The Soul in the Machine:
The Case of Charles Sheeler and His *Classic Landscape*

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In 1931, the artist Charles Sheeler imagined "a beautiful world…with no people in it."[1] At least that was how he described his pictures of the Ford's River Rouge factory (Figure 1). Within the factory's buildings are the people that Sheeler has not shown. One such person was Louis-Ferdinand Céline, a Ford employee who described the interior of the factory in a 1933 memoir:

> Right up to sky itself [there was] the heavy many-sided roar of a cataract of machines, shaping, revolving, groaning, always about to break down and never breaking down….One was turned by force into a machine oneself, the whole of one's carcass quivering in this vast frenzy of noise.[2]

One picture, which Sheeler entitled *Classic Landscape*, seems to smooth over Céline's account. It quiets a visceral cacophony with a silent application of opaque paint. Sheeler has removed the workers and every trace of their toilsome labor. Crisp lines and clearly defined forms dominate the canvas instead. A pale pink smokestack on the right mimics the perfectly cylindrical poles of a power-house, while a series of parallel diagonal lines occupy the foreground.

Now considered one of the most emblematic works of American Precisionism, *Classic Landscape* is one of four paintings of the Ford factory that Sheeler completed between 1930 and 1936, several years after he was commissioned to photograph the Detroit plant (Figures 2-4). Sheeler's landscapes and Céline's account may be different, but they share a fundamental interest. When Céline writes that the worker was "turned by force into a machine," he imagines a radical transformation. The sense that man was becoming a machine had existed since at least René Descartes' proclamation that man was a "machine made by God."[3] By the twentieth century, the machine-man had become less of a metaphor and more of a reality. Inventions such as Henry Ford's assembly line created systematic labor conditions, rendering human workers cogs in the well-built machine of industry. Artists sought to match the workers' efficiency. Their art-making was peopleless in two regards: both because they did not represent people *and* because they were striving to become less people-like themselves, less expressive and more mechanical. Unlike industry, however, the arts were traditionally the domain of human expression, so one might consider the omission of people somewhat perverse. *Classic Landscape* provides an opportunity to explore this perversity.

For those living in the self-proclaimed Machine Age, the technologies of the twentieth century felt new. Along with newness came fear. Even some modernists considered the city a "Waste Land" or believed that it was art's very purpose to oppose the growing dominance of the machine. The stakes were as much philosophical as they were aesthetic. Take one journalist's impression of a 1927 show of machine art: "Are we, in the strictest sense, gaining the whole world and losing our own soul?...are we moving so fast that there can be no halting before the edge of the precipice?"[4] To pull man back from this precipice, the machine's proponents had an equal and opposite reaction. They believed that the machine was the "symbol of universal dynamism" and that it had the utopian potential of transforming the modern world.[5]

Sheeler avoided engaging with these controversies directly. The title *Classic Landscape* is a case in point. Is its stance praiseworthy? Ironic? Critical? Scholars cannot be sure, since Sheeler was especially guarded of his opinions and politics in written remarks. Despite their ambiguity, his pictures continue to perpetuate optimism. In fact, Sheeler's art has become *the* paradigm for inter-war machine aestheticism. Along with fellow artists, he was deemed an "immaculate," an "objectivist," and, later, a Precisionist.[6]

1   Charles Sheeler, interview by Martin Friedman, 18 June 1959, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

2   A passage from Céline's 1933 memoir *Journey to the End of the Night*, quoted at length in Terry Smith, *Making the Modern: Industry, Art, and Design in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 17.

3   Quoted in Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (New York: Brace, 1934), 41.

4   Charles Moran, "Gently Spoofing the Machine Age: 'The Transit of Venus' Turns Out to Be Light and Frivolous Entertainment, but with Just a Trace of Seriousness," *New York Times*, 22 May 1927, X2.

5   Enrico Pramplioni, "The Aesthetic of the Machine and Mechanical Introspection in Art," in *Machine-Age Exposition*, ed. Jane Heap, exh. cat. (New York: Little Review, 1927), 10.

6   Gail Stravitsky, "Reordering Reality," in *Precisionism in America: 1915-1914*, ed. Gail Stravitsky (New York: Harry N. Abrams, in association with Montclair Art Museum, 1994), 18, 155. "Immaculate" was used in Henry McBride's 1924 *New York Times* review of Preston Dickson's paintings. Later, the term would be used to label the "Immaculate School" of painters in and around New York. The "Objectivist" movement in poetry was launched in 1931 by Louis Zukofsky, who edited an issue of *Poetry* magazine entitled "Objectivists." Williams was associated with the movement briefly, as were contemporary visual

Such artists believed that they could faithfully transcribe reality by adopting a pragmatic and systematic approach to drawing, painting, and sculpture. As the artist became more mechanical, however, his role as an intentional agent became questionable. For that reason, we can use Sheeler's practice as a way of exploring issues of artistic agency.

The Precisionist aesthetic appeared in poetry as well. Sheeler's good friend William Carlos Williams proclaimed that any poem is a "small (or large) machine made out of words."[7] He even modeled the poem "Classic Scene" off of Sheeler's factory pictures. Though the poem and the picture were completed in isolation and do not correspond directly, they share an exacting technique. Like Sheeler's painting, this poem proposes to be a self-enclosed description of an industrial environment: one focused not on the people but rather the place. Williams writes:

> A power-house
> in the shape of
> a red brick chair
> 90 feet high
>
> on the seat of which
> sit the figures
> of two metal stacks—aluminum—
> commanding an area
> of squalid shacks
> side by side
> from one of which
>
> buff smoke
> streams while under
> a grey sky
> the other remains
> passive today—[8]

Williams's language is economic and unemotional. Images of solid things, like "power-houses," are fragmented by the rhythm of short and abrupt line endings. Herein lies the reason that Sheeler and Williams have been championed as leaders of Precisionism. Both pictorial and poetic productions had become radically streamlined. They cultivated this precise style, in part, through their earlier encounters in the New York art world.

Sheeler admired Marcel Duchamp in particular and praised the artist, who turned an inverted urinal into a work of art, by calling him a man "built with the precision and sensitiveness of an instrument for making scientific mea-

surements."[9] Duchamp's fellow expatriate Francis Picabia pictured such an instrument when he made the pen-and-ink drawing *Ici, C'est Ici Stieglitz* (Figure 5). By defining the person of Alfred Stieglitz through a mechanical attribute—a broken camera with an automotive shift—Picabia imagined a symbolic fusion of human with the machine. In defense of this drawing, Picabia claimed that: "the machine is more than a mere adjunct of human life. It is really a part of human life—perhaps the very soul."[10] He tried to defeat the argument that humans were becoming soulless machines simply by inverting its logic. While his portraits often adopt an ironic and sexual subtext, these creations influenced a suite of figural works during the 1920s and '30s. Portraiture was just one way in which the artist expressed the dynamic, artistic possibilities of the machine.

By 1927, just before Sheeler went on commission in Detroit, he and Duchamp served on the committee for a small but influential show in New York: the *Machine-Age Exposition* was an international display of artwork, architecture, and engineering hosted by the editor of the *Little Review* magazine, Jane Heap. Heap's show (which predates Alfred Barr's famous *Machine Art* show by seven years) followed in the spirit of the French Purist Fernand Léger, whose drawing of ball bearings are featured on the catalogue's cover. For Léger and Heap, the ideal artist was an "Engineer" who made beautiful objects from rote, utilitarian production.[11] Together with Duchamp and Picabia's innovations, Heap's exhibition inflected a change in the very notion of artistic creation.

Following their lead, Sheeler described his own aim as an attempt "to eliminate the evidence of painting as such, and to present a design giving the least evidence of the means of accomplishment."[12] Like his fellow avant-gardists, he wanted to remove his authorial mark. Photography offered one possibility for such a practice. In a 1940 photograph, his dealer Edith Halpert stands between *Classic Landscape* and his painting *View of New York* (Figure 6). Until the 1930s, Sheeler divided his time between painting and photography, causing some critics to deride the photographic quality of his paintings. When Halpert took Sheeler under her wing, she effectively forced the artist to end his work as a commercial photographer. It was not an easy decision for Sheeler and something of his hesitation remains caught, like Halpert herself, between his painted worlds. Nevertheless, if one takes Sheeler at his word, there ought to be barely any evidence of the artist in *Classic Landscape*. The painting represents an unspoiled scene, portrayed in a straightforward manner. Its

artists. Sheeler was referred to as a "precisionist par excellence" in 1935.

[7]   William Carlos Williams, introduction to "The Wedge," in *Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams* (New York: New Directions, 1969), 256.

[8]   William Carlos Williams, "Classic Scene," in *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams: Volume I, 1909-1939*, ed. A. Walton Litz and Christopher McGowan (New York: New Directions, 1986), 444.

[9]   Charles Sheeler, "Notes for Autobiography," c. 1937, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institute; reprinted in Stravitsky, "Reordering Reality," 12.

[10]   Francis Picabia, interview by Anonymous, "French Artists Spur on an American Art," *New York Tribune*, 24 October 1915. Quoted in William A. Camfield, *Francis Picabia in His Art, Life and Times* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 77.

[11]   Jane Heap, "Machine-Age Exposition," *Little Review* 11, no. 1 (Spring 1925): 22.

[12]   Sheeler, "Notes for Autobiography."

lack of expressiveness serves only to document the calibration of its creator: a man looking at a landscape with the lens of a camera rather than the window to a soul.

So far, then, Sheeler's perversity has remained under wraps. Analyzing *Classic Landscape* as an objectivist picture is a common, and plausible, way of understanding the painting. Sheeler was among those who wanted to assimilate to the modern world by becoming a part of it, by becoming machine-men, and yet, this narrative is only half complete. Recall that Williams's "Classic Scene" is inhabited by "figures" of metal stacks that sit on the chairs of buildings. In Céline's account, the machine could roar, revolve, and groan. In order to become the machine they admired, artists had to first enliven that inanimate object. Lewis Mumford dwelt on this paradox in his 1934 book *Technics and Civilization*. He called it "The Obstacle of Animism," writing that "For thousands of years animism had stood in the way of this development for it had concealed the entire face of nature behind a scrawl of human forms."[13] De-animation was the special burden of Precisionist artists. It was in their work, which spurned anything human, and where animism was explicitly taboo. Yet a closer look at these very works reveals that animism is not only present, but pervasive. With that in mind, consider again the very objects that were used to try to eradicate animism.

One month after Picabia published Stieglitz's portrait in the 1915 issue of *291* magazine, Paul Haviland, a critic and photographer, wrote an accompanying description.

> We are living in the age of the machine. Man made the machine in his own image. She has limbs which act; lungs which breathe; a heart which beats; a nervous system through which runs electricity. After making the machine in his own image, he has made his human ideal machinomorphic. But the machine is yet at a dependent stage. Man gave her every qualification except thought.[14]

Haviland's account clearly animates the machine; he equates machine pieces with human body parts. Humans, he believes, have control over animate machines since humans alone have thought. For that reason, there can be no confusion between man and machine, no matter how much they appear to look like one another.

As the century had progressed, machines had been built to *look* more and more like humans. While these creatures have occupied popular imagination, they also present real philosophical challenges. Indeed, the American philosopher Stanley Cavell has even incorporated the automaton into his thinking regarding the possibility of knowing other minds. Returning to Haviland's account, one might use Cavell as an

interlocutor. Cavell's quotation, taken in full from his 1979 book *The Claim of Reason*, can be inserted within Haviland's text. Although they are writing nearly fifty years apart, one can construct something of a call-and-response between the two figures, using Cavell to expose, rather than oppose, Haviland.

> Haviland: "She has limbs which act; lungs which breathe; a heart which beats; a nervous system through which runs electricity…"

> Cavell: "Is this because the machine literally…resembles (behaves like) a living human being? Or has one first to anthropomorphize the machine in order to have these descriptions called for?"[15]

Cavell wonders, like Mumford, if it is ever possible to get away from anthropomorphic description. If man wants to understand that which is truly other, he must first inscribe it with human attributes: the limbs, lungs, and heart that Haviland mentions.

> Haviland: "After making the machine in his own image, he has made his human ideal machinomorphic."

> Cavell: "If so, then when someone thinks of them as applying metaphorically to human beings it will be because they have first automatized the human being."[16]

Haviland believes that the machinomorph is an ideal, even logical, evolution for man; but for Cavell, the very reference to a human being as automotive is what, paradoxically, allows him to think about machines as living beings. In other words, we treat machines as bodies only because we have come to think of the human body as a mechanical apparatus. Clearly Cavell is interested in how these interactions play out through the use of language. He helps us recognize the crutches of animism that support Haviland's rhetoric. Whereas Haviland thinks that machines are living but controllable things, Cavell wonders whether clear distinctions can even be made between humans and things, between control and freedom. Humans, too, are automatized; they are created and controlled by machines through linguistic metaphors that become actualized. So when Picabia says that the machine is the very soul of human life, he only reveals that he must first imagine the machine as human—as possessive of a soul. The issue isn't simply man becoming machine or machine being referred to as a man, but also the very limit of self-understanding, of knowing who (or what) possesses human-like qualities.

Sheeler's *Self Portrait* of 1923 offers a more explicit musing on these themes (Figure 7). It is Sheeler's only experiment

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[13]   Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, 41.

[14]   Paul Haviland, "We Are Living in the Age of the Machine," *291*, September/October 1915, 1.

[15]   Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 364.

[16]   Ibid.

with the genre of mechanical portraiture in the tradition of Picabia. The telephone, prominently placed on the desk in the center of the canvas clearly attempts to signify the "self" in this "self-portrait." A closer look, however, reveals the reflection of a man lingering in the window-pane just behind the telephone. Presumably, it is the outline of Sheeler himself: his shoulders, neck, and chin are visible on the silvery surface of the window. Sheeler's portrait is above all an investigation of how he could understand himself through the telephone, but which element is genuinely Sheeler? The headless body or the limbless phone? Something of the human—if only shadowy—yet remains behind that machine object. The telephone cannot stand alone, let alone stand for, the human since without the human it could never stand at all. Their mutual dependence has made it impossible to tell who is really in control.

Halpert acts as a similar proxy in Sheeler's 1940 photograph. He has positioned her along a wall of other objects, where she too has become objectified. Within the photograph Sheeler drops subtle hints that allude to his own shadowy presence. After all, he's the one clicking the camera, capturing her standing between two of his paintings, wearing a dress that he designed.[17]

This type of self-inscription exists throughout his River Rogue series. There is a temptation to imagine who is hidden within these pictured buildings. As Cavell has suggested, however, sometimes the interior is no more revealing than what one finds on the surface. Sheeler also hints that this interior-exterior question is a ruse: his painting *City Interior* (1936; Figure 4) shows only exterior façades. All of these paintings have an intensely interior feeling. Diagonal lines recede but there are no vanishing points. One is invited into the picture with a dramatic entrance of train tracks or a river, only to discover there is no egress. Instead of a sprawling openness, Sheeler entraps the viewer within walls of paint.

Historical distance can only enhance an understanding of these works. Instead of trying to overcome animism, as Mumford suggests, scholars have now embraced it. Often, this academic animism is not the anthropomorphic kind that Haviland and Sheeler have expressed, but rather a quasi-magical or animalistic vitality. Just like machines, artworks flirt with life through everyday language and elaborate metaphors. Both animistic machines and animate works of art are ways of trying to understand some unknowable other. Such a humanistic pursuit underlies both the Digital and the Machine Ages. Precisionism, which strove to be completely objective, was in fact, always shot through with subjectivity.

In the end, *Classic Landscape* is animated throughout: not by people but by things. There are silhouettes of wires to the right of the train tracks that converge and diverge wildly. Black shadows haunt each wooden tie on the tracks, and raking diagonals form below windows and rooftops. The clouds in the background align themselves into an unnatural line. What are these abstract elements, these enigmatic beings? All of a sudden, this very legible scene has become unfamiliar and unreadable.

These strange features resist a photographic stasis; there is an element of prolonged time soaked into their saturated pigments. It recalls the historical lacuna that occurred between 1927 and 1931, from when Sheeler visited the factory in person and when he finally completed this picture. The canvas itself expresses something of this drawn out temporality: it stretches a duration across the peaks and valleys of piled-up soot, around each slow curve of a smokestack or pauses between the ties of wood on the track. This is not an impersonal transcription made by a photographic automaton. Sheeler's labored reflection on a single place is a compilation of memories and imaginations: that is what we find in the alcoves of the painting's surface. So there has always been something of Sheeler in here all along—like the reflection in the window of *Self Portrait*—an encryption of human form within his peopleless world.

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[17]   See "Edith Gregor Halpert, c. 1940," Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, accessed 30 April 2013, http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/images/detail/edith-gregor-halpert-3976.

Figure 1. Charles Sheeler, *Classic Landscape*, 1931, oil on canvas, 63.5 x 819 cm. Collection of Barney A. Ebsworth, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

Figure 2. Charles Sheeler, *American Landscape*, 1930, oil on canvas, 61 x 78.8 cm. Gift of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York.

Figure 3. Charles Sheeler, 1883-1965, *River Rouge Plant*, 1932, oil and pencil on canvas, 20 3/8 x 24 5/16 inches (51.8 x 61.8 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase 32.43. Photograph by Geoffrey Clements.

Figure 4. Charles Sheeler, *City Interior*, 1936, aqueous adhesive and oil on composition board, 55.9 x 68.9 cm. Museum purchase in memory of Jonathan and Elizabeth M. Sawyer, Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Massachusetts.

[*left*] Figure 5. Francis Picabia, *"Ici, C'est Ici Stieglitz Foi et Amour"* Alfred *Stieglitz*, 1915, relief print on paper, 38 x 22.8 cm. Gift of Katharine Graham, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

[*above*] Figure 6. Charles Sheeler, portrait of Edith Gregor Halpert, *c*. 1940, black and white photographic print, 9 x 13 cm. Downtown Gallery records, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

[*below*] Figure 7. Charles Sheeler, *Self-Portrait,* 1923, conté crayon, gouache, and pencil on paper, 50.1 X 65.2 cm. Gift of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York.