Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz, *Media Events. The Live Broadcasting of History*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1992.

[23] “Niemals wäre es ohne Rundfunk möglich gewesen, eine ganze Nation von einem Willen her zu umfassen.” Eugen Hadamovsky, *Der Rundfunk im dienste der Volksführung*, coll. “Gestalten und Erscheinungen der politischen Publizistik,” vol. 1, Leipzig, Universitätsverlag von Robert Noske, 1934, p. 13. My translation.

[24] “Große Feierstunden der Nation, Tage der nationalsozialistischen Erhebung, Feiertage der Arbeit, Stunden des Gedenkens sollen durch den Rundfunk eine schicksalsverbundene Volksgemeinschaft schaffen und sichtbar machen, wenn zugleich in ganz Deutschlands Gauen die Millionen vor den Lautsprechern aufmarschiert sind.” *Ibid.*, p 22. My translation.

[25] See David Bathrick, “Making a National Family with the Radio: The Nazi *Wunschkonzert*,” *Modernism/Modernity*, vol. 4, n° 1, 1997, p. 115-127. The author refers especially to p. 119. Despite such fantasies of unifying the national body, however, the radio also posed a problem on account of its potential uncontrollability, i.e., its disregard for national borders. The Nazi theorist Gerhart Eckert thus outlined the various dangers of the radio for the national community when operators from one’s own country or from neighboring countries sent subversive messages to German listeners. See Eckert, 1941, p. 250-253. Little wonder, then, that new Volksempfänger receivers came with warnings about the illegality—in some cases a capital offense—of listening to foreign broadcasts.

[26] The second issue was Heinrich Zerkau, *Die kulturpolitische Sendung der deutschen Zeitung*, coll. “Gestalten und Erscheinungen der politischen Publizistik,” vol. 2, Leipzig,

Universitätsverlag von Robert Noske, 1934.

[27] Walther Günther, *Der Film als politisches Führungsmittel*, coll. "Gestalten und Erscheinungen der politischen Publizistik," vol. 3, Leipzig, Universitätsverlag von Robert Noske, 1934.

[28] Gernhard Menz, *Die Zeitschrift als Führungsmittel*, coll. "Gestalten und Erscheinungen der politischen Publizistik," vol. 4, Leipzig, Universitätsverlag von Robert Noske, 1935.

[29] "So enthält ein Waggon eine drahtlose Telegraphenstation, die aus allen Ländern Nachrichten empfängt. Es ist dadurch möglich, die Landbevölkerung ständig mit den Tagesereignissen auf dem Laufenden zu erhalten. In einem anderen Abteil des Zuges ist eine Zeitungsdruckerei untergebracht, deren Druckerpresse täglich eine Zeitung in einer Auflage von 15000 Exemplaren herstellen kann, so daß der betreffende Landesbezirk fortlaufend mit den aus Moskau eingehenden Nachrichten bedient werden kann." "Die Güterzugsreklame. Rußlands rollende Propaganda," *Seidels Reklame*, vol. 5, 1920, p. 339. My translation.

[30] "Man sieht da kommunistische Pfadfinder auf ihren Fahrten, Kinderversammlungen in Petersburg und ähnliches. Eine elektrische Kraftstation, Küchen und Speiseräume, ein Buchhändlerladen, ein Vorführungsraum von Grammophonen, die revolutionäre Lieder oder die Reden Trotskis und Lenins wiedergeben, vervollständigen die Inneneinrichtung des Zuges. [...] Ist der Zug dann in der Station eingelaufen, so beginnt sofort die Kinovorführung, die Verteilung der Zeitung, die auch unterwegs bereits herausgeworfen worden ist, und der Buchverkauf," *ibid.* My translation.

[31] See Jay P. Telotte, *A Distant Technology. Science Fiction Film and the Machine Age*, Hanover, Wesleyan University Press, 1999, p. 36-46.

[32] See for example Alan Larson Williams, *Republic of Images. A History of French Filmmaking*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1992, p. 163; James M. Welsh and Stephen Kramer, "Abel Gance's Accusation Against War," *Cinema Journal*, vol. 14, n° 3, 1975, p. 62-63; Felicia Miller Frank, "L'*Inhumaine*, *La fin du monde*: Modernist Utopias and Filmmaking Angels," *Modern Language Notes*, vol. 111, n° 5, 1996, p. 952.

- [33] *LA FIN DU MONDE* vue par Abel GANCE. *Miracle moderne en 3 parties écrit et exécuté par Abel GANCE*. Screenplay held at the Cinémathèque française. Gance B42, dossiers 110.2-110.8. Hereafter cited as *LA FIN DU MONDE* followed by dossier and page numbers from the manuscript.
- [34] The screenplay contains several directives such as the following: “Dépasser dix fois l’impression des triptyques de la tempête de Napoléon,” *LA FIN DU MONDE*, dossier 110.6, p. 56).
- [35] Gance explicitly saw the film as containing both an “drame individuel” revolving around the rivalry for Geneviève and a “tragédie collective” involving the competing visions of global politics. See *LA FIN DU MONDE*, dossier 110.4, p. 44.
- [36] See Malte Hagener, *Moving Forward, Looking Back*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2007, p. 153-154.
- [37] Gance also insisted to his head of publicity that Ruttmann should be listed as “mon collaborateur le plus important et le plus immédiat, et en marge de tous les autres.” Letter to Paul Magnenat, December 27, 1929. Document held at the Cinémathèque française, Gance B42, dossier 107.2.
- [38] See Markus Nornes, *Cinema Babel. Translating Global Cinema*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007, p. 123-155. The author refers especially to p. 132.
- [39] For an insightful reading of Ruttmann’s “global” montage, see Laurent Guido, “Le film comme ‘symphonie du monde’. L’universalité des gestes rythmiques dans *Mélodie der Welt* et sa réception française,” *Intermédialités*, n° 16, 2010, p. 105-128.
- [40] I use the term citationally. Gance’s screenplay is very specific about the different ethnographic groups who should appear throughout the film, including what he dubs, in the language of the time, “lapons” (*LA FIN DU MONDE*, dossier 10.5, p. 47).
- [41] Most of these montage sequences consisted of found footage, which Gance sent his editors to collect. In one note to his chief editor Marguerite Beaugé, Gance wrote: “Trouvez-moi beaucoup plus de documentaires d’animaux et aussi davantage de morts de fleurs. Il y en a certainement d’autres. N’oubliez pas que je prendrai quelquefois 1 mètre ou même 0m.50 de ces scènes, ce qui veut dire

qu'il me faut une énorme diversité.” Document held at the *Cinémathèque française*, Gance B42, dossier 107.1.

[42] *Découpage* for *La fin du monde* (1929), document held at the Cinémathèque Française, Gance B42, dossier 109.2.

[43] *Ibid.*

[44] *Ibid.*

[45] See Miller Frank, 1996, p. 950-951.

[46] *LA FIN DU MONDE*, dossier 110.6, p. 54.

[47] Welsh and Kramer, 1975, p. 58.

[48] Miller Frank, 1996, p. 950.

[49] “Résumé de l’argument de l’oeuvre écrit par M. Abel Gance en 1912,” document held at the Cinémathèque Française. Gance B42, dossier 110.1.

[50] In the 1929 sceenplay, Geneviève is explicitly saved by a “miracle,” and she returns at the end of the film to live with Martial. See *LA FIN DU MONDE*, dossier 110.5, p. 43.

[51] In this context, Gance’s film might support Paul Virilio and Friedrich Kittler’s well-known arguments that the development of electronic media in the information age are catalyzed first and foremost by concerns of warfare rather than entertainment. It is striking how little interest Gance shows in conceiving radio as an entertainment medium. Rather, the film conceives radio almost entirely in terms of the capacity of electromagnetic waves to overcome space and coordinate global action (hence turning the entire earth into a battlefield), as well as efforts to disrupt the information channels of the enemy. Kittler and Virilio’s arguments on the links between warfare and media can be found in Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema. The Logistics of Perception*, London, Verso, 2009; Friedrich Kittler, *Optical Media: Berlin Lectures 1999*, Cambridge, Polity, 2010, p. 41-43.

[52] *LA FIN DU MONDE*, dossier 110.5, p. 47.

[53] Hence in his descriptions of the new government, Gance assiduously included an army of translators: “Il y a des délégations chinoise, russes, africaines, indiennes [...] Flash de types différents représentant ethnographiquement toute la flore humaine: des Mongols, des Patagons, des Esquimaux, des Nègres. *Service de traducteur devant les travées de chaque délégation. Des dactylos, des sténos* [...] Une Tour de Babel d’idées, de langages, d’éléments hétéroclites mais réunis la devant le danger immense,” *LA FIN DU MONDE*, dossier 110.6, p. 56-57, my italics. Far from offering an effortless transparency of communication or “universal language,” Martial’s “Society of Nations” can only be held together by a formidable bureaucracy of middlemen, translating between the Babelian cacophony of languages.

[54] This status of the telescope as a metaphor for televisual technologies in the 1920s is different from earlier scenarios in which the telescope and the microscope had served as reference points for new technologies in their occult capacity to “reveal” previously invisible worlds. See Tom Gunning, “Invisible worlds, Visible Media,” in Corey Keller (ed.), *Brought to Light*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2008, p. 60-61.

[55] Indeed, in the earlier scenario for the film mentioned above, in which there was only to be one hero named Novalic, Novalic actually *invents* the story of the comet precisely in order to rally humanity towards a global perspective. See “Résumé de l’argument de l’oeuvre écrit par M. Abel Gance en 1912,” dossier 110.1.

[56] Early on, Martial states to Jean : “Les gens veulent de l’argent, du luxe, du bien-être à tout prix, pas d’idéalisme. Ils s’en foutent.”

[57] The term “decadence” is used several times in the manuscripts and the film. In his plot summary from March 1929, Gance associates the term—and Novalic’s plot to overcome decadence—with Nietzsche and the theme of nihilism. See “Résumé de l’argument de l’oeuvre écrit par M. Abel Gance en 1912,” dossier 110.1.

[58] See for example *LA FIN DU MONDE*, dossier 110.5, p. 45; dossier 110.7, p. 62.

[59] *LA FIN DU MONDE*, dossier 110.6, p. 54.

[60] Reminiscent of Josephine's ball in *Napoléon*, the ball in *La fin du monde*, organized by a certain Prince Izard, is coded as a space of sexual excess: half-nude women and couples writhing on the ground, filmed with an increasingly unchained camera as the festivities degenerate into orgiastic licentiousness. Gance described the sequence in the screenplay as follows: "Costumes très déshabillés; beaucoup de nus sous les voiles. Licence piquante. On ne se connaît pas mais tout de suite on s'embrasse. Les jambes nues des femmes sont magnifiques. Victuailles sur les tables. Vins. Parfums qu'on vaporise [...]. On devine d'un coup d'oeil que le besoin de jouir et d'oublier a réuni là les femmes les plus jolies, les hommes les plus distingués mais les plus corrompus, pour trouver dans ces deux dernières nuits la mort la plus exquise qui soit," *LA FIN DU MONDE*, dossier 110.6, p. 52.

[61] *LA FIN DU MONDE*, dossier 10.5, p. 39.

[62] *LA FIN DU MONDE*, dossier 10.6, p. 48-49.

[63] "Il n'y a plus qu'un pauvre homme vide de son radium qu'il vient d'inscrire sur la pellicule et dans le disque et qui est sur le point de s'évanouir." *LA FIN DU MONDE*, dossier 110.3, p. 18.

[64] *LA FIN DU MONDE*, dossier 110.3, p. 22.

[65] See *LA FIN DU MONDE*, dossier 110.4, p. 25: "Flash de disques différents. On lit sur le centre de l'un d'eux : Texte—Pour Martial. Sur un autre: Texte—Préparation des États-généraux de la Convention Universelle. Sur un autre: Texte—Pour ma mère. Sur un autre: Texte (en anglais)—À mes frères anglo-saxons. Sur un autre: Texte (en russe)—À mes frères slaves. Sur un autre: texte (en hindoustan)—À mes frère hindous. On voit par le nombre de disques et de films enregistrés que Novalic profitant de ses connaissances encyclopédiques gigantesques a préparé la Parole pour tous les milieux, tous les esprits, pour tous les peuples. »

[66] *LA FIN DU MONDE*, dossier 110.4, p. 35.

[67] Joseph Landau, "Mechanisierte Unsterblichkeit," *Der deutsche Kaiser im Film*, Berlin, Verlag

Paul Klebinder, 1912, p. 18. My translation.

[68] Numerous were the reflections such as the following from Landau: “to think that if the cinema and the phonograph had existed earlier, Schröder-Devrient, Catalani, Henriette Sontag, Döring, Devrient, Dessoir, Dawison, Haase, Marie Seebach and Niemann Raabe could have lived not only for their time, but for all times,” *ibid.* My translation.

[69] In a direct reference to recording technologies, he tells Geneviève: “Grave bien en toi mes paroles, Geneviève.” *LA FIN DU MONDE*, dossier 10.3, p. 24. And such a mindful “engraving” stands in opposition to the presentism of Izard’s orgies, of the stock market and—at least provisionally—of broadcasting media.

[70] On the temporal structure of melodrama defined by the “too late,” see Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess,” *Film Quarterly*, vol. 44, n° 4, 1991, p. 11.

[71] *LA FIN DU MONDE*, dossier 110.7, p. 67.

Liste des figures

EDISON'S TELEPHONOSCOPE (TRANSMITS LIGHT AS WELL AS SOUND).

(Every evening, before going to bed, Peter and Peterkin sit up on electric chairs observing over their bedroom mantel-piece, and gladden their eyes with the sight of their children at the Antipodes, and converse gaily with them through the wire.)

Telephonician (in Wilton Place). "BEATRICE, COME CLOSER, I WANT TO WHISPER." Beatrice (from Ceylon). "YEE, PAPA HEAR."

Telephonician. "WHO IS THAT CHARMING YOUNG LADY PLAYING ON CHARLIE'S SIDE?" Beatrice (from Ceylon). "YEE, PAPA HEAR."

Beatrice. "SHE'S JUST COME OVER FROM ENGLAND, PAPA. I'LL INTRODUCE YOU TO HER AS SOON AS THE GAME'S OVER!"

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