

“No imagination without innervation”. Benjamin on Technology and Imagination

Martin Ritter

Institute of Philosophy,
Czech Academy of Sciences

Department of Philosophy,
University of Vienna



EUROPEAN UNION
European Structural and Investment Funds
Operational Programme Research,
Development and Education



MINISTRY OF EDUCATION,
YOUTH AND SPORTS



Film empowers people through reorganizing their (ap)perception

- 1) enables to deconstruct what seems natural in society and to reveal/construct its new nature
- 2) helps to acquire new sensibility, a new way of perceiving

Film empowers people to experience in a historically appropriate way

How does film realize the task?



Structure of presentation

1 Change in the medium of perception

2 Training the senses and the optical unconscious

3 Transformation of apperception



1

Change in the medium
of perception





Transformed experience calls for transformed art

“Whereas Poe's passers-by cast glances in all directions, seemingly without cause, today's pedestrians are obliged to look about them so that they can be aware of traffic signals. Thus, technology has subjected the human sensorium to a complex kind of training. There came a day when a new and urgent need for stimuli was met by film. In a film, perception conditioned by shock [chockformige Wahrnehmung] was established as a formal principle. What determines the rhythm of production on a conveyor belt is the same thing that underlies the rhythm of reception in the film.”

“Change in the structure of experience”:
Erfahrung replaced by *Erlebnisse*, or Chockerlebnise

“How lyric poetry can be grounded in experience for which exposure to shock [Chockerlebnis] has become the norm”





Transformed medium of experience calls for new artmedium

“[t]he way in which human perception is organized – the medium in which it occurs – is conditioned not only by nature but by history”

Focus not on the experiencing subject

Not only the world has changed: **the medium of our experiencing** of it, the very “mechanism” of how perception takes place, has changed

The new medium of film corresponds to the new medium of perception since both are based on an apparatus

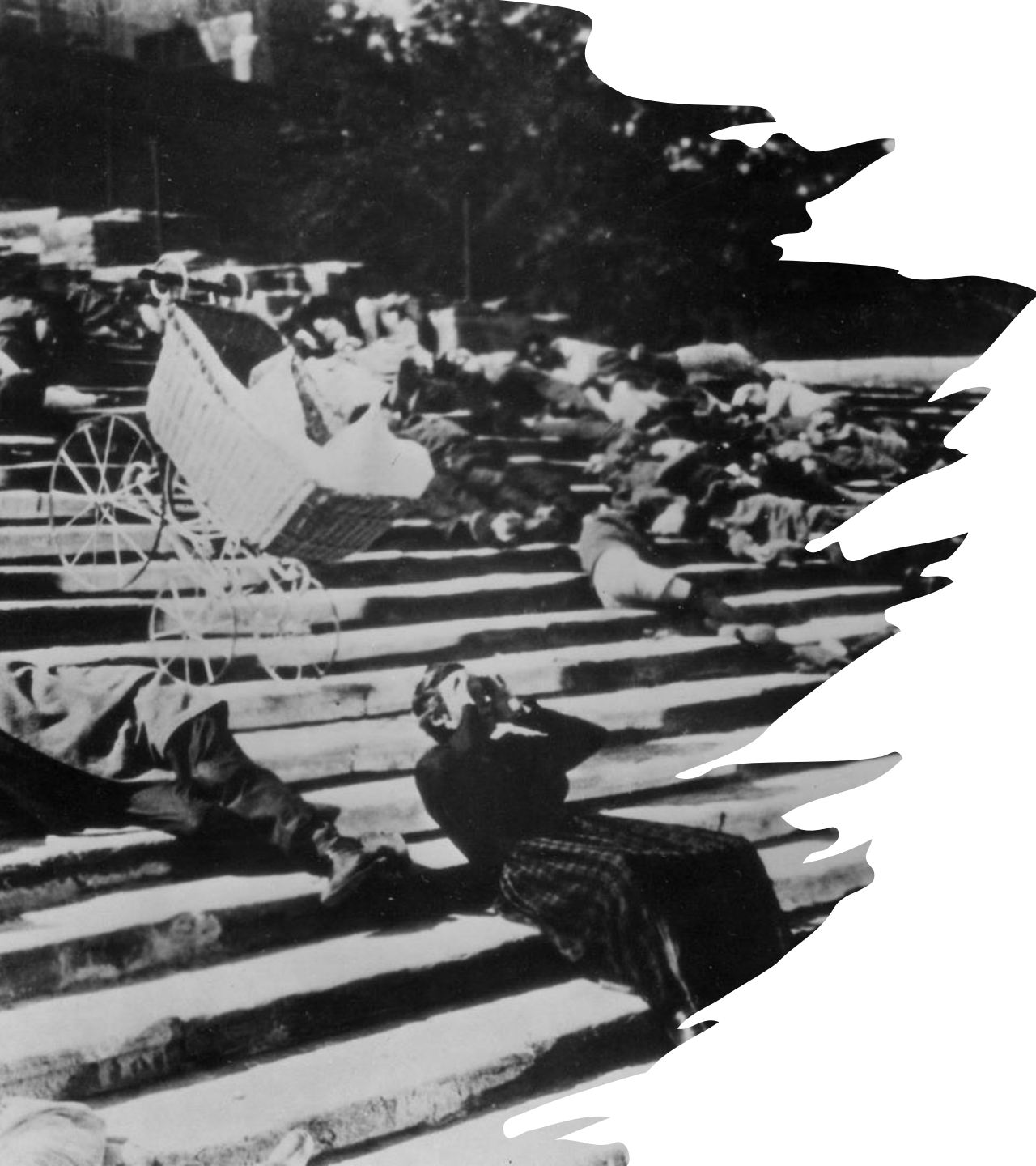
The apparatus is irreducible to machines



2

Training the senses and the optical unconscious





Film trains senses by both how and what it presents

“The function of film is to train human beings in the apperceptions and reactions needed to deal with a vast apparatus whose role in their lives is expanding almost daily”

The training neither merely by mechanical adaptation to the regime of machine nor merely by understanding the contents of film.

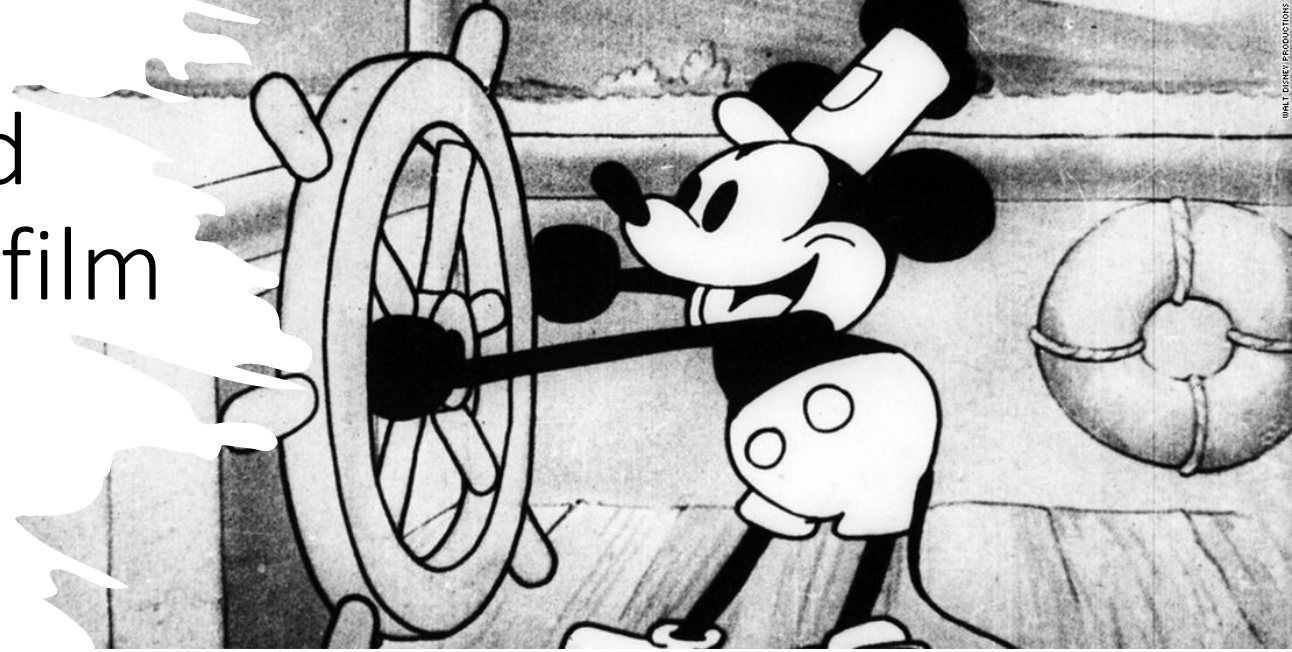
“Film is the prism in which the spaces of the immediate environment ... are laid open before their [i.e. people] eyes in a comprehensible, meaningful, and passionate way”.

A camera lens mediates the world: looking through this **prism**, we gain a different view of what we are looking at.



The optical unconscious and the therapeutic function of film

“It is another nature which speaks to the camera as compared to the eye. ‘Other’ above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious”.



“The dangerous tensions which technology and its consequences have engendered in the masses”
are met “by means of certain films in which the forced development of sadistic fantasies or masochistic delusions can prevent their natural and dangerous maturation in the masses. Collective laughter is one such preemptive and healing outbreak of mass psychosis”.



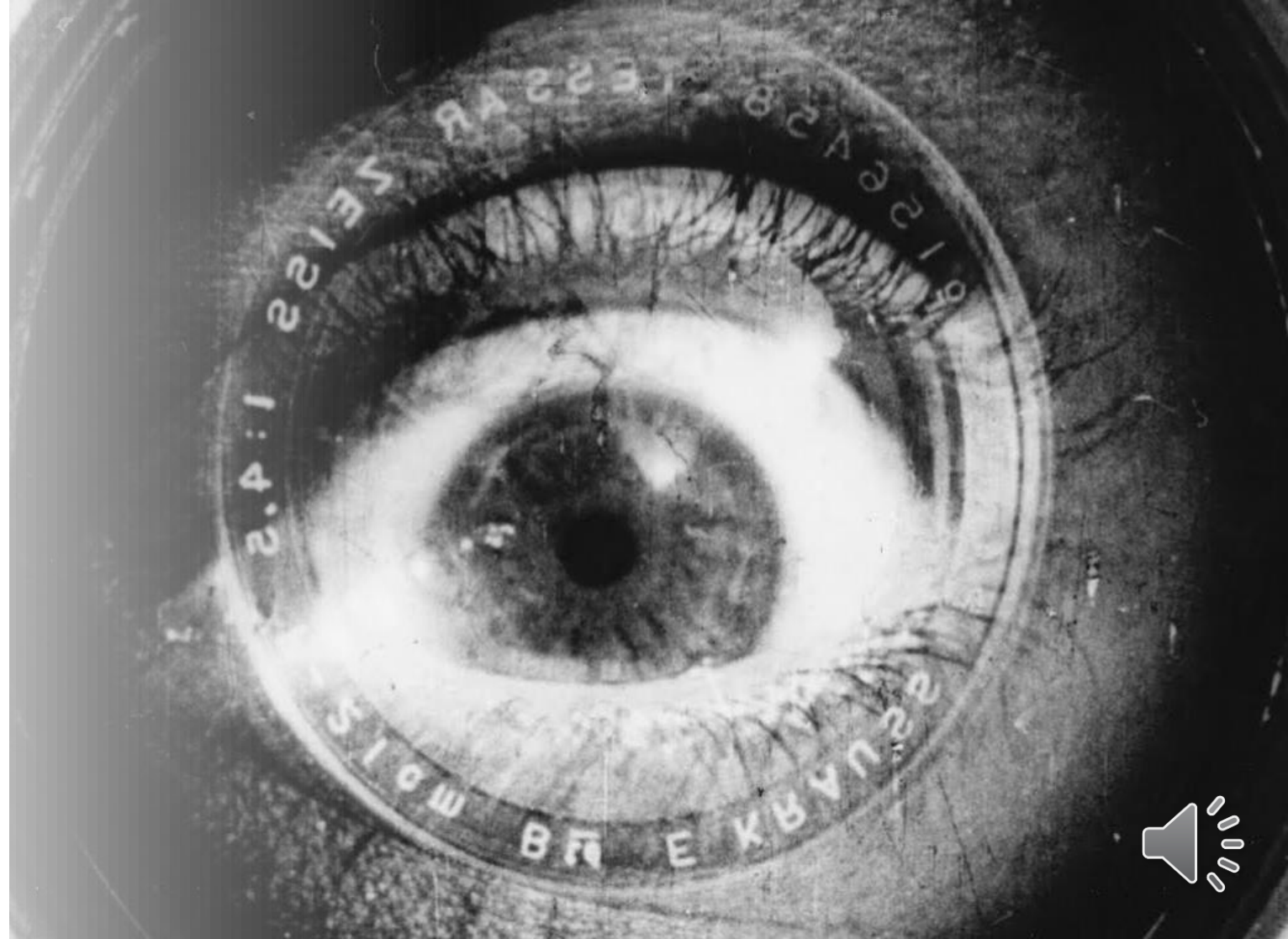
The optical unconscious reveals effective yet unexperienced parts/conditions of our perception

“We are familiar with the movement of picking up a cigarette lighter or a spoon, but know almost nothing of what really goes on between hand and metal, and still less how this varies with different moods. This is where the camera comes into play...”

The camera “comes into play” neither for venting of unconsciousness nor for broadening of our perceptions but for making our perceiving “healthy”.

Film trains our senses not merely by shocking us but **by making accessible the area where the shocks are produced** and undoing their traumatic effect.

A sort of communication between the camera and the eye.



3

Transformation of apperception



Film trains in the medium of distraction

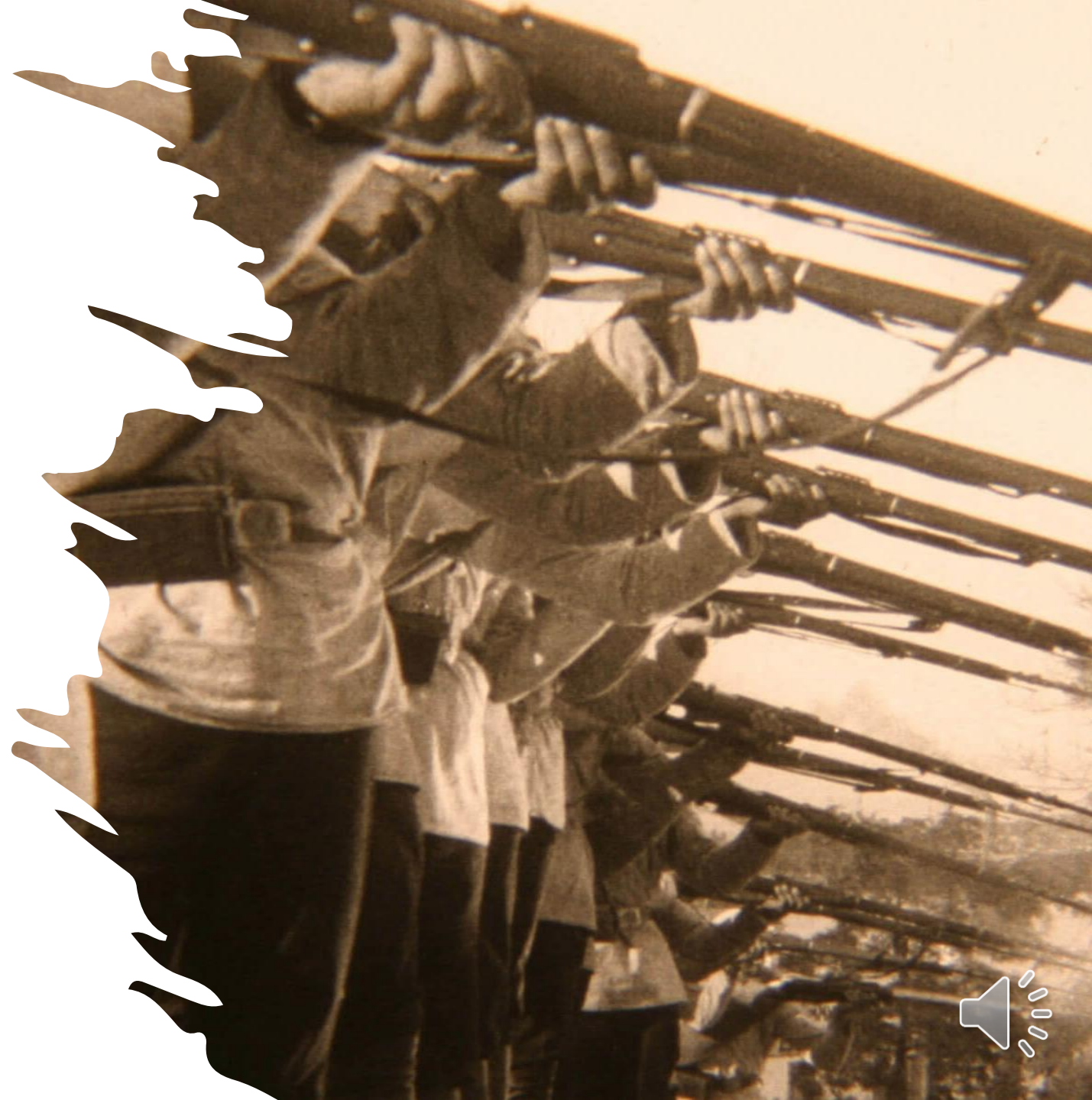
The change in the medium of perception cannot be met by a conscious effort of the subject but only (subconsciously) through the technology of camera.

The camera is able to notice that which remains invisible to the eye also because it does not concentrate on anything by itself.

The camera view itself is distracted just as the reception of a movie is distracted.

The powerfulness of film consists in its **haptic** distractivity.

Human senses are trained by this perceptual offensive.





Distracted attentivity

Spectators are distracted, not concentrated, yet attentive to the distracted regime of camera.


Film teaches our perceptive apparatus thanks to its/our being attentive to what film presents to us.

It is **not me who is trained** but the perceptive apparatus itself in its contribution to my conscious experience.

The viewers of film do not simply transfer the mechanistic functioning of the camera but *learn* to perceive otherwise, thus transforming their understanding.

Bodily learning/cognition.





How deep (and wide) must reach the transformation of apperception?

“new tasks of apperception” = making experience possible

Without apperception, there would be no unity of experience (Kant), or there would be no experience unless the perceived is included into the already achieved experience (Wundt).

Open questions

- 1) Must apperception be unitary?
- 2) Is it individual, or collective?



Conclusion: “organizing” technology

Training of the senses by film is as a precondition for innervating the technological apparatus of the whole society.

This training itself is based on innervation.

The bodily essence of the process: it is not enough to know technology, we have to feel it in our own bones.

Thanks to the camera we do not become machines but our cognizing bodies become able to function, i.e. to feel and perceive, organically.

Thanks for your attention!

