

Modernity, Hyperstimulus, and the Rise of Popular Sensationalism

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Of the many overlapping ideas implied by the term "modernity" (and leaving aside the host of adjacent meanings denoted by "modernism"), perhaps three have dominated contemporary thought. As a moral and political concept, modernity suggests the "ideological shelterlessness" of a postsacred, postfeudal world in which all norms and values are open to question. As a cognitive concept, modernity points to the emergence of instrumental rationality as the intellectual framework through which the world is perceived and constructed. As a socioeconomic concept, modernity designates an array of technological and social changes that took shape in the last two centuries and reached a kind of critical mass near the end of the nineteenth century: rapid industrialization, urbanization, and population growth; the proliferation of new technologies and transportations; the saturation of advanced capitalism; the explosion of a mass consumer culture; and so on.

With the recent interest in the social theories of Georg Simmel, Siegfried Kracauer, and Walter Benjamin, it has become clear that we are also dealing with a fourth major definition of modernity. These theorists focused on what might be called a *neurological* conception of modernity. They insisted that modernity must also be understood in terms of a fundamentally different register of subjective experience, characterized by the physical and perceptual shocks of the modern urban environment. In a sense, this argument is an offshoot of the socioeconomic conception of modernity, but rather than simply pointing to the range of technological, demographic, and economic changes of advanced capitalism, Simmel, Kracauer, and Benjamin stressed the ways in which these changes transformed the texture of experience. Modernity implied a phenomenal world—a specifi-

cally urban one—that was markedly quicker, more chaotic, fragmented, and disorienting than in previous phases of human culture. Amid the unprecedented turbulence of the big city's traffic, noise, billboards, street signs, jostling crowds, window displays, and advertisements, the individual faced a new intensity of sensory stimulation. The metropolis subjected the individual to a barrage of impressions, shocks, and jolts. The tempo of life also became more frenzied, sped up by new forms of rapid transportation, the pressing schedules of modern capitalism, and the ever-accelerating pace of the assembly line.

Modernity, in short, was conceived of as a barrage of *stimuli*. As Simmel put it in his 1903 essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life" (a crucial text for Kracauer and Benjamin), modernity involved an "intensification of nervous stimulation." Modernity transformed both the physiological and psychological foundations of subjective experience:

The rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impression: These are the psychological conditions which the metropolis creates. With each crossing of the street, with the tempo and multiplicity of economic, occupational and social life, the city sets up a deep contrast with small town and rural life with reference to the sensory foundations of psychic life.¹

Cities, of course, had always been busy, but they had never been nearly as busy as they became just before the turn of the century. The sudden increase in urban population (which in the U.S. more than quadrupled between 1870 and 1910), the escalation of commercial activity, the proliferation of signs, and the new density and complexity of street traffic (particularly with the major expansion of electric trolleys in the 1890s) made the city a much more crowded, chaotic, and stimulating environment than it had ever been in the past (fig. 3.1).² One need only look at early "actuality" footage of Manhattan, Berlin, London, or Paris—not to mention smaller cities such as Lyon, France, or Harrisburg, Pennsylvania—to be convinced of Simmel's assertion as an encapsulation if not of all aspects of modern experience than at least of a significant part of it.³

To place Kracauer and Benjamin's conceptions of modernity in context, we need to look both before and after the periods in which they formulated their ideas. On the one hand, it is apparent that their framing of modernity anticipates much of what contemporary theorists have described as the condition of *postmodernity*. A definition of postmodernity stressing its "immediacies, intensities, sensory overload, disorientation, the *melée* of signs and images" overlaps greatly with the neurological conception of modernity, whether or not the overlap is complete (fig. 3.2).⁴

Looking backwards, on the other hand, one is struck by the extent to which Kracauer and Benjamin were tapping into an already widespread



Fig. 3.1. New York, Times Square, 1909.

discourse about the shock of modernity. Social observers in the decades around the turn of the century were *fixated* on the idea that modernity had brought about a radical increase in nervous stimulation and bodily peril. This preoccupation can be found in every genre and class of social representation—from essays in academic journals to aesthetic manifestos (such as Marinetti's and Leger's) to middlebrow commentaries (such as the ubiquitous discussions of neurasthenia) and cartoons in the illustrated press (both in comic magazines such as *Puck*, *Punch*, *Judge*, and *Life*, and lowbrow sensational newspapers such as New York's *World* and *Journal*).⁵

Henry Adams's description of urban life, written in 1905, was typical of this broad discourse about the sensory upheavals of modernity:

Forces grasped his [modern man's] wrists and flung him about as though he had hold of a live wire. . . . Every day Nature violently revolted, causing so-called accidents with enormous destruction of property and life, while plainly laughing at man, who helplessly groaned and shrieked and shuddered, but never for a single instant could stop. The railways alone approached the car-



Fig. 3.2. New York, Fifth Avenue and 23rd Street, ca. 1900.

nage of war; automobiles and fire-arms ravaged society, until an earthquake became almost a nervous relaxation.⁶

A New York social reformer named Michael Davis coined an apt—and surprisingly mod—term to describe the new metropolitan environment (as well as the sensational amusements it cultivated, as I discuss later); modernity, he declared in 1910, was defined by “hyperstimulus.”⁷

The illustrated press offers a particularly rich trace of the culture's fixation on the sensory assaults of modernity. Comic magazines and sensational newspapers scrutinized the chaos of the modern environment with a dystopian alarmism that, in varying degrees, characterized much of the period's discourse on modern life. Many cartoons represented the new landscape of commercial solicitation as a type of horrific, aggressive stimulus (fig. 3.3). Others, portraying dense, chaotic mobs of pedestrians, keenly illustrated (fifty years in advance) Benjamin's suggestion that “fear, revulsion, and horror were the emotions which the big-city crowd aroused in those who first observed it” (fig. 3.4).⁸ A 1909 illustration in *Life* magazine entitled “New York City, Is It Worth It?” represented the metropolis as a frantic onslaught of sensory shocks (fig. 3.5). Its combination of multiple spacio-temporal perspectives in a single, instantaneous view (several years before Cubism) conveys the fractured perceptual intensity of urban experience.⁹



Fig. 3.3. "How We Advertise Now," *Punch*, 1887.



Fig. 3.4. "A Quiet Sunday in London; or, The Day of Rest," *Punch*, 1886.

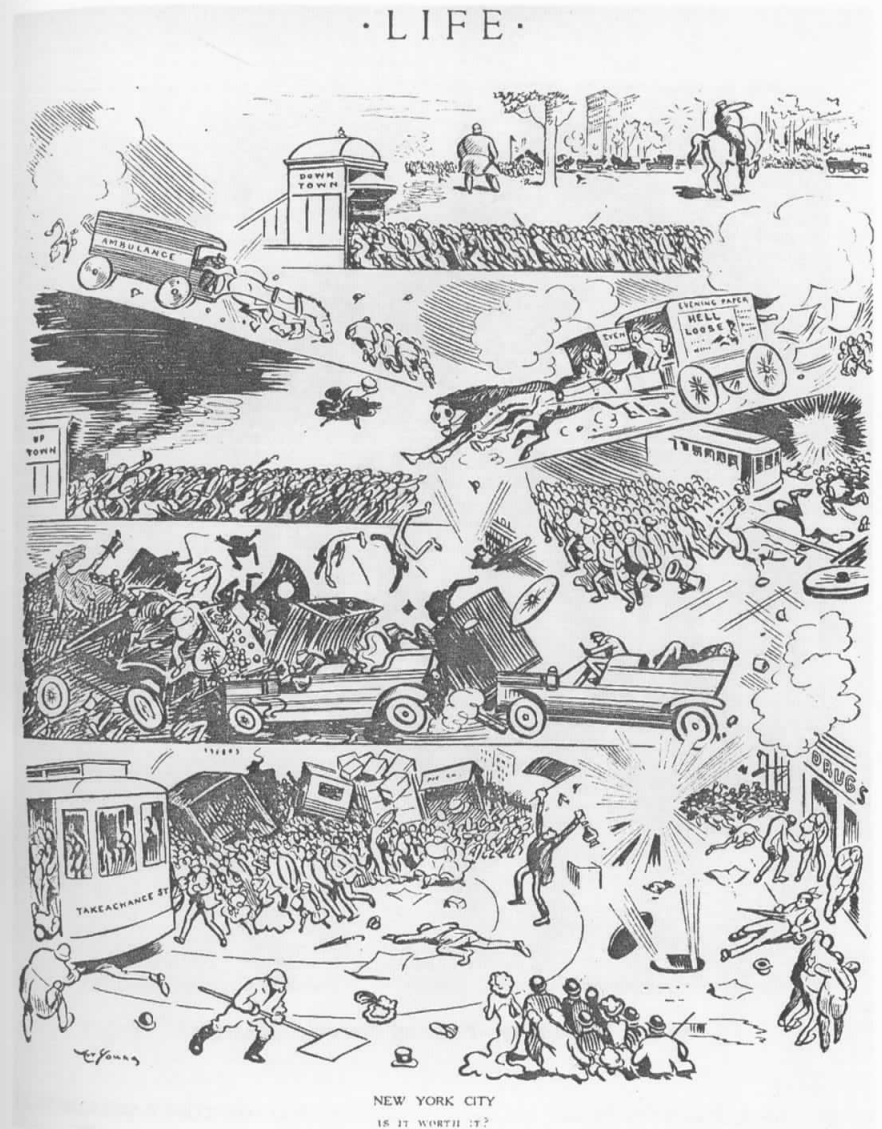


Fig. 3.5. "New York City: Is It Worth It?" *Life*, 1909.

A number of illustrations dealt specifically with the harsh transformation of experience from a premodern state of balance and poise to a modern crisis of discomposure and shock. A 1900 cartoon in *Life* entitled "Broadway—Past and Present," for example, contrasted a pastoral scene with a twentieth-century view of a trolley car bearing down on terrified



Fig. 3.6. "Broadway—Past and Present," *Life*, 1900.

pedestrians (fig. 3.6). In the background, billboards advertise a sensational newspaper called the *Whirl* and Sunday shows of boxing movies. The serenity of the "savage's" life in the past accentuated the true savagery of the metropolitan present. The collision between two orders of experience—premodern and modern—also figured in numerous images representing actual collisions between horse-drawn carts—the traditional mode of transportation—and their modern-day replacement, the electric trolley (fig. 3.7). Such pictures conveyed an anxiety about the perilousness of life in the modern city and also symbolized the kinds of nervous shocks and jolts to which the individual was subjected in the new urban environment.

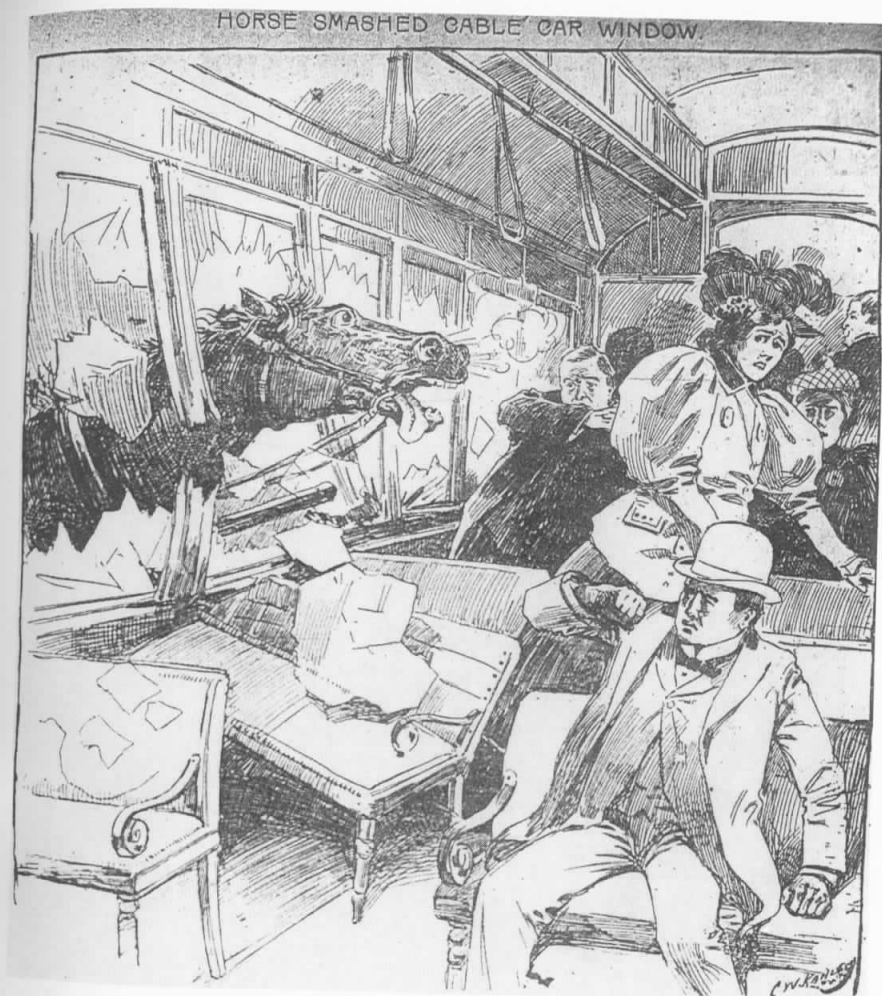


Fig. 3.7. "Horse Smashed Cable Car Window," *New York World*, 1897.

The dominant dystopic motif around the turn of the century highlighted the terrors of big-city traffic, particularly with respect to the hazards of the electric trolley (figs. 3.8, 3.9, 3.10). A plethora of images representing streams of injured pedestrians, piles of "massacred innocents," and perennially gleeful skeleton-figures personifying death focused on the new dangers of the technologized urban environment. Sensational newspapers had a particular fondness for "snapshot" images of pedestrian deaths. This fixation underscored the sense of a radically altered public sphere, one defined by chance, peril, and shocking impressions rather than by any traditional conception of safety, continuity, and self-controlled

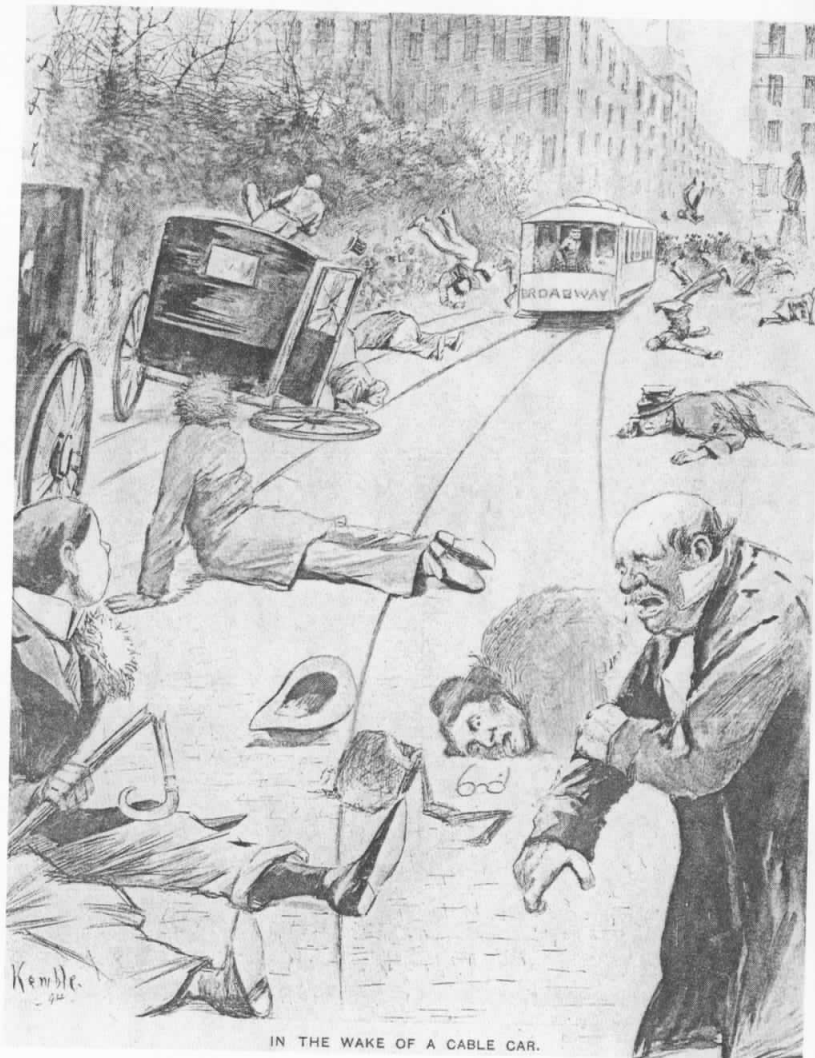


Fig. 3.8. "In the Wake of a Cable Car," *Life*, 1895.

THE STANDARD

Vol. XI—No. 90.

NEW YORK, MAY 4, 1895.



Price Ten Cents.



THE BROOKLYN HORROR!

The merciless trolley car has added another victim to its list of massacred innocents, and still runs on unchecked. Thousands of citizens have protested, and a united press has assailed the pitiless trolley monopoly without result. Even the Mayor is weak-kneed and weak-backed. The slaughter still goes on. What will Brooklyn do about it?

Fig. 3.9. "The Brooklyn Horror!" *The Standard*, 1895. The fine text reads: "The merciless trolley car has added another victim to its list of massacred innocents and still runs on unchecked. Thousands of citizens have protested and a united press has assailed the pitiless trolley monopoly without result. Even the Mayor is weak-kneed and weak-backed. The slaughter still goes on. What will Brooklyn do about it?"

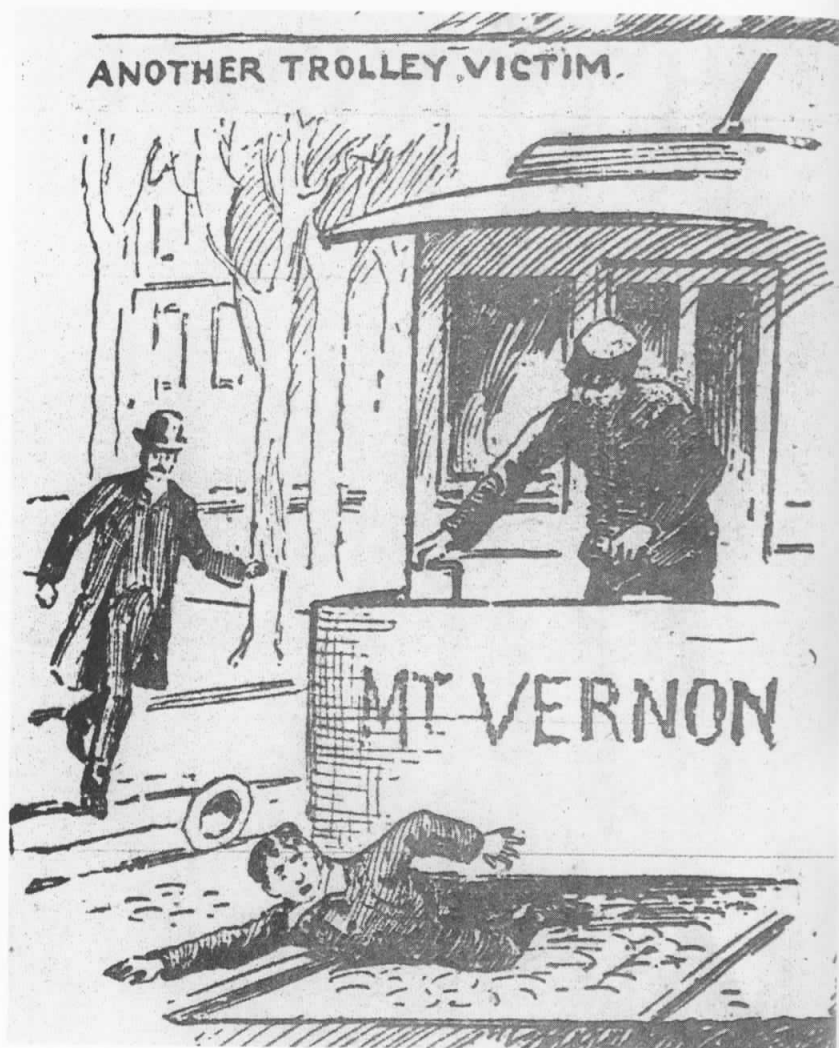


Fig. 3.10. "Another Trolley Victim," *New York World*, 1896.

destiny. Unnatural death, needless to say, had been a source of fear in pre-modern times as well (particularly with respect to epidemic, famine, and natural disasters), but the violence, suddenness, and randomness (and, in a sense, the humiliating publicity) of accidental death in the metropolis appear to have intensified and focalized this fear. The specter of Isaac Bartle infiltrated modern consciousness. As an 1894 article in the *Newark Daily Advertiser* reported:

Isaac Bartle, a prominent citizen of New Brunswick, was instantly killed at the Market street station of the Pennsylvania Railroad this morning. His body was so horribly mangled that the remains had to be gathered up with a shovel and taken away in a basket. . . . He was ground into an unrecognizable mass under the wheels of a heavy freight engine. The engine struck Mr. Bartle in the back and dragged him several yards along the track, mangling his body in a horrible manner. Almost every bone was broken, the flesh was torn away and distributed along the track, and so completely was the body torn apart that the coins and knife in the trousers pocket were bent or broken, and the checkbook, pocketbook, and papers were torn in pieces.¹⁰

There is no question that descriptions such as this were motivated in large part by the fact that grotesque sensationalism sold newspapers. But they were more than simple manifestations of morbid curiosity and economic opportunism. In its meticulous attention to the physical details of accidental death, the Isaac Bartle item seems to convey a historically specific hyperconsciousness of physical vulnerability in the modern environment.¹¹

The chaos of the city instilled life with a nervous edge, a palpable feeling of exposure to danger. As the *Outlook's* editor mentioned in 1900, "The Spectator is not unduly timorous, but he confesses that in these days of haste he often gets a little nervous in the city streets lest something may happen to somebody."¹² The modern city appears to have transformed subjective experience not only in terms of its visual and aural impact but also in terms of its visceral tensions, its anxious charges. Modern experience involved a constant triggering of reflex reactions and nervous impulses, flowing through the body, as Benjamin described it, "like the energy from a battery." It is telling that illustrations of accidents almost always employed a particular presentational schema: They were obliged, of course, to show the victim at the instant of most intense shock, just before death, but along with this they almost always showed a startled bystander looking on in horror, his or her body jolted into a reflex reaction. Such illustrations thus stressed not only the dangers of big city life but also its relentless nervous shocks.

The popular fear of trolley hazards did eventually subside. One sees a dropping off of this theme in the sensational press around 1903 and 1904. But just as the public apparently was getting used to trolley traffic, another peril—the automobile—followed on its heels and assumed an equivalent position as the central motif of modernity's dystopic imagination. The 1913 illustration "When Unlicensed Chauffeurs Are Abroad," among numerous others, portrayed a state of affairs in which, as Benjamin put it, "moving through traffic involves the individual in a series of shocks and collisions" (fig. 3.11).¹³ (Indeed, this image criticizes modernity on two fronts: overtly, it decries the hazards and jolts of modern traffic; implicitly, it casts aspersions on the expanded presence of women in the

public sphere. The picture presents a soon-to-be stereotypical image of women as bad drivers, and at the same time, in representing only female pedestrians, expresses a common paternalistic admonition about the vulnerability of unaccompanied women in the big city.)

Aside from traffic hazards, three other motifs that pervaded turn-of-the-century newspapers suggest the depth of the popular fixation on the new dangers of modern life. The first portrayed deaths of workers mangled by factory machinery. One can get a good idea of this motif from a few sample titles and subheadings from the *Newark Daily Advertiser* in 1894: "Whirled to Instant Death: His Body Caught in Rapidly Revolving Belts and Crushed Against the Ceiling At Every Revolution," and "Horrible Death of a Street-Cleaner: His Head Twisted Almost Off by a Sweeping Machine."¹⁴ This keen attention to graphic accidental death in the workplace, like the traffic-death stories, posed modern technology as a monstrous assault on life and limb. It stressed a hazardous dimension of modern life which, not coincidentally, was suffered most acutely by the working class that made up the sensational press's core readership.

Another motif, also focusing on modern working-class experience, concentrated on a broad variety of deaths relating to various hazards of tenement life—ranging from brutal attacks by crazed neighbors to deaths involving novel facets of tenement architecture (fig. 3.12). Newspaper stories in this genre sometimes underscored a sense that uncontrollable, almost supernatural dangers lurked everywhere in the urban environment. One item, for example, described the agonizing death of a little girl whose skull was pierced by a rusty steel rod. The account noted: "Where the rod came from, or how it received enough force to make the wound that it did is a mystery. The child was at play in the yard when the rod, propelled by an unseen force, crushed down through the branches of a cherry tree, penetrating the girl's skull. The little girl died in great agony this morning."¹⁵ In the modern environment, death could drop from the sky, inexplicably.

Falls from great heights also preoccupied sensational newspapers. At first, this genre may seem the most "purely" sensational (that is, having little to do with anxieties about modern life). But in several respects, such illustrations overlapped with the others. All of the deaths by falling, except for suicide leaps, were workplace accidents and thus conveyed a general sense of the perils of proletarian labor. Even the suicides can be read as implicit indictments of an intolerable modern life, especially since they often involved modern modes of transportation as the immediate agents of physical obliteration (such as illustrations showing a man plunging from a building onto the tracks of an oncoming train). Some of these falls also underscored the tyranny of chance in the modern environment and

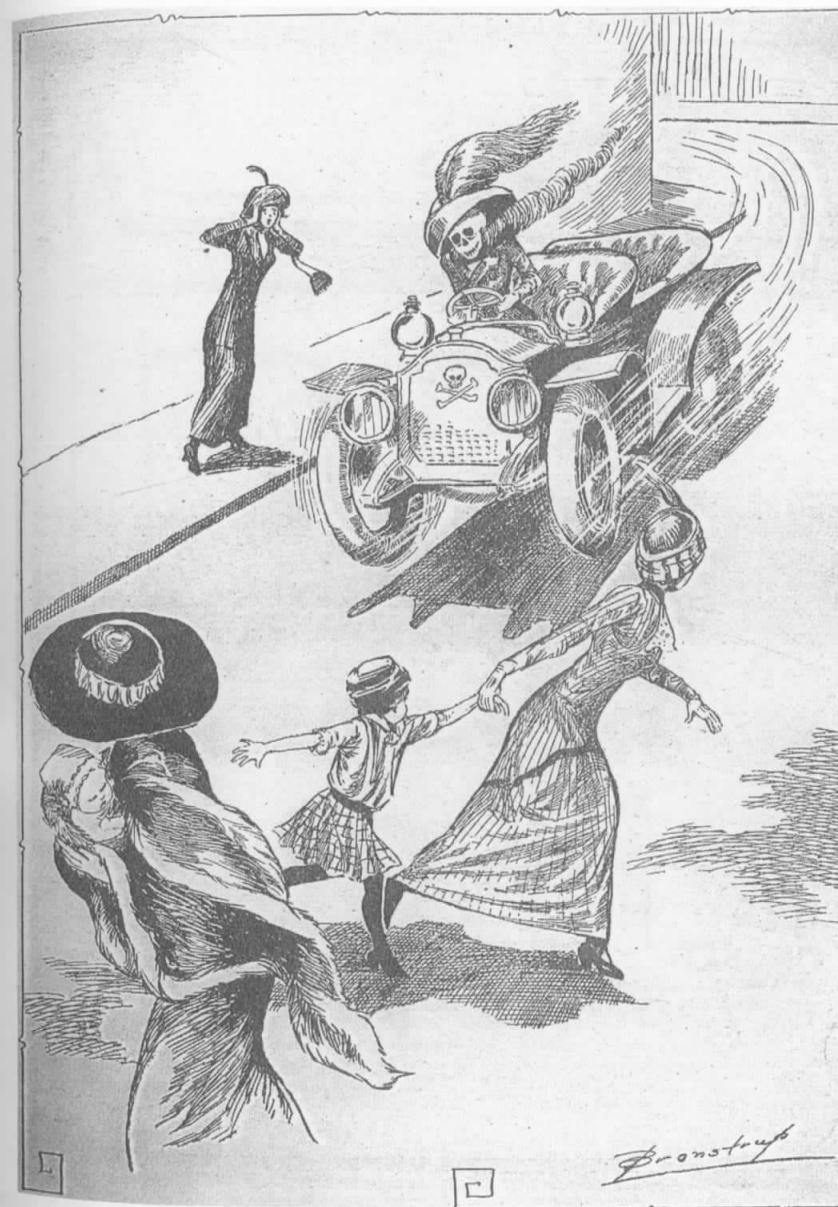


Fig. 3.11. "When Unlicensed Chauffeurs Are Abroad," *Cartoons*, 1913.



Fig. 3.12. "Child Choked By a Transom," *New York World*, 1896.

the random dangers of tenement life. A typical example is an image of a little boy about to be squashed to death by housepainters plummeting off a broken scaffolding (fig. 3.13).¹⁶

The portrayals of urban modernity in the illustrated press seem to fluctuate between, on the one hand, an antimodern nostalgia for a more tran-



Fig. 3.13. "A Falling Man Kills a Boy," *New York World*, 1896.

scared the dissecting table more than he did the grave.
Lawyer Rotan has not yet examined the papers left by Holmes, but he feels certain that no will is among them.

William Mitchell, twenty-eight years of age, of No. 52 Leonard street, and Nelson Hingham, forty years of age, of No. 124 Bedford avenue, employed by William Russell, of No. 124 Nassau avenue, yesterday afternoon were painting the cornice on the top of the three-story and basement building at No. 87 Jewett street, Brooklyn, when, owing to a break in the swinging scaffold, they were thrown to the ground, a distance of thirty-five feet.
Hingham, who weighs 160 pounds, landed on Charles Scott, four years of age, and crushed him to death. Hingham sustained a fracture of the left leg and severe contusions, and was taken to St. Catherine's Hospital. Mitchell, who was taken home, sustained internal injuries which, it is feared, will prove fatal.

quil time, and on the other hand, a basic fascination with the horrific, the grotesque, and the extreme. The illustrated press's images were, paradoxically, both a form a social critique and, at the same time, a form of commercialized sensationalism, a part of the very phenomenon of modern hyperstimulus the images criticized. In both these aspects, the illustrated press traded in bombast. This is not surprising, since the press had an

obvious commercial interest in portraying the world in a drastic light. After all, hue and cry and thrills, not uneventful quotidian realism, sold copies.

But the images in the illustrated press are historically interesting not only as instances of discourse, as examples of a particular set of critical or commercial rhetorical postures towards the modern world, but also as suggestions of a condition of cultural duress surrounding the onset of urban modernity. The illustrated press's preoccupation with the perils of modern life reflected the anxieties of a society that had not yet fully adapted to urban modernity. We have had a century to get used to modern life. At the turn of the century, however, the metropolis was still perceived as overwhelming, strange, and traumatic.

Modernity transformed the texture not only of random daily experience but also of synthetic, orchestrated experience. As the urban environment grew more and more intense, so did the sensations of commercial amusement. Around the turn of the century, an array of amusements greatly increased the emphasis placed on spectacle, sensationalism, and astonishment. On a more modest scale, these elements had always been a part of amusements geared toward working-class audiences, but the new prevalence and power of immediate, gripping sensation defined a fundamentally different epoch in popular entertainment. Modernity ushered in a commerce in sensory shocks. The "thrill" emerged as the keynote of modern diversion.

The thrill took many forms. Beginning around 1895, as we have seen, sensational newspapers began flooding their pages with high-impact illustrations of anything strange, sordid, or shocking. The Coney Island amusement complex opened in 1895, and other parks specializing in exotic sights, disaster spectacles, and thrilling mechanical rides soon proliferated across the country. These concentrations of visual and kinaesthetic sensation epitomized a distinctly modern intensity of manufactured stimulus.¹⁷ Vaudeville, which also emerged as a major popular amusement in the 1890s, epitomized the new trend toward brief, forceful, and sensually "busy" attractions, with its random series of stunts, slapstick, song and dance routines, trained dogs, female wrestlers and the like. Gaudy burlesque shows and "dime museums" (housing sundry curiosities, freak shows, and, occasionally, short blood-and-thunder dramas) also took on greater prominence around the turn of the century, as did a variety of mechanical daredevil exhibitions, such as "The Whirlwind of Death" and "The Globe of Death," in which a car somersaulted in midair after hurling off a forty-foot ramp (fig. 3.14). The editors of *Scientific American*, who in 1905 cast a bemused eye on the expanding field of dangerous automotive stunts, aptly summarized the essential objective of all these varieties of popular sensa-

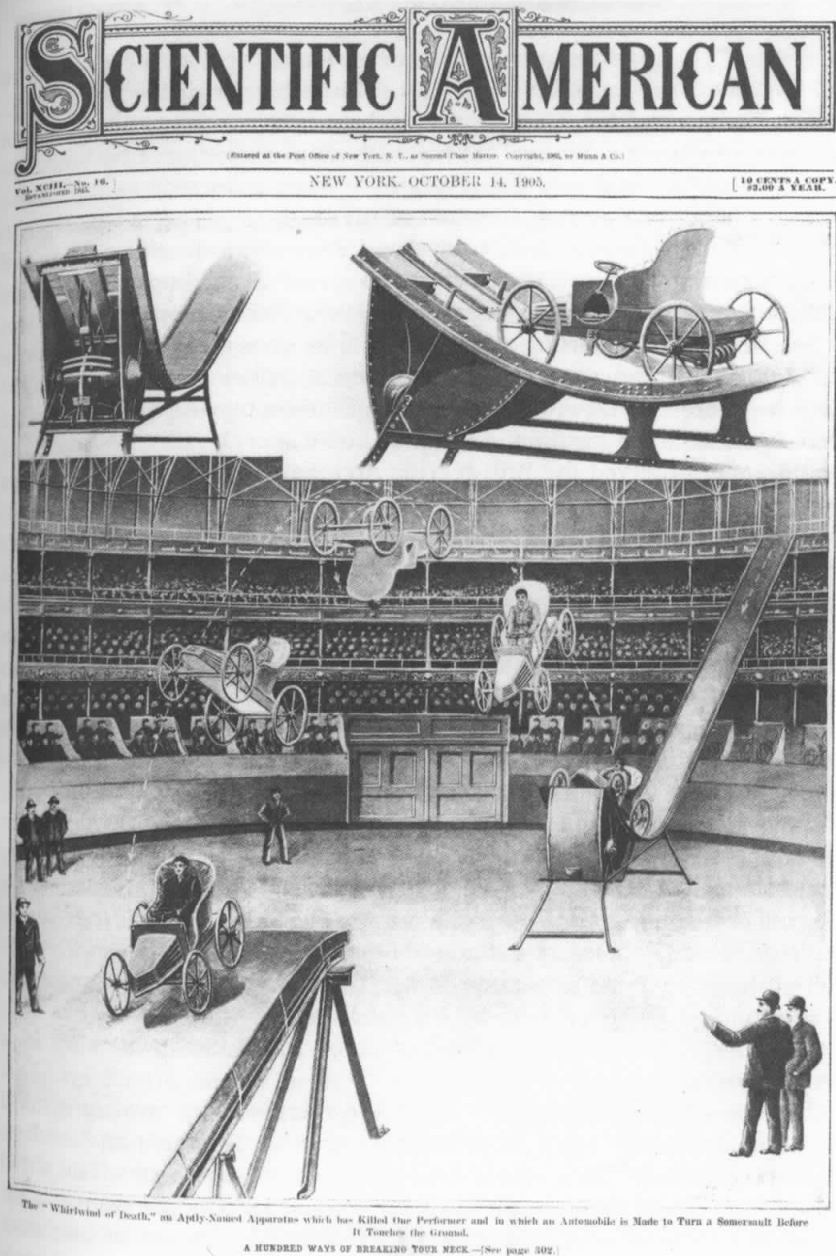


Fig. 3.14. *Scientific American*, 1905. The fine text reads: "The 'Whirlwind of Death,' an aptly named apparatus which has killed one performer and in which an automobile is made to turn a somersault before it touches the ground."

tionalism: "The guiding principle of the inventors of these acts is to give our nerves a shock more intense than any hitherto experienced."¹⁸

The "sensationalization" of commercial amusement was particularly pronounced in stage melodrama. Whereas Victorian melodrama had emphasized the pathos and moralizing oratory of innocent victims and their heroes, melodrama around the turn of the century became virtually synonymous with violent action, stunts, and spectacles of catastrophe and physical peril. "Sensation scenes" such as burning buildings, explosions, and shipwrecks had been an ingredient of stage melodrama at least since the early 1800s, but starting around 1890 they grew more and more realistic, ambitious, and astonishing. And whereas earlier melodramas might have had one spectacular climax, turn-of-the-century melodrama piled thrill upon thrill. "A startling change has come over the tone and spirit of melodrama," observed the British critic Archibald Haddon in 1905. "The simple, demonstrative human element no longer appeals. Touring dramas, nowadays, are not properly constituted unless every scene is a shriek, every title a yell."¹⁹ Desmond MacCarthy, writing a few years later in the *New Statesman*, reiterated this perception: "The development of recent melodrama has been away from high moral sentiments and towards catastrophes and ingenious thrills. Noble harangues are no longer essential. . . . Mechanism [stunt effects] has almost ousted morality."²⁰ Theodore Kramer's 1906 play *Bertha, the Sewing Machine Girl* exemplified melodrama's new paradigm: It included a four-way race between two automobiles, a locomotive, and a bicycle, as well as a motorboat race, fire engines speeding toward a burning building, various torture scenes, and a cyclone climax in which the villain was killed by a shaft of lightning.²¹ In *Edna, the Pretty Typewriter*, a 1907 melodrama by Owen Davis, the heroine jumped from the roof of a building to the top of a moving elevated train. Another scene depicted a race between real automobiles, which were placed on a treadmill while an immense panorama backdrop moved rapidly in the opposite direction. The abducted heroine leaped from the villain's clutches into the hero's car, at which point, pushed beyond its limits, it blew up in a fiery explosion.

The rise of the cinema culminated the trend toward vivid, powerful sensation. From very early on, the movies gravitated towards an "aesthetics of astonishment," in terms of both form and subject matter. The thrill was central, for example, to the early "cinema of attractions" (to use Tom Gunning's term for spectacle-centered films before the rise of narrative integration around 1906) and to powerful suspense melodramas such as Griffith's Biograph thrillers of 1908 and 1909 (*The Fatal Hour*, *An Awful Moment*, *The Lonely Villa*, among others).²² Action serials in the early teens, such as *The Perils of Pauline* and *The Exploits of Elaine*, elaborated every form

of physical peril and sensational spectacle in explosions, crashes, torture contraptions, elaborate fights, chases, and last-minute rescues and escapes.²³ It is not surprising that the modernist avant-garde, drawn to modernity's affective intensity, seized upon these serials, and upon the cinema in general, as an emblem of modern discontinuity and speed. Marinetti and other Futurists celebrated the cinema's excitement as a "jumble of objects and reality thrown together at random." For the French Surrealists, sensational serials "marked an epoch" by "announcing the upheavals of the new world." These writers recognized the mark of modernity both in the sensational subject matter of the *ciné-feuilleton* ("crimes, departures, phenomena, nothing less than the poetry of our age") and in the film medium's power to convey speed, simultaneity, visual superabundance, and visceral shock (as Eisenstein, Vertov, and other filmmaker/theorists would soon elaborate).²⁴

For Kracauer, Benjamin, and their many predecessors, this broad escalation of sensational amusement was clearly a sign of the times: Sensationalism was the aesthetic counterpart to the radical transformations of space, time, and industry. Sidestepping a more strictly socioeconomic explanation,²⁵ they framed the commercialization of the thrill as a reflection and symptom (as well as an agent or catalyst) of neurological modernity. The increasing intensity of popular amusements, they argued, corresponded to the new texture of daily life.

Kracauer, writing in 1926, argued that amusements based on "distraction"—that is, on disconnected, busy, powerful impressions—were "meaningful . . . as a reflection of the uncontrolled anarchy of our world." "In pure externality," he observed, "the audience encounters itself. Its own reality is revealed in the fragmented sequence of splendid sense impressions. . . . Shows which aim at distraction are composed of the same mixture of externalities as the world of the urban masses."²⁶ The aesthetic of shallow thrill and sensory stimulation, Kracauer stated, paralleled the texture of urban, technological experience. Benjamin picked up on this concept a decade later in his 1936 Artwork Essay, and then again in his 1939 essay on Baudelaire. "The film," he asserted, "corresponds to profound changes in the apperceptive apparatus—changes that are experienced on an individual scale by the man in the street in big-city traffic, on a historical scale by every present-day citizen."²⁷ The medium's rapid tempo and high-impact audiovisual fragmentation paralleled the shocks and sensory intensities of modern life: "In a film, perception in the form of shocks was established as a formal principle. That which determines the rhythm of production on a conveyor belt is the basis of the rhythm of reception in the film."²⁸

While Kracauer and Benjamin may have expressed this connection

between popular sensationalism and urban modernity with particular acuity, the idea was already a rather familiar one. For example, a German critic named Hermann Kienzl declared in a 1911 newspaper column that movies were the prime expression of the new metropolitan experience. "The psychology of the cinematographic triumph," he proclaimed, "is metropolitan psychology. The metropolitan soul, that ever-harried soul, curious and unanchored, tumbling from fleeting impression to fleeting impression, is quite rightly the cinematographic soul."²⁹ In a similar but less celebratory vein, Michael Davis tied vaudeville's aesthetic to urban hyperstimulus. Vaudeville, he complained, was symptomatic of "the excitement of the city and the mental disintegration induced by the kaleidoscopic stimuli of New York life." In its vivid, disjointed, fleeting spectacle, vaudeville mirrored "the experience afforded by a street-car ride, or any active day in a crowded city."³⁰ This argument made its way into academic discourse as well. In a 1912 essay in the *American Journal of Sociology*, Howard Woolston (a professor at the City College of New York) stressed the connection between modern experience and the appetite for "powerful shocks" in amusement. Cataloging a series of city noises and crowd situations, Woolston noted that

urban life is marked by its heightened stimulation. . . . Such excitement deeply stirs the nervous system. The natural result of city life is increased nervousness. The restless current in which men are immersed produces individuals who are alert, active, quick to seek new satisfactions. The recreation of city dwellers is perhaps as true an index of their characteristic reactions as can be found. The most popular amusement of large towns today is furnished by saloons, dance halls, variety theaters, and moving picture shows. Coney Island, with its "chutes" and "bumps," "loops of death" and "circular swings," "ticklers," peep shows, bars, and assorted gastronomic marvels, is a favorite resort for thousands of young New Yorkers. There is "something doing every minute." . . . All these have a tendency to stimulate a jaded attention by a succession of brief, powerful shocks that arouse the tired organism to renewed activity.³¹

These assertions of a connection between sensationalism and modernity incorporated a number of underlying and overlapping hypotheses about the psychological mechanisms by which modern hyperstimulus transposed itself into the aesthetic of popular amusement. Kracauer, Benjamin, and their predecessors all appear to have embraced a notion of the mutability of human sensation and perception. Modernity, they suggested, prompted a kind of reconditioning of the individual's sensory apparatus. The metropolis and conveyor belt, Benjamin wrote, subjected "the human sensorium to a complex kind of training." The organism shifted into a higher gear, so to speak, synchronizing to the geared-up world. This con-

ditioning ultimately generated a "new and urgent need for stimuli," since only stimulating amusements could match the nervous energies of a sensorium calibrated to modern life.³²

Kracauer elaborated further on this need for stimuli. Sensationalism, he suggested, functioned as a compensatory response to the impoverishment of experience in modernity. Distractions and thrills offered a momentary escape from the "formal tension . . . of enterprise," from the meaningless frenzy and tedium of alienated labor in the modern factory and bureaucratized office.³³ Simmel had made a similar argument as early as 1896; in an essay on the Berlin Trade Exhibition, he observed, "It seems as if the modern person wishes to compensate for the one-sidedness and uniformity of what they produce within the division of labour by the increasing crowding together of heterogeneous impressions, by the increasingly hasty and colourful change in emotions."³⁴ Kracauer's debt to Simmel (and perhaps to a wider journalistic discourse)³⁵ is evident here, but Kracauer was more sensitive to the argument's inherent irony: The compensatory thrills of popular amusement reproduced the very register of hyperstimulus that vitiated modern experience to begin with. Alienated labor and urban experience "demands to be compensated," Kracauer stated, "but this need can only be articulated in terms of the same surface sphere which imposed the lack in the first place. . . . The form of entertainment necessarily corresponds to that of enterprise."³⁶ Popular sensationalism both compensated for and mimicked the frenzied, disjointed texture of modern life.

Attempts to understand popular sensationalism as a symptom of modern life also drew on a widespread belief about the physiological consequences of nervous overstimulation. Simmel, along with a host of physicians specializing in neurasthenia (or "modern nervousness"), insisted that excessive sensory stimulus of the sort associated with the pressures of urban life had the ultimate effect of exhausting or incapacitating the senses. The idea was that human nerves were subject to physical wear and tear and became weaker, duller, and progressively less responsive when exposed to too many stimuli. "Over-excited and exhausted nerves" created a mode of "jaded" or "blasé" perception that cast the world "in an evenly flat and gray tone."³⁷ Stronger and stronger sensations were needed simply to break through the blunted sensorium, to make an impression and reawaken perception.³⁸ Popular sensationalism putatively fit into this pattern. The demand for thrills escalated as blasé perception required increasingly intense impressions. Simmel characterized the 1896 Berlin Trade Show as a manifestation of the jaded urbanite's need for increasingly vivid thrills.³⁹ In the same year, Maxim Gorky situated the cinema precisely within this inflationary cycle of sensory deadening and countervailing overstimulation.

His firsthand account of the first exhibition of moving pictures (by the Lumière brothers in Paris) delivered what appears to have been an already stock rhetoric about the neurological dangers of "the thirst for the strange and the new."⁴⁰

At least one more hypothesis tried to explain the psychological mechanisms behind the "new and urgent need for stimuli." Benjamin adapted a theory laid out by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* concerning the function of anxiety as an adaptive defense against traumatic shock. Studying victims of shell shock from World War I, Freud observed that a severe traumatic breakdown occurred only among soldiers for whom the frightful event was totally unexpected. But those who had anxiously prepared for the shock by fixating on it, by mentally rehearsing it over and over again, or, in other words, by getting used to it in small, controlled doses, did not suffer major breakdowns. In this context, Freud believed, anxiety was self-protective, since the individual could defend himself against the traumatizing potential of shock. "The more readily consciousness registers shocks," he wrote, "the less likely they are to have a traumatic effect."⁴¹ Benjamin applied this hypothesis to the film experience: The shocks of the film medium, he suggested, functioned as a kind of preparation or immunization against the shocks of the modern environment. "The acceptance of shocks," he argued, "is facilitated by training in coping with stimuli." "The film is the art form that is in keeping with the increased threat to his life which modern man has to face. Man's need to expose himself to shock effects is his adjustment to the dangers threatening him."⁴² Film, Benjamin hypothesized, provided a training in coping with the stimuli of the modern world.

In their breadth and diversity, these discourses around the subject of modernity—both the myriad representations of urban shock and the multilayered attempts to understand popular sensationalism as a symptom of modern hyperstimulus—reveal a critical fixation, a sense of anxious urgency in documenting and dissecting an awesome social transformation. At the heart of this fixation is the fact that critical observers of modernity felt the "shock of the new" firsthand. They lived in a culture that had not yet fully adjusted to the sudden transformations of experience. The pre-modern millennium had yet to fade into a quaint abstract concept; it was still a vital and tangible memory, one that constantly accentuated the novelty and trauma of the modern world. Ortega y Gasset aptly described this situation: "The *tempo* of modern life, the speed with which things move today, the force and energy with which everything is done, cause anguish to the man of archaic mould, and this anguish is the measure of the imbalance between his pulse-beats and the pulse-beats of the time."⁴³ The critical fixation on modernity and sensationalism underscores if not the

anguish then at least the anxiety of a generation that could still feel such an imbalance.

NOTES

1. Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, ed. Kurt H. Wolff (New York: Free Press, 1950), p. 410.
2. The U.S. urban population more than quadrupled between 1870 and 1910, from just under ten million to over forty-two million. In other words, the urban population doubled in size every twenty years or so: Between 1880 and 1900, for example, it rose from fourteen million to thirty million. Miles of electric-trolley tracks in the North Atlantic region increased from 2,952 in 1890 to 10,175 in 1902. In the United States as a whole, coverage rose 178 percent in those years, from 8,123 to 22,589 miles of track (U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1980 Census of the Population* [Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1980], table 3; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Special Reports, Street and Electric Railways* [Washington, D.C., 1903], p. 34).
3. A good compilation of film footage of Manhattan around 1900 can be found in episode seven of the PBS series *Heritage: Civilization and the Jews*. The series is available on video at many public libraries. The screening list of the conference "Cinema Turns 100," held under the auspices of DOMITOR in New York in 1994, includes numerous street scenes from the 1896–1902 period held by major film archives in Europe and North America.
4. Mike Featherstone, "Theories of Consumer Culture," in *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (London: Sage Publications, 1991), p. 24.
5. An example of an academic essay is Howard B. Woolston, "The Urban Habit of Mind," *The American Journal of Sociology* 17, no. 5 (March 1912): 602–614. Stephen Kern offers a stimulating and eclectic survey of contemporaneous literary and artistic discourses about speed, fragmentation, and modernity (such as the Cubist and Futurist manifestos) in *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880–1918* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), especially chapter 5. On neurasthenia, see Kern (chapter 5); Tom Lutz, *American Nervousness, 1903: An Anecdotal History* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991); James B. Gilbert, *Work Without Salvation: America's Intellectuals and Industrial Alienation, 1880–1910* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), pp. 31–43. George Beard's *American Nervousness* (New York, 1881) is generally considered the seminal discussion of neurasthenia.
6. Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (1917; reprint, New York: Modern Library, 1931), pp. 494–495.
7. Michael M. Davis, *The Exploitation of Pleasure* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1911), pp. 33, 36. Davis's survey was conducted in 1910.
8. It is no coincidence that social theorists began focusing on mob psychology around the turn of the century. Two key works, among many popularizations, were Gustave Le Bon, *Psychologie des foules* (1895) and Gabriel Tarde, *Opinion and the Crowd* (1901). A representative popularization is Gerald Stanley Lee, *Crowds: A Study of the Genius of Democracy and the Fear, Desires, and Expectations of the People* (London:

Methuen, 1913). Quotation from Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1968), p. 174. All further citations of Benjamin are from this collection.

9. The *Life* illustration appeared on 6 May 1909. Picasso held the first exhibition of Cubist paintings at Ambroise Vollard's gallery a bit later, in the summer of 1909. Cubism did not emerge as a bona fide movement (at least not one that a mainstream illustrator in New York might catch wind of) until the period between 1911 and 1914. The famous Armory show, in which eleven hundred works of modern art were exhibited in New York (and then Chicago and Boston), and which gave this work its first real exposure in America, took place in February 1913 (Herbert Read, *A Concise History of Modern Painting* [New York: Praeger, 1959], p. 117). The formal similarities between the *Life* illustration and the Cubist aesthetic suggest their common basis in the perceptual transformations of modernity.

10. Anon., "Ground to Pieces on the Rail," *Newark Daily Advertiser*, 9 May 1894.

11. A wealth of municipal-government data on the numbers of trolley and road accidents and deaths has survived. Some statistics are presented in "Highway Accidents in New York City During 1915," *Journal of American Statistical Association* 15 (September 1916): 318-323; Roger Lane, *Violent Death in the City: Suicide, Accident, and Murder in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979).

12. *Outlook*, 15 September 1900.

13. Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," p. 175.

14. *Newark Daily Advertiser*, 18 and 29 May 1891.

15. Anon., "A Little Girl's Peculiar Death," *Newark Daily Advertiser* (26 May 1891), p. 1, columns 7 and 8.

16. Deaths by falling might also have had a particular resonance for the first-generation immigrants, many of whom came from rural agrarian cultures with no tall buildings, who read these newspaper accounts. Perhaps these images spoke to their sense of uneasiness in the strange spatial coordinates of the vertical modern metropolis.

17. John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978); Richard Snow, *Coney Island: A Postcard Journey to the City of Fire* (New York: Brightwaters Press, 1984); Andrea Stulman Dennett and Nina Warnke, "Disaster Spectacles at the Turn of the Century," *Film History* 4 (1990): 101-111.

18. "A Hundred Ways of Breaking Your Neck," *Scientific American*, 14 October 1905.

19. Archibald Haddon, "Sensational Melodrama," *Daily Express* (London), 28 August 1905. Clipping is at the Harvard Theater Collection, "Melodrama" file, Cambridge, Mass.

20. Desmond MacCarthy, "Melodrama," *The New Statesman* (London), 27 June 1914.

21. Ads and reviews for "Bertha, the Sewing Machine Girl," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Sunday, September 2, 1906, p. 9; Tuesday, September 4, 1906, p. 4; Sunday, September 23, 1906, section 3, p. 10; Sunday, October 6, 1907, section 2, p. 8 and p. 9.

22. Tom Gunning explores aspects of sensationalism in early film in "An Aesthetics of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)credulous Spectator," *Art and Text* 34 (spring 1989): 31.

23. On sensational melodrama and the action serials, see my article "Female Power in the Serial-Queen Melodrama: The Etiology of an Anomaly," *Camera Obscura* 22 (January, 1990): 91-129, and my chapter on serials in Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, ed., *A History of the Cinema, 1895-1995* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

24. "The Futurist Cinema," in *Marinetti: Selected Writings*, ed. R. W. Flint (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), p. 131. Both Phillipe Soupault and Jean Epstein recalled the thrill of seeing *The Exploits of Elaine* in Paris in 1915. Soupault wrote in 1923, "We dashed into the movie house and realized that all was changed. Pearl White's smile appeared on the screen, that almost ferocious smile announcing the upheavals of the new world. We finally understood that the cinema was not just a mechanical toy, but the terrible and magnificent flag of life. Wide eyed, we [saw] crimes, departures, phenomena, nothing less than the poetry of our age." Jean Epstein similarly declared, "These popular, foolish (that goes without saying), penny dreadful-ish, incredible, blood-and-thunder films such as *The Exploits of Elaine* mark an epoch, a style, a civilization no longer lit by gas, thank God" (Soupault, "Cinema, U.S.A.," in *The Shadow and Its Shadow: Surrealist Writings on Cinema*, ed. Paul Hammond [London: British Film Institute, 1978], p. 32; Jean Epstein, "Le Sens 1bis," in *Bonjour Cinema* [Paris: Editions de la Sirene, 1921], translated by Stuart Liebman in "Jean Epstein's Early Film Theory, 1920-1922" [Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1980]; an alternate, and, I think, less apt translation by Tom Milne is in *Afterimage* 10 [Autumn 1981]: 9-16, reprinted in Richard Abel, *French Film Theory and Criticism: A History/Anthology, 1907-1939* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988], vol. 1).

25. A socioeconomic explanation would focus on the demographic changes of modern capitalism as a key factor in the rise of sensationalism. Clearly, the rapid growth of the urban working class in the last quarter of the nineteenth century provided a mass audience predisposed towards startling and violent spectacle, however one might want to explain this predisposition. As the journalist Rob Wagner put it in 1921, "Rough workers . . . like things that go bang." Sensational newspapers, the "mellerdrummer," action serials, burlesque—these all hinged on the new lowbrow social configuration of the amusement marketplace (Robert Wagner, "You—At the Movies," *American Magazine* 90 [December 1920]: 42-44, excerpted in *Literary Digest* 68 [26 February 1921]: 46).

26. Siegfried Kracauer, "The Cult of Distraction: On Berlin's Picture Palaces," (orig. pub. 1926), trans. Thomas Y. Levin, in *New German Critique* 40 (winter 1987): 91-96. My discussion of Kracauer and Benjamin is informed by a number of valuable essays in this issue of *New German Critique*, particularly Miriam Hansen's "Benjamin, Cinema and Experience," Heide Schlupmann's "Kracauer's Phenomenology of Film," Patrice Petro's "Discourse on Sexuality in Early German Film Theory," and Sabine Hake's "Girls and Crisis: The Other Side of Diversion."

27. Benjamin, "The Work of Art," in *Illuminations*, p. 250.

28. Benjamin, "Some Motifs in Baudelaire," p. 175.

29. Hermann Kienzl, "Theater und Kinematograph," *Der Strom* 1 (1911/1912): 219-220; quoted in Anton Kaes, "The Debate About Cinema: Charting a Controversy (1909-1929)," *New German Critique* 40 (winter 1987): 12.

30. Davis, op. cit., pp. 33, 36.

31. Woolston, op. cit., p. 602.

32. Benjamin, "Some Motifs in Baudelaire," p. 175.

33. Kracauer wrote, "The tension to which the working masses are subjected is . . . greater and more tangible [than in the provinces]—an essentially formal tension which fills their day fully without making it fulfilling. Such a lack demands to be compensated" ("Cult of Distraction," p. 93).

34. "Berliner Gewerbe-Ausstellung," *Die Zeit* (Vienna), 25 July 1896; quoted in David Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity: Theories of Modernity in the Work of Simmel, Kracauer, and Benjamin* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), p. 94.

35. A British journalist named Arnold Smith expressed a similar argument in 1904, suggesting that the notion that popular sensationalism was an escape from or compensation for modern experience was something of a commonplace by the time Kracauer incorporated it. Smith writes, "The increasing mass of sensational literature which appears daily is a serious symptom of mental debility in the country at large. The cause of the demand for this fiction is not far to seek. It lies in the nerve-shattering conditions of modern life; in the ceaseless strain and worry which must be escaped from somehow, if only for an hour ("The Ethics of Sensational Fiction," *The Westminster Review* 162 [August 1904]: 190).

36. Kracauer, "Cult of Distraction," p. 93.

37. Simmel's key discussion of the blasé attitude is in "The Metropolis and Mental Life": "The blasé attitude results first from the rapidly changing and closely compressed contrasting stimulations of the nerves. A life in boundless pursuit of pleasure makes one blasé because it agitates the nerves to their strongest reactivity for such a long time that they finally cease to react at all. . . . Through the rapidity and contradictoriness of their changes, harmless impressions force such violent responses, tearing the nerves so brutally hither and thither that their last reserves of strength are spent; and if one remains in the same milieu they have no time to gather new strength. An incapacity thus emerges to react to new sensations with the appropriate energy. . . . The essence of the blasé attitude consists in the blunting of discrimination. This does not mean that the objects are not perceived, but rather that the meaning and differing values of things, and thereby the things themselves, are experienced as insubstantial. They appear to the blasé person in an evenly flat and gray tone; no one object deserves preference over any other" (Simmel, op. cit., p. 414).

38. The reader will observe that Howard Woolston invokes this theory in the last sentence of the passage quoted above.

39. Frisby, op. cit., p. 75.

40. Gorky wrote, "Say what you will, but this [the cinematograph] is a strain on the nerves. . . . Our nerves are getting weaker and weaker, are growing more and more unstrung, are reacting less and less forcefully to the simple 'impressions of daily life' and thirst more and more eagerly for new, strong, unusual, burning and strange impressions. The cinematograph gives you them—and the nerves will grow

cultivated on the one hand, and dulled on the other! The thirst for such strange, fantastic impressions as it gives will grow ever greater, and we will be increasingly less able and less desirous of grasping the everyday impressions of ordinary life. The thirst for the strange and the new can lead us far, very far" ("Gorky on the Films, 1896," in *New Theatre and Film, 1934 to 1937: An Anthology*, ed. Herbert Kline [New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985], pp. 227-233; a slightly different translation appears in Jay Leyda, *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film*, 3d ed. [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983]).

41. Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974), 18:13.

42. Benjamin's fullest discussion of Freud's theory of protective anxiety is in "Some Motifs in Baudelaire," pp. 161-163. The first quotation is taken from "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" (p. 162); the second is from "The Work of Art" (p. 250). For a similar interpretation of this aspect of Benjamin's framework, see Susan Buck-Morss, "Aesthetic and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered," *New Formations* 20 (summer 1993): 123-143.

43. José Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1932), p. 31. Also available in a newer translation by Anthony Kerrigan (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985).