MODERNISM AND THE NARRATIVE CULTURES OF FILM

Jonathan Higbie Foltz

A DISSERTATION
PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY
OF PRINCETON UNIVERSITY
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE
OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
RECOMMENDED FOR ACCEPTANCE
BY THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Advisors: Eduardo Cadava, Michael Wood, Jean-Michel Rabaté

November 2011
Abstract

*Modernism and the Narrative Cultures of Film* treats writing about film as a literary genre unto itself, where authors spun self-reflexive fictions about the cinema that doubled as commentaries on their own novelistic experiments. For the early period of the twentieth century in which no definition of cinema was self-evident, each description of the medium assumed the speculative quality of a fiction. Reading literature by Virginia Woolf, H. D. and Henry Green alongside film reviews and treatises on aesthetics, I show that film offered a displaced figure for persistent questions about representation, psychology, and narrative omniscience. Cast alternately as a mechanized art of surfaces and as the ideal vehicle of subjectivity, as the epitome of aesthetic detachment and as the prime example of art’s manifest entanglement in everyday life, film lent itself to rampant figuration, at once organizing and undoing the central antagonisms of modernist aesthetics.

I argue that the mobile appropriation, affirmation, and disavowal of film by modernist writers provided ready occasions to rethink literary narration. Situating these writings within the chaotic debates about film as “art,” *Modernism and the Narrative Cultures of Film* shows that literary descriptions of cinema functioned as richly digressive allegories of narrative method, in which notions of subjectivity, language, and omniscience were reconfigured in the shadow of a medium that seemed to make those categories at once obsolete and newly urgent. As the works of Virginia Woolf, H. D., and Henry Green attest, such literary fables of cinematic meaning (and meaninglessness) harbored striking—if oblique—meditations on narrative innovation and its social content, seeking unlikely affinities between the apparent privacy of prose and the conjectural modes of spectatorship. Writing not out of a desire to imitate film but out of a need to address its aesthetic consequences, the writers I consider expressed their discontent with the individualism of the novel, exploring formal modes of collective dissidence and public fantasy.
Acknowledgements

The thoughts and reflections which line these pages owe a significant debt to the scholars, teachers, and friends who have had the generosity to accompany me in conversation and commentary throughout this process. Eduardo Cadava has been an inspiring advisor, whose engaging insights and sensitive readings pushed me towards ever more direct ways of honoring the incongruities of thought. In Michael Wood, I found a mentor of uncommon patience and discernment, who guided me in the inquiry and the rigors of talk. Our discussions were rarely about what we had planned, and in this he showed me that digression is its own philosophy, with each question supplying the preface to another. Jean-Michel Rabaté was a dynamic interlocutor, whose keen advice helped me navigate the jungle of the profession.

My dissertation also draws on my coursework and dialogue with Maria DiBattista, whose intellectual generosity and incisive commentary proved invaluable. Zahid Chaudhary, Susan Stewart, Diana Fuss, Dan Blanton, Bill Gleason, Mark Hansen, P. Adams Sitney, and Susan Wolfson, offered welcome support and inspiration. An informal workgroup with Colleen Rosenfeld and Sarah Kennedy gave a much needed outlet early in the process. Further, I bow my head in deference to the friends and colleagues at Princeton and beyond, for the smiles and all our enlightened chatter: Michelle Coghlan, Wendy Lee, Masha Mimran, Maureen Chun, Lyra Plumer, Aaron Hostetter, Greg Londe, Casey Walker, Mary Noble, Rachel Galvin, Roger Bellin, Adrienne Brown, Alicia Christoff; to Armando Mastrogiavanni for his wealth of provocation, to Joe Rezek for his unwavering support, to Evan Kindley for his friendship, to Nicholas Patnaude for his metaphors and his open heart, to Dave Urban for the noise, and to Jacky Shin for her generosity and wisdom.

I am grateful to have had several opportunities to refine the terms of this project: in Princeton’s Media + Modernity Colloquium, at the Summer Institute for Media Theory at Northwestern, at the conference on Modernism and Visual Culture at Oxford, at Princeton’s Americanist Research Symposium, at NYU’s conference on Literature and the Mass-Produced Image, and in seminars at the MSA. I thank all those whose questions and responses prompted me toward a clearer understanding of my project. An earlier version of chapter three appeared in *Modernism / modernity* (18.1), and I thank my editor there, Benjamin Madden, for his painstaking care.

I would like to thank my family for what cannot be thanked, for their understanding, their faith, and their love. My father, the videographer, first tutored me in the silent languages of the image. This dissertation is dedicated to him. Finally, my debt to Carrie Hyde is heartfelt and immeasurable. Her incomparable grace and intelligence have sustained me, and made me what I am. This project, and so much else, would not have been possible without her.
List of Illustrations

Figures

1: Still from *By The Law* (1926) 137
2: Still from *By The Law* (1926) 139
3: Still from *By The Law* (1926) 142
4: Stills from *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928) 160
5: “Henry Green Proffers Some Alternative Poses to the Cameraman,” from *Life Magazine* (1952) 180
Modernism and the Narrative Cultures of Film

Contents:

Abstract iii
Acknowledgements iv
Illustrations v
Preface: “Ice-cream out of lilacs” 1

Chapter One: Fables of Detachment: Formalism and the Metaphorical History of Film 16
1. Disoriented Life 16
2. Comparative Formalisms; Or, The “Ghost of Art in the Movies” 24
3. Language “Obtuse and Hyperbolic” 34
4. What Remains of Literature 55

Chapter Two: Virginia Woolf and the Eye of History 75
1. “no man’s language” 75
2. The “unnatural alliance”—Cinema, Literature 85
3. “the character-making power” 98
4. “the picture-making power” 106
5. The “Eye” of History 113

Chapter Three: The Laws of Comparison: H. D. and Cinematic Formalism 123
1. Literature By the Law of Film 128
2. The Indeterminacy of Film 138
3. The Usual Star—Multiple Eyes 145
4. Film’s Nonexistence 151

Chapter Four: Henry Green and the Infinitely Remote 166
1. “the oldest gesture” 166
2. The Giant’s Breath 181
3. A Sense of the Remote 188
4. The Fog of Proximity 197

Coda: Mrs. Filmer’s Papers 210

Bibliography 212
Individual problems of art resemble each other.

— Sergei Eisenstein, “Lectures on Literature”
“Ice-Cream Out of Lilacs”: Prefatory

If we maintain that cinema influences the novel then we must suppose that it is a question of a potential image, existing exclusively behind the magnifying glass of the critic and seen only from where he sits. We would then be talking about the influences of a nonexistent cinema, an ideal cinema, a cinema that the novelist would produce if he were a filmmaker; of an imaginary art that we are still awaiting.

— André Bazin, “In Defense of Mixed Cinema” (1952)

To write about film is also to invent it. It is to offer, in place of the world which film presents, motley narratives and metaphors of the medium that mourn, compensate, or celebrate, its unavailability. The act of describing film creates, as Stephen Heath observes, a “new object,” and is thus an “intolerable necessity,” “the paradox holding the movement, the friction with which the analysis is concerned.”¹ That the reconstitution of film also distorts it—repairing its discontinuities, smoothing out its edges, etc.—should not, however, be taken only as a feeble disciplinary caution against the dangers of ekphrasis. Rather, it suggests that our knowledge of film is always tacitly accompanied by a recognition of the persistence and density of fiction; and that film’s imbrication within the refractory nets of language is an inescapable part of its history.²

If these comments seem like the tenets of some obscure theory, it is because the institutional grammars of cinematic specificity have evolved so far that we have forgotten

²Stanley Cavell acknowledges this when he remarks of the first edition of The World Viewed that while he had often gotten the details of a film wrong, that these artifacts of memory are in fact central to the experience, even to the medium, of film. See Stanley Cavell, The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film, Enlarged Edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), ix-x. To affirm the reparative fiction of film as it is described or remembered, as opposed to seeking some better idea of how it is or was, is to confront the fact that what we now accept as the unit “film” began as a trope, theoretically derivative on other arts, dependent on acts of description and construal.
what film might look like without these ways of speaking about it. In the absence of
settled concepts and terminologies for understanding film in the modernist period, the
most expedient way of making sense of the medium was to cloak it in metaphors and
analogies borrowed from other arts. It was by this means to give film a “character,” to
chart its erratic emplotment in known histories of expression.

It was in this spirit that in 1915, a prophetically named teacher of literature from
Hartford, Connecticut—one Alfred M. Hitchcock—published an article that sought to
assess the “relation of the picture-play to literature.” Before comparing film’s mere
“kaleidoscopic jumble of unrelated information” to the lyric “romance of inward history”
offered by classics such as Hawthorne’s The House of the Seven Gables, the author
presents us with a loquacious sketch of literature’s uncertain kinship with film. “Sisters?
cousins—first, second, or third? distant connections by marriage?” writes a skeptical
Hitchcock:

How are they related, these two? Who is she anyway, this amazing, fascinating,
bewildering, spectacular creature; at her best so beautiful, at times so
commonplace and coarse and tawdry and painted; so meekly innocent, a veritable
saint ...yet suspiciously familiar with all the deadly sins abhorrent to sainthood; so
lacking in reticence, yet withal too timid to lift her veil in sunlight; a veritable
Circe in whose herd may be seen priest and scholar and grimy-faced street urchin,
yet, miracle of miracles, dumb—absolutely dumb save for a click in her throat?
Whoever she be, one thing is certain: she’s into the house bag and baggage, and settled, not in the third floor back, but in the very best room—come to stay.\footnote{Alfred M. Hitchcock, “The Relation of the Picture Play to Literature” \textit{The English Journal} 4.5 (May 1915), 292-298. 292.}

A figurative intruder in the house of literature, film nevertheless wraps itself thoroughly within the baggy rhetoric of literary convention, taking on both the consistency and contradictions of the ill-suited language that describes it. Less a careful reflection on the representational modes of film itself than an excuse to revel in writing”s power to determine its object, Hitchcock”s description exemplifies how the cinema was materially obscured by its irreticent commentary. It also shows why, in the early writing on film, literature so often arises as its implied, transitive afterimage.

The word “narrative” in my title thus refers to the conspicuous desire in the modernist period to place film within a discernible history of representation, to ascribe to it relations of kinship and antipathy, to speculate anachronistically about film”s link to the ancient past or to prophecy the horizon of its artistic future—in short, the cultural need to craft fictions of identity and destiny for a medium which in its newness seemed to have none of its own.\footnote{This phrase “narrative” also invokes a number of methodological possibilities which I happen not to pursue. For example, I am not attempting to reframe the relation of modernist literature and film—as it would be possible to do—in light of recent studies in film about the transition from the “cinema of attractions” to classical narrative style, in what Tom Gunning, describing the early work of D. W. Griffith, calls the establishment of the “narrator system,” (see Gunning, \textit{D. W. Griffith and the Origin of American Narrative Film} [Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991]). I am also not pursuing here anything like the general narratology proposed by Seymour Chatman, when he writes that “only a general narratology can help to explain what literature and cinema have in common, narratively speaking, and only a good sense of that commonality will permit us to understand what is distinctively cinematic or literary,” \textit{Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film} (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 2. What is offered here is neither a history of the convergence between cinematic...} Indeed, it was often film”s nonidentity which seemed to be its most
enchanting quality. So Jean-Paul Sartre could write in his literary autobiography of his memories of silent film: “The cinema was a suspect appearance that I loved perversely for what it still lacked.” The sense that film’s nature had yet to be written held special allure for writers already invested in remapping the territory of the novel. For example, when Virginia Woolf locates—in the image of a passing shadow on the screen—an abstract “secret language” in which film’s aesthetic future might be written, she is also reimagining potentialities in her own writing, reallocating, in the proxy of film, new configurations of narrative agency. The narrative cultures of film, then, refers both to the stories told about film and to the discoverable mutations of form which it silently provoked in the imagination of its interpreters.

*Modernism and the Narrative Cultures of Film* treats writing about film as a literary genre unto itself, where authors spun self-reflexive fictions about the cinema that doubled as commentaries on their own novelistic experiments. For the early period of the twentieth century in which no definition of cinema was self-evident, each description of the medium assumed the speculative quality of a fiction. Reading literature by Virginia Woolf, H. D. and Henry Green alongside film reviews and treatises on aesthetics, I show that film offered a displaced figure for persistent questions about representation, psychology, and narrative omniscience. Cast alternately as a mechanized art of surfaces and as the ideal vehicle of subjectivity, as the epitome of aesthetic detachment and as the prime example of art’s manifest entanglement in everyday life, film lent itself to rampant and literary practice, nor a narratological theory of the conditions for such a convergence, but something more akin to a literary history of narrative style, metaphor—and the fictions of identity they support—reread in the crowded shadow of film.

figuration, at once organizing and undoing the central antagonisms of modernist aesthetics.

I argue that the mobile appropriation, affirmation, and disavowal of film by modernist writers provided ready occasions to rethink literary narration. Situating these writings within the chaotic debates about film as “art,” I argue that literary descriptions of cinema functioned as richly digressive allegories of narrative method, in which notions of subjectivity, language, and omniscience were reconfigured in the shadow of a medium that seemed to make those categories at once obsolete and newly urgent. The versions of film that emerge in these writings are to a large extent “nonexistent cinemas” in Bazin’s sense, “imaginary arts” whose articulation was an essentially fictive act. But as the works of Virginia Woolf, H. D., and Henry Green attest, such literary fables of cinematic meaning (and meaninglessness) harbored striking—if oblique—meditations on narrative innovation and its social content. Pushing against the forms of interiority which literature was held to cultivate, these texts sought unlikely affinities between the apparent privacy of prose and the conjectural modes of spectatorship which it could remake. Writing not out of a desire to imitate film but out of a need to address its aesthetic consequences, the writers I consider expressed a dissatisfaction with the individualism of the novelistic tradition, exploring formal modes of collective dissidence and public fantasy.

This does not mean that these writers always affirmed the technologies of expression manifested in particular films, or the idiom of juxtaposition or panoptic observance which film might reasonably be taken as providing. Instead, it was often by pushing defensively against these literal techniques, finding unique ways of writing about the act of seeing, that these authors were able to transmute the emergent tropes of the
cinema into those vital malapropisms of form and being which could animate their fiction. As Viktor Shklovsky observes in *Literature and Cinematography* (1923), the expressive modes of literature and film are so superficially similar, and so materially divergent, that “the laws of influence are difficult to define.” “Introducing Chaplinism into literature,” he writes in a remarkable thought, “is like making ‘ice-cream out of lilacs.’ You have to work in the material...”\(^6\) There is a canny fascination in Shklovsky’s rebuke, indicating both the impropriety of inter-medial comparison, and the strange power of the improper to reawaken thought in the vivid sphere of metaphor. “Ice-cream out of lilacs”\(^7\) is thus the name of a way of thinking about form that is undeterred by the catachrestic dissonance that constitutes it in movements of comparison and resemblance.\(^8\) Taking a cue from the exemplary drift of Shklovsky’s formula, this project proposes to study cinema’s influence on the novel in the uneven way in which film is interpreted and reconstituted in acts of representation; it thus locates in the practical non-objectivity of film a forceful context for literary experiment, in which the aims of narrative address are at once frustrated and illuminated. In this, *Modernism and the Narrative Cultures of Film* is not a traditional study of aesthetic influence: it does not seek to locate causal analogies between cinematic and literary practice. Instead, it treats the reception of film as an

---


\(^7\) It goes without saying that “ice-cream made out of lilacs” is now in fact a periodic option on restaurant menus, and hence no longer quite the figure of logical absurdity that Shklovsky seems to intend.

\(^8\) As Wendy Steiner observes of comparisons between literature and painting, the study of analogy “reveals the aesthetic norms of the period during which the question is asked” because it obliges literature or painting (or film) to face the “their paradoxical status as signs of reality,” Wendy Steiner, *The Colors of Rhetoric: Problems in the Relation between Modern Literature and Painting* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 18 and xii. Of course, photography and film, in questioning the nature of signs and the consistency of reality have also changed the meaning of analogy.
anarchic process in which writers allegorized the conditions of their own fiction in oblique yet substantive ways. Interpreting this body of work, I suggest, means accepting a form of literary history unredeemed by determinism and uniquely attentive to the refractory demands of reading.

Scholarship on literature and film has customarily assumed that the novelty of cinematic practices—montage, close-up, the flicker of moving images—provide concrete models for modernism’s own obsession with formal innovation, whether or not such connections can be substantiated beyond vague mimetic analogies. Or, when direct genealogies of style cannot productively be established, criticism has tended to ground the comparison in the common metaphor of “modernity” to which they separately refer.

The phrase “concrete” refers in part to Alan Spiegel’s notion “cinematographic form” in which narrative has become “concretized” or “reified”—“a way of transcribing the narrative not as a story that is told, but as an action that is portrayed and presented” (Alan Spiegel, “Flaubert to Joyce: Evolution of a Cinematographic Form,” Novel: A Forum on Fiction 6.3 [Spring 1973], 229-247: 229; see also his Fiction and the Camera Eye: Visual Consciousness in Film and the Modern Novel [Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1976]). The “debatable affinities” of film and literature are rationalized by Keith Cohen, who argues that “what makes possible...a study of the relation between two separate sign systems, like novel and film, is the fact that the same codes may reappear in more than one system” (Film and Fiction: The Dynamics of Exchange [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979], 3). See also Susan McCabe, Cinematic Modernism: Modernist Poetry and Film (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), where she suggests a more complicated application of these analogies to speak to the “cultural debate in modernity over the unstable conjunctions of the mind and the sensate body” (3).

See Miriam Hansen, “The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism,” Modernism/modernity 6.2 (April 1999) 59-77, where Hansen points out that classical Hollywood cinema may be considered “the single most inclusive horizon in which the traumas of modernity were reflected, rejected, or disavowed, transmuted or negotiated” and that it was also, like modernist literature, “capable of a reflexive relation with modernity” (68). Hansen’s article condenses and historicizes the Benjamminian tradition which sees modernity as a grammar of shocks and perceptual traumas inflicted by the accelerated movements of technology—a dehumanizing rhythm that film both exemplifies and helps its audience to surmount. Literature which touches on this fugitive territory, then, reaffirms its modernity by imitating cinema. This “modernity thesis” has recently been reevaluated by Malcolm Turvey, who wishes to
Indeed, the notion of the “cinematic novel” has taken on so many contrary valences (describing everything from languid stream of consciousness to clipped, hard-boiled prose) that it has become, as Steve Kellman writes in his brief survey of the concept, a “creature both mythical and protean.” Yet, if cinematic style does not always correspond in neatly material ways to the experiments of modern fiction, and if, as David Trotter has pointed out, our critical desire to affirm such a relation often betrays a disconcerting anachronism, we still need to be able to account for the ways that the figure fine-tune its terms, specifying only avant-garde films as truly modern in their disjunctive address. See Malcolm Turvey, *The Filming of Modern Life: European Avant-Garde Film of the 1920’s* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2011).

Steve G. Kellman, “The Cinematic Novel: Tracking a Concept,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 33.3 (Fall 1987), 467-477: 475. Charles Eidsvik similarly cautions that the notion of “cinematic” modernism is fraught with ambiguity: “The media-awareness of modernist literature makes any claim about „the cinematic” quality of literature a tricky endeavor. A passage can look cinematic without being demonstrably cinematic. Qualities such a fragmentation, montage, and animation have analogs in printed verbal language which resemble, but do not necessarily stem from, the cinema” (Charles Eidsvik, “Demonstrating Film Influence,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 1.2 [Spring 1973], 113-121: 120.)

There have been have been a number of ingenious proposals to justify the comparison of film to literature while still rescuing the concept of the materiality of each medium in the process. Eidsvik, for example, suggests that literature is most cinematic when it plays upon the graphic possibilities of the page, writing that “film has made writers self-conscious, concerned with their own medium, print” (“Demonstrating Film Influence,” 114). Garrett Stewart takes this proposition even further, pointing to the zero degree of language itself: “Across a comparable thickness of notation in each medium” he writes, “we find unreeling the still active signifier beneath the marshalled blocks of signification. In this sense, the filmic stands to the cinematic, once again, as écriture does to classic representation” (“Cinécriture: Modernism’s Flicker Effect” *New Literary History* 29.4 [1998] 727-768: 746); see also his *Between Film and Screen: Modernism’s Photo-Synthesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). It is also in a spirit of preserving the specificity of literature that Maria DiBattista distinguishes between the “cinematic regime” of sight which is uniquely instituted in the novel and the “cinematic” per se, “This is Not a Movie: *Ulysses* and Cinema” *Modernism/modernity* 13.2 [April 2006], 219-235: 230). In literature, she writes, “banishment from a paradise of images is compensated for by depth, by access to an interior where the fateful, not the fortuitous, dwells” (232).
of “cinema” offered writers a narrative cipher, through which the social and aesthetic aims of literary representation were articulated and modified.\textsuperscript{13}

This project joins recent scholarship by Laura Marcus, Michael North and others in reappraising the manifest entanglement of modernist literature in the debates over film and the cultural meaning of art.\textsuperscript{14} As North has shown, the influence of photographic and filmic technology did not always obey the material destinies proffered for it in retrospect; film, like photography, he writes, “was much more than a medium. It was the context, simultaneously technical, social and aesthetic, within which both writers and artists in the avant-garde worked out their ideas about representation.”\textsuperscript{15} Marcus’s \textit{The Tenth Muse} also reevaluates this aesthetic context by foregrounding the rich textual reciprocity between critics developing a new critical language for film and writers striving to renovate their own styles, a shared “experimentalism” in which each, with distinct but converging imperatives, sought to create a new “discursive medium.”\textsuperscript{16} And yet, the

\textsuperscript{13}David Trotter, \textit{Cinema and Modernism} (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007). Trotter specifies a particular criticism against the use of theories of montage to describe literary works that predate the publication of Eisenstein’s theories. Affinities between literature and cinema, he cautions, “should only be established—and put to use in literary criticism—on the basis of what a writer might conceivably have known about cinema as it was at the time of writing. Historically, the term “montage” acquired in a short period of time a range of not always entirely compatible meanings...Where literature and film are concerned, argument by analogy fails not only on historical but also on theoretical grounds. Literature is a representational medium, film a recording medium.” (2-3). And yet, the ability to distinguish between film and literature based on the neutrality of film as a recording medium is also anachronistic. In the film practice of Gunning’s cinema of attractions, film’s recording power is on display—but as a spectacle, not as a neutrality.


\textsuperscript{15}North, \textit{Camera Works}, 16.

\textsuperscript{16}Marcus, \textit{The Tenth Muse}, 16.
concepts and ways of writing developed in early film criticism were not always aptly commensurate with the new art; instead—like Hitchcock’s belabored description—they frequently gave voice to the haphazard displacement of traditional values. For this reason, modernist writing on film—and the notions of fiction which are constructed in its shadow—provide only peripheral confirmation of the cinematic concepts that initiate them, at once managing and exacerbating formal anxieties about medium specificity. Such oblique trajectories suggest the opportunity to read these writings as the site of reflexive mythologies, in which writers both adopted and transformed the figure of cinema into signposts of communicative promise. In this respect, the modernist novel can be seen to demonstrate with an exemplary thoroughness what Julian Murphet has called the “sedimented trace history of ...competing media institutions.” Indeed, from the inhumanly lucid soliloquizing of the permeable characters in The Waves, to H. D.’s narrator in “The Usual Star”—conceived only as the meeting point of echoing likenesses—to the self-effacing “remoteness” of Henry Green’s narrator in Party Going, the writers I consider embraced the metaphoricity of film as a way of denaturing literary norms and the models of identity which they were taken to support.

To locate the genealogy of these narrative practices within readings of the cinema is to observe that the history of literary form is embedded within what would now be called the history of media. When Roger Fry and I. A. Richards invoke cinematic

---

17Murphet, Multimedia Modernism, 3.
18John Guillory, for example, sees the history of the “media concept” as a shift from the classical emphasis on mimesis in the arts to the concept of “communication.” See Guillory, “Genesis of the Media Concept” Critical Inquiry 36.2 (Winter 2010) 321-362. In this sense, the transformations described in this project might otherwise be described as writers turning to film to discover the nonuniqueness of literature and to articulate there its “medial” quality. The process described here is thus similar to, but perhaps less
vision as alternately exemplifying formal detachment and dissolving art’s structuring effects, they separately testify to the fact that their emergent notions of formal unity relied upon the assumption of film’s incoherence. William Empson glimpses this uneasy situation when he describes the attempt to reconcile the inconsistencies of film form with traditional literary structures as being only a “defensive gambit,” and that in an essential sense films “are not designed for critics.” Of course, tensions not useful for critics can prove extraordinarily productive for writers. And as the texts I examine show, the incompatibility of film and literature manifests itself in startling forms of writing which are, as Virginia Woolf will say, “fertilized” by the impersonal ways of seeing conjured by film. If this study takes the analysis of form as its focus, then, it is not out of a fealty to the formalist discourses that posit the “literariness” of literature, but out of a sense that “form” is something that arrests our reading in its material apprehension of the discordant histories of communicable experience. After all, the genealogies of disciplines and critical modes do not run in a straight line, but are traversed by the promiscuous genres, figures and tropes that constitute each in chains of dependency and confusion. The mixed modernisms examined in this project demand that we explore the discrepancies of technological media whose apparent neutrality often makes the world they represent programmatic than, the structure of “remediation” which Bolter and Grusin locate, for example, in film adaptations of Victorian novels, or literary representations of film (see Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, Remediation: Understanding New Media [Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999], 45.). William Empson, The Book, Film & Theatre Reviews of William Empson: Originally Printed in the Cambridge Magazine Granta, 1927-1929, and Now Collected for The Foundling Press (Turnbridge Wells, Kent: The Foundling Press, 1993), 74.

20 The modes of writing that emerge from a reading of film are thus also unruly comparative records of “form” in the sense named by Angela Leighton, glossing Roland Barthes, as that which “give us pause...reroutes our very trains of thinking.” See Angela Leighton, On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of the Word (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 20-21.
seem axiomatically universal, uninflected either by cultural bias or errant fantasy. In showing how the needful repurposing of film by modernist authors responded to particular social and aesthetic pressures—rather than to impartial theory—Modernism and the Narrative Cultures of Film suggests that our understanding of media more broadly must remain mindful of the fictions by which they are conditioned.

My first chapter—“Fables of Detachment”—assesses the impact of film on the competing discourses of formalism. The belated affirmation of film’s artistic possibilities, more than twenty years after its initial emergence as a mass attraction, prompted new elaborations of the autonomy of aesthetic experience and of the ordering notion of literary form. By the end of the nineteen twenties, the growing sense that film had “come into its own” as a medium made it possible for cinematic culture to appear as at once the fulfillment and final bastardization of formalism’s promise. Although many of our current assumptions about film’s specificity as a medium still derive from the categories and argumentative strategies developed in this period (from roughly 1915-1930), it is impossible to return to the early writing on film without sensing that these critics were remarkably unreliable narrators of the medium they described, and whose consistency they helped establish. By far the greatest difficulty of reading the formative essays of early film criticism is the temptation to take them at their word: as a rule, we learn more from the prominent inelegance of their language than from their argumentative claims. And yet, if the early debates over film’s status as an art tacitly relied on speculative tropes and analogies, the figure of film was also instrumental in contemporaneous formalist discussions of literature. Tracing these intersecting histories in the contested role of film in Roger Fry and I. A. Richards’s theories of literary form, this chapter
argues that the affirmation and denegation of film aesthetics shared a common grammar of metaphor and fable. The study of the ongoing transformations of literature in the age of film—which is, as Ian Balfour has recently suggested, another name for the study of literature—thus found its starting place in the discursive formalization of film within and through the tropes of literature.  

Chapter Two—“Virginia Woolf and the Eye of History”—opens with a reading of Woolf’s 1926 essay “The Cinema,” where she contrasts literature’s capacity for depicting psychological depths to the impersonal world of filmic surfaces (“life as it is when we have no part in it”). I suggest that the aesthetic comparison with film enabled Woolf to extend her more limited claim about the importance of “character” for modern fiction to an experimental personification of literature as a medium. Film, she contends, shows us something different from subjectivity, but not entirely unrelated to it: it shows the “likeness of thought,” as she puts it, rather than thought itself. Reading “The Cinema” as a restaging of “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” and its defining antagonisms, I argue that Woolf’s theory of character can also be understood as a theory of media, and that The Waves—her most formless and generically unstable work—is its most sustained elaboration. In The Waves, the tragic isolation of characters’ private lives is only partially redeemed by the all-too-perfect legibility of their lyric narration. Read in light of her essay on film, Woolf’s uncanny language in The Waves—ostensibly lucid, but palpably unreal—reveals a striking impatience with the insularity of the self, and a melancholic fascination with linguistic artifice.

If writing on the cinema became an occasion to construct literary form through negation, film theory also provided a displaced reflection on the nature of linguistic meaning. From Vachel Lindsay to Sergei Eisenstein, film theorists attempted to specify cinematic techniques through the appeal to a “film grammar” that hearkened back to language’s ostensible origin in pictographic or hieroglyphic script. The influx of Russian film theory through the journal *Close-Up* (1927-1933) provided English audiences with their first glimpse of Russian Formalism, many of whose proponents, most notably Victor Shklovsky, had turned to film criticism and production in the early twenties. Drawing on H. D.’s review of a film written by Shklovsky and her essay on Carl Dreyer's *Joan of Arc*, my third chapter—“The Laws of Comparison”—reads her contributions to *Close-Up* as divided between her idealization of film as a universal language and her frustration with films that negate the subjective structure of cinematic spectatorship. If H. D.’s objection mirrors Woolf’s insight into the impersonality of film, she also gestures to a larger conflict between the orders of the literary and the cinematic, their “spiritual antagonism.”

The final chapter—“Henry Green and the Infinitely Remote”—traces the relation of literature to film into the 1930’s. I begin by examining the poetics of authorial self-effacement in Green’s theoretical essay “The English Novel of the Future,” which discusses the way that novelistic technique has been influenced by film. The very self-evidence of cinema’s influence on literary forms, for Green, indicates a nonchalance about this relationship at variance with the contentious debates that characterized earlier responses to film’s emergence as an “art.” Gone is any trace of the formalist arguments concerning the “aesthetic” suitability of cinema for representing life—film has overcome
that impasse simply by becoming part of life itself, by infiltrating not only its daily practices but the metaphorical imaginary according to which these practices are reflexively constituted. Film, like other technological innovations, has become merely another part of vernacular experience, making the question of its “influence” appear inevitable. Indeed, it was in part the banality of film, rather than its grammar of shock, that captured the interest of many writers of Green’s generation, for whom it functioned largely as an organ of mass culture that promised vicarious access into social experience. *Modernism and Narrative Cultures of Film* thus concludes with the suggestion that fiction most honors its purpose when it makes its authority unstable, and becomes, like the cinema, the inconspicuous stage of the shared fantasy which is the condition of our unconscious intimacy with other people. In this, Green draws on the cinema to rework the modernist paradigms he at once inherits and disavows, showing that the narrator’s access to characters’ thoughts may ultimately bar us from the collective fog of ordinary life.
16

Chapter One:
Fables of Detachment: Formalism and the Metaphorical History of Film

*When history is what it should be, it is an elaboration of cinema.*
—José Ortega y Gasset, *On Point of View in the Arts*”

1. Disoriented Life

When Roger Fry began, in 1909, to formalize his ideas concerning art and aesthetic emotion, he happened to pen one of the earliest existing discussions of film as art—although he did not set out to do so. Indeed, *An Essay in Aesthetics*”—which was originally published in *New Quarterly* and subsequently reprinted in *Vision and Design* (1920)—is not chiefly about the cinema at all, but instead concerns the way in which the viewing of art might be considered a fundamentally unique perceptual and affective experience. Different modes and contexts of seeing, he argues, produce corresponding changes at the level of consciousness and reflex. *A great many objects in the world,*” Fry writes, *when presented to our senses, put in motion a complex nervous machinery which ends in some instinctive appropriate action.*” This instinctive action—caught in the habitual *machinery* of sensation—sends us towards responses that so determine the way that emotions are experienced that they must be suspended (as they are in art) if we are to feel them with any clarity. *We see a wild bull in a field,*” writes Fry; *quite without our conscious interference a nervous process goes on, which, unless we interfere

---

forcibly, ends in the appropriate action of flight...[and] which causes a certain state of consciousness, which we call the emotion of fear. ...But in the imaginative life no such action is necessary, and, therefore, the whole consciousness may be focused upon the perceptive and emotional aspects of the experience. In this way we get, in the imaginative life, a different set of values, and a different kind of perception” (EA,” 13).

Art’s power, he will go on to say, is that it presents life to us in the distance of form, offering an uncanny lucidity in a detached perspective: —the motives we actually experience,” he says, —are too close to us to enable us to feel them clearly. They are in a sense unintelligible. In the imaginative life, on the other hand, we can both feel the emotion and watch it” (EA,” 19).

At this point in Fry’s essay, we are presented with another example in which to test his formalist hypothesis—more prosaic than the previous situation with the bull, perhaps, but no less revealing. We view art, Fry suggests, with the same distance with which we view films.

We can get a curious side glimpse of the nature of this imaginative life from the cinematograph. This resembles actual life in almost every respect, except that what the psychologists call the conative part of our reaction to sensations, that is to say, the appropriate resultant action is cut off. If, in a cinematograph, we see a runaway horse and cart, we do not think either of getting out of the way or heroically interposing ourselves. The result is that in the first place we see the event much more clearly; see a number of quite interesting but irrelevant things, which in real life could not struggle into our consciousness, bent, as it would be, entirely upon the problem of our appropriate reaction. I remember seeing in a
cinematograph the arrival of a train at a foreign station and the people descending from the carriages; there was no platform, and to my intense surprise I saw several people turn right around after reaching the ground, as though to orientate themselves; an almost ridiculous performance, which I had never noticed in all the many hundred occasions on which such a scene had passed before my eyes in real life. The fact being that at a station one is never really a spectator of events, but an actor engaged in the drama of luggage or prospective seats, and one actually sees only so much as may help to the appropriate action (―EA,‖ 13).

Quite unlike the customary myth of early film spectators fleeing in panic at the Lumière brothers’ *Arrivé d’un train en gare à La Ciotat* (1895)—as the locomotive appeared to pass through the lens of the camera and into the audience—Fry’s train station is the site of a strangely contemplative discernment. The disembarking passengers who seem confused at the absence of a platform, circling themselves in their “almost ridiculous performance” in search of surer footing, come to indicate by negation the kind of clarity of vision which is open to the spectator. In this case, it is not the viewers who are frightened by the violent intrusion of filmed realities into the present, but reality itself which is shown to be full of unaccountable behaviors and movements, odd dislocations that are invisible except when seen from a distance. Film discloses the thickness and

---

fluctuating nature of perception, its dependence on context as well as its potential dissociation from the spheres of the routine.  

And yet, it would be easy to misconstrue, or to overstate, the emphasis on cinematic representation in Fry’s analysis. Far from offering a sustained inventory of its aesthetic qualities, Fry’s essay invokes the cinema as an exemplary metaphor, a “curious side glimpse” at what happens in aesthetic experience more generally. Indeed, if we read further into the essay it quickly becomes clear that film is only one of many available figures for the separation imposed by the “imaginative life.” — A somewhat similar effect to that of the cinematograph,” he writes in the subsequent paragraph, “can be obtained by watching a mirror in which a street scene is reflected. … [I]n the mirror, it is easier to abstract ourselves completely…and we become true spectators” (EA” 14). Like Fry’s fabular encounter with a “wild bull in a field,” or like the later allegory of the village boy

---

4 It should be noted that Fry’s reflections on film here are remarkable in part for the familiar polemics of photo-realism which they evade. Given that Fry’s conception of aesthetic experience is expressly designed to describe and authorize the visual distortions of what he will come to term —post-impressionism,” it is significant, and perhaps paradoxical, that his two chief examples of aesthetic experience are the cinematograph and the reflections of a mirror. What matters, it would seem, is not the external contours of the world which is depicted, but the mode of perception which they solicit in the viewer—an opinion which casts film (or even vision itself) as a strangely non-objective mechanism. It is as though the most familiar icons of mimesis are also shown, in Fry’s hands, to be the organs of its basic incoherence. Traces of this dialectical stance can be found as early as his unpublished article, “The Philosophy of Impressionism” (1894), in which Fry locates the ostensible abstractions of impressionism firmly within the western tradition of perspective—the “science of appearances” (14)—which photography crystallizes and dissolves. For the impressionist, he observes, the instantaneous photograph is of no value; it may be a record of what happens; it is not, owing to the imperfect structure of the eye, a record of what appears, and with that alone he is concerned. Whether a variety of the human species which thus carefully deprives itself of the warning which sight gives us of the nature of objects with which we are surrounded, must not in the end be submerged in the struggle for existence, I leave to the speculative evolutionist” (21). See, Roger Fry, “The Philosophy of Impressionism,” in A Roger Fry Reader, ed. Christopher Reed (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
encountering a wolf in the forest (which Fry appropriates from Tolstoy’s *What is Art*?),
the scene of the train arriving at the station functions primarily as a commonplace figure
through which the perceptual drama of art gets enacted.\(^5\) It indicates an attempt to
translate the minute solicitations of visual forms into a more readily comprehensible
idiom, sketching in a presumptively ordinary manner the imperative that art remove us
from ordinary experience. Held under the contradictory expectation that it both elucidate
the everyday and embody its suspension, film absorbs the multiple demands of Fry’s
aesthetic discourse—even if he never claims that the cinema is itself artistic. If these
presentational tensions do not immediately offer a solid foundation from which to
reinterpret Fry’s theories of aesthetic detachment, they do suggest a fitting entry point for
re-examining the status of film in early twentieth-century discourse, where the concept of
film can often assume a strange opacity in the very casualness with which it is invoked by
analogy.

Because the changing status of film—not just its technical emergence, but the
increasing assertion of film as a culturally prestigious narrative medium—implied
significant changes in the idea of art and its relation to everyday experience, it makes
sense to find that metaphors of film persistently appeared on the sidelines of discussions

\(^{5}\) See Leo Tolstoy, *What is Art?* trans. Almyer Maude (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell &
Co., 1899), 42. As J.B. Bullen observes in his annotations, Fry changes Tolstoy’s wolf
into a bear in his essay. Here is how Fry narrates it: "...[Tolstoy] gives an example of
what he means by calling art the means of communicating emotions. He says, let us
suppose a boy to have been pursued in the forest by a bear. If he returns to the village
and merely states that he was pursued by a bear and escaped, that is ordinary language,
the means of communicating facts or ideas; but if he describes his state first of
helplessness, then of sudden alarm and terror as the bear appears, and finally of relief
when he gets away, and describes this so that his hearers share his emotions, then his
description is a work of art" ("EA,” 20). For Tolstoy, of course, the boy’s narrative might
be considered art even if the encounter with the wolf/bear is invented.
about aesthetic detachment. Film could easily be seen to embody that separation of vision analogous to the disinterestedness theorized by neo-Kantian aesthetic philosophy. 

In this way, Vernon Lee—when trying to analyze the apparently laborious mechanisms of attention and resemblance which she identifies as the hallmark of aesthetic perception—implies that only an impersonal mode of observation, such as film provides, could capture the complexity of aesthetic feeling. The aesthetic subject, she writes, is not aware, for instance, of making eye adjustments and eye movements... yet his eye movements could have been cinematographed, and his eye adjustments have been described minutely in a dozen treatises. And in a vein that clearly recalls Fry's essay, José Ortega y Gasset describes the abstracting, stylizing operations of modern art as a proto-cinematic dissociation of perception from lived reality. Seeing requires distance,” he writes, —Each art operates a magic lantern that removes and transfigures its objects. On its screen they stand aloof, inmates of an inaccessible world, in an absolute

---

6 For an account of the interrelationship between the development of narrative screen practice and borrowed forms of cultural prestige (in literary adaptations, the employment of well-known stage actors, etc.), see Tom Gunning, *D. W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 151-188. The sense of film as an art was also a response the increased length of films, which promised to remove them from the erratic sphere of common entertainment and elevate them to the level of, if not epic, then at least continuous narrative. For a discussion of the impact of film length on the development of narrative, see Jean-Michel Rabaté, *1913: The Cradle of Modernism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 21-24.

7 And, as Laura Marcus has shown, the logic and vocabulary of formalist aesthetics proved a valuable tool for critics of film eager to establish its cultural value (see her chapter —A New Form of True Beauty‘: Aesthetics and Early Film Criticism,” in *The Tenth Muse: Writing About Cinema in the Modernist Period* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007], 179-233. The chief touchstones for this discussion would be Vachel Lindsay’s *The Art of the Moving Picture* (1915, 1922), Hugo Münsterberg’s *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* (1916) and Victor Freeburg’s *Pictorial Beauty on the Screen* (1923), as well as the work of Jean Epstein and Louis Delluc, but also Clive Bell’s essays on film or Harold Stearns’ ‘Art in Moving Pictures” (1915).

distance." And yet, these offhanded comments, it would appear, do not signal anything as identifiably concrete as their author's personal "opinion" about film. Indeed, if we investigate Lee's work and Ortega's other writings, we find evidence to contrary.10

In Fry's case, too, his writing betrays a remarkably unstable appraisal of film in relation to art. In his 1924 lecture, "The Artist and Psychoanalysis" (reprinted the same year by the Hogarth Press), the cinema appears as the emblem of exactly the sort of wish-fulfillment-based "art industry" from which Fry would like to disentangle more serious considerations of aesthetic emotions as the remote contemplation of formal effects. He remembers an advertisement of a Cinema with the legend "Let us live a life in two hours," he writes. "This was a clear appeal to the desire to realize ideally what reality had denied, and indeed there can be no doubt about the method and purpose of nearly all the films... By a process which is mere child's play in the dream life we instantly identify ourselves with the hero, and then what satisfaction we attain!"11 Nothing could be further from Fry's earlier observation of cinema's contemplative gaze than the vicarious magic

---

10 See, for example, Lee's bewildering anti-war drama-treatise, Satan, The Waster (1920), in which the cinematograph, along with a phonograph machine, appears as the representational symptom of modernity's ills, depicting for the muses of history all the self-aggrandizing egotism of cultured British life that, in Lee's view, makes something like the events of the first world war possible. The fiction of identity as distinct from "otherness," she notes, is, as she puts it, an "optical illusion" (Satan, The Waster (New York: John Lane Co., The Bodley Head, 1920), xxxiv. The reflection on film serials in Ortega's "Notes on the Novel," too, seem inconsistent with the invocation of the "inaccessible world" of the screen quoted above. See "Notes on the Novel," The Dehumanization of Art and Other Essays, 66.
of films that allow their audience to live out the roles denied to them in life. Here, however, Fry unhesitatingly asserts that this crude wish fulfillment is—the method and purpose of nearly all the films.” Part of what remains enigmatic about Fry’s initial invocation of film is the way in which his reflections are underpinned by an idea—or more exactly by a figure—that is removed from the sphere of argumentative judgment, apparently commonplace in content, and uncomfortably variable in meaning.

What is the status of such apparently incidental metaphors and analogies? In addition to asking what they illuminate in each given case (a particular concept—art, for example), it is also necessary to probe into the set of assumptions and conditions to which these metaphors bear witness and upon which they rely. It might strike us as remarkable, for instance, that in his ostensibly timeless explication of what he calls the “nature of the graphic arts” through observations of “elementary psychology” Fry would turn to an example—film—that is so clearly marked by its contemporaneity. One could raise the same question about Bergson’s famous discussion of cinematographic models of consciousness in Creative Evolution.12 If these examples now strike us as blatantly uncritical or troublingly unspecified, such rhetorical instability is also an object study, and an oblique window onto the mutual imbrication of media, history and language that conditions our understanding of modernity. Indeed, although Fry’s essay suggests that the detachment of cinematic vision extricates us from the confusions of life, a closer examination of the figure of the cinema in the early twentieth century shows that it is in

fact one of the period’s chief signs of aesthetic confusion. In what follows, I explore both
the tropological underpinnings of critical writing on the “art” of film, and discussions of
literary form which use the typically inchoate figure of the cinema to entrench—by
negation—notions of textual order. In so doing, I hope to show that the history of
nascent literary formalism is bound up with the cultural emergence of film, and that an
attention to the rhetorical structure of film criticism can help to illuminate the
overlapping histories of cinema and literature.

2. Comparative Formalisms; Or, The “Ghost of Art in the Movies”

_The hardest thing a critic of the movies has to face is the accusation that he wants
to make the movies artistic._
— Gilbert Seldes, “Art in the Movies” (1925)\(^\text{13}\)

_The movies have been led astray for a long time by what, for want of a better
term, is called art._
— Ralph Block, “The Ghost of Art in the Movies” (1924)\(^\text{14}\)

The exploratory writing on film in the first decades of the century gained its
specificity just as much from the absence of an accepted critical vocabulary as from the
disputed character of film’s artistic or cultural merit. For this reason, we might say, it is
the awkward contortions of description and comparison in these pieces, their often
acknowledged conceptual ineptitude, which stages the most eloquent reflection on the
problems of cinematic representation. “We never get out of the state of conceptual
confusions,” Georg Lukács wrote in a 1913 essay on film aesthetics, “something new and

\(^{13}\) Gilbert Seldes, “Art in the Movies,” _The Nation_ 121.3134 (1925), 148.

beautiful has arisen in our days, yet, instead of accepting it as it is, people want to classify it by all possible means in old, unfitting categories.”15 This belated thinking is the hallmark of the early discourse on film. From Vachel Lindsay’s comparative classification of filmic modes—as “sculpture-in-motion,” “painting-in-motion,” and “architecture-in-motion”16—to common claims about film’s “pantomimic,”17 “pictorial,”18 “rhythmic,”19 “poetic,”20 “novelistic,”21 and “hieroglyphic”22 character, the insistently analogic grammar of film criticism in the period attests to the perceived

22 Lindsay, The Art of the Moving Picture, 171-188; Terry Ramsaye, A Million and One Nights (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1926), li-lxvii.
necessity, but also the conceptual difficulty, of evaluating film within previously established codes.\textsuperscript{23} This difficulty is often acknowledged in the same breath as it is practiced. One critic, for example, explicitly complained of Lindsay’s painterly comparison—remarking that the “trouble with such an analogy is that…it is apt, if pressed too far, to lead to absurdity”—before proceeding, three pages later, to offer “narrative fiction” as his own illustrative model.\textsuperscript{24}

These descriptive contradictions expressed the historical nature of film’s opacity in the period. This, at least, is the argument of Ralph Block’s paradigmatically titled “Not Theatre, Not Literature, Not Painting”—which was published in The Dial in 1927, and commissioned by Marianne Moore. “An art may have a large body of aesthetic tradition and be moribund,” writes Block, “it may have none to speak of and be very much alive. The movies are this kind of art. \textit{It is not possible to understand them, much less truthfully see them, within the limitations, judgments and discriminations of the aesthetic viewpoint.”\textsuperscript{25} In pointing to the futility of judging film by pre-established criteria, Block argues that contemporary assessments of film are necessarily distorted because they are enmeshed in a history that will only be clear with greater distance. Thus

\textsuperscript{23} The most prevalent comparison, of course, was to the theater, a tendency that reflected both the explicitly theatrical conventions of film practice, and the fact that the majority of early film critics (including A. Bakshy, W. P. Eaton, J. Agate, E. A. Baughan, etc.) began as drama critics. Victor Freeburg was in fact a scholar of Elizabethan theater.

\textsuperscript{24} Frank L. George, “Towards an Art of the Photodrama,” \textit{Out West Magazine} 44.6 (1916), 251, 254. “If analogies from the other arts are to be insisted upon,” he symptomatically wrote, “in defining the motion-picture, fiction has an illustrative value. While its direct method of representation is pantomimic (certainly a form of drama) and photographic (certainly a form of pictorial art), the steady flow of event in the photodrama is clearly allied to the steady flow of vents in narrative fiction” (254).

\textsuperscript{25} Ralph Block, “Not Theatre, Not Literature, Not Painting,” \textit{The Dial; a Semi-monthly Journal of Literary Criticism, Discussion and Information} (January 1927), 20 – my emphasis.
film might be judged only in the future, when film will have been mellowed and tested by time, and captured by an audience saturated with tradition—acclimated by use to an understanding of the laws, intentions, and refinements of the medium. The movies by that time will have lost their excitement, but at least they will be aesthetically correct.”

The slim consolations of aesthetic correctness suggest that film’s vitality consists in its resistance to art and to the borrowed categories used to support it. Given Block’s critique of comparisons to other arts, however, it should appear at once ironic and exemplary that he goes on to elaborate the indistinctness of cinema as a function of its relation to the masses, just —like music, painting, and the drama in their primitive stages.” Indeed, these rhetorical gestures can come to seem inevitable, even compulsive, such that it is tempting to reverse Block’s argument and say that a true history of cinema in the modernist period is impossible if it does not start from an acknowledgement of film’s discursive opacity in the eyes of its critics, their sometimes startling statements of affinity as well as their blithe negatives.”

26 Ibid., 20.
27 Ibid., 20.
28 This language is taken from a 1927 article by Ernest Betts, where he echoes the general anxiety that —after thirty years of erratic history no literature of the film exists. …None of the old buttresses of criticism sustains this insubstantial fabric; they serve a temporary purpose. …we have no criticism, save the equivocal or sensational or frankly ignorant stuff which fills up the columns of the popular Press. Some of this, with many technical embellishments, attempts to enter a region of high seriousness, and the plain story, distinguished by nothing but its box-office merits, is stuck into a great quarto of glorification and glued for ever in dubious academics.” For Betts, —we can only discover the first principles [of film as a distinct medium] by reference to those which govern other art forms. We appeal to the next of kin. It has been said that there is no organic relation between the motion picture and the novel or short story. Film criticism is full of these blithe negatives.” Even in making the comparison between film and literature, however, Betts wishes to —turn back” having carried the analogy to its danger-point” (Ernest Betts, The Film as Literature,” 905).
For, in truth, those critics who were engaged to show film’s resemblance to other arts were participating in exactly the same project as those who argued against such comparisons. That is, as Rudolph Arnheim’s *Film as Art* would later exemplify, both the positive and negative expression of film’s relation to other arts were incipient articulations of its “medium.” As Arnheim would write in 1932, “film resembles painting, music, literature, and the dance in this respect—it is a medium that may, but need not, be used to produce artistic results.” That is, to have an identifiable medium is to be similar to other arts in the very distinction, or specificity, of film’s mode of representation. The paradox of aesthetic identity is that it relies upon these resemblances, even as it is exacerbated by them.

Revisiting the field of writing on film from roughly 1910 to 1930, then, we are ill-equipped to account for the unsystematic nature of these texts precisely because the project of film’s establishment as an independent art, towards which so many critics blindly groped, now seems a self-evident proposition. By 1935,” wrote Dudley Andrew in his now canonical study, *The Major Film Theories*,

it was taken for granted in nearly all educated circles that cinema was an art, independent from all other arts, yet having in common with them the process of transformation whereby dull matter is shaped into scintillating and eloquent statement. If most of us still see cinema in much this way, if most articles on

---

cinema still hold on to this general perspective, it is in large part because of the powerful viewpoint propounded between 1915 and 1935.  

Recent scholarship has significantly complicated the valence of Andrew’s narrative by showing how the aesthetic debates about film were conditioned by institutional changes in the film industry, the museum and the university, rather than the self-enacting claims of theorists. Still, Andrew’s comments testify to the intervening rift in the basic modes of critical practice, such that we seem fated to misunderstand these early writings by reducing them to arguments we are prone to accept too readily, while the common anxieties of value and vocabulary which motivated their claims now seem too obscure to be useful. (Indeed, Andrew himself focuses only on the more systematic writings of Münsterberg, Eisenstein, Arnheim and Balázs for just this reason: since ‗the first ‗theories‘ sound more like birth announcements than scientific inquiries.‘) In investigating the conditions of early film criticism, however, it is the unscientific nature of these writings—often more than the concepts they introduce—that can best inform our understanding of film’s relation to the discourses adjacent to it. That is, because film, as a more or less discrete and stable concept, was a late development, to write about film, and

---

30 Dudley Andrew, The Major Film Theories: An Introduction (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 13. Andrew marshals this historical summary in order to acknowledge the basic discontinuity between that ‗major‘ strand of theory and those ‗primitive‘ theorists—such as Vachel Lindsay, Louis Delluc, Jean Epstein, etc.—whose erratic, prophetic and self-consciously poetic writing advances ‗esthetic propositions…seldom supported in a rigorous way‘” (12).


32 Andrew, The Major film Theories, 11.
especially to evaluate its artistic merit, was to think reflexively about the status of other arts, or even about the nature of art itself.

Not incidentally, to judge the expressive capacity of film was also to reflect upon the relation of film to language. Laura Marcus, in her authoritative recent study of writing on film in the period, highlights the fact that the lack of inherited critical and institutional film cultures obliged critics to adapt a new way of writing. These critics, Marcus argues, were – acutely aware of the need to forge a new critical language of film and cinema and often described their task as an experimental one, in the process of formation and necessarily provisional. ” Critics themselves, however, routinely cast this experimental imperative as a tragic reminder of the ineptitude of journalistic [film] criticism generally.” Thus a writer for The New York Times could bemoan, in 1915, that the lack of adequate interpretation and criticism must astonish the Martian or other visitor coming to these shores… The cinema is a Topsy ‘ dat jes’ grewed. ‘ There are no canons of the art, no rules of criticism, no intelligent body of opinion, and no agreement on anything except that D.W. Griffith as a producer is the best ever' and his film _The Birth of a Nation’ is by far the greatest motion picture work yet put forward.” Indeed,

34 Frank L. George, “Towards an Art of the Photodrama,” 253.
35 Henry MacMahon, “The Art of the Movies.” The New York Times, June 6th 1915. Incidentally, the – Topsy” metaphor is actually quite common in early film criticism: see Alfred Kuttner – The Pantomime and the Picture” in The Nation 113.2935 (October 5 1921), 375. – The motion picture is like Topsy; it jes‘ grewed.” It grew up in an atmosphere of contempt and abuse, and it is therefore not surprising that even its finest achievements still show traces of this unfavorable environment. But like Richard III it also grew hardy, and those who formerly abused it owe it an apology as they now approach it to share in its triumphs” (375). There had also been an earlier instance in Louis Reeves Harrison, “What Happened to Mary” The Moving Picture World 17.1 (1913), 26. Harrison writes that, — the first steps [toward narrative filmmaking] were
most critics—regardless of their particular intellectual investments—could agree that film
criticism was in a "chronic muddle," a "state of chaos," a "critical jungle" that
could only be made intelligible, in the words of Alexander Bakshy, through the task of
creating the canons and standards, of shaping the conventions of cinematographic art, and
of building up a tradition which will pass, in due course, through the period when it is
merely fashionable, and attain finally the position of an acknowledged medium of artistic
expression." These disciplinary cautions show both the experimental drive to forge a
new language, and a recognition that film could only uneasily bear the scrutiny of
aesthetic thinking.

This lingering conceptual disagreement is mirrored in the awkward terminology
so common in these works. Even by the early 1930's, when theoretical explications of
film were much more readily available, C. A. Lejeune could still remark of the occasional
awkwardness of her descriptive and conceptual language that "We stumble along, doing

36 Ernest Betts, "Criticism and the Film Critic," *Close-Up* (November 1927), 40. As
Betts continued: "I do not mean that there is simple disagreement among the critics. …I
mean that no *credo* has been forthcoming to give clarity and consistency to what we read
about films" (40).
(September 1919), 448-456. "The cinematograph is itself an art," Baughan wrote, "with
its own aesthetic could we but formulate it…" (449).
38 Seymour Stern, "Clearing the Critical Jungle," *National Board of Review Magazine* 2.2
(1927), 8-10.
the best we can with the old terms while we try to rough out a new vocabulary, borrowing from this art and from that, compromising, slipping in a tentative technicality here and there; without quite the courage to invent, as the movie actually demands, a new vernacular.” And yet, the issue does not seem to have involved a lack of courage to invent a new vocabulary or new concepts commensurate with film; these terminological hesitations express, with an inadvertent precision, the inability to satisfactorily define cinema without first constituting it in advance through acts of antic, straining description. Even the most basic questions of denomination and reference with respect to film—the -kinematograph,” the -photoplay,” the -photodrama,” the -movies,” the -cinema,” the -motion pictures,” the -silent drama,” the -picture play,” or -the silent stage” (=that detestable phrase,”) etc.—fluctuated drastically in the period, leading critics to periodic bouts of agony over their apparently painful contortions of language. Thus Filson

40 C. A. Lejeune, Cinema: A Review of Thirty Years’ Achievement (London: A. Maclehose & Co., 1931), 21; quoted in Marcus, The Tenth Muse, 240. The establishment, and distillation, of a precise critical vocabulary was the explicit project of Raymond Spottiswoode’s 1933 tome, A Grammar of the Film: An Analysis of Film Technique (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1950), where he similarly opines that -when a new school of painting defines its art in extravagant terms, there is no danger of discredit to the whole art; but the cinema is not yet established, and the outside critic may be forgiven a smile at the quarrels carried on with strange and various vocabularies over an art which may not exist and has certainly not produced any works of lasting importance” (27). At least one of Spottiswoode’s phrases has found a renewed currency in the last few years—he is often credited as having coined the term -3-D” to describe the stereoscopic films which he would later help to develop.

41 Iris Barry, -A Comparison of Arts,” The Spectator (May 3, 1924) 707.

42 Indeed, in speaking about film—or its many permutations—it was often unclear (as it remains to a certain extent) whether one was describing an art, an institution, a mechanism, or the object it projected. Ralph Block, for example, attempted to add some clarity by distinguishing between the -movies” (a popular art) and the -motion pictures” (a -fine art” expressed -by means of the motion camera”): see Block, -The Movies versus The Motion Pictures,” The Century Magazine 102.6 (October 1921), 889-892. And in 1922, The New York Times ran a piece called -Screen Words—and Other Words,” which introduced its readers to the proliferated vocabulary generated by film (-iris,”
Young lamented, in 1912, that there was “no escaping from” such abbreviated terms as “the kinema”—distorted, misspelled, mispronounced, debased by unholy conjunctions and alliances, it [the “kinema”] has, nevertheless, in the sacred phrase of banality, “come to stay.”

From this perspective, it is possible to re-approach the once predominant question of film language, but from the more unassuming, and apparently less philosophical, angle of its bemused reception. The labyrinthine articulations of cinematic “syntax”—through the discourses of linguistics, semiotics, narratology—which long defined the academic study of film, and which still determine its pedagogy, enabled new generations of critics to make visible both the formal challenges and tangled ideologies peculiar to film, and they did so by at once perpetuating and repressing the epistemological and aesthetic confusions of the twenties. Indeed, the great structuralist elaborations of film in the sixties and seventies rendered with analytic weight the sorts of analyses that could only have sounded like prophecy or dream to the writers of the interwar period. These differences of disciplinarity, or of genre, however, are sharp indicators of the way in which film history and literary history inform each other. It is well known that the Russian formalists, especially Viktor Shklovsky, went to great lengths to apply their poetics to film but it is rarely acknowledged that it was in the importation of Russian film theory (most notably Eisenstein’s) that English audiences were first exposed to those

—inset,” etc.) before listing a number of words which it would behoove filmmakers to start learning (“beauty,” “realism,” “self-respect,” etc.): —Seven Words and Other Words, “The New York Times” June 4 1922.
43 Filson Young, “Kinema,” The Living Age [reprinted from The Saturday Review] 272.3530 (March 2, 1912), 565.
44 I discuss this history in more depth in chapter 3.
formalist concepts which he had reworked. Indeed, once we begin to put pressure on the early reception and theorization of film, it becomes increasingly clear that the conceptual transformations did not only flow in one direction (as the application of literary standards and categories onto cinematic forms of meaning). Film—not just the technical mechanisms it developed, but the accompanying descriptive drive which is indistinguishable from the idea of “film”—has been for many years now inhabiting and reordering our ideas of what literature is and how it behaves. The language of early film criticism exhibits the historicity of this contact in its laborious attempts to script, or to narrate, film’s aesthetic nature, its history and its future.

3. Language “Obtuse and Hyperbolic”

We have been verging for some time now on the arguments of Benjamin’s “work of art” essay, which—aside from its foundational arguments about the decay of aura and the apperceptive transformations solicited by film and other technologies of reproduction—also offers a reflection on the symptomatic hyperbole of early film criticism. The fraught debates about film’s artistic character which had so consumed the previous generation of critics could only illustrate the relevance of Benjamin’s central thesis: that film and photography had made traditional notions of aesthetic value

45 There do seem to a few discussions of the formalist theories of literature prior to the publication of Eisenstein’s essays—such as in D.S. Mirsky’s vague sketch in the preface to Boris Pilniak’s Tales of the Wilderness (1925), Mirsky’s own Contemporary Russian Literature: 1881-1925 (1926), or of course the 1925 translation of Trotsky’s Literature and Revolution—but, so far as I have been able to tell, the ideas do not seem to have been explicitly taken up in England as a subject of inquiry and analysis until the 1950’s.
incoherent, or had made that incoherence uniquely visible. This is the train of argument
that he pursues in the essay’s ninth section, where he observes that

The nineteenth century dispute over the relative artistic merits of painting and
photography seems misguided and confused today. But this does not diminish its
importance, and may even underscore it. The dispute was in fact an expression of
a world-historical upheaval whose true nature was concealed from both parties.

Though commentators had earlier expended much fruitless ingenuity on the
question of whether photography was an art—without asking the more
fundamental question of whether the invention of photography had not
transformed the entire character of art—film theorists quickly adopted the same
ill-considered standpoint. But the difficulties which photography caused for
traditional aesthetics were child’s play compared to those presented by film.

Hence the obtuse and hyperbolic character of early film theory… It is instructive
to see how the desire to annex film to “art” impels these theoreticians to attribute
elements of cult to film—with a striking lack of discretion… This did not deter
Abel Gance from making the comparison with hieroglyphs, while Séverin-Mars
speaks of film as one might speak of paintings by Fra Angelico. It is revealing
that even today especially reactionary authors look in the same direction for the
significance of film—finding, if not actually a sacred significance, then at least a
supernatural one.  

46 Walter Benjamin, —“The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility”
(Second Version) trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn, in The Work of Art in the Age
of its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media ed. Michael Jennings,
Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press at Harvard
Writing on film attempts to reconstruct, in edifices of startlingly unlikely rhetoric and comparison, a semblance of the grandness and sublimity of what art had been. In Benjamin’s reading, then, the customary routes of film aesthetics are really efforts of erasure, denial or evasion—the more pronounced the more celebratory their tone. To see this —classifying— impulse as a desire is helpful, because it makes the strangeness of early film criticism legible as something other than contrasting descriptions of film that are either correct or incorrect from our present vantage. It presents a more frankly symptomatic reading of these texts: allowing us to see the ways that the difficulty of writing about film had as much to do with the rhetorical conditions of categorical description as with the material novelty of film itself. That is, film modifies the field of aesthetics in part by confronting the grammar of art with its imaginative dead-end.

While it is customary to address the “literary” quality of early film theory with reference either to the delirious essays of the French tradition upon which Benjamin was drawing (Delluc, Cendrars, Aragon, Cocteau and others), or to the Whitmanesque prophet-criticism of Vachel Lindsay’s apparently anomalous monograph, *The Art of the Moving Picture*, the criticism in the English and American traditions calls attention to the status of its own language in a more structural, shared, and hence also mysterious, way. Lindsay and the writers of the French tradition were artists themselves, novelists and poets intent on celebrating, as well as theorizing, the new forms of beauty awakened by film. And yet, the literariness of early film criticism is not simply a function of the overlapping professional investments of a few of its authors. The generic instability of

---

47 The pun here is taken from Montgomery Evans, who observes that the aesthetic approach to film is also an attempt to stratify film audiences according to pre-established class structures: see Evans, "The Movies and the Highbrows," *The Bookman: A Review of Books and Life* 67.5 (July 1928), 533.
these texts instead reflects what John Gould Fletcher (himself a minor Imagist poet) called the "extraordinary paradox that lies at the root of all discussion of cinematic art." While critics were endeavoring to demonstrate film's artistic validity, Fletcher reasoned, individual films, taken in themselves, rarely seemed to justify this attention. Indeed, we might say that theoretical constructions of "film" as a medium were persistently, even essentially, in tension with the appraisal of "films." For to speak of film as an art was not only to generalize or to abstract from individual cases, but to repair the disappointments of existing film culture in acts of mannered, speculative projection.

Fletcher's 1929 tract, *The Crisis of the Film*, can thus be understood as an attempt to diagnose the problematic gap between a beautiful idea—the singular "film" to which his title alludes—and the abject industry of commerce which it only incidentally names. For Fletcher, what distinguishes film art—and what films express only inconsistently—is the ability to "create a symphony of pictorial expression" built out of the rhythmic, alternating tension between the human mood as reflected in a gesture and a face as opposed to the natural mood as reflected in light, wind, rain, darkness, vastness of space," violent hither and thither leaps between the inner feelings of the characters, and the outer conditions of their story." But these effects, he claims, are hardly ever sustained, which is why "so few films of the last fifteen years have been worth preserving." The effect of this contradiction is that —the few people who have trained themselves to think

---

49 As Fletcher puts it, in the opening remarks of his monograph: "No new form of art has ever been brought into the world under such favorable circumstances as has the film; and no new form of art has so little justified its claim to be ranked as an art at all" (7).
50 Ibid., 24-25, 27.
51 Ibid., 16.
intelligently of the motion-picture often wish that the motion-picture camera had never been invented at all.‖

Fletcher’s position is more acrimonious than most, though he was certainly not the only writer to notice that in light of the heady proclamations of cinematic beauty that abounded in the period movie houses were often shown to be “jerrybuilt hovels of disappointment.”

Indeed, the speculative drive implicit in most early film criticism was an indirect comment on the essentially contested nature of how notions of cinematic art were to be related to the banality of typical releases. This distinction—between film as it is, and as it “might be”—is part of the founding logic of defenses of film art. The terms of this logic were established by Alexander Bakshy, who emblematically wrote in 1916:

Two things which are entirely distinct have been persistently confused by all critics: the cinematograph as a medium, and the cinematograph theatre as we know it at the present time. That the second is below criticism—indeed, something coarse, crude and altogether ugly—can be easily and unreservedly admitted. But to deduce from this fact the impossibility of an artistic cinematograph betrays a lack of logic and imagination. ...It is unnecessary to dwell upon the many similar drawbacks of the cinematograph. We are not so much concerned with what it is as with what it might be.

In stating that “logic and imagination” are requirements of intelligent film criticism, Bakshy suggests that film is partly the object, if not of fantasy, then at least of a theoretical fiction related to the films of the present only as a tree to its seed. It is likely,

---

52 Ibid., 35.
53 Kenneth Macgowan, “Beyond the Screen,” The Seven Arts (December 1916), 166.
too, that Bakshy meant to stress, and even advocate, this fictive dimension of film theory. As Bakshy notes in the opening sentences of the essay, “The Cinematograph as Art” was a direct response to Walter Prichard Eaton’s critique of film in which, among other charges, he voiced the common objection that film’s photographic basis doomed it to a cruel realism which at once dulls the imagination and destroys the illusive romance of art.55 Bakshy’s response, we might say, is to define film criticism as a compensatory romance of its own, which rescripts the stubborn insufficiency of film as we know it at the present time” with the intangible, suggestive promise of film’s future.

To view films as the portent of a future art is to adopt a uniquely selective and eccentric mode of viewing. The future does not manifest itself in totalities, but in fragmentary moments which appear lodged in current films like hints or promises. These striking but transitory details, found here and there, of course, separated by feet, yards, reels of celluloid stupidity,” Kenneth Macgowan reflects, point to a new pictorial distinction” even as they seem to be at once irrelevant and strangely purposive; or, as he puts it, they are accidents that are so essential to the camera as to need some other name”:

It may be the rounding of a valley into view, the poise of a shoulder against a background, the proportions of a house to its frame of trees or even to the edges

55 Walter Prichard Eaton, “Class-Consciousness and the Movies,” The Atlantic Monthly 115.1 (January 1915), 55. With respect to the main topic of his fascinating, politically schizophrenic essay, Eaton examines the notion that film—in attracting a proletarian audience—might facilitate a socialist development by making visible the cultural symptoms of economic stratification. Eaton ultimately rejects this idea as too hopeful, suggesting that movies will only deepen the existing divides, and that any gains of political consciousness would pale compared with the damage done by the loss of theater’s popularity: “Who can say that a class-consciousness gained by the loss of the former [theater] is an advantage, either to the proletariat themselves or to our nation? What is the subtle but incalculable loss to the next generation?” (55).
of the picture, the flare of a shadow cast by a single point of light, or just the reflection and diffusion of a cross light under a summer pier. These hazards of the cinema camera are the things that the rare moving picture director of today, and the plodder of the future, can make the rule.\textsuperscript{56}

Although Macgowan questions whether or not these moments of disarming aesthetic condensation are a reliable index of directorial skill—“Even the worst bungler gives once or twice…some new grasping at reality”—their effect is to suggest a possibility of the cinematic medium itself in creating “that curious assemblage of broad impressions which the screen can gather as no other art.”\textsuperscript{57} Actually, we could say that the articulation of cinematic potentiality is entered upon most decisively when the individuality of a particular film gets reorganized by the more specialized gaze of the critic, for in such moments what is on display is not the prosaic incidentals of plot, but the power of cinema itself to evoke the “effects of moving air and water,”\textsuperscript{58} scattered images that “bear within them the distilled essence of the film’s narrative purpose,”\textsuperscript{59} the “poignant beauty of

\textsuperscript{56} Macgowan, “Beyond the Screen,” 166.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid. 166, 165.
\textsuperscript{58} Clayton Hamilton, “The Art of the Moving-Picture Play,” The Bookman: A Review of Books and Life 32.5 (1911), 512. Hamilton wonders, in particular, at the possible advantages of staging Shakespeare’s romances “in an actual forest, drifting from place to place among trees that sift the sunlight and flutter their leafy branches in the breeze. The kinematograph is especially successful in rendering effects of moving air and water…in the moving-picture play a scene may pass upon an actual sandy beach, with league-long round-backed breakers creaming on the shore. …[It] may fluently represent the paddling of a canoe past bend after bend of a rippling river.”
glowing lights and falling shadows, of flowing lines and melting forms, and all that
strange evanescence that makes up the lure of cinematic forms.”60

Christian Keathley, in his recent study, locates the fetishizing of such apparently
marginal moments within the history of cinephilia, but for these early critics it is worth
noting that the celebration of film’s disarming materiality, moments of what Keathley
(borrowing from Bordwell) calls cinematic —excess,” was tied as much to the expression
of film’s present failings as to the erratic glimpses of beauty it afforded.61 Indeed, the
recognition of such transitory moments seems to call upon the viewer, as Charles Davy
put it, —as one image flows into the next, their speech must form itself into a

Barry writes that —even in the crudest films something is provided for the imagination,
and emotion is stirred by the simplest things—moonlight playing in a bare room, the
flicker of a hand against a window” (published in America as *Let’s Go To The Movies!*
[New York: Payson & Clarke, 1926], ix). Miriam Hansen quotes this passage in order to
suggest possible ways of historicizing the incongruities between male and female
spectatorship. Since film adopted a masculine perspective, she argues, female spectators
developed —a mode of reception that is potentially in excess of textually constructed
positions of subjectivity” (Miriam Hansen, *Babel & Babylon: Spectatorship in American
Silent Film* [Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, 1991], 124). For Hansen, the
—ephemeral” gazes of Barry and Woolf are employed to bolster her claim that cinema
facilitated —emitting temporalities.” In suggesting that this fragmentary mode of
viewing was also a strategy for, or an effect of, reconciling film with ideas of art, I am
also invested in recuperating the contradictory time-zones that marked film’s reception,
but within a different context.

61 Christian Keathley, *Cinephilia and History, or, The Wind in the Trees* (Bloomington:
Indiana University Press, 2006), see especially pages 7–8, 53. Keathley’s remarkable
study provides a genealogy of the transformation of cinephilia within the growing
academic codes, but begins his focus with readings of Bazin and the *Cahiers du cinema*
group, which he frames as drawing upon the practices of —first generation” theorists.

In her chapter, —Aesthetics and Early Film Criticism,” Laura Marcus also identifies the
notion of transitoriness as a significant notion in early film aesthetics, connecting it at
once to the notion of *photogénie* developed in the contemporaneous writings of Delluc and
Epstein (those —intermittent paroxysms” for which Epstein celebrated the close-up), and
(like Keathley) to the genealogy of Pater and Baudelaire (see, *The Tenth Muse*, 186-187,
198-199).
sentence, into a chapter, into a complete story.”62 What this means, however, is that it is the spectator who becomes the passive narrator of an ideal or imaginary film. This is why Jean Epstein exaggerates the silence of film as a condition, not of technological constraints, but of an evocative withholding that allows for a spectatorial eloquence to “interrupt” and reanimate the potentialities of the image: “Even more beautiful than a laugh is the face preparing for it,” he writes, “I must interrupt. I love the mouth which is about to speak and holds back, the gesture which hesitates between right and left, the recoil before the leap, and the moment before landing, the becoming, the piano being tuned before the overture. The photogenic is conjugated in the future and in the imperative.”63 Epstein’s description reminds that such moments of aesthetic intensity fetishize not just the erratic movements of space at the edges of the frame, but the pleasing detachment from the image which allows the viewer to become the author of a new and better text.

This unlikely authorial power is visible in the typically paratactic sentences in which the critic reorders the film into an object of abstract formal purity, released from the world of cluttered detail and the irrelevancies of plot—the gesture of a hand...a handkerchief, a key, a pair of shoes64—or in those figurative suspensions of tiny gestures whose original appearance had passed too quickly, and which therefore seem to need to be arrested, prolonged, and re-narrated in order to thicken their elusive

64 Davy, “Between Painting and Writing,” 40.
materiality. In this way, the film critic reconstructs an essence of film out of its discarded
dmoments, asserting the autonomy and future of the cinematic medium, but in a language
that plays up the spectacle of its own lucid, combinatory power.\textsuperscript{65} In this way, essays on
film often resemble a theoretical version of the Imagist poetry which Vachel Lindsay
imagined would provide the basis of a future film grammar.\textsuperscript{66}

To point out that the idea of film as a medium was constructed in acts of
description is not to suggest that the idea itself is a fiction only, or to imply that writing
about film—even at the level of syntax we are discussing here—did not take its lead from
actual developments in visual style. It is instead to underscore that film criticism in the
period is neither reducible to a particular set of films nor to the techniques they
employed.\textsuperscript{67} Indeed, even when critics explicitly addressed specific films, these

\textsuperscript{65} Jacques Rancière has written a relevant examination of a similar relation between the
visible and the sayable with respect to Godard’s \textit{Histoire(s) du Cinéma} (the recent
apotheosis of what Keathley’s cinephilic spectatorship), which examines how
communities are constituted through the mixed ways that art—and explicitly the
cinema—manages heterogeneity through acts of linkage and comparison. See,
\textsuperscript{66} Lindsay, \textit{The Art of the Moving Picture} (1922), 267-269. —The Imagist impulse need
not be confined to verse,” Lindsay writes, —Why would you be imitators of these leaders
when you might be creators in a new medium? There is a clear parallelism between their
point of view in verse and the Intimate-and-friendly Photoplay…There is no clan to-day
more purely devoted to art for art’s sake than the Imagist clan. An Imagist film would
offer a noble challenge to the overstrained emotion, the overloaded splendor, the mere
repetition of what are at present the finest photoplays. …Imagist photoplays would be
Japanese prints taking on life, animated Japanese paintings, Pompeian mosaics in
kaleidoscopic but logical succession, Beardsley vase-paintings in motion” (267-268).
More mysteriously, Lindsay imagined subtle explorations of light’s gradation which he
called —Imagist textures”: —1)The whiteness of swans in the light. 2). The whiteness of
swans in a gentle shadow. 3). The color of a sunburned man in the light. 4). His color in
a gentle shadow…” (269).
\textsuperscript{67} For example, in an article entitled —The Abstract Movie” which responds to Virginia
Woolf’s idea that future films should be based entirely on visual abstraction (which will
be examined in greater depth in the following chapter), observes that the contemporary
references often proved remarkably ancillary to their arguments—belying the incongruity between the idea of film they sought to articulate and the material history of its practice.

Consider, for example, Ralph Block’s assessment of European avant-garde films which seek to harmonize forms and develop structures of abstract thought, with light in motion as the medium of expression”: “their art,” he notes, “exists as yet only in theory.” The evident dissonance in referring to extant films as yet unrealized possibilities does not simply indicate a confusion or a blindness on Block’s part, but arises from a desire to align the speculative project of criticism with the stridency, provocation, and resurgent inventiveness of these (at least culturally) marginal films. The gesture, then, is not to dismiss the importance of the avant-garde, but to express a kinship between film criticism and film practice in the tacit understanding that film’s essence remained as yet unwritten. Thus even films which seemed to embrace the more extreme notions of aesthetic and experiments of the European avant-garde would make her conditional future unnecessary.” Gilbert Seldes, “The Abstract Movie,” *The New Republic* (September 15, 1926), 95. The tendency to construct theoretical purities without reference to real conditions is one Seldes also notes later in the essay, referring to one of his own notions that film should be constructed out of “the appearance of a known line, …the pace, the timing, the rhythm of that appearance”: “In all such speculations, we who are not actually engaged in making movies assume one thing which the professionals instantly deny. We insist that the movies can be made great by ceasing to be realistic…” (96). In this way, the “abstract movie” of the article’s title cuts two ways, describing at once the avant-garde efforts of the period and the intangible concepts of idealistic writers.

Ralph Block, “A Literature of the Screen?” *The Bookman: A Review of Books and Life* 60.4 (December, 1924), 472. My emphasis. In a similar passage of his 1928 *Anatomy of Motion Picture Art* (Territet: POOL, 1928), Eric Elliott similarly suggests that “All the things the cinematograph has so far actually demonstrated, and all its possibilities as we now foresee them should have been theoretically obvious the moment it became practicable to project on a screen a series of animated images in series” (13). In a way, Elliott’s assertion is more aggressive than Block’s, for he claims for theory not only a kinship with experimental cinema, but the (belated) ability to replace all of film history itself.
formal purism proposed by film critics could be viewed as it were in the subjunctive, as organs of potentiality and promise, the scattered seeds of future arts.

Indeed, programs for future cinema appear as more than the implicit horizon of early film criticism—they are its most characteristic preoccupation. In visions and prophecies which were uniquely fanciful extensions of aesthetic categorization, rather than simple aberrations, critics created patchwork models of screen art to come, proxy

69 Robert Nichols, “Cinema To-Be,” The Spectator 146.5352 (January 24, 1931), 103-104. Film, Nichols proposes, will achieve a position as potentially the most highly developed medium of artistic expression known to man… I say potentially for it is with potentialities I am dealing, and a generation will probably pass before these potentialities are fully exploited” (103).

70 Iris Barry, “A Comparison of Arts” The Spectator May 3, 1924, 707. Here Barry describes a vision of films throughout which pictures of ineffable loveliness should continually melt into each other. There will be such films yet. There have been promises…” (707).

71 Ivor Brown, “An Art in Search of its Youth,” The Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art 137.3560 (January 19, 1924), 57-58. Speaking of the rare, exceptional film which justifies the interest of intellectuals, Brown muses that it is the seed of cinematic reform, sparsely scattered but existing, at large in harsh winds and drifting over stony ground” (57).

72 A full list of criticism which fits this description would be laborious here, and some of it has been noted already. Still, it is possible to understate the nearly compulsive nature of this rhetorical mode. See, Alexander Bakshy, “The Artistic Possibilities of the Cinema,” National Board of Review Magazine 3.11 (1928 [a reprinting from 1913]), 3-5; Kenneth Macgowan, “The Artistic Future of the Movies,” North American Review 213 (1921 Jan/Jun), 260-265; Bertram Higgins, —Hms of the Future,” The Spectator 130.4949 (May 5, 1923), 756 – where the author concedes that Prophecy is as out of place in the Cinema as permanent values,” before indulging in his own (756); Alec Waugh, —The Film and the Future,” The Fortnightly Review 116.694 (1924), 524-531; J. Ecclestone —The Cinema,” The Nineteenth Century and After Vol.XCIV No.560 (October 1923), 634-639, who argues that there is Kent in it a new form of aesthetic expression” which makes the belief in the future of the film” not an original claim but rather only the adherence to —nods orthodox a work than Lessing’s Laocoon” (635); as well as monographs such as Ernest Betts Heraclitus, Or, The Future of Films (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1928), which opens with its fairy-tale mantra: There is no future for the films until somebody believes in them” (7); Edward s. Van Zile’s propagandistic That Marvel—The Movie: A Glance at Its Reckless Past, Its Promising Present, and Its Significant Future (New York & London: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1923) which proclaimed film, as a universal language or Esperanto of the eye,” to be the hope of civilization.”
allegories which attempted to resolve the basic contradictions of film discourse. One of the more characteristic predictions was for the emergence of a future screen artist, a "man of genius" or "Shakespeare of the films," some unequivocally authorial figure who would reconcile all the promising strands of current production with the expressive values of the history of art. In the same essay quoted above, for example, Ralph Block closes his discussion with a vision of a future in which film will have attained the broad cultural recognition and expressive capacity of literature. In this prophecy, Block constructs the fictive character of a directorial "messiah" as a composite image of the leading directors of the day, but purified and reassembled into an ideal unity:

What the movies need now, to gain new vitality and a renewed hold on that audience that tires of old ways of telling old stories, is a master to invent new and strange ways of storytelling. …This man will not be Chaplin, who is after all an intellectual, not Von Stroheim, still breathing heavily in the age of Zola, nor Lubitsch, an aristocrat among hucksters. He will be not unlike the Griffith of the

73 There are innumerable examples in the period, from Julian Johnson, "I am the Motion Pictures: A Prophetic Eye Briefly Glimpses the Situation" (1917) to Dr. J. B. C. Grundy, "Language and Film: A Prophecy," Sight and Sound 2.6 (Summer 1933), 45-46. Alfred Kuttner even imagines a future in which a generation brought up exclusively on moving pictures would hail the sudden introduction of the actual performer as a great invention" (51): Alfred Kuttner, "Drama Comes Back from the Movies," The New Republic (August 14 1915), 51-52.


75 Seldes, for example calls Griffith the "Marlowe of the movies," paving the way for the master to come in The Seven Lively Arts (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishing, 1924), 32; See also: William De Mille, "The Audience and Motion Pictures," The Drama 11.10 (July 1921), 345-346, where he writes that The next generation will contain the great masters of the screen. We are the Heywoods, the Ben Jonsons, if you like—we are making an art form… darkly and in different schools. Among the men who come after us will be "Shakespeare," "Moliere," and "Ibsen;" but it will be worth while that we have cleared away the snags, so that when the next generation shall come, an art will be ready to their hands, which they will develop as the real screen literature" (346).
early days, but rid of the stereotyped forms which the conventionalized art have enforced. ...The future of the screen lies in some great dreamer in camera terms, able to make the celluloid unfolding of character more fascinating, more closely related to the desires and dreams of modern audiences, than that mere unwinding of contingent events which is plot can ever become. When this Messiah arrives, the screen will have passed through its second period, and will have entered the Hals, Rubens, Van Dyck, Vermeer, Rembrandt, Dürer, Holbein, Velasquez stretch of its history. ...The day of literature of the screen will have come and gone. The visual evidences of an art of the screen will be in the celluloid exhibits themselves, among the archives.\footnote{Ralph Block, “A Literature of the Screen?” 472.}

It is useless to approach such descriptions with the assumption that the author was unknowingly dreaming of Hitchcock, Welles, or Kubrick—figures whose later triumphs might tempt us to take such speculations more or less at their word. Even the filmmakers mentioned here (Chaplin, Von Stroheim, Lubitsch, Griffith) are commonly acknowledged masters, currently enshrined in the “archives” of film culture. Indeed, what is most difficult to understand about passages like this, and what is also most determinative for our historical understanding, is the intransigent sense of dissatisfaction with the “present” cinema (and the perceived duty to rewrite it) which demonstrates the superbly tangled imperatives of an early film criticism forced to rely on a borrowed, inadequate language in order to formulate cultural futures that look in retrospect like ill-conceived Frankensteins of imagination.\footnote{Some prophecies, of course, look more familiar than others. Alexander Bakshy, for example, sounds remarkably prescient when he writes that “it is quite likely that the}
In Block’s essay, it is the comparison of film with literature—and the attendant incongruities of value it implies—that sets this vision in motion. In this way, his essay exemplifies the peculiar tendency of criticism to adopt the contradictions which it describes into the generic flexibility of its own writing, which Block’s essay shows by adopting the grammar of fantasy and paradox: “Even to think of a literature of the screen, now or in the future,” he writes, “is to begin with a misconception. …[W]hen we produce a literature of the screen, it won’t be a literature of the screen.” The “literature” of the screen—which refers here to films of the quality of literature, not to the body of criticism which evaluates them—is a troublesome concept because it expects from film a level of expression which is proper only to language and the conventions of the novel. Film, Block asserts but cannot yet formulate, demands its own standards, in the absence of which we are left with the blunt futility of a language that remains necessarily, inescapably literary. For this reason, his essay suggests, we must make do with the imagination of a future in which, as he says, “the screen itself will be the literature of the screen, to which all litterateurs of today may, borrowing from Montague Glass, look forward in anticipation, God forbid.”

The future in these cases is not—as we might think—taken up as a figure through which critics gave voice to the new freedoms implied by the unformed nature of cinematic representation, but routinely functions as a critical crow’s nest of sorts, an

future movie will be largely an entertainment at home obtainable either through a broadcasting station or, for the more discriminating, through a film library supplying films, probably printed on paper by the colotype or photogravure process, and at prices only a little higher than those at which books are sold or hired today” (“The Future of the Movies,” *The Nation* 127.3301 [1928], 360). Will it always seem so?

Ralph Block, “A Literature of the Screen?” 472.

As it does, for example, in Ernest Betts’s “The Film as Literature,” 905.

Block, “A Literature of the Screen?,” 473
imagined point of Archimedean remove from which the “unruly”\textsuperscript{81} confusion of aesthetic values could be given proper scale. And yet, just for this reason, these futures were also remarkably incautious figures in which early film critics acknowledged the stubborn chains of conceptual dependency which marred their emergent articulations of medium specificity and aesthetic autonomy. In particular, these speculative flights called attention to the absence of more clinical\textsuperscript{82} or impartial methods, to the unavoidable needfulness of metaphor, analogy, and of all the compensatory mediation of language, to repair a history and a concept which could not be consolidated in the present.

This is no doubt why even the histories of film written in the period so often veer into the figurative territory of literature. Terry Ramsaye’s then definitive history \textit{A Million and One Nights} (1926), for example, posits film as a new Scheherazade, thus proposing the effective evolution of a new means of storytelling in place of the old. And despite the fact that Ramsaye is clearly committed to the work’s legitimacy as piece of historiography, and its ability to unravel the “extensive fabric of erroneous tradition, with some strands of deliberate distortion,”\textsuperscript{83} he also adopts the mannered and colloquial voice

\textsuperscript{81}This is the language of Ernest Betts, who muses in distress: “Who will set boundaries to this unruly creature?” Ernest Betts, “The Film as Literature,” 906.

\textsuperscript{82} It was the desire, for example, of Eric Elliott’s “anatomy” of film to transcend “the confusion of impertinent sentiments” in which, he claimed, the cinema was currently merged: “If we would learn something about the functions, the capabilities and the possibilities of the human body, we should not refer to artists or connoisseurs, who judge form alone, and then only in accordance with their individual taste. We should refer, instead, to the scientist, who dissects without interest in either its superficial form or its moral practices, revealing what does exist without reference to what ethically ought to exist” \textit{(Anatomy of Motion Picture Art, 12).}

\textsuperscript{83} Terry Ramsaye, \textit{AMillion and One Nights: A History of the Motion Picture} Vol. 1 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1926), vii. Indeed, the reviewer for \textit{The Nation} confessed to being bored by Ramsaye’s “multitudinous references to every lawsuit and personal interview and salary contract that ever happened for the past fifty years” (Donald Douglas, “Seeing Things” \textit{The Nation} 123.3205 [1926], 604).
of a narrator—pitched somewhere between a newspaperman giving us the “scoop” on an unfolding story and the glibly mythologizing persona of one telling a tale over a campfire.\(^8^4\) If this now appears to be a strange historiographic approach, Ramsaye assures us that it results from the inherent difficulty of telling a history of an art so new. If “most history is autopsy,” as Ramsaye puts it, “this one is vivisection.”\(^8^5\) That is, we are invited to trace the history of film equally in the sequence of events which Ramsaye’s study lays out, as in the strained style which he is compelled to adopt while doing so. This is not only because the history which he is telling is “too close” to be ordered authoritatively, but also because film is itself a model of history, so that descriptions of film seem already to encrypt narratives of development and evolution at a more fundamental level than history, as a discipline, is able to narrate. As Ramsaye remarks in his foreword:

> The motion picture reveals all of the art processes of all the ages. In the swift history of the films we see the entire evolution of art, compressed and oversped on the screen of Time. The motion picture is itself a tabloid picture of the evolving eternity behind us.

> An art is born before our eyes, just as these very movies have shown us in stop-motion pictures the butterfly emerging from the cocoon. We see it struggle

\(^8^4\) The book’s journalistic conceit, he reports in the preface, is an artifact of his own background: “Twenty-one years ago Charles I. Blood, city editor of The Kansas City Times, called me, a timid novitiate, to the desk for my first assignment. ‘There has been a shooting in the West Bottoms,’ he said. ‘Go find out who did it, when he did it, why he did it and who he did it to—and that will be a story.’ That is what I have endeavored to do for the motion picture” (ix).

\(^8^5\) Ibid., xiv.
limply forth, dry its glamorous wings, and fly—with all its gay, gaudy spirit of youth, strong as youth is strong, weak as youth is weak.

And butterfly like, the service of this gossamer winged art of flitting shadows is mostly in pollenizing the blossoms of the Wish, be they ragweeds of commonalty or roses of culture. Ragweeds are more abundant than roses.

The scholars, the historians, the cloistered critics of the colleges, all seeing the older arts down the cooler vistas of the ages, see them detached from their origins. Inevitably they see them all wrong. You can not know the nut unless you know the tree. You can not know the tree unless you know the soil. The motion picture is close to the soil. 86

What Ramsaye indicates here as film’s lack of detachment, its troubling historical proximity, expresses itself in the curious impressionism of his writing, which offers a racing series of conflicting metaphors (about butterflies, ragweeds, soil and the "oversped" mechanism of film itself) in lieu of a more deliberative account of causal relationships. Elsewhere in his history, Ramsaye describes this quality as the "motion quality of language re-creation of events," describing his antic voice as "ki netic, motion-pictorial journalism," in which he attempts to render film’s history with the verbal immediacy of a headline. 87 In this way, Ramsaye attempts to work through the contradictions in the history and idea of film within the metaphorical chrysalis of language, where he discovers both a model of narrative movement and the heuristic lure

86 Ibid., xiii.
87 Ibid., xlvii.
of immediacy.\textsuperscript{88} And while it would be a mistake to say that metaphor was the only method available to commentators of film’s history and development, it is unquestionably true that discordant, often ungainly metaphors proved a uniquely available method of conveying film’s convulsive development. Thus William De Mille remarks, in a 1921 essay that “instead of being able to develop slowly…this newest art was at once inflated to the physical size of a man, before its brain had time to develop beyond childish immaturity. At present, the soul of the motion picture is trying to grow fast enough to fill the gigantic body.”\textsuperscript{89} Similarly, Ernest Betts remarks in 1928 that, like an obscure, untutored child, the film has no clear character that has been built up, no developed youth, no guidance from people or things, by which its coming career can be safely measured. The film is still a boy making up its mind what it is going to do, with eagerness and delight. Possibly it is a girl.”\textsuperscript{90}

The early writing on film is often quite blatant in showing how traditional aesthetic categories, and the forms of cultural discourse which support them, are made enigmatic in the difficulties of description and definition which this criticism undertook. Such difficulties, as we have seen, are endemic to the labored comparison between film and the traditional arts, but they are also allegorized in the very looseness with which these critics drew upon the great reservoir of literary tropes in order to more effectively coax film into positions of general legibility. The more artificial the language employed, the more we can see, in examinations of film’s aesthetic character, a parallel inquiry into

\textsuperscript{88} This, in fact, is the case in a more literal way as well – since Ramsaye, like Vachel Lindsay before him, traces the “prehistory of the screen” in the pictographic origins of language (xlxi-lvii).

\textsuperscript{89} William De Mille, “The Audience and Motion Pictures,” \textit{The Drama} 11.10 (July, 1921), 346.

\textsuperscript{90} Betts, \textit{Heraclitus, Or The Future of Films}, 13.
the workings of language. This did not of course mean that film criticism was experimental or modernist in its style—far from it. In fact, the modes of writing on which critics drew were most often very classical indeed.

The most pronounced example of the incongruous generic resources of early film criticism, however, is the preponderance of documents composed in mock imitation of Greek philosophy. This stemmed from the often-cited Greek etymology of the -kinēma,” as well as from the available resemblance of film-going to Plato’s allegory of the cave. For example, one early essay/sketch, –Plato and the Movies,” systematically charted these similarities in an imitation of a Platonic dialogue between a movie-made daughter and her more philosophic father.  

Iris Barry—founder of the London Film Society and, later, director of the Museum of Modern Art’s first film curator—concluded her 1926 book, Let’s Go To The Pictures!, with “A Dialogue of Two Sober Men” which is a discussion between –Plato” and –Aristotle” on the subject of film aesthetics. And

91 Frank Cole Babbitt, “Plato and the Movies,” The Harvard Graduate’s Magazine 35.137 (September 1926), 20-25. The classical vocabulary of early film criticism is even more thorough than these examples. Ernest Betts, for example, points out that cinematic movement is simply an elaboration of Heraclitean thought (Heraclitus, Or The Future of Films, 1928), and Ben J. Lubschez, among others, points to its origin in Lucretius in his aptly titled monograph, The Story of the Motion Picture: 65 B.C. to 1920 A.D. (New York: Reeland Publishing Company, 1920). It is possibly in response to Lubschez’s unlikely timeline that Pierre Loving bitterly objected to the absurdity of thinking Lucretius, and other eminent figures, a proto-cinematic writers: “–Homer,” he mocked, –ehanted the sea thunder of his Odyssey for the screen; and another was that of Virgil, thinking of upholstering his nest against old age, cast a potboiling eye upon future picturization. From this it will be seen that the movies, although a young art, feed and keep alive a body of folklore that it curiously their own.” See Pierre Loving, –Lucretius and the Motion Picture” The Bookman 57.6 (1923), 609.

92 Barry, Let’s Go to the Pictures!, 257-264. A characteristic passage, which confesses Barry’s aim, finds –Aristotle” grappling with film’s persistent failures: “–if we were to form our opinions upon this medium from the examples that have been set before us and try to decide on such evidence whether, in the profoundest sense, we can expect from it a new mode of art, I think we might well be reduced to despair. ...Would it not be better,
Gilbert Seldes, writing two years earlier, had crafted an article called “An Imaginary Conversation” in the same style, but taking place instead between D. W. Griffith and Walter Prichard Eaton, the drama critic. Seldes, taking on a borrowed tone, begins his piece in the theatre of Dionysus where from afar the bustle of the town dies away, and, perhaps, in a moment of unutterable stillness, the murmur of the many-sounding sea can be heard...[as] a man is taking apart a mechanism—that from which the dues sprang in this evening’s play. Two other men remain... These fanciful conceits, like the visions of future arts discussed earlier, used the trope of temporal remove to find putative clarity, but they also pointed to a recognition of the dramatic misfit between the film’s vague artistic pretensions and the venerable traditions of thought upon which it was encroaching. This is the attitude taken by Arthur Walkley’s strange composition, —A Aristotelian Fragment.” A drama critic for the London Times, Walkley begins his piece by remarking that In the neighborhood...where the princes of the film hold their court, a legislative code for film-making, a "Poetics" of the film, by some maestro di color che sanno, has long been yearned for,” before proceeding to narrate a story in which a wayward soldier, along with the monks of Mount Porthos, come across exactly that: an entirely unknown MS. of the ‗Poetics,’ more complete even than the Parisian” which includes an entirely new chapter inquiring into the structure of the Moving-Picture

then, to confine our discussion to this medium as a pure form and refuse to be turned aside either by unhappy memories or by gloomy forebodings?” (257-258).

93 Gilbert Seldes, The Seven Lively Arts, 27-35. One might also mention H.L. Mencken’s commentary on Hollywood moronia,” which was later republished as —A Interlude in the Socratic Manner,” but which is in fact merely an interview with Mencken, who I imagine in this configuration was filling the role of Socrates, —The Low-Down on Hollywood,” Photoplay Magazine 32.5 (April 1927), 36-37, 118-120.

94 Ibid., 27
Drama."\(^{95}\) Though riddled with unfortunate lacunae caused by the monks’ cigars,” the excavated document contains a long reflection on the cinema’s structural inadequacy for representing tragedy, except in the most impoverished form. Since film audiences come and go as they please, remarks Walkley’s Aristotle, they can never be subject to the unities of dramatic progression upon which tragedy depends. By this means,” writes the imagined philosopher, “the general sense of confusion in human affairs is confirmed in the picture theatre, and in this sense, but only in this sense, the picture drama may be said to be, like tragedy, an imitation of life.”\(^{96}\) In documents like Walkley’s, the formal confusions of the cinema find their unexpected mirror image in the reanimated figure of the ancient text, with its cigar burns like sprocket holes, marking the ungainly translation from one mode of thinking to another.

4. What Remains of Literature

_The kinematograph bereaves the drama of the spoken word; and it must be surprising to the literary theorists to learn how much is left..._  
— Clayton Hamilton, “The Art of the Moving-Picture Play” (1911)\(^{97}\)

The conspicuousness of language in early film criticism, its mechanisms of comparison and description, is in fact a clue that the retrospective histories which have given these writings a disciplinary legibility does not really belong to them. Certainly, as we have seen, the articulation and establishment of “film” as a defined medium with its own expressive limits and possibilities was both made possible and immobilized by acts


\(^{96}\) Ibid. 9.

\(^{97}\) Clayton Hamilton, “The Art of the Moving-Picture Play” _The Bookman_ 32.5 (January 1911), 512.
of compensatory exaggeration and generic impropriety. We do not now need to condone this impropriety in order to see that the analogic anxiety which film elicited in its commentators cuts both ways. That is, the criticism of film puts pressure on the categories of literature, not simply in the unstable application of its norms, but by discovering in film a denaturalization of the codes of formal regularity which literature traditionally sustains. William Empson, who wrote a series of theater and film reviews during his time at Cambridge, thus observes in his 1929 review of Fritz Lang’s *The Spy* that such film thrillers recall earlier literary genres, while so thoroughly lacking their sequential consistency as to make such comparisons an exercise in futility.

Thrillers are Elizabethan, in their force and vehemence of detail, incident and invention, in their moral simplicity, in their wealth of death, …in the way incidents succeed so as to obliterate one another without form as a whole, in the ruthless way things are translated into stage effects, in the convention that events off stage happen impossibly fast (emptying the flat, for instance), in - but this is a defensive gambit; the fact is they are not designed for critics, you can't order the thing in your mind and judge it as you leave the theatre, that is not the mood intended; life starts again, you feel at once exhausted and refreshed, and it is no use pointing out inconsistencies, because nobody minds about its being absurd. You can only praise any subtleties you remember.  

As Empson alludes, there is a violence in the cinematic serial that is more fundamental than its formulaic wealth of blood”: it is an attack on the very idea of form which is

---

expressed in the succession of events that —obliterate one another without form as a whole.” This —worthless” activity is, of course, part of what makes thrillers —Elizabethan,” even as it obliges Empson to acknowledge that such reflexive comparisons are only a —defensive gambit.” To search for kindred examples within the well of literary history is to give too much clarity to their formlessness, too much of the wrong sort of context, making possible a knowledge about film that prevents us from really seeing it. The point here does not seem to be that we shouldn’t take films seriously, or that they are only the absurd objects we habitually accept, but that we misunderstand the cinema when we treat its formal —inconsistencies” as extraneous or somehow avoidable.

In this way, film becomes a treacherous figure for literary criticism, offering an all-too convenient foil for emergent notions of formal purity, even as it places these ideas under duress. This is certainly the case, though in a more negative manner, in *Principles of Literary Criticism* written in 1924 by Empson’s teacher, I. A. Richards, where the notion of the formal and social ordering of works of literature is propped up in many places by handy diagnoses of the disordered experience of the cinema as a mass art. The distinction between ordered and inchoate experience—which Richards will call the judgment of —value”—is in fact heavily shaped by his critique of —aesthetic detachment” as it had been proposed in the work of Vernon Lee and Roger Fry, and popularized by Clive Bell. The —phantom aesthetic state,” Richards reasons, is a fantasy of being separated from the challenges of social and historical existence in a mystified —private heaven for aesthetes” (*PLC*, 17), which persists in criticism only by means of a misapprehension of its aims.
When we look at a picture, or read a poem, or listen to music, we are not doing something quite unlike what we were doing on our way to the Gallery or when we dressed in the morning. The fashion in which the experience is caused in us is different, and as a rule the experience is more complex and, if we are successful, more unified. But our activity is not of a fundamentally different kind. To assume that it is, puts difficulties in the way of describing and explaining it, which are unnecessary and which no one has yet succeeded in overcoming.99

The difficulties which Richards identifies in the concept of aesthetic detachment, however, does not appear to consist in the claims made about the subjective effect of aesthetic emotion,” as Bell had rechristened Fry’s imaginative life.” Indeed, detachment,” “disinterestedness,” and impersonality” are all qualities which are eventually reappropriated by Richards, and when he later describes the difference between how the mind processes experience in ordinary life” and in the imaginative experience,” he sounds so close to Fry’s An Essay in Aesthetics” as to be quoting him directly.100 Richards’s objection arises instead out of a concern that, in so refining and qualifying the specialness” and sui generis nature of aesthetic experience, post-Kantian


100 See the conclusion to the section Art, Play, and Civilization,” where he writes: In ordinary life a thousand considerations prohibit for most of us any complete working out of our response; the range and complexity of the impulse-systems involved is less; the need for action, the comparative uncertainty and vagueness of the situation, the intrusion of accidental irrelevancies, inconvenient temporal spacing—the action being too slow or too fast—all these obscure the issue and prevent the full development of the experience. We have to jump to some rough and ready solution. But in the imaginative experience these obstacles are removed. Thus what happens here, what precise stresses, preponderances, conflicts, resolutions and interanimations, what remote relationships between different systems of impulses arise, what before unapprehended and inexecutable connections are established, is a matter which, we see clearly may modify all the rest of life” (PLC, 238).
aesthetes had whittled it out of the sphere of useful human thought. If art is to have any virtue as a concept, Richards argued, it needs to be made comparable to other, more practical and more urgent, kinds of activity. It needs to be given what Richards, in his deceptively simple phraseology, will call “value.” In thus endeavoring to provide a critical system designed to help decide “what experiences are more valuable than others,” *Principles* would seem to offer less a theory of art, in the traditional sense, than a theory of cultural and historical progress which happens to privilege art and literature as “the most important judgments we possess as to the value of experience” (*PLC*, 33, 32). It is perhaps unnecessary here to pause over the intriguing wrinkles in the overall theory of value Richards proposes—such as the implicit surrealistic possibilities suggested by the endless comparability of experience (“a cold bath in an enameled tin,” he very strangely observes, may quite easily be judged against the value in the act of “running for a train” [*PLC*, 32]).101 For Richards, the value of a piece of literature consists in its ability to organize the experience of its reader; it is the difference between clear coherent thinking and confusion or stupidity, between free, controlled emotional response and dull or clogged impassivity,” and so on (*PLC*, 50). This greater psychological clarity, Richards is at pains to establish, is not an end in itself, but a means to greater “freedom” to fulfill the potentials of life, while he describes disorganized mental states as “wasteful of human

101 Richards, of course, does not offer to specify which of these experiences is more valuable. Perhaps he assumes that running for a train has a self-evident value: but does it have that value only if we reach the train in time? Or if the train we board is bringing us somewhere desirable? Similarly, how is it possible to localize, let alone evaluate, the horizon of good or ill effects precipitated in our “cold bath”? Like Lautréamont’s “chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella”—but of course quite unlike it as well—Richards’s puzzling example releases a vertigo of imponderables into his critical fetishization order, precisely where he believes it to be most incontestable and self-explanatory.
possibilities” (*PLC*, 52). Literature, where it is valuable, tutors us in modes of thinking that, far from having only esoteric, privative, or emotional effects, promise to help us navigate the growing confusion and chaos of social life.

Considering that, for Richards, film is one of the chief symptoms of modern confusion, it is not surprising that the cinema recurs throughout *Principles of Literary Criticism* mainly as a reminder of what may befall us if we neglect that enlightened precision which is the effect of artistic unity. It is in this spirit, for example, that he diagnoses the “more sinister potentialities of the cinema and the loud-speaker” to invite “a collapse of values…by which popular taste replaces trained discrimination” (*PLC*, 36).

The whole notion of cultural value, as we have said, has been designed to repair this apparent antagonism, by comparing the remote calculations of aesthetic feeling to the vagaries of daily life which they might ideally illuminate, to “bridge the gulf,” as Richards says, “to bring the level of popular appreciation nearer to the consensus of best qualified opinion” (*PLC*, 36).

---

102It should be noted that Richards would revise his opinion of mass media later in his career, seeing in it a pedagogic salvation for the dwindling of the humanities, and a “literature for the unlettered.” See “The Future of the Humanities in General Education,” in *Speculative Instruments* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1955), 62; and “Literature for the Unlettered,” in *Poetries: The Media and Ends* (Paris: Mouton, 1975), 149-164.

103It is exemplary, in this sense, that Clive Bell’s articles on cinema—though similarly dismissive of its aesthetic promise—express an apparently opposite intention. For Bell, the advent of cinema (even that which strives for the mantle of art, such as *Caligari*) does not portend the democratization of artistic values, but the exacerbated antagonism between the aesthetic and the common. —If the cinema, which hitherto has catered almost exclusively for the uneducated, takes to catering for the half, surely those painters and writers who have catered exclusively for the latter must be to some extent affected. And, supposing this to happen, what effect might it have upon art? Well, it might hurry on a movement which is going fast enough already. *It might widen the breach between art and life, between the artist and the artisan. …personal art will be driven closer and closer to that stronghold which is inaccessible to the profane.* Concerning itself
And yet, the very indeterminacy of popular culture, in Richards’s formulation, begins to take on the character of aestheticism’s bad twin. This, in any case, is the argument put forward in the chapter entitled “Badness in Poetry,” where Richards identifies cases in which communication is either “defective” or “worthless.” In the case of “defective” communication—Richards’s example here is H. D.’s Imagist poem, “The Pool”—the obscurity of the idea places excessive demands on the reader. Richards’s second form of “badness,” however, is successful in communicating only conventionalized or stereotyped ideas, ideas which are not so much communicated but whose familiarity is gestured to, relied upon. Popular forms, Richards suggests, generally traffic in precisely this kind of “stock conventional attitude” (PLC, 202). “At present,” he writes, “bad literature, bad art, the cinema, etc., are an influence of the first importance in fixing immature and actually inapplicable attitudes to most things. Even the decision as to what constitutes a pretty girl or a handsome young man...is largely determined by magazine covers and movie stars” (PLC, 203). These prepackaged attitudes buffer us from life in a cloak of reassuring sentiment which we do not have to trouble ourselves to question, or even to feel first hand. Just for this reason, too, Richards claims that such commonplace attitudes are debilitating—they make their unfortunate adherent—functionally unable to face facts: do what he will he is only able to face fictions, fictions exclusively with purely aesthetic problems, appreciated only by those rare people who are capable of reacting to abstract form, art might become, like the highest mathematics, the preoccupation of a tiny international ´élite” (Clive Bell, “Art and the Cinema: A Prophecy that the Motion Picture, in Exploiting Imitation Art, will Leave Real Art to the Artists,” Vanity Fair 19.3 [November 1922], 40). Seven years later, when he took up the question again, he had convinced himself that his earlier prophecy had already come true: “Today the gulf between the elite and the mass is unbridgeable” (Clive Bell, “Cinema Aesthetics: A Critic of the Arts Assesses the Movies” Theatre Guild Magazine 7.1 [October 1929], 63).
projected by his own stock responses” (PLC, 203). These “fictive” attitudes thus mimic the insulating effect of aestheticism’s mystified view of art’s autonomy, because like the erroneous notion of the “specialness” of art, mass art works by removing us from experience” (PLC, 202). Far from being an index of shared experience, Richards wants to say that in the grips of the desensitizing effects of inferior culture we do not truly live at all. 104

It is because works of art and literature discipline us in complex acts of cognition and judgment, resulting in “states of composure”—because, in other words, of their felicitous ordering influence—that they provide a moral and social good. It is also why inferior art—and Richards consistently names “the cinema” in an unqualified way in this connection—conceals a serious threat in its promotion of “the mediocre in ordinary life,” the “blurring and confusion of impulses” and a very widespread loss of value” (PLC, 230).

No one who has repeatedly lived through experiences at the level of discrimination and co-ordination presupposed by the great writers, can ever, when fully vigilant, be contented with ordinary crudities, though a touch of liver may of course suspend these superior responses. …These remarks apply even more evidently to the Cinema. People do not so much imitate what they see upon the screen or what they read of in best-sellers. It would matter little if they did… They tend instead to develop stock attitudes and stereotyped ideas, the attitudes

104 This is his claim when he suggests that cultural forms have become so important in our idea of life as to be practically indistinguishable from it. “For a civilized man,” he writes, this is so true that life without these cultural activities is regarded as intolerable…Life deprived of all but the barest physiological necessities… is for many people worse than non-existence” (PLC, 49-50).
and ideas of producers: attitudes and ideas which can be ‘put across’ quickly through a medium that lends itself to crude rather than to sensitive handling.

…The danger lies not in the fact that school-girls are sometimes incited to poke revolvers at taximen, but in much subtler and more insinuating influences. … No one can intensely and wholeheartedly enjoy and enter into experiences whose fabric is as crude as that of the average super-film without a disorganization which has its effects in everyday life. The extent to which second-hand experience of a crass and inchoate type is replacing ordinary life offers a threat which has not yet been realised. If a false theory of the severance and disconnection between ‘aesthetic’ and ordinary experience has prevented the value of the arts from being understood, it has also prevented their dangers from recognition (*PLC*, 230-231).

What is most revealing in Richards’s analysis is not the utterly conventional observation that cinema employs banal plots and canned sentiment, or that it lacks the more genuine rigors of recognized culture. This line of critique has long shown its futility and irrelevance. More interesting in Richards’s argument are the contradictions into which it leads him. Neither a form of art, nor a facet of life—the cinema, he says, is a kind of ‘second-hand experience’ that ‘replaces ordinary life’—film’s formal ‘disorganization’ seems to straddle that no man’s land of deluded philosophizing about art’s ‘phantom’ autonomy which in Richards’s bitter metaphor turns its subject into ‘a blind man in a dark room chasing a black cat which is not there’ (*PLC*, 40). Film—as the unqualified signifier of aesthetic ‘badness,’ as well as the exaggerated figure in which the incongruities of the ‘aesthetic idea’ can be made visible—plays a negative but
instrumental role in Richards’s theorization of literary form. Traversing a space between art and life (whose existence he nevertheless denies), film thus actually arises as the unwelcome shadow of the poetic order that Richards finds exemplified in tragedy’s “balance,” its “equipoise” between apparently incommensurate sensations, “mediating relations between the supporting systems brought in from either side” (PLC, 252). In Richards’s text, which reinscribes the formalist notion of aesthetic autonomy as a moral philosophy of cultural reading, film is the most available figure of disorganized and “inchoate” experience—of experience which is not experience—ushered in to mediate literature, to give it sense, order, unity, while also disidentifying it by expressing the very comparability and non-uniqueness of its antinomies.

It is no accident that film—or some distant caricature of film—recurs in definitions of art in the modernist period, even in its secondary role of the disordered or delinquent art, symptomatic of modernity’s ills. These characterizations, of course, were all fictions—though in a wider sense than Richards implies. We cannot say, for example, that these discourses were founded on a simple misunderstanding of cinema’s real nature. Adorno’s dictum that misunderstanding is “the medium in which the noncommunicable is communicated” was never more fittingly applied than to the theorization of film. Although these depictions often seem uncritical, biased and maladroit reactions against (as well as in favor of) the singularity and newness of cinematic representation, we would misread them if we ignored their implicit suggestion that what we now so easily take to be film’s disciplinary, structural or material truth is in fact an historically contingent construction whose loose edges we no longer perceive. If these texts seem only

intermittently to be describing something that we now recognize as the discrete object of film history (with sustained analyses of filmic plots and the evolution of visual style, etc.), it is because the narratives of specificity and aesthetic purism which were seen for so long to be the definitive legacy of modernist aesthetics, and which persist as the hallmarks of disciplinary specialization, are at once tightly focused and aggressively denaturalized in early discussions of film. The idea of film, then, was a fiction, but not in the sense that it connoted a rigidity and inflexibility of thought (as Richards describes the "fiction" of film). Indeed, film, viewed in the history of its discourse, is the inescapable figure of the incoherence of reigning aesthetic hierarchies, a fact which is registered both in the attempts to expose this incoherence, and in the heterogeneous, generically unstable, attempts to entrench film within these old categories. Film, then, is not the name of a particular kind of art, or a figure of what art abhors, but a reminder of the strangely mobile character of cultural form. To write about film was to be faced with this mobility, a fact which is most often recorded inadvertently, as it were, in the far flung stretches of critical logic that seek to impose a needed clarity, or to restore a needed order.

Richards's unwitting delineation of film's impurity, its resistance to ready notions of formal unity, order, structure, etc., also calls into question the applicability of these terms to the modernist literary text as a discrete "object," an idea which was increasingly refined in the development of New Criticism. As Principles of Literary Criticism shows, the literary appropriation of formalist aesthetics needed to repress multiple inconsistencies in order to maintain its bounded sphere of reading. Indeed, in privileging

---

106 For a comprehensive discussion of the evolution of this idea, and its determinative repression in contemporary criticism, see Douglas Mao, "The New Critics and the Text-Object," ELH 63.1 (Spring 1996), 227-254.
poetry over prose, for example, Richards evades the more complicated, nebulous project of describing the formal structure of prose fiction, where a lingering concern with plot, character, and the evocations of life’s banality could easily obscure attention to the precise uniformities of effect which poetry, in Richards’s view, exhibits more easily. “In prose,” he writes, “the influence of past words extends only a little way ahead. In verse, especially when stanza-form and rime co-operate to give a larger unit than the line, it may extend far ahead” (PLC, 140). The nagging irregularities of prose fiction also led Clive Bell to deem literature “impure” and to deny it the status of art in his titular monograph, even though he grants it freely to objects as diverse as pots, carpets, and stained glass windows.¹⁰⁷ And, as Percy Lubbock observed in the preface to The Craft of Fiction (1921), the form of the novel remains necessarily obscure in part because we can never perceive it as a whole—its form is only ever reconstructed in memory, “shadowy and fantasmal.” “As quickly as we read,” he writes, “it melts and shifts in the memory; even at the moment when the last page is turned, a great part of the book, its finer detail, is already vague and doubtful.”¹⁰⁸

Given that Bloomsbury formalism, as presented in the work of Fry and Bell, endeavored to construct a comprehensive or unified theory of art (not just the graphic arts, but Art with the capital “A” announced in Bell’s hubristic title), the inability to account for literary modes raised significant questions about the commonality of aesthetic experience, significant form, and the very consistency of the concept of art which they

¹⁰⁷ Clive Bell, Art (New York: Frederic A. Stokes Company, 1914). “Literature is never pure art,” he writes, “Very little literature is a pure expression of emotion; none, I think is an expression of a pure inhuman emotion. Most of it is concerned, to some extent, with facts and ideas: it is intellectual” (153).
elaborated. It was on this issue that Fry reproached Bell’s *Art* (1914) in a review, suggesting that it had thus missed a chance to have been even “more ambitious and more comprehensive.”

Literature could have form, Fry hazards, “if in words images may be evoked in such an order, and having such a rhythmic relation as to arouse aesthetic emotion. This would be… not a visible, but an ideal form.” Similarly, he suggests that if it were discovered that literature works by “an admixture of form with content, then there would be nothing surprising in discovering that the art of painting was of a similar composite nature.”

Both Bell and Fry would go on to explore the extent to which literature could be interpreted in terms of the aesthetic concepts derived from their analysis of graphic arts: Bell in his monograph *Proust* (1928), and Fry in his translation of and commentary on Mallarmé, (written in 1921 and published posthumously in 1936).

In Mallarmé, for example, Fry discovered “the first poet to aim consciously

---

109 I do not mean to suggest that the writings of Fry and Bell always line up with each other—indeed this is very often not the case—or even to suggest that Fry’s writing is systematic in a conclusive sense. Still, both writers proceed from similar assumptions about the distinctness of aesthetic emotion from the emotion of daily life (even if it is unclear whether or not this is mainly a matter of context, or of essence), and both attempt interrogate the problems of aesthetics by asking what is common to all arts. As Christopher Reed notes, Chatto & Windus had initially approached Fry to write a book consolidating his theories, but Fry instead suggested Bell for the task (Christopher Reed, “Refining and Defining” in *A Roger Fry Reader* ed. Christopher Reed, [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996], 128.

111 Ibid., 159.
112 Ibid., 159.
113 See Clive Bell, *Proust* (London: Leonard and Virginia Woolf at the Hogarth Press, 1928); and Roger Fry, *The Poems of Mallarmé*, trans. by Roger Fry, ed. Charles Mauron and Julian Bell (London: Chatto & Windus, 1936). Though I will be focusing on Fry’s work, Bell’s reading of Proust is also forms a fascinating context for this discussion, not least in his attempt to surmount the gap between painting and literature by contending that Proust’s novel —is a shape in time; it is not an arabesque on time. It is constructed in three dimensions, and may be described as architectural if we bear in mind that the blocks of which it is built are time-blocks. … Better to think of the book as a picture—an oil
Fry also undertook a prolonged collaboration with Charles Mauron, the chemist turned literary critic, who would later lead the school of psychocritique in France. In Mauron’s 1927 monograph, *The Nature of Beauty in Art and Literature*, which Fry also translated, Mauron advanced the notion that literature could be compared to painting through its expression of “psychological volumes,” a concept that ostensibly allows Mauron to isolate and measure the emotional effects of literature with the precision and concreteness so often lacking in discussions of linguistic suggestion. (To some, Fry acknowledged in his preface, “the analogy is suspect from its use as a rhetorical device for persuasion or at best for the illumination of an already acquired idea. Here it is a technical instrument…”)

Fry, *A Roger Fry Reader*, 297. Christopher Reed notes that Fry’s sense of “purity” expresses a trans-medial quality, and is distinct from the later, Greenbergian association with medium specificity (“Literature and the Performing Arts,” in *A Roger Fry Reader* 283). Still, as we have seen, comparison and specificity are mutually supporting operations.

For a more in-depth reading of Fry’s partnership with Mauron, see Linda Hutcheon, *Formalism and the Freudian Aesthetic: The Example of Charles Mauron* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).


Fry’s continued attempt to find an adequate way to justify a possible comparison between painterly and literary form—and thus locate a possible synthesis of aesthetic form that would be truly unified—found its most explicit expression in *Transformations* (1926), particularly in the opening essay, “Some Questions Concerning Esthetics,” in which he responds—not incidentally—to the critiques levied against his work by I. A. Richards. When addressing, for example, Richards’s contention that our experience of a work of art is not qualitatively different from our experience getting dressed, Fry responds by mysteriously stating that “many structures which profess to be works of art do not even aim at provoking the special kind of response [aesthetic emotion] which I hope to describe.” Of course, if there are works of art which are not works of art, or which do not behave as art works ought to behave, one might be forgiven for thinking that Fry’s theory of art was contradictory, or at least in need of clarification. Fry in fact does attempt to manage this tension by suggesting as a hypothesis the existence of pure and impure works of art—a distinction which Mr. Richards has the good fortune to be able to ignore.” Yet, as Fry states, the notion of the pure work of art—even as a heuristic model—applies only inopportunistly to literature, a medium that is constitutively tied to the debris of fact and events to which its language refers, preventing a pure access to form. It is, as Fry states, “a medium which admits the mixture of esthetic and non-

---

119 Ibid. 3. Fry, quite paradoxically, elaborates this idea by asserting that “It nowise invalidates this conception if such a thing as an absolutely pure work of art has never been created: the contention is that some works approximate much more nearly than others to this ideal construction. I cannot deny that the position I am trying to maintain is dangerously exposed. If it is to be held at all it must be held with regard to works of art of all kinds” (3). If each work of art is only an approximation, with greater or lesser degrees of success, of Art,” then the only possible mode of interpretation is *analogy*. 
esthetic treatment to an almost unlimited extent. Even in the novel, which as a rule has pretensions to being a work of art, the structure may be so loose, the esthetic effects may be produced by so vast an accumulation of items that the temptation for the artist to turn aside from his purpose and interpolate criticisms of life, of manners and morals, is very strong.\textsuperscript{120} In his attempt to reconcile the novel with the norms of aesthetics, Fry presents only Mauron’s notion of psychological volumes, which—even though based on nothing more than an analogy”—has at least —pointed in the right direction.”\textsuperscript{121}

In the midst of these apologies, evasions and repositionings, however, Fry offers an analogy of his own, one which would have been familiar to readers of his previous essay on aesthetics: the cinema. In his only sustained comment on the aesthetic problem of literary structure in the essay (and one of the only which he would ever publish), Fry defers the question, responding to Richards through a puzzling and oblique narrative again involving his experience at a film. In this instance, however, the example of a train arriving at a station is replaced by a film depicting a rescue mission to recover victims of a shipwreck. The change of subject matter, as we will see, is not incidental. By recounting a scene in which human life is dramatically held in the balance, rather than one that merely reproduces of ordinary activity, Fry locates the cinematic image within the suspending agencies of the spectator’s absorption and expectation (rather than their lucid detachment). This scene, in its mixture and mutual adumbration of form and content, suggests a parallel with a literary, rather than a purely graphic, structure. Significantly, as a response to Richards, the structure which the scene illustrates is

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid. 9. Fry observes that “comparatively few novelists have ever conceived of the novel as a single perfectly organic esthetic whole” (9).
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid. 12.
tragedy. —The cinema,” he writes, —has provided us with a new angle of perspective which helps us to a clearer idea of what our experience really is before at least one type of literary structure, the tragic drama.”122 The film is tragic, Fry reasons, because it solicits not only the spectator’s distanced perception of the image as image but their contradictory attachment to the imperiled world it indicates. This play of distance and absorption is allegorized in Fry’s description of what he sees in the shifting relation of objects in the background and foreground of the frame.

One saw at a considerable distance the hull of the vessel stranded on a flat shore and in between crest after crest of huge waves. In the foreground men were working desperately pulling at a rope which ever so slowly drew away from the distant ship a small black object which swayed and swung from the guide rope. Again and again the waves washed over it in its slow progress shorewards. It was not till it was near shore that one realized that this was a basket with a human being in it. When it was finally landed the men rushed to it and took out—a man or a corpse, according to the luck of the passage or the resistance of the individual. The fact that one was watching a film cut off all those activities which, in the real situation, might have been a vent and mitigation of one’s emotions. One was a pure, helplessly detached spectator, and yet a spectator of a real event with the real, not merely simulated, issue of life and death.123

From the ship to the rope, to the basket, to its contents, the images on the screen progressively collapse the felt security, if not the structural absence, of the viewer. By the time the basket is close enough to the screen for Fry to be startled by what it

122 Ibid. 12.
123 Ibid. 12-13.
contains—a man or a corpse—the distance from the world onscreen, which was the initial pretext to observe its pictorial qualities (the glimpse of the flat shore amidst the crest after crest” of the waves), is now experienced as a deprivation, a feeling of being “cut off,” “helplessly detached.” Fry sees the events more clearly from this distance, it is true, but clarity does not resolve the desire to do something, to intercede or to assist, which would “mitigate” this emotion of helplessness.

No longer the icon of an empowered disinterestedness, film now appears a vehicle for “pure” but also “helpless” detachment. The spectator is moved in viewing to an awareness of the troubles and impotencies of cinematic separation. The emotions which the scene elicits are intensified, then, by being deprived of any resolution, heightened in the scene’s prolonged suspense but given no “vent” from which they might be externalized. For this reason, Fry writes, “no situation on the stage could be half so poignant, could grip the emotions of pity and terror half so tensely. If to do this were the end and purpose of drama, according to Aristotle’s purgation theory, and not a means to some other and different end, then the cinema had surpassed the greatest tragedians.”

In other words, film may imply the structural tragedy of the spectator’s absence, but even this is not quite commensurate with the literary mode which Tragedy names. Tragedy as a form, that is, entails more than the emotions it evokes (and here Fry’s argument is surprisingly sympathetic to Richards’s reading of tragedy in Principles); tragedy depends also on the relations of event and causality, the chains of necessity and fate which condition and transform these emotions into a narrative framework. The experience of watching the film, Fry continues:

---

124 Ibid. 13.
though it was far more acute and poignant, was recognizably distinct and was judged at once as of far less value and significance than the experience of a great tragic drama. And it became evident to me that the essential of great tragedy was not the emotional intensity of the events portrayed, but the vivid sense of the inevitability of their unfolding, the significance of the curve of crescendo and diminuendo which their sequence describes, together with all the myriad subsidiary evocations which, at each point, poetic language can bring in to give fullness and density to the whole organic unity.\textsuperscript{125}

Although the scene which Fry describes is not without its narrative interest, as his drawn out description makes clear, his observation is that a mere sequence of events onscreen is fundamentally distinct from the properly artistic feeling of fateful ‘inevitability’ which is the essence of tragedy. The scene of the shipwreck, in being real, is more haunting, but it is also, aesthetically speaking, more arbitrary, an expression of mere contingency and chance. Tragedy, on the other hand, derives its force from the knowledge that a culminating action is the inner expression of a longer development. In tragedy, individual catastrophes are stretched out as the expression of larger destinies, rather than standing behind the opacity of the solitary and singular event, as does the cinematic image.

In this way, it would seem, the differences between Fry’s cinematic fables, from 1909 to 1926, does not rest so much on his changed or more nuanced perception of film itself, as on the changing context of the aesthetic form which it is used to clarify. Showing both the heightened awareness of painting and the bereaved longing of tragic drama, Fry’s ‘cinema’ is all things to all arts. Without the fullness and density of whole

\textsuperscript{125} Ibid. 13.
organic unity,” film remains here the silent partner in Fry’s divination of literary structure, pointing vaguely to possibilities of definition but remaining outside the real argumentative scope of his essay. Not a medium, not quite an art, film functions here once again as a metaphor, and, like the affective intensity it evokes, it is — a means to some other and different end,” shuffling between the laws of one art and those of another, expressing in that motion the incessant figurality of mediation itself.
Chapter Two:

Virginia Woolf and the Eye of History

"...[A picture] is not a description at all; it leaves out the meaning. But what sort of meaning is that which cannot be expressed in words? What is a picture when it has rid itself of the companionship of language and of music? Let us ask the critics..."

— Virginia Woolf, Walter Sickert

1. “no man’s language”

A perverse reasoning often attends our sense of the material specificity of a particular medium. More often a heuristic shorthand than a rigorous concept, this curious assumption—that one or another aspect of experience, of emotion or action, is unpaintable” or unwriteable,” or, conversely, that the visual” and the verbal” describe intrinsically settled fields of expression—promises that regulation of the dissimilar which is indissociable from the impression of identity. But like identity, the notion of medium specificity is one of those myths whose power does not derive from the belief that it is true. This is undoubtedly why the category of literature can seem most indispensable to writers whose work is least describable by that name. Their wisdom consists in the understanding that identity is best justified by its infringement, and that an idea is most valuable when put in contact with what it cannot explain. Understood in this way, the notion of medium specificity is not a principle of explanation, but a pretext for experiment.

To characterize literature’s specificity, then, is not necessarily to simplify its nature, but to call its solidity into question. That is, we can only consider it a

simplification if we think that identity itself is simple—which it is not. This in any case is the lesson of Virginia Woolf’s 1925 essay on comparisons between the arts, entitled “Pictures.” Here, she fancifully contemplates that an entire book could be written on the Loves of the Arts,” which would detail the flirtations between music, letters, sculpture, and architecture, and the effects that the arts have had upon each other throughout the ages.”² In this fraught romance of form, however, Woolf notes that literature is continually held at a disadvantage. As she says, “literature has always been the most sociable and most impressionable of them all” (“P,” 243). By its nature open to influence, literature is, like the amatory subject, easily lured, desirous of contact. For this reason, Woolf suggests, the sociability” of literature can also lead it astray, and that it now finds itself “under the dominion of painting” (“P,” 243). All too easily, writers succumb to the temptation of the image and abandon meaningful narrative in the attempt to become painting’s mirror-image. In the false ecstasy of ekphrasis, Woolf implies, literature risks forgetting the unique power of language—the power to express the volatile territories of thought, affect and memory.

The world is full of cripples at the moment, victims of the art of painting, who paint apples, roses, pomegranates, tamarinds, and glass jars as well as words can paint them, which is, of course, not very well. We can say for certain that a writer whose writing appeals mainly to the eye is a bad writer; that if, in describing, say, a meeting in a garden, he describes, lilies, carnations, and shadows on the grass, so that we can see them, but allows to be inferred from them ideas, motives, impulses, and emotions, it is that he is incapable of using his medium for the

Writing does not exclude the province of the image per se; it is instead a question of literature's proper appeal, which Woolf contends is not confined solely to what can be seen but to what can be felt, or as she puts it a few sentences later, to "an emotion which has nothing to do with the eye" (p. 244). Imagistic description is not an end in itself, we might say, but needs to be subordinated to the narrative context within which its effects become legible. Still, it is evident that Woolf is not really invested in a strict Lukácsian hierarchy of narration and description. Indeed, even the impoverished surface debris noted here—"lilies, carnations, …shadows on the grass"—seem effectively to conjure a corresponding series of "ideas, motives, impulses, and emotions." What hinders writing that lingers too long in the field of the visual, it would seem, is that this undepicted emotionality is left to be only "inferred" and not given any more direct expression. Of course, if Woolf did not explicitly point out the crippling "incapacity" of this failed writer, the reader would be forgiven for mistaking in the ability to suggest such a diversity of effects something less than an infirmity of expression. Despite its inflated rhetoric, then, Woolf's argument against a visual language seems willfully paradoxical and self-defeating (especially considering how closely this imagined scene of a "meeting in a garden" resembles her own "Kew Gardens").

---

3 Georg Lukács, "Narrate or Describe?" in Writer and Critic and Other Essays, ed. and trans. Arthur Kahn (London: Merlin Press, 1970), 110-148. For Lukács, the naturalist turn toward description had already signaled an impoverished form of literary agency, that in lieu of events fully integrated with the lives of characters could only provide a sensuous "substitute" which the reader is left, not to experience, but only observe.
Indeed, the more we examine her diagnosis of the ills of impure literature, the more nearly Woolf’s essay seems to double as a reflection on her own writing. It is not that impure description is—as she baldly claims—“bad writing,” but that this impurity needs to be put to work. In this way, Woolf argues the best literature is not that which has most retained the “essence of literature,” but rather the text that most successfully reflects its “sociality” with other arts. This is perhaps why the work of Proust provides a key example. Woolf admires in Proust precisely his ability to balance visual language with an attention to character, seeing in *A la recherche du temps perdu* an expressive power which ostensibly “has nothing to do with the eye” but which is at the same time—picking up again the metaphor of romance—“fertilized” by it. And yet, as she describes the virtues of Proust’s novel, Woolf also substitutes her text in place of his, inviting us to read her astounding praise as a self-reflexive allegory of her own method:

> It is the eye, in Proust above all, that has come to the help of the other senses, combined with them, and produced effects of extreme beauty, and of a subtlety hitherto unknown. …With an abundance of images and comparisons we are made to appreciate the forms, the colours, the very fibre and texture of the plush seats and …the dullness or glow, sparkle or colour, of the light. At the same time that our senses drink in all this our minds are tunnelling logically and intellectually into the obscurity of the young man’s emotions, which as they ramify and modulate and stretch further and further, at last penetrate too far, peter out into such a shred of meaning that we can scarcely follow any more, were it not that suddenly in flash after flash, metaphor after metaphor, the eye lights up that cave of darkness and we are shown the hard tangible material shapes of
bodiless thoughts hanging like bats in the primeval darkness where light has never visited them before (P, 244).

The visual space of Proust’s novel does not so much directly represent the psychology of its protagonist as it does invite us to decode in the images themselves, and in the flash of metaphors, the avenues of desire and memory, ramified and modulated into what Woolf calls the hard tangible material shapes of bodiless thoughts.” The mobility of the image, here, reroutes psychological experience so that the reader experiences it in a displaced material form. The eye intervenes in the process of representation, yielding the shape of consciousness, its color and texture, rather than its content, but in such a way, Woolf suggests, that its indirection is felt as more startling, unprecedented and, in fact, more faithful.

Whatever indirection exists in the passage in Proust’s novel to which Woolf refers, however, is only exacerbated by the unfolding language of her own description. Indeed, the primeval cave of darkness finds us a far cry from the interiority of the young man’s emotions.” It offers us something altogether different: after promising that a responsible use of visual description always leads back to the subject, Woolf then replaces the content of subjectivity with a series of images. As Cheryl Mares has shown, Woolf’s reading of Proust was deeply entwined with her own ambivalence about painting, but it also speaks forcefully to the questions of character and representation that she had raised during the writing of Mrs. Dalloway. Specifically, this description evokes what Woolf calls in her diary my tunnelling process: my discovery; how I dig out

---

4 Cheryl Mares, Reading Proust: Woolf and the Painter's Perspective,” Comparative Literature 41 (1989), 327-359. As Mares observes, Woolf’s readings (and misreadings) of Proust were often strategic distortions of his prose that allowed her to negotiate her ambivalence toward the formalist theories of Roger Fry and Clive Bell.
beautiful caves behind my characters…the caves shall connect, & each comes to daylight at the present moment.” Leading thus from Proust’s own inspiration in painting to the skillful measure of his prose, and from Woolf’s description of Proust into the heart of her own aesthetics, these intersecting, impalpable tunnels articulate at once a theory of character and a theory of inter-medial comparison. In the same way that Proust uncovers Marcel’s fascination with the actress La Berma in a resonant chain of external images, we discover the inner aptitudes of “literature” in its displaced interaction with painting. Indeed, since Woolf has characterized literature in terms of its — impressionability,” she seems to invite us to read its defining, indeed identifying, features in those places where it is most transformed by other arts.

In refusing to distinguish between the (oblique, metaphorical) expression of character and the (similarly oblique, similarly metaphorical) character of fiction, Woolf’s essay obliges us to rethink the overly literal narratives of inter-arts comparison that are the customary arsenal of the literary critic. Our labored speculations about —post impressionist fiction,” for example, require us to construct such unimpeachable generalities about both painterly and literary modes—and the intersecting histories which bring them into discernible contact—that we are apt to miss the fact that the most powerful points of comparison are the most shadowy, and the least measurable. Indeed,

as Woolf writes, “it is extremely difficult to put one’s finger on the precise spot where
paint makes itself felt in the work of so complete a writer [as Proust]” (P, 243). This is
because what writers learn from painting is not painting, but an undiscovered form of
writing. The very silence of pictures, Woolf suggests—speaking now on behalf of all
writers—stirs words in us where we had not thought words to exist; suggests forms
where we had never seen anything but thin air. As we gaze, words begin to raise their
feeble limbs in the pale border land of no man’s language, to sink down again in despair.
…It is vain, it is futile; but we can never resist the temptation” (P, 245). In its very
distance from literature, painting draws language from its silence. And yet, Woolf
suggests that the resulting language does not really resemble any painting. We cannot
retrace, in other words, the analogies of color, line, brush strokes, shading, etc., back to
conceivable narratives of causality, inspiration or influence. We will know painterly
literature, Woolf seems to suggest, because it is no longer painterly. Or rather, we will
know it by its —no man’s language,” that language which seems to belong to neither
medium, but is marked instead by a common impropriety.

* 

There is such overwhelming evidence of painting’s influence in Woolf’s work
that it would seem strangely inconvenient to adopt the observations offered in —Pictures”
as a critical methodology. Perhaps it seems so, too, because —Pictures” is only narrowly
about literature’s relation to painting. Taken in its farthest implications, Woolf’s essay
suggests a way of reading metaphors, figures—pictures” in the broad sense—as the
space in which literature acknowledges the nagging arbitrariness of language, as well as
its permeability to what is outside it. This is a troublesome suggestion in part because—
as Woolf’s work would otherwise seem to testify—literature subsists upon the notion that it has a privileged relation to the inner fluctuations of subjectivity. The rhetoric of vision, on the other hand, tends to assert the basic contiguity of individuals with their surroundings, stressing adjacency, relationality, nonidentity. This is in part because “visuality” is something that is both native to painting (or to any medium) and that escapes it. It defines the specificity of a medium, and the modes of aesthetic perception which that medium makes possible, while also defining a mobile principle that exceeds its strictures. The “image” holds many valences: optical, mental, verbal, graphic, etc., each with their own history, and no art can lay claim to them all. Woolf’s acts of comparison with the visual arts, then, are not so much studies in the influence of one medium on another, as they are restricted fables of how literature imagines itself from the outside, analogies that condition the notion of fiction’s link to interiority.

If “Pictures” (1925) hints at the complexities which other arts might introduce into Woolf’s incipient theorization of modern literature, her subsequent essay on film, “The Cinema” (1926), shows that these relations cannot be thought singly on the model of the “loves of the arts.” Indeed, as we have seen, the early discourse on film aesthetics was defined by conceptual and generic anxieties, such that one could scarcely begin to write about film without beginning to speak in the borrowed language of fiction. In one sense, the sheer impurity of cinematic discourse is thoroughly amenable to Woolf’s metaphoric reading of formal influence. And yet film also lacked the consolidated alterity of form through which painting, for her, could be seen to “fertilize” language.

---

from a distance. Woolf had praised Cézanne for example, stating that "no painter is more provocative to the literary sense, because his pictures are so audaciously and provocatively content to be paint and not words" (P, 244). Yet no such claim could be made of film, with its apparently ill-fitting amalgam of dramatic performance, trick photography, literary narrative and fairground aesthetics. If there is a "zone of silence in the middle of every art" which makes us feel like outsiders looking in on a world withdrawn into the depths of form, as Woolf would later write in "Walter Sickert," the "silence" of silent film could seem strangely technical by contrast, an extraneous artifact of recording technology rather than a glimpse of essential distinction. Cinema did not have, as she claims, "its own devices." In order to compare film and literature, then, Woolf is obliged to offer a prophesy of what film might be in the future—she is obliged, that is, to speculate as to the identity of an art which, as an "embryo," seems to have none at all.

In this sense, Woolf's reflection on film is also a rereading of her roughly concurrent description of fiction as properly concerned with interiority, character and the

---

7 In a letter to Vita Sackville-West, dated Sept. 8 1928, Woolf reflects —that the main thing in beginning a novel is to feel, not that you can write it, but that it exists on the far side of a gulf, which words can't cross: that it's to be pulled through only in a breathless anguish. ...But a novel, as I say, to be good should seem, before one writes it, something unwr...” The Letters of Virginia Woolf, 6 vol., ed. by Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann Banks, Vol.III [New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975], 529. It is for this reason that Emily Dalgarno, in a more Lacanian register, claims that, for Woolf, "narration begins in the need to negotiate the boundaries of the visible world.” Emily Dalgarno, Virginia Woolf and the Visible World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 14.


Her famous arguments in “Modern Fiction” (1919, rev. 1925) and “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” (1924) about the subjectivist project of modern fiction are restated, but also denaturalized, in the comparison to film. In “The Cinema,” however, the claim to interiority and emotional truth is not posed as a comment on the impoverishment of Edwardian fiction, but as an imagined characteristic of literature itself. Rather than seeing these restatements as moments of exaggeration, however, I have proceeded from the assumption that “The Cinema” can help us reinterpret the stakes of Woolf’s more canonical pronouncements, revising our sense of what can be said about subjective life and how representation works to modify notions of experience. Reading “The Cinema” as a restaging of “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” and its defining antagonisms, I argue that Woolf’s theory of character can also be understood as a theory of media, and that The Waves—her most formless and generically unstable work—is its most sustained elaboration.  

11 Woolf’s relation to “theory” is vexed and involved. Despite the preeminence of her criticism on the novel and modernist aesthetics, Woolf herself actively rejected any notion of systematic thinking, considering only half-heartedly the prospect of setting down “my views upon aesthetics,” and claiming, for example, in her 1928 introduction to Mrs. Dalloway that “it was necessary to write the book first and to invent a theory afterwards” (see, The Letters of Virginia Woolf, vol. II, 257; and The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Vol IV, 550). Indeed, even Woolf’s most speculative statements about the novel are inflected with elements of fiction, characterization and metaphor (see, for example, Jane Goldman’s reading of “Modern Fiction” where she points out that the involved description of literary impressionism which has been received as an articulation of Woolf’s aesthetics, is in fact her qualified description of Joyce’s method: Modernism, 1910-1945: Image to Apocalypse [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004], 69). Any attempt to theorize fiction, she seems to imply, must also engage in it—which also means that we cannot generalize about her notion of reading without engaging in its practice. This is, of course, part of the rigor of her criticism, and why she can seem both deeply philosophical (as in Ann Banfield’s work) and resolutely anti-philosophical (see, for
2. the “unnatural alliance”—cinema, literature

To disagree about character is to differ in the depths of one’s being.
— Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” (1923 version).  

Woolf’s earliest treatment of cinema is, tellingly enough, not a discussion of cinema at all but a reading of a novel. Calling Compton Mackenzie’s novel The Early Life and Adventures of Sylvia Scarlett a “movie novel,” in her 1918 review, Woolf criticizes the book’s frenetic action, which in constantly shuttling from scene to scene, and event to event, trivializes the lives of its characters. The book’s poor characters, she writes, “have spun all their substance into adventure, and nothing remains of them but a frail shell inhabited by a very small creature with an enormous egotism and an overweening vanity.” Emphasizing the absurdly overcranked movement of Mackenzie’s plot—“You can scarcely open the book anywhere without finding a cab bolting down Haverstockhill with an eloping couple inside it, or a baboon escaping from Earl’s Court Exhibition, or an actor dropping dead…”—Woolf’s review suggests that the novelist’s exaggerated desire to make his characters exciting is really only a veiled form of contempt for their
insignificance apart from these outsized situations.\textsuperscript{14} We cannot identify with the characters in the book, she writes, because though Mr. Mackenzie can see them once he can never see them twice, and, as in a cinema, one picture must follow another without stopping, for if it stopped and we had to look at it we should be bored. …So it is with Sylvia Scarlett and her troupe. Up they get and off they go, and as for minding what becomes of them, all we hope is that they will, if possible, do something funnier next time. No, it is not a book of adventures; it is a book of cinema.”\textsuperscript{15} The mechanism of film analogizes the mechanics of plot in its relentless and merely external movement, pointing to the destructive impatience of narrative devices which treat characters only as disposable pretexts for action.” This pitilessly eventful way of seeing the world, Woolf argues, erodes both the mental life of characters and the psychology of reading which it is the purpose of the novel to preserve. This is in part because viewing the world as a space of unending action deprives us of the reflective magic of reading to give substance to the frail shells” on the page. This is why, speaking of another novel in which events pass by like a hedge seen from an express train,” Woolf will again invoke cinematic spectatorship as the prime figure for a mode of reading which does not deserve the name. –There is no shape to these apparitions,” she writes of Gladys Stern’s \textit{A Deputy Was King}, –Scene melts into scene; person into person. …All this representation of the movement of life has sapped our imaginative power. We have sat receptive and watched,

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 289.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 290-291.
with our eyes rather than with our minds, as we do at the cinema, what passes on the screen in front of us."\textsuperscript{16}

In illuminating the shapelessness of ineffective prose, Woolf’s cinematic metaphor performs what we might call a reading of reading. If reading does not simply mean being exposed to the depicted world of fiction but imaginatively animating that world—if, as Woolf says elsewhere, reading attends to—what is not written\textsuperscript{17} as well as to what is—then cinema can become the convenient name for a mode of viewing which places no lasting demands on us. The world of the screen is animated, of course, but it is animated automatically, by lights, sprockets and gears rather than by the pulsing engines of thought. The cinema is the triumph of the literal, the external, the mechanistic, etc; fiction deals with the life which moves, more unstably, beneath these outer crusts. And yet, since Woolf is in fact still describing novels in these cases, it would be better to say that fiction is easily drawn by lures which are not essential to it, and that it is when

\textsuperscript{17}Virginia Woolf, “Anon’ and ‘The Reader’: Virginia Woolf’s Last Essays,” ed., with introduction and commentary by Brenda Silver, \textit{Twentieth Century Literature} 25.3/4, Virginia Woolf Issue (Autumn-Winter, 1979), 429. In her unfinished history of the culture and practice of reading, as distinguished from the forms of spectatorship that preceded it, Woolf argues that—reading—develops—faculties that the play left dormant,” such that the reader—can pause; he can ponder; he can compare; he can draw back from the page and see behind it...he can read directly what is on the page, or, drawing aside, can read what is not written. ...It gives a difference pace of mind. We are in a world where nothing is concluded” (429). For an examination of Woolf’s idiosyncratic notion of reading, see Kate Flint, “Reading Uncommonly: Virginia Woolf and the Practice of Reading,” \textit{The Yearbook of English Studies}, 26, Strategies of Reading: Dickens and after Special Number (1996), 187-198.
writing transgresses these boundaries that we can see most clearly what it is or ought to be.\textsuperscript{18}

If Woolf’s reviews find her testing out viable metaphors for film as an interpretive or didactic hinge, her 1926 essay on film at once continues and amplifies her reflection on cinematic perception and its relation to the vexed epistemologies of fiction. Indeed, although Woolf’s essay is ostensibly on “The Cinema” or on “The Movies and Reality” (as the essay was alternately titled in its various reprints),\textsuperscript{19} the guiding antagonisms of her thinking remain those of literature. In particular, the most revealing context for her discussion of film, as I will show, was the argument about the centrality of character to literary form which she had developed in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” and “Modern Fiction.” And yet, even as “The Cinema” remaps those discussions of literary

\textsuperscript{18}And yet, even in its rejection of cinematic modes of viewing “Life and the Novelist” (1926) poses the identity of the novelist in the photographic and filmic language of “exposure” and “development.” “The novelist—it is his distinction and his danger—is terribly exposed to life,” she writes, pointing to the unique connection to sensation and incongruous impressions (The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Vol IV, 400). While other artists must withdraw into the solitude of their studio, Woolf claims, a more anarchic sensibility is the condition of the novelist’s life.” Bad writing, however, like the cinematic A Deputy Was a King, gives only the external impressions and does not gather or reorganize them into a synthetic whole. The real writer, by contrast, “must expose himself to life...but at a certain moment he must leave the company and withdraw, alone, to that mysterious room” where the “processes” of composition take place (405). Indeed, Woolf often employed the tropes of photography to identify the permeability of the senses which gave her a writerly power of observation. In her 1939 autobiographical Sketch of the Past,” for example, she describes herself as “a porous vessel afloat on sensation, a sensitive plate exposed to invisible rays...” Moments of Being (New York: Harcourt, 1985), 133.

\textsuperscript{19}“The Cinema” was originally published in Arts (New York) in June 1926, but subsequently revised it before publishing it under the same title in Nation & Atheneum the following month. This revised version was subsequently published, without Woolf’s consent, in America, under the title “The Movies and Reality”—a situation which led Woolf to write a letter of apology to the editors of Arts. Since the later version is the most revised, I have preferred it here, distinguishing between the two versions in parenthetical citation by referring to them as “C” (for the early version) or as “M & R.” (for the revised). Both however were published under the name “The Cinema.”
onto the perceptual apparatus of film, it also renarrates its meaning in a concluding prophecy about the development of what she calls its —secret language,” which suggests a provisional compatibility with her own literary project. This rediscovery, in cinema, of a mixed language—of a no man’s language,” to use the idiom of Pictures”—suggests not only an aesthetic future” for film, but a new literacy of the self.

Before admitting of any correspondence between the literary and the cinematic, however, Woolf disguises this connection by placing cinema in a prelinguistic limbo as a savage” medium. —People say that the savage no longer exists in us,” she writes at the opening of The Cinema,” —but these philosophers have presumably forgotten the movies. …They have never sat themselves in front of the screen and thought that for all the clothes on their backs and the carpets at their feet, no great distance separates them from those bright-eyed naked men who knocked two bars of iron together and heard in that clangour a foretaste of the music of Mozart (€,” 348). To view film as uncivilized, as archaic despite its technical modernity, was very common. Indeed, as Laura Marcus has shown, even the grammar of Woolf’s treatment of the cinema here is largely borrowed from Elie Faure’s The Art of Cineplastics, which uses a similar language of infancy and the primitive to rationalize the formal alterity of the new medium.20 In

20 Laura Marcus, How Newness Enters the World: The Birth of Cinema and the Origins of Man,” Forum for Modern Language Studies 27.2 (2001), 186-203. Marcus shows how narratives newness often converged with and depended upon metaphors of infancy, primitivism and origins, exoticizing film as they attempted to give it sense. The key passage in Faure’s study reads: —It is an unknown art that is beginning, one that today is as far perhaps from what it will be a century hence as the Negro orchestra composed of tom-tom, a bugle, a string across a calabash, and a whistle, is from a symphony composed and conducted by Mozart.” Elie Faure, The Art of Cineplastics trans. Walter Pach (Boston: The Four Seas Company, 1923), 27.
adopting this language, however, Woolf somewhat redirects the primitivist fetishizing of film’s newness in order to highlight the unfinished or unperfected nature of its producers and its audience. It is not exactly that film is a primitive art, but that its technology reveals our own inability to read it. This is why she can end the essay by repeating the trope borrowed from Faure while at the same time reversing its emphasis.

For a strange thing has happened—while all the other arts were born naked, this, the youngest, has been born fully-clothed. It can say everything before it has anything to say. It as is if the savage tribe, instead of finding bars of iron to play with, had found scattering the sea-shore fiddles, flutes, saxophones, trumpets, grand pianos by Erard and Bechstein, and had begun with incredible energy, but without knowing a note of music, to hammer and thump upon them all at the same time (―M & R,‖ 595).

It is no longer the technology of the cinema which Woolf imagines to be deficient; it is rather its audience and creators who strive in vain to keep pace with it. Woolf can make this reversal because, quite characteristically, she is more interested in relating technology to human experience than in making any sort of claim about the technicality of the medium itself. This reversal is significant in that it anticipates the provisional separation, developed later in the essay, between the technology of the cinema (with its "accretions of alien matter" [−Є,‖ 348]) and the order of language. The recourse to a Darwinian rhetoric of development, typically invoked to celebrate cinema as a sign of "advancement," is put to use here in order to dramatize the gap that separates the complexity of human experience and the flatly impersonal space imposed by the cinema. Woolf emphasizes this point in her description of the sort of confusion that is endemic to
the cinematic experience. —All is hubble-bubble, swarm and chaos,” she writes, —\W are peering over the edge of a cauldron in which fragments of all shapes and saviors seem to simmer; now and again some vast form heaves itself up and seems about to haul itself out of chaos. Yet at first sight the art of cinema seems simple, even stupid…” (—€,” 348). It’s the —\yet” here that proves sticky: the description of the cauldron filled to the brim with a brand of primeval soup (Darwin‘s —\warm little pond” by way of Macbeth)\(^{21}\) doesn’t sound especially complex. Woolf undercuts the rhetoric of fragmentation and molten chaos, as if to recognize that the enchanted language used to romanticize the cinema is in fact far more interesting than the reality of the average film. The juxtaposition also serves to highlight the more fundamental antagonism between cinema’s mechanistic vision and the representation of thoughts and emotions which Woolf understands as the province of literature. It is as if, in the presence of so

\(^{21}\) A reference to Darwin’s famous letter describing this —\primeval soup’ to J.D. Hooker in 1871: —\It is often said that all the conditions for the first production of a living organism are now present, which could ever have been present. But if (and oh! what a big if!) we could conceive in some warm little pond, with all sorts of ammonia and phosphoric salts, light, heat, electricity, &c., present, that a protein compound was chemically formed ready to undergo still more complex changes…” Charles Darwin, The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin: Including An Autobiographical Chapter, Vol. II, Ed. Francis Darwin (New York and London: D. Appleton and Company, 1911), 202-203. The strong evolutionary language of the essay has led David Trotter to what can only be described as a perversely literal reading of —\The Cinema” as a piece of social Darwinism: "Woolf's brief but intense engagement with the cinema in the early months of 1926 altered her thinking about the common life. It encouraged her to suppose that one might grasp the commonness of common life by means of a principle (or theory) of constitutive absence. According to this principle, encounters between people living in the same place at the same time were there to be missed; though, with a view to the survival of the species, some had better not be. A community would thrive only if it succeeded in maintaining the appropriate level of non-relationship among its members. It perhaps seemed to Woolf that cinema, and the newsreel in particular, might contribute to a better understanding of the principle of constitutive absence.” David Trotter, Cinema and Modernism, [Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007], 169).
technically proficient an art as film, the florid evocation of language is denuded of its power.\textsuperscript{22}

In this regard, Woolf’s subsequent critique of film adaptations of literary works is predictably severe. The “stupidity” of the cinema—its extra-linguistic status, its commitment to reproduction rather than thoughtful representation—finds its limit when it vainly attempts to reproduce a novel such as \textit{Anna Karenina}. The argument has a particular force for Woolf, in large part because she had taken such pains to redefine the aim of fiction as the oblique expression of thoughts and emotions.\textsuperscript{23} The cinema, by contrast, presents a world entirely devoid of human presence, even—and especially—when it takes the “theme” of emotional life as its subject. The objects recorded by the cinema have become

not more beautiful in the sense in which pictures are beautiful, but shall we call it (our vocabulary is miserably insufficient) more real, or real with a different reality from that which we perceive in daily life? We behold them as they are when we are not there. We see life as it is when we have no part in it (\textit{-E,}” 349). Cinema implies a form of structural dispossession, it strips experience of precisely the form of interior perspective that Woolf will claim for literature. The precise

\textsuperscript{22}Gillian Beer has noted a similar tendency in Woolf’s representation of prehistory, which figures in Woolf’s writing as an emblem of time which has “escaped registration,” and which therefore takes “language out towards obliterations, towards things she feels cannot be described” (Gillian Beer, \textit{Virginia Woolf and Prehistory,”} in \textit{Virginia Woolf: The Common Ground} [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996], 12-13). Film seems to offer a secondary form of this destructive sublimity, at once evoking the charged rhetoric of impenetrable history and proving itself strangely undeserving of it.

\textsuperscript{23} In “Modern Fiction,” of course, Woolf’s articulation of a literature based around consciousness’s “myriad impressions” is registered in a language that recalls photographic processes: “Let us record the atoms as they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sigh or incident scores upon the consciousness.” \textit{The Common Reader, First Series}, 150.
verisimilitude of the cinema's representation of the world uniformly fails since it has
discarded the singular perspective that confers upon existence the sense of "reality" as
such. Such a deprivation of point of view holds a certain fascination, Woolf allows, but it
is a fascination linked primarily with death and with the irretrievable passing of time.
—We are beholding a world which has gone beneath the waves,” she writes. —Brides are
emerging from the abbey—they are now mothers; ushers are ardent—they are now silent
[…]The war sprung its chasm at the feet of all this innocence and ignorance” (€,” 349).
The catastrophe of the war, intervening between the shooting and the screening of a film,
stands in for the formal absence that the medium imposes on the world. Film envelopes
the world it depicts with a funereal allure, —the queer sensation,” as Woolf puts it, that
—beauty will continue to be beautiful whether we behold it or not” (€,” 340). And yet,
she hesitates, this dark beauty is not really in the images we see, it is a product of our
reparative awareness only: —the brain adds all this to what the eye sees upon the screen”
(€,” 349). The remote world of the screen, in other words, both solicits and mocks the
audience's imagination, which cannot help investing it with pathos even as the image
itself remains unresponsive, impassive, sealed.24

24For this reason, it is difficult to see in Woolf’s reflections on the cinema the exposition
of representational “neutrality” that David Trotter identifies when he suggests that
—inema had taught her a crucial lesson about constitutive absence. It gave a productive
shape to her enduring preoccupation with “the thing that exists when we aren’t there.‘
—The Cinema’ represents literary modernism's most profound acknowledgment of film's
neutrality as a medium,” Trotter, Cinema and Modernism, 169. For while Woolf’s essay
does elaborate the concept of neutrality in some respects, it also dramatizes the perverse
sense in which film’s detached and absent vision draws our imagination into realms of
thought it does not earn. Speaking of photography, rather than film, most critics
underscore Woolf’s desire to combat the apparent neutrality of the image; see for
example, Helen Wussow, —Virginia Woolf and The Problematic Nature of the
Photographic Image,” Twentieth Century Literature 40.1 (Spring, 1994), 1-14.
Woolf’s essay casts the structural or formal inconsistency of cinematic beauty, its dependence on the borrowed awareness of the viewer, as but a part of film’s institutional reliance on the literary works which provide the perennial fodder for adaptation. For if film occasionally stirs the audience’s thoughts in the photographic elegy of the “world gone beneath the waves,” most films seem eager to repress such moments in the insistent desire to advance a story. “The picture-makers seem dissatisfied,” Woolf writes, “with such obvious sources of interest as the passage of time and the suggestiveness of reality” (M & R,” 592). Instead, filmmakers “want to be improving, altering, making an art of their own” (M & R,” 593). And yet, instead of developing a unique mode of storytelling, films continue to cling to the already established forms of narrative found in novels and plays. But this encroachment upon the domain of literature is not presented as evidence of “flirtation” between the arts. Indeed, for an author as devoted as Woolf to the power of the literary tradition, the question of the adaptation takes on a decidedly fatal element. The cinema becomes a lurching “parasite” of literary works, desiring the validity that they afford, but without at the same time incorporating any of the expressive value they contain. Woolf’s narration of the plundering of novels for screenplays underscores the act as a particularly bloody form of cultural violence:

The cinema fell upon its prey with immense rapacity, and to the moment largely subsists upon the body of its unfortunate victim. But the results are disastrous to both. The alliance is unnatural. Eye and brain are torn asunder ruthlessly as they try vainly to work in couples. […] So we lurch and lumber through the most famous novels of the world. So we spell them out in words of one syllable, written, too, in the scrawl of an illiterate schoolboy (€,” 350).
Critics eager to read Woolf’s cinema essay as an endorsement of the interplay between mass culture and high art have tended to elide the impasse against which Woolf finds herself, faced with the “disastrous” coupling of word and image. We misunderstand Woolf’s meditations on cinema, that is, if we neglect their emphasis on film’s “ruthless” effects, which—in evacuating experience of subjectivity, and in violently mishandling the novels in which such subjectivity is celebrated—can breed only a stylized form of death.

Nevertheless, even here we can mark a strange hesitation in the language which the essay language employs in its attack on cinema’s “illiteracy.” In particular, an echolalia in the phrase sends us back to Woolf’s infamous dismissal of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, which she noted in her diary and then reworked for publication in *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown.* As Woolf progressed in her reading of the novel, her initial enthusiasm gave way to boredom and irritation, seeing in Joyce’s convoluted prose “a queasy undergraduate scratching his pimples,” as she remarked in her diary: “And Tom, great Tom, thinks this on a par with *War and Peace!* An illiterate, underbred book it seems to me; the book of a self taught working man, and we all know how distressing they are…” As she reincorporated this critique into the text of *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,* the charge of “underbreeding” gets rephrased as a charge of “calculated indecency” at worst, and, at best, a form of “savagery.” Of course, this in no way means


27 Here Joyce, as well as Eliot later on, becomes the representative of the erosion of literary conventions that Woolf identifies as both necessary and regrettable. The crisis in which modern novel has found itself has led it to “destroy the very foundations and rules of literary society. Signs of this are everywhere apparent. Grammar is violated; syntax disintegrated; as a boy staying with an aunt for the week-end rolls in the geranium bed
that the “illiteracy” or “savagery” of Joyce’s novel is retrospectively being read as “cinematic;” rather, these echoes suggest the ways that film frames Woolf’s reading of literature, and restages the debate already endemic to her theorization of modern literature, repeating along with it a parallel set of exclusions and qualifications.

The parallel comments on her work more proleptically, however, in her description of cinema’s clumsy depiction of the world in “words of one syllable”—a phrase which reappears in To the Lighthouse (1927) and “Middlebrow” (1932), as well as in The Waves (1931) and Between the Acts (1941). In The Waves, especially, the phrase forms part of the text’s well-known aesthetic reflection about the limits of language in a description of a world evacuated of any stable experience of identity: “What is the phrase for the moon? And the phrase for love? By what name are we to call death? I do not know. I need a little language such as lovers use, words of one syllable such as children speak when they come into the room…”

The phrase, here, is uttered by Bernard although it is in fact the fifth time that the refrain, which appears in the voice of other characters as well, is repeated throughout the novel. But whereas this “little...

out of sheer desperation as the solemnities of the sabbath wear on. The more adult writers do not, of course, indulge in such wanton exhibitions of spleen. Their sincerity is desperate, and their courage tremendous; it is only that they do not know which to use, a fork or their fingers. Thus, if you read Mr. Joyce and Mr. Eliot you will be struck by the indecency of the one, and the obscurity of the other. Mr. Joyce's indecency in Ulysses seems to me the conscious and calculated indecency of a desperate man who feels that in order to breathe he must break the windows. At moments, when the window is broken, he is magnificent. But what a waste of energy! And, after all, how dull indecency is, when it is not the overflowing of a superabundant energy or savagery, but the determined and public-spirited act of a man who needs fresh air!” (―CF,” 434).

29 It is introduced by Louis, observing his friends in conversation: “They speak now without troubling to finish their sentences. They talk a little language such as lovers use. An imperious brute possesses them…” (W, 143); and is repeated by Bernard in his
language” is, in *The Waves*, a way of acknowledging the insufficiency of language to match either the depth of intimate feeling or the enormity of life’s imponderable end, film speaks “words of one syllable” that are comic reductions of experience to the neat formulae of heavy-handed melodrama. In the cinema, a kiss is love. A broken cup is jealousy. A grin is happiness. Death is a hearse” (−M & R,” 593). If in *Anna Karenina*, Woolf claims, we know Anna “almost entirely by the inside of her mind,” in the cinema “all the emphasis…is laid upon her teeth, her pearls, and her velvet” (−M & R,” 593). Highlighting the rigid allegories of filmic drama, Woolf claims that cinema deprives us of the associative mobility of reading—even as the associatively marked language with which she makes this argument seems to complicate this distinction. Although the context for a full reading of either Woolf’s critique of *Ulysses* or her interest in “words of one syllable” could hardly be found in “The Cinema,” the very consistency of the linkages (at once linguistic and thematic) illustrates the systematic way in which the antagonism of cinematic and literary representation dovetails, so that, in speaking of the one, Woolf at the same time invokes the other. At the point, too, where the essay’s opposition between films and novels is felt most bitterly, and where its argument is most tightly policed, its language quietly confesses the unforeseen correspondences which pass between them.

*frustration at the falseness of his language: —…how I distrust neat designs of life that are drawn upon half-sheets of notepaper. I begin to long for some little language such as lovers use, broken words, inarticulate words, like the shuffling of feet on the pavement…” (W, 238), and echoed still again on 263, 293.*
3. “the character-making power”

That Woolf’s reading of film is also a reading of literature can be seen by examining how her critique of film recalls the argumentative terms of “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” (also printed as “Character in Fiction”). The relation between the two mediums is implicit in the distinction made in that essay between the “external,” social and economic aesthetic of Woolf’s triad of realists (Wells, Bennett, Galsworthy) and the “internal,” fleeting, impressionistic one suggested by modern fiction. In pushing against the realists, Woolf goes out of her way to stress the instrumental relation to style that suggests a literary form of industrialization whose fault is that it has disfigured from the beginning any reality it might plausibly record. These Edwardian writers, Woolf writes,

have looked very powerfully, searchingly, and sympathetically out of the window; at factories, at Utopias, even at the decoration and upholstery of the carriage; but never at her, never at life, never at human nature. And so they have developed a technique of novel-writing which suits their purpose; they have made tools and established conventions which do their business. But those tools are not our tools, and that business is not our business. For us those conventions are ruin, those tools are death (“CF,” 430).

It is the “technical” nature of realist style, just as much as its mundane subject matter, which signals, for Woolf, a crippling failure. Like the cinema, whose alienated images strip experience of its human fragility, the materialism of realist style can represent only

---

30 Paul Tiessen was the first to observe the possibility of this parallelism in his essay, “The Shadow in Caligari: Virginia Woolf and the ‘Materialists’ Response to Film,” Film Criticism 11 (1986-1987), 75-83.
a specific form of absence, substituting at every turn a surface facticity (the "decoration" or the "upholstery") for the nebulous field of "life" or "human nature." But, more than an argument about the necessity of representing the vicissitudes of inner life, Woolf’s treatment of realism also offers a critique of the conventionality of literary technique as it relates to the world it describes. On this point, realism is found guilty of a double crime: it has defined character in terms of economic determinism and social type, and in doing so it has consented to a separation between form and content. In foregrounding the artificiality of realism’s conventions, its "technique" and its “tools,” Woolf suggests the way in which technology becomes a way of naming a literary style whose alien method consigns representations of character to "ruin" and "death."

Considering Woolf’s famous articulation of a generational shift on or about December, 1910, we might expect her to affirm a more experimental version of mechanized form—as a stylistic encapsulation of the proliferated technologies of modern life. The earliest version of the essay does suggest that "the novel is a remarkable machine for the creation of character” and that its essence is what she calls its "character-making power;” and yet, Woolf’s subsequent revisions increasingly insist upon more adamantly metaphysical constructions, introducing ostensibly organic and deliberately "vague” assertions about fiction’s fidelity to "the spirit we live by,” "life itself,” “human nature,” etc. By offering an ostensibly organic opposition between the vital rhythms of

---

31 Virginia Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” (1923 version) in The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Vol. III, 384; my emphasis. This is the earliest version of the essay, published in 1923, where Woolf summarizes, and gently satirizes, Arnold Bennett’s critique of Jacob’s Room (1922), writing that "the novel is a very remarkable machine for the creation of character, we are all agreed. ...And it is because this essence, this character-making power, has evaporated that novels are for the most part the soulless bodies we know, cumbering our tables and clogging our minds.” Later versions delete
life and the artificial conventions of the novels which distort them, Woolf lays herself open to obvious objections, which were not lost on her contemporaries. Indeed, Wyndham Lewis, whose chapter on Woolf in *Men Without Art* discusses “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” mocks Woolf’s distrust of materialism, and what he considers her fear of “the great and coarse Without.” As he writes in a later chapter, it is only by accepting the inherent externality of form implied by art that “life could be represented at all. —Art] consists among other things in a mechanizing of the natural,” writes Lewis, “It bestows its delightful disciplines upon our aimless emotions: it puts its gentle order in the place of natural chaos: it substitutes for the direct image a picture. And, ultimately, and analyzed far enough, it substitutes a thing for a person every time…” Lewis’s contrarian stance finds him embracing the very aesthetics of objectivity that Woolf’s theory of character might appear to denounce.

In a similar vein, T. S. Eliot’s wife, Vivienne—who reviewed the essay in the *Criterion* (as “Eiron Morris”)—takes Woolf to task for creating in Mrs. Brown not a representative figure of modern life, but a purely symbolic figure, a “creature of fancy”

---

who → would evaporate into thin air long before the Richmond train reached Waterloo.”

She continues:

In an age of machinery, an age of horrid young people who won't fall in love, and who talk in harsh staccato tones, with no nonsense about it, an ominous demon has slipped into old Mrs. Brown's corner. We will call him, if he must be named, Mr. Leopold Bloom... [The young people] watch with calm understanding the activities of the machine-like insect, which is man, in the form of Mr. Bloom, held steadily for their inspection under the microscope of Mr. Joyce's intellect. Mr. Bloom is real: he might almost be called, by friends of Mrs. Brown, "photographic"—a dreadful word. But what can one hang on one's walls now? What is there...except the photographic and the abstract? And has not modern literature solved its problem by finding the symbolic in the photograph—as Mr. Bloom is both symbol and photograph?²⁵

For both Lewis and Eliot, the "age of machinery" demands a form of art that would respond in kind. *Ulysses* is exemplary in this regard, because of its investment in the encyclopedic, which, as Hugh Kenner suggests, institutes a "technological space."³⁶

What makes Bloom photographic is not the depiction of the indecencies of life that pass for realism, but the extent to which Bloom's consciousness is made precise, exact, and held for "inspection under the microscope of Mr. Joyce's intellect."

---

²⁵ Ibid. 136.
If these objections suggest that Woolf’s manifesto lacks the recognizable markers of modernity (the mechanical, the photographic) that it purports to espouse, it is perhaps because these tropes are at once addressed and hidden in the intransigent personalism of Woolf’s vocabulary. Certainly, Woolf rejects both the representational photo-realism of Bennett’s descriptions, as well as the Joycean “photo-symbolism” advocated by Vivienne Eliot. And indeed, far from Lewis’s aggressive substitution of things for people, Woolf’s essay consistently argues that literature must remain a place where the intimacy of human interaction can be preserved. “The writer must get into touch with his reader,” she writes, “by putting before him something which he recognizes, which therefore stimulates his imagination, and makes him willing to co-operate in the far more difficult business of intimacy. And it is of the highest importance that this common meeting-place should be reached easily, almost instinctively, in the dark, with one’s eyes shut” (“CF,” 431). In the dark night of this mutual seduction of the author and the reader, Woolf replaces the awkward question of literary technique with a form of writing bordering so closely on the transparent that it can mask as instinct. The reader, with their eyes shut, can see no incongruity between the form and the content, no obtrusive technologizing of thought.

Instead, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” addresses the question of media as a problem in the nature of communication which is internal to literature, and inscribed in the central ambiguity in its treatment of “character.” At the outset of the essay, Woolf

---

37 Woolf studies has also been eager to claim a renewed relevance for her work by framing it within the recognizable sphere of technological modernity. See, *Virginia Woolf in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, ed. Pamela Caughie (New York: Garland, 2000), and especially Leslie Kathleen Hankins’s playful, but aptly titled, “Virginia Woolf and Walter Benjamin Selling Out(Siders).”
provides a fable of sorts, a narrative in which the origin of fiction is seen to be inseparable from the “character” which serves as its inspiration. Fiction, she implies, arises from a desire to tell the stories suggested by the faces of strangers, to respond to the momentary hints supplied by “life itself” with a language equal to its mystery. Certainly this involves literature in any number of epistemological demands, but we fail to adequately parse this premise if we accept too readily its documentary claims. After all, the essay’s “Mrs. Brown” is caught between the elderly woman on the railway carriage whose real name we never discover and the figure she becomes in the narratives, at once fictional and didactic, with which Woolf surrounds her. “When I asked myself,” Woolf writes, “as your invitation to speak to you about modern fiction made me ask myself, what demon whispered in my ear and urged me to my doom [that is, urged her to the “folly” of writing fiction], a little figure rose before me—the figure of a man, or of a woman, who said, ‘My name is Brown. Catch me if you can’” (―CF,” 420). This “little figure,” the “demon” who provides the impetus to write, and whose story Woolf goes on playfully to repeat (or invent), is steeped in a language of fairy tales and nursery rhymes (invoking here the taunting challenge of the gingerbread man, of all things). It is as if Woolf, just before arguing that all fiction has its inspiration in a fugitive encounter with reality, is pointing us towards an unspoken anxiety: that the characters of fiction might only be figments of the author’s narcissism, false expressions suggested by a multitude of inner voices. But the invocations of literature as a will to truth are only

---

38 That this anxiety reflects a personal concern as well as a purely textual indeterminacy is evidenced in the diary entry where Woolf first begins to formulate her plans for the series of articles that would become “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” on June 19th, 1923: “I daresay its true, however, that I haven’t that ‘reality’ gift. I insubstantise, willfully to some extent, distrusting reality – its cheapness. But to go further. Have I the power of
half-hearted in the few places they do occur. In fact, the anecdote of the encounter on
the railway carriage is substantively repeated from her short story —An Unwritten Novel— (1920), in which the narrator attempts to read various narratives from the mysterious eyes of her fellow passenger. Mrs. Brown,” then, is at once the emblematic individuality whose life is the focus of fiction, and a personification of fiction itself. This apparent circularity suggests that, for Woolf, one cannot speak about fiction without speaking about the self—and foremost about the selfhood of fiction as a medium. Or, to put it in the questioning phrase of —An Unwritten Novel,” we cannot presume to read a line of fiction without asking when the self speaks to the self, who is speaking?

In this context, it is possible to make sense of the surreptitious displacement of the role of character in the essay. Woolf inherits the term character from Arnold Bennett’s 1923 review of Jacob’s Room, entitled Is the Novel Decaying?”, in which he critiqued her for failing to create believable characters. For Bennett, novelistic character stands in a relation to truth and the mark of its success is what he calls convincingness: The characters must be so fully true,” he writes, that they possess even their own creator. Every deviation from truth, every omission of truth, necessarily conveying the true reality? Or do I write essays about myself?” (The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Vol. II, 248).

As for example at the end of the essay, where she upbraids her audience for allowing writers to palm off upon you...an image of Mrs. Brown, which has no likeness to that surprising apparition whatsoever” (–CF,,” 436).


Ibid., 120.

impairs the emotional power and therefore weakens the interest.” Woolf, however, uses the word with an evident perversity which is meant to delegitimize Bennett’s critique of her work while appearing to agree to its terms.

As multiple critics note, Woolf plays upon a more obscure etymological root of the word “character”—from the Greek kharratein, meaning to engrave and suggesting the technology of printing—in order to detach it from its colloquial sense of an eccentric or exaggerated “type,” and to connect it to a nuanced form of literary impressionism. The essay does not attempt to describe the thoughts or opinions of Mrs. Brown; rather, it offers a figurative language that attempts to register the impression, the mark she leaves behind her: “The impression she made was overwhelming… Myriads of irrelevant and incongruous ideas crowd into one’s head on such occasions; one sees the person, one sees Mrs. Brown, in the centre of all sorts of different scenes…in a seaside house…perching on the edges of chairs, picking meals out of saucers, indulging in long, silent stares” (“CF,” 425). It is this figurative movement, this elaboration of the other through a series of scenes and images that Woolf comes to call “character.” By shifting narrative emphasis away from the identity of Mrs. Brown and towards the images which her presence evokes, Woolf suggests that what is most compelling about “character” does not

---

43 Ibid., 113. Bennett goes on to say of Jacob’s Room that “I have seldom read a cleverer book than Jacob’s Room, a novel which has made a great stir in a small world. It is packed and bursting with originality, and it is exquisitely written. But the characters do not survive in the mind because the author has been obsessed by details of originality and cleverness” (113).

strictly belong to it, but to the tenuous relation which involves it with other people. That is, Woolf’s essay uses a casual encounter in order to redefine literature as a kind of speculative attachment to the world, and to redefine subjective experience primarily in terms of this relationality.

4. “the picture-making power”

—. metaphors are necessary directly you deal with thought.”

— Virginia Woolf, Reading notes to Bacchae

It is with Woolf’s argument about realism looming in the background, and haunted by the ambiguity that characterizes her conclusions there, that we can see in “The Cinema” more than simply a timely reflection on the popular medium. The essay restates her case for the primacy of psychological impressions in narrative, while at the same time employing a perverse Darwinian language, not to herald in cinema the birth of a new age, but rather to displace its modernity. Having just provided a reading of the cinema that schematically opposed it to literary forms of knowledge, however, Woolf disrupts her otherwise cogent argument in order to describe a shadow moving across the screen:

[At] a performance of Dr. Caligari the other day a shadow shaped like a tadpole suddenly appeared at one corner of the screen. It swelled to an immense size,

45 It is in the articulation of this founding sociality of literature that Woolf notes, later in the essay, that “A writer is never alone.” Besides the company of Mrs. Brown, of course, Woolf is referring to the way in which writing is always addressed in part to its structural relation to the “public”: A writer is never alone. There is always the public with him—if not on the same seat, at least in the compartment next door. Now the public is a very strange traveling companion…” (“CF”, 432).

quivered, bulged, and sank back again into nonentity. For a moment it seemed to embody some monstrous diseased imagination of the lunatic's brain. For a moment it seemed as if thought could be conveyed by shape more effectively than by words. The monstrous quivering tadpole seemed to be fear itself, and not the statement 'I am afraid.' In fact, the shadow was accidental and the effect unintentional. But if a shadow at a certain moment can suggest so much more than the actual gestures and words of men and women in a state of fear, it seems plain that the cinema has within its grasp innumerable symbols for emotions that have so far failed to find expression. Terror has besides its ordinary forms the shape of a tadpole; it burgeons, bulges, quivers, disappears. Anger is not merely rant and rhetoric, red faces and clenched fists. It is perhaps a black line wriggling upon a white sheet… (M & R,” 593-594).

Half-perceived, the shadow—this little tadpole—at once interrupts the action of the film and completes it. The shadow, Woolf explains, is not even part of the film proper, but accidental” and producing only an unintentional” effect. And yet, as Michael Wood notes, Woolf clearly interprets it in the context of the madhouse plot in Caligari, seeing in the shadow —some monstrous diseased imagination of the lunatic’s brain.”47 What is even more surprising, however, is that Woolf then proceeds to identify in the passing shadow a potential future history of cinematic expression: —it seems plain that the cinema has within its grasp innumerable symbols for emotions that have so far failed to find expression.” It is as if, for Woolf, the most exciting form of cinema is not itself properly cinematic. The shadow, which condenses a fundamental element of the technological

operation of the filmic process, thus allegorizes the cinema at the same time as it shows its limits. Presumably, it is some artifact or a kind of interference, a portion of damaged print or the chance shadow cast by a passing insect. Woolf however is careful not to give it a name—only a metaphor: “the tadpole.” As in her early story, “The Mark on the Wall,” or the airplane passage in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf is less interested in clarifying the objectivity or factuality of the event than in exploring the multiplicity of perspectives that it engenders.

That Woolf gives the shadow a metaphoric description—“the monstrous quivering tadpole”—rather than a name, is significant for another reason: the movement towards the figural, which at first masks as description, suggests a correlation between the experience of “fear,” as a sensation rather than thought, and the transition from the literal image of the shadow to its reformulation as a literary image. Woolf thus reads the fate of cinema alongside an implicit claim for its relation to language. The shadow, she remarks, is incidental—but it is the tadpole, “the monstrous quivering tadpole,” that gives her the shock. Recalling the Darwinian rhetoric of the primeval soup from earlier in the essay, the figure of the tadpole is brought in to suggest an evolutionary movement that leads from the exterior to the interior, and from the image to language. The result, however, is not quite language understood as a rational bearer of information, not the language of the “statement,” but rather language mixed with the image, with sensation and volatility: that is, not language, per se, but its hybrid — “a black line wriggling upon a white sheet.”

Woolf’s subsequent reflections, then, only complicate things by

---

48. The resemblance between the shadow on the screen and writing’s “wriggling” lines is reinforced by Woolf’s revisions to the initial version of the essay, which emphasizes instead the possibility that anger might “writhe like an infuriated worm in black zigzags”
suggesting that this ambiguity is not the effect of her description but a property, or at least a possibility, of visual experience itself, its “secret language”:

Is there, we ask, some secret language which we feel and see, but never speak, and, if so, could this be made visible to the eye? Is there any characteristic which thought possesses that can be rendered visible without the help of words? It has speed and slowness; dartlike directness and vaporous circumlocution. But it has, also, especially in moments of emotion, the picture-making power, the need to lift its burden to another bearer; to let an image run side by side along with it. The likeness of the thought is for some reason more beautiful, more comprehensible, more available, than the thought itself… (M & R, 594, my emphasis). 49

What can often sound here, and later in the essay, as an avant-garde call for a purely nonrepresentational cinema, of the kind that might be recognized by Stan Brakhage (“something abstract, something which moves with controlled and conscious art” [M & R, 594]), ought to be read carefully. For, while some critics have wondered why Woolf’s essay suddenly adopts a tone favorable towards the cinema and derogatory towards literature, it should be noted that Woolf only alters her stance once she has in fact redefined the cinema on the basis of literary value. 50 The cinema’s “secret language” does not properly belong to it; rather it is borrowed from consciousness itself. It is

49 This passage is the most significantly and extensively revised from the first draft. Many of this material is new, but the most significant change is to the phrase highlighted here: “the likeness of the thought,” which in the first version reads the “likeness of the thing thought about”—a change which suggests a renewed emphasis on the structure, rather than the discrete content, of consciousness.
thought, more fundamentally than the cinema, which is disclosed in the vision of the
tadpole. What the moment reveals for Woolf is less the remarkable power of the cinema
to capture what words cannot, than the recognition that consciousness is in some ways
already marked by the work of the image.

Thought, Woolf remarks, has in it — the picture-making power, the need to lift its
burden to another bearer; to let an image run side by side along with it.” If the image of a
passing shadow can embody the movement of thought, then, it is only because
consciousness is already a latent form of non-linguistic communication. This — residue of
visual emotion” — which, as Woolf puts it, —is of no use either to painter or to poet” — is
or ought to be the real object of cinema (—M & R,” 594). What the cinema essentially
shows, then, is not a clumsy world of extraneous surfaces, —fleal shells” which block the
insubstantial magic of the self, but the mute speaking of the mind in its —secret language”
of likeness. It is unclear from Woolf’s discussion here whether the images thus given off
by consciousness are perceptible to the naked eye, or whether this continuous strip of
inner metaphors only hazardously intersects with the discernible field of vision. —As
smoke pours from Vesuvius,” she writes, —we should be able to see thought in its
wildness, in its beauty, in its oddity, pouring from men with their elbows on a table; from
women with their little handbags slipping to the floor. We should see these emotions
mingling together and affecting each other” (—M & R,” 595). But do we care about the
elbows and handbags, or the —smoke” of metaphor erupting from Woolf’s own pen?
Woolf’s essay on film does not remotely resolve these questions, yet there is a rigor in
this theoretical instability. Woolf’s prophetic vision of film oscillates between literal and
figurative registers, suggesting a version of film that is so thoroughly the product of
writing that we are obliged to see in it (or in its potentialities) not a discrete art with its
own rules, but an amorphous figure in which the notions of language, reading,
character—in short, the identifying hallmarks of literature—are reimagined and
transformed.\textsuperscript{51}

To say that consciousness is inescapably accompanied by pictures, lifted in
images from the caverns of thought to another bearer,” is to suggest that the self is
indistinguishable from its basic communicability, its sociability.” It is also to say that
the experience of community is predicated on acts of reading and viewing which media
like cinema and literature uniquely help to prepare. But it is also to pose the question of
mediation outside of the strict limits of recognizable mediums (language, painting, film,
etc.). This indeed seems to be the primary lesson of Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,”
which, for all its emphasis on the duties and conventions specific to novelists, continually
reminds us that fiction” is only another name for our relations to those strangers who are
our constant travelling companions.”\textsuperscript{52} Every relationship is imaginary, is governed by a
fictive attachment that must constantly be redrawn.\textsuperscript{53} As she puts it in a posthumously

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{51} It is an ironic confirmation of Woolf’s reading of film that Arnold Bennett, when he
published an article on film for Close-Up the following year, disregards the development
of a visual aesthetic, comfortably remarking that it was story” that was essential:
Apparently the leaders of the cinema have not yet grasped the fundamental truth that the
most important part of any creative film is the story itself, and that all other parts of the
enterprise are merely parts of an effort to tell the story,” Arnold Bennett, “The Film
‘Story,’” Close-Up 1.6 (December 1927), 29.
\textsuperscript{52} This is no doubt why she insists that every one...is a judge of character” and that it
would be impossible to live for a year without disaster unless one practised character-
reading and had some skill in the art” (“CF” 421).
\textsuperscript{53} In the inadvertent lyricism of adjacency, the vision or the writing of character” thus
becomes the nexus of what Gillian Beer has called, those impersonal intimacies of
juxtaposition and association which usually go unrecorded,” Gillian Beer, The Body of
\end{footnotesize}
published reflection on social relations, “it is impossible that one should not see pictures” when faced with those we do not know. 54 In this respect, the novel’s “character-making power” and the cinema’s “picture-making power” are each only metaphors for the medial capacity of character itself. This, in any case, is the lesson Woolf draws from her example on the railway carriage. “What I want you to see in it is this,” she writes, “here is a character imposing itself upon another person. Here is Mrs. Brown making someone begin almost automatically to write a novel about her” (“CF,” 425). It is not because Mrs. Brown is so eager to share her story with Woolf that a novel about her seems inevitable: in fact, the two never speak to one another. Instead, the medium of fiction attempts to record—“almost automatically”—the silent language written in the faces of others. For this reason, we should view “Mrs. Brown” not as the icon of ordinary individuals whose inner lives it is the job of novelists to represent, but as a figure for the disorderly essence of social experience which taunts writers with its cryptic, elusive visibility. As Woolf wrote in the original version of the essay, once we stop believing in the truisms of character made popular in fiction, Mrs. Brown’s “solidity disappears; her

54Virginia Woolf, “Three Pictures,” in The Death of the Moth and Other Essays (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1942), 12. Woolf begins the essay by seeing this as the condition of necessary social misconception: “it is impossible that one should not see pictures; because if my father was a blacksmith and yours was a peer of the realm, we must needs be pictures to each other. We cannot possibly break out of the frame of the picture by speaking natural words. You see me leaning against the door of the smithy with a horseshoe in my hand and you think as you go by: "How picturesque!" I, seeing you sitting so much at your ease in the car, almost as if you were going to bow to the populace, think what a picture of old luxurious aristocratical England! We are both quite wrong in our judgments no doubt, but that is inevitable” (12). By the end of the essay/story, however, Woolf has revised this position by showing the power of language to restore to social experience its fundamental obscurity.
features crumble” and she becomes, in Woolf’s strikingly cinematic metaphor, a dancing light, an illumination gliding up the wall…” (MBMB,” 387).

5. The “Eye” of History

“To read this poem one must have myriad eyes, like one of those lamps that turn on slabs of racing water at midnight in the Atlantic, when perhaps only a spray of seaweed pricks the surface, or suddenly the waves gape and up shoulders a monster…”

— Virginia Woolf, The Waves

Beginning and ending with the breaking of dawn over heaving waters, The Waves (1931) is a story about the secret resemblance of light and character. Perched within the remote vantage of their thoughts, the characters of Woolf’s novel send us lyric attestations of the transparency of identity, its unsubstantial territory” (W, 16). I am not a woman,” ponders Susan at one point, but the light that falls on this gate, on this ground” (W, 98). To claim to be light, this light, is to draw close enough to the transient fringe of common identity as to risk relinquishing the very intelligibility of speech. And yet, the characters in The Waves are so insistent on their ecstatic lightness of being, and are so improbably eloquent about this lightness, that their inscrutability as characters pales in comparison with the deceptive lucidity of their speech. These are characters who have learned the lesson of Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” so well that they themselves

55And yet, The Waves is often taken to nullify or erase the notion of character. Hélène Cixous thus wonders, How would it be possible to study character’ in Virginia Woolf’s The Waves when the vacillation of subjectivity between nobody and all the possible individualities discomposes the text by provoking it?” —The Character of Character” New Literary History 5.2 (Winter, 1974), 383-402: 389. Susan Gorsky, on the other hand, expresses the inevitable confusion produced by the book when she tries to read the
can whisper to us of how they are made translucent by the gaze of others, as for example when Rhoda remarks that Miss Lambert’s glance runs through her “like streaks of fire”: Month by month things are losing their hardness; even my body now lets the light through; my spine is soft like wax near the flame of the candle. I dream; I dream...” (W, 45). The language of these soliloquies, like the light that passes through soft tissue, seems both to define their speakers and to disregard them.

Jane Goldman has argued that Woolf’s feminist aesthetics proceeds from a remobilization of visual tropes which she calls, following Jürgen Habermas, the “enlightening of the Enlightenment.” That light is by nature abstract, however, does not imply its rational character. Rather, as The Waves makes clear, Woolf employs the trope of light’s abstraction to frame the disproportion of the novel’s lyrical perspective. “This is our world,” we read during one of the character’s early soliloquies, “lit with crescents and stars of light... Everything is strange. Things are huge and very small. The stalks of flowers are thick as oak trees. …We are giants, lying here, who can make forests quiver” (W, 23). Woolf treats light not as a condition of the world’s visible “reality,” but as a communicative property of perception, connecting the world of appearances to the metaphorical work of representation. Yet, the photological character of The Waves is not limited to its many solar descriptions, but poses the formal problem of perspective as one

---

in which subjective experience cannot be separated from the lyric abstractions that render it unreal.\footnote{As James Naremore observes, the speeches in the novel rest upon a certain detachment from the actual events that produce them, a kind of formally expressed wonder at the mystery of personality,” The World Seen Without a Self: Virginia Woolf and the Novel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 157.}

The language of vision in *The Waves* derealizes both time and experience, obliging us to read outside the linear narratives of human history. The effect of this, however, is not to rewrite literature so that it might appear unconstrained by external events. Instead, the novel stages the question of history more paradoxically, suggesting that an awareness of our “attachment” to the world at once defines subjective experience and makes it unintelligible. It is for this reason that a young Louis, on a train ride returning home at the end of the school year, links the moment of perception to a dispossessing of identity.

“Now we are off,” said Louis. “Now I hang suspended without attachments. We are nowhere. We are passing through England in a train. England slips by the window, always changing from hill to wood, from rivers and willows to towns again. And I have no firm ground to which I go. ... Therefore a poignant shadow, a keen accent, falls on these golden bristles, on these poppy-red fields, this flowing corn that never overflows its boundaries; but runs rippling to the edge. This is the first day of a new life, another spoke of the rising wheel. But my body passes vagrant as a bird’s shadow. I should be transient as the shadow on the meadow, soon fading, soon darkening and dying there where it meets the wood, were it not that I coerce my brain to form in my forehead; I force myself to state, if only in one line of unwritten poetry, this moment; to mark this inch in the long,
long history that began in Egypt, in the time of the Pharaohs, when women carried red pitchers to the Nile. I seem already to have lived many thousand years…” (W, 65-66).

Louis’s vision of his “poignant shadow” describes the groundlessness of his identity, at the same time as the distance imposed by the novel’s omniscient lyricism gives it a false intelligibility. The passage stages an aesthetic drift into the excess of the visible, which can only be counteracted through a constant application of “coercion” or “force” (“I coerce my brain to form in my forehead”). In the vagrancy of sight, which like the train shuttles Louis through an incongruity of other spaces, it is the eye that permits an ontological leakage, so that each moment of description assumes the quality of elegy: “I am the ghost of Louis, an ephemeral passer-by” (W, 67). The melancholic logic of narration, evident here and throughout the work, can be understood as a very precise effect of the novel’s metaphorical separation of language from character. By filtering the experience of reading through the novel’s elaborate lyric prism, then, Woolf reproduces the alien structure of cinematic perception as a version of “life as it is when we have no part in it.” But the “world seen without a self” (W, 287), as presented in The Waves, parallels cinematic alienation only by violently rewriting it. Throughout The Waves, we are not so much presented with a simple absence of subjectivity from the world, as we are led to conceive of subjectivity itself as marked by a kind of absence, or

58 Angela Leighton notes that Woolf’s fiction is “deeply implicated with the nature of the elegaic.” “Elegy,” she writes, “is writing bereft of its object, form missing its content. It thus, thematically, corroborates the gap which lies at the heart of all literary writing generally. Form and content do not quite match up…and thus leave language feeling its formal purposelessness, its failed relevance” (Leighton, On Form, 126).
by what Bernard variously calls the “central shadow” (W, 292), and the “sunless territory of non-identity” (W, 116).

*The Waves* places the visible grammar of non-identity at the heart of historical consciousness, rewriting each in the figure of the “eye.” The transitory shadows in which Louis reads the signature of his own eclipse are thus allegorized in the passage by the syncopic rhythm of his blinking eyes, which converts all experience into a phantom.

…I seem already to have lived many thousand years. But if I now shut my eyes, if I fail to realise the meeting-place of past and present, that I sit in a third-class railway carriage full of boys going home for the holidays, human history is defrauded of a moment’s vision. Its eye, that would see through me, shuts—if I sleep now, through slovenliness, or cowardice, burying myself in the past, in the dark… (W, 65-66).

The parallel slippage of Louis’s eye into the “eye” of history, in the final lines, reflects a melancholic temporality by emphasizing, not an empowered omniscience, but a precarious form of oblivion that enters experience as quickly and easily as the blink of an eye. The blink of the eye punctuates vision, while at the same time interrupting it with a kind of temporal caesura. Woolf evokes this biological “shutter-effect” in *Orlando*—written in 1928, during the composition of *The Waves*—when she has Orlando reflect:

There was something strange in the shadow that the flicker of her eyes cast, something which (as anyone can test for himself by looking now at the sky), is always absent from the present—whence its terror, its nondescript character—something one trembles to pin through the body with a name and call beauty, for
it has no body, is as a shadow and without substance or quality of its own, yet has the power to change whatever it adds itself to.\footnote{Virginia Woolf, \textit{Orlando} (New York: Harcourt, 1956), 322.}

For \textit{The Waves}, we might say, the lyricism of its language is always present as a kind of shadow, lending an absent voice to the implied present of the novel’s \textit{action}.” The effect of this, of course, is that each event, each moment of perception, is haunted by the suggestion of its simultaneous non-occurrence. The true narrative can only be said to take place in the gap between the implicitly metaphorical perspective of the novel’s voice and the lives of the characters that this voice comes to represent.

\textit{The Waves}, of course, could not be more upfront in its denaturalization of narrative and historical progression, but it also strips the story of any possible reading of character development. Unlike \textit{The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man}, for example, in which Joyce provides an organic parallel for the incremental growth of literary style as it matches Stephen’s changing age, Woolf has the children speak with the same inhuman clarity as the adult versions of the characters: "A shadow falls on the path,‘ said Louis, ‘like an elbow bent.’ ‘Islands of light are swimming on the grass,’ said Rhoda. ‘They have fallen through the trees’” (\textit{W}, 9).

The lyric tone of the novel, as I have suggested, provides a false lucidity that only obscures the relation between the words we read and the world that they describe. As L. P. Hartley wrote in his perceptive review of the book, the novel is full of moments of remarkable insight and moments of vision, and yet, he concludes,

…vision of what? Insight into what? The page flickers before one’s eyes like a pointillist picture, alive with golden notes, but so much has been disrupted,
standards overturned, ideas blown sky-wards, the great body of knowledge has been punched so full of deadly holes that there is, it seems, no authority to whom we, or they [the characters], can refer for an answer to the simplest question. … [Mrs. Woolf’s] genius is like a shaft of sunlight breaking into a room—a golden medium in which float a million fiery particles but beyond that enchanted area the darkness is darker than it ever was.  

Throughout The Waves, this “darkness” is the consequence of a language that everywhere mixes the phenomenal with the metaphorical. The Waves was to be “an abstract mystical eyeless book,” Woolf notes in her diary. In the text itself, Woolf incorporates something like a logic of “eyelessness” into the novel’s metaphoric structure. But The Waves does not simply use metaphor as a stylistic nicety; rather, the text quite deliberately evokes metaphor as a conceptual frame for reading subjectivity itself. We are not moved by the news of Percival’s death, just as we are not moved by Louis’s abortive romance with Rhoda. The fact that we are moved by the language shows the degree to which the question of “emotion” or “interiority”—all those aspects of subjective experience elsewhere located at the heart of Woolf’s theory of fiction—must be read through the incongruities of metaphor and allegory. This does not amount to a denial of the notion of character, but rather reflects the extent to which it needs to be thought in terms of the experiences which remain “unseen,” even by their participants.

---

62 Ann Banfield remarks that in the opening section of The Waves “there is no candidate for a fictional observer.” “Describing the Unobserved: Events Grouped Around an Empty Center,” in The Linguistics of Writing: Arguments Between Language and Literature, ed. Nigel Fabb, Derek Attridge, Alan Durant and Colin MacCabe (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), 274. Banfield will elsewhere argue that subjectlessness is the
This does not necessarily mean that experience in *The Waves* is therefore rendered with the photographic unconscious of the cinema. Indeed, Woolf was appalled upon hearing that an acquaintance of hers was considering adapting a film version of *The Waves*, which she feared would reduce the book to merely “dumbshow.” Woolf’s anxiety makes sense, for her style is not in any obvious way “cinematic.” In fact, it hardly seems —novelistic.” *The Waves*, indeed, is written out of a manifest dissatisfaction with identity—both that of its characters and that of its form. In this respect, it is her most far-flung experiment in the “sociability” of the arts; for *The Waves* is so immersed in borrowed forms—the pictorial and photographic imagism of its interludes, the dramatic conceit and lyric language of its voices, even the cinematic rhythms in which “scene melts into scene; person into person”—that it asks to be read along other coordinates altogether.

Indeed, *The Waves* seems to have been modeled on the “novel of the future” which Woolf outlined her 1927 article “Poetry, Fiction, and the Future,” written during

---

63 The anecdote is from a letter to Virginia Isham, who was, at the same time, planning a radio adaptation of the book: “Of course I should be delighted if you could make anything of the Waves on the wireless. I'm afraid you will find it very difficult to get it taken, unless you know somebody there who would be interested. Let me know if I can do anything to help. Yes of course be Susan if you like her; and I should be delighted if Gyles [Isham] would be Bernard. We must meet and discuss it—I am rather in the dark as to what you think could be done. The only other suggestion was from a man called Wogan Phillips—the husband of Rosamond Lehmann, who wanted to make a film of it. But I don’t think this will come to anything. Also, your idea is quite different, for I suppose a film would be all dumbshow. However please consider that you have my permission and blessing for whatever they are worth. It would interest me immensely to see what you could do with it”: Virginia Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. 5, 149-150.

64 See also, Gillian Beer, “The Body of the People: *Mrs. Dalloway* to *The Waves*,” where she describes *The Waves* as searching for “all that is unpossessed by writing,” “the communal world of the unrecorded” (71-72).
the time when the idea for The Waves was first recorded in her diary. 65 There, Woolf argues that so much effort has been spent — under the dominion of the novel” that we have been left with a narrow and wholly insufficient understanding of character. — The psychological novelist has been too prone to limit psychology to the psychology of personal intercourse,” she writes, — we long sometimes to escape from the incessant, the remorseless analysis of falling into love and falling out of love. ...we long for some more impersonal relationship” (PFF,” 435). In order to express these unacknowledged sentiments (such as — on emotions toward such things as roses and nightingales, the dawn, the sunset...,” and — the stimulus of sight, ...the shape of trees or the play of colour, the emotions bred in us by crowds” [—PFF 439]), Woolf suggests that fiction needs to remake itself into a mixed art commensurate to the monstrous, hybrid, unmanageable emotions” it seeks to record. Woolf’s novel of the future” is in fact not really a novel but the ravenous product of the other arts it will have devoured.” Like cinema, that lurching parasite,” Woolf fantasizes that in the future the novel will have licked up” the conglomerate powers of other arts — with its long glutinous tongue”:

That cannibal, the novel, which has devoured so many forms of art will by then have devoured even more. We shall be forced to invent new names for the different books which masquerade under this one heading. And it is possible that there will be among the so-called novels one which we shall scarcely know how to christen. It will be written in prose, but in prose which has many of the

65 Though a number of diary entries track the genesis of The Waves in Woolf’s thinking throughout the spring of 1927, the first detailed note occurs on June 18. See Letters, Vol. III, 139. — Poetry, Fiction, and the Future” (sometimes published as — The Narrow Bridge of Art”) was published in August of that year, and written in May. See the editorial notes, The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Vol. IV., 439. Hereafter cited as —PFF.”
characteristics of poetry. ...It will be dramatic, and yet not a play. It will be read, not acted. ...[It] will stand further back from life. It will give, as poetry does, the outline rather than the detail. It will make little use of the marvellous fact-recording power, which is one of the attributes of fiction. It will tell us very little about the houses, incomes, occupations of its characters; it will have little kinship with the sociological novel or the novel of environment. With these limitations it will express the feelings and ideas of characters closely and vividly, but from a different angle (—PFF,‖ 434).

Written in a prose that is not prose, dealing —closely and vividly” with emotion while also standing —further back from life,” the imagined text of Woolf’s incongruous prophecy is only —masquerading” as a novel. From the primeval caves of darkness in —Pictures” to the cannibalistic future imagined here, Woolf’s comparative theories of fiction in the 1920’s testify to the sense in which her insistent yoking of literature and the expression of character was mediated by unassimilable fantasies, not just of other arts, but of the obscure angles of life which they promised to disclose. The cinema, because it seemed to erode the categories by which representation conventionally orders itself, rekindles the possibility—which is the guiding premise of Woolf’s literature and criticism—that we do not yet understand the self, that there is still some —residue” of its —secret language” (as she says in —The Cinema”) which has not yet been settled into the habitual canons of thought and the abstractions of —form.”66

66 In her essay on Percy Lubbock’s The Craft of Fiction, Woolf objects to the concept of literary form, noting that —whenever Mr. Lubbock talks of form ...we feel the presence of an alien substance which requires to be visualised imposing itself upon emotions which we feel naturally...”: —On Re-reading Novels” (1922), in The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Vol. II, 340.
Chapter Three:

The Laws of Comparison: H. D. and Cinematic Formalism

[One] should have expected the history of “imagistic art,” as they call it, to consist of a history of changes in imagery. But we find that images change very little; from century to century, from nation to nation, from poet to poet, they flow on without changing. Images belong to no one: they are “the Lord’s”... Images are given to poets: the ability to remember them is more important than the ability to create them.
—Viktor Shklovsky, “Art as Technique” (1917)

Images are often taken as peculiar icons of —presentness.” This prevailing myth suggests that images tell essential stories about the conditions of modernity, since their very form (as Lessing once insisted) is one of simultaneity. And yet, images—whether visual or verbal—are also uncanny products of time; they stand in a mysterious relation to their present usage. This may explain Viktor Shklovsky’s contention, in his 1917 essay —Art as Technique,” that a rigorous history of poetics must be based upon changes of technique, since the images presented in poetry are not themselves essentially new. His point is not that images are strictly speaking —historical,” but simply that their histories cannot be concretely narrated. As Shklovksy suggests, images are profoundly impersonal—they —belong to no one”—because, as heightened forms of remembrance, they recall histories of use and reference that exceed their immediate appropriation. We might say, then, that part of what images conceal is their distance from us, just as what they reveal is our distance from our own perceived modernity.

1 An earlier version of this chapter was previously published in Modernism / modernity 18.1 (Winter 2011), 1-25.
The observation that images are by nature untimely pertains to the ongoing reappraisal of the relation between modernist literature and the culture of film, since cinematic form has so often been called in to support narratives of stylistic modernity. Indeed, it is often taken for granted that the novelty of cinematic practices provides a self-evident paradigm for modernism’s own obsession with formal innovation. According to this assumption, the striking features of film’s representational mechanisms—montage, close-up, the flicker of moving images—become the stylistic models for textual practices, whether or not such connections can be substantiated beyond the barest analogy. Yet, if cinematic style does not correspond in neatly material ways to the experiments of modernist literature, and if, as David Trotter rightly points out, our critical desire to affirm such a relation often betrays a disconcerting anachronism, we still need to be able to account for the ways that the concept of cinema itself offered writers a kind of analogy, through which the distinct aims of literary representation were articulated and modified. Although the “literary” and the “cinematic” can have only limited use if taken as axiomatic empirical categories, or as self-fulfilling indices of medium specificity, they often operate, as rhetorical figures, with a curious disregard for this fact. Attending to the

---

3 In his essay, Shklovsky is concerned with the status of poetic language—the images to which he refers are verbal, meant to invoke, and to refute, the symbolist tradition in Russian aesthetics according to which art was defined as a “thinking in images.” Nonetheless, as I hope to show, his comments might also be read in the context of film’s influence on the literary culture of the early twentieth century, a context, that is, in which “image” and “technique” increasingly could not be made so discrete.

4 This assumption, of course, is often provoked by the statements of modernists themselves, such as Stein’s bald retrospective claim from 1934 that in The Making of Americans “I was doing what the cinema was doing.” Gertrude Stein, “Portraits and Repetition,” in Lectures in America (London: Virago Press, 1988), 176.

5 Trotter adds a special caution against retroactively projecting Eisenstein’s notion of montage into understandings of film that predate the late 1920’s. David Trotter, Cinema and Modernism (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 2-3.
ways that modernist writers reflected on literary form in their engagements with film may not always confirm direct or concrete narratives of influence, but it does shed light on the contested reception of cinema as it came to be considered an art, and the reciprocal ways in which the identity of “literature” was redefined in the process.6

The entanglement of literary and cinematic form is especially prominent in the criticism and prose work of H. D. in the 1920’s and early 1930’s. As Susan Stanford Friedman has argued, H. D.’s prose experiments reflected a concerted attempt to trouble her reputation as an Imagist poet.7 This shift of stylistic modes, as H. D. framed it in a 1919 letter to John Cournos, arises out of the conflicting ways of seeing implied by each genre: —You must remember that writing poetry require[s] clarity, a clairvoyance almost… But in the novel I am working through a wood, a tangle of bushes and bracken out to a clearing, where I can see clearly again.”8 The obstruction, if not the elision, of clarity that H. D. identifies as the perverse capacity of prose fiction, provided a model for her contributions to the film journal Close-Up. These reviews, like her remarkable prose experiments from the period, depart from a typically Imagist attempt to transcend rhetorical verbiage through the crystallization of the visual, exploring instead how the complexities of vision solicit and are transformed by the thickets of language, metaphor, and reference. Indeed, it might be said that her critical engagement with cinema provided

6 In this sense I would echo Michael North’s observation that photography (and tacitly film) was —much more than a medium. It was the context, simultaneously technical, social and aesthetic, within which both writers and artists in the avant-garde worked out their ideas about representation.” Camera Works: Photography and the Twentieth Century Word (Oxford and New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), 16.
7 Susan Stanford Friedman, Penelope’s Web: Gender, Modernity, H. D.’s Fiction (Cambridge and New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 34.
8 Quoted in Friedman, Penelope’s Web, 34.
a crucial vocabulary for her “Dijon” novellas of the late twenties and early thirties.\(^9\) The index of this influence, however, is not limited to the ways that H. D.‘s fiction emulates cinematic technique; rather, in H. D.’s film criticism she develops a kind of literary spectatorship, a way of writing about the act of seeing, that begins to double for the detached omniscience of prose works like her novella, “The Usual Star.”\(^10\)

In locating a connection between H. D.’s narrative practices and the impersonal forms of spectatorship modeled by her criticism, I hope to show that the coincidence of H. D.’s experimentation in prose fiction and her interest in cinema can help to contextualize the ambivalent tone of her articles for Close-Up, which mix literary and cinematic categories in ways that are strikingly, often frustratingly, oblivious of the ostensible “specificity” of these mediums. This tonal ambivalence can be flummoxing, but we should resist the temptation to ignore it by neatly assimilating her film criticism either to the contemporary psychoanalytic models developed by Freud or to the theories of montage and reception put forward by Eisenstein.\(^11\) As Laura Marcus observes of Close-Up generally, the

---

\(^9\) These novellas—“Kora and Ka,” “Mira Mare,” “The Usual Star,” “Two Americans,” and “Nights”—were initially composed between 1928-1931, and subsequently published in limited editions by Maurice Darantière in Dijon between 1934-1935.


\(^11\) The importance of both psychoanalytic discourse and Eisenstein’s writings for H. D.’s participation in cinematic culture has been well documented. Yet, we must also be receptive to the idiosyncrasy with which H. D. articulates her relation to film if we wish to understand its structural importance for her writings. Dianne Chisholm is right to point out that H.D.’s is surely a mixed medium, a Freudian-Fenollosan-Eisensteinian medium,
journal sought to establish film as an art precisely by finding a form of writing and language adequate to the cinema… a discursive medium and forum commensurate with the new art.” For this reason, I find it less productive to reduce H. D.’s essays on film to their more well-known definitions of cinematic beauty than to underscore the modes of writing in them which cinematic spectatorship enables. Her dense and elusive commentaries must be read carefully as themselves mini performances of the ideas they are trying to convey. Drawing on H. D.’s review of *By The Law* (written by Viktor Shklovsky and directed by Lev Kuleshov), I take Shklovsky and H. D. as exemplifying two distinct and admittedly extreme approaches to the relation of cinema to literature. While Shklovsky subordinates cinematic style to formalist literary categories, H. D. seeks to reconfigure narrative conventions through an enthusiastic emulation of the mode of visionary consciousness epitomized by cinematic spectatorship. Using a common text—*By the Law* (1926)—as a way to clarify these divergent strategies, I suggest that H. D.’s writing shaped itself through gestures of comparative differentiation, even as it sought to transcend the antagonistic rhetorical conditions that structure film’s relation to literature.


1. Literature By the Law of Film

_The cinema has no laws; the best proof of this is that in our language only one brochure in all has been written on the “laws of cinema” (by V. Shklovsky), while one could as a joke write a whole encyclopaedia on the lawlessness of cinema. Ask the filmgoer—he is at the heart of these questions._  
—Aleksandr Belenson, _Cinema Today_ (1925)_{13}

Viktor Shklovsky, father of Russian formalism, made a name for himself as a proponent of the science of poetics, the inner “laws” of literature and what he called the “revolution of the word,” but he was equally a commentator on film. Between 1923 and 1930, Shklovsky was the author of more than 15 articles and multiple monographs on film,_{14} and one can see in his work the ways in which his early definitions of literature shaped his appraisal of cinematic form. In _Art as Technique_ (also translated as _Art as Device_), for example, Shklovsky seeks to define literary art by displacing the centrality of images. For Shklovsky, art cuts through the layers of habit and memory in order to reopen the world to the immediacy of unformed sensation, a sensation that has been reawakened, or “turned over like a log in a fire,” as he puts it in _Literature and Cinematography_ (1923)._{15} Methodologically, this required a critique of what Shklovsky considers the false economy of images that facilitate a dubious efficiency. This false impression of immediacy arises, he argues, from the comparative structure of verbal

---

_{14} Many of these articles are collected in _The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents: 1896-1939_, ed. Richard Taylor and Ian Christie (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1988), and one of the monographs was recently translated as _Literature and Cinematography_, Trans. Irina Masinovsky (Champaign, IL and London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2008).
_{15} Shklovsky, _Literature and Cinematography_, 14.
figures which "clarify the unknown by means of the known." This kind of "thinking in images," Shklovsky contends, brings the world too quickly to us as a predigested abstraction, while the aim of literary form is precisely to restore the "unknown" to perception through techniques of repetition and delay ("impedence" and "deceleration"), and by renegotiating the history of literary conventions (which need, periodically, to be replaced). In this way, the formalist definitions of "literariness" also carried basic, and often contradictory, assumptions about the discontinuous temporalities of literature, and about its constant need for renewal or "evolution."

Shklovsky's engagement with film (as theorist and screenwriter) in the twenties can be seen as an extension of problems endemic to his study of literature, rather than as a general application of the "formal method" to a new medium. Although Shklovsky was, among the members of the formalist school (OPOYAZ), the most prolific commentator of film, his attitude towards it betrays a marked skepticism. Indeed, it is fair to say that Shklovsky conceived of film almost entirely from the perspective of literature. He himself was a screenwriter (working notably with Abram Room and Lev Kuleshov), and while his criticism often attempts to specify the "form and material" unique to each art, his account of film relied heavily on the vocabulary derived from his work on literature. Shklovsky's mostly inconclusive attempts to locate "poetry and

---

16 Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays, 6.
17 "Form and Material in Art" is the name of the opening section of Literature and Cinematography, in which Shklovsky provides an "objective" approach to the analysis of form. Indeed, it is indicative of his treatment of cinema that he feels the need to preface his discussion of it by turning first to a catalogue of existing arts, in this case music, painting, and literature. Implicitly then, "art" itself, or the "artfulness" of all art, must be reinterpreted if we are to understand how film operates as a form of expressive representation. This is the conclusion reached by Boris Eikhenbaum in his 1926 essay "Literature and Cinema," where he writes: "One thing is clear: we are going through an
prose” in film,18 his many discussions of film —semantics,”19 his emphasis on the impossibility of abstract film and on the centrality of plot (in spite of the contemporary achievements of Vertov and Eisenstein in the creation of increasingly non-narrative forms of documentary and historical drama,)20 and the concomitant privilege he accorded to the creative authority of the script21—all of these point to the awkward and apparently antagonistic relationship that he discerned between literature and film. In his criticism literature colonizes film; its interpretation is inflected with distinctly literary categories, values, and criteria.

era in which literary material is being re-examined from the point of view of film. In the face of cinema, literature must realize its own methods in a new way. The development of film poses anew the ancient problem of the relationship and differentiation of the arts.” See Russian Formalism: A Collection of Articles and Texts in Translation, ed. Stephen Bann and John E. Bowlt (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1973), 126.

18 See, for example, his 1927 article, “Poetry and Prose in Cinematography,” in Bann, 128-130.

19 See, for example, the 1925 piece, “The Semantics of Cinema,” as well as “Sound as a Semantic Sign” (1930) and “The Film Language of New Babylon” (1930), and some comments in 1927’s “Mistakes and Inventions.” All of which are to be found in The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents: 1896-1939, ed. Richard Taylor and Ian Christie (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London: 1988).

20 See, “Where is Dziga Vertov Striding?” (1926), as well as “The Cine-Eyes and Intertitles (1926), “Sergei Eisenstein and ‘Non-Played‘ Film” (1927) and “Beware of Music” (1929), in which he comments, bitingly in reference to Eisenstein: “All right, we’ll have jumping and stopping titles and no montage shooting plan. But we need a montage plan in order to shoot. Consequently, between the montage lists of the director and the somersaulting titles there must some kind of point which will in any case contain an order of scenes and their exact content. Then a film script will emerge.” Taylor, The Film Factory, 252.

21 For these discussions see “The Temperature of Cinema” (1927), “The Film Factory” (1927), “Mistakes and Inventions” (1927), and his 1930 article, “The Script Laboratory,” in which Shklovsky calls for “new cadres of scriptwriters… created from among the people who are linked with production, with the new ways of life, and who are participating in the construction of our new life.” Taylor, The Film Factory, 294.
It is perfectly emblematic, then, that his first foray into film production, Kuleshov’s 1926 film *By the Law* (Po zakonu), was a literary adaptation. For Shklovsky, film needed to be explained in the language of literature if it was to be accepted. Cinematic expression (as technique) imitates literature, Shklovsky suggests, in its ability to representation out of its usual focus, and yet Shklovsky argues, somewhat perplexingly, that cinematic art, like linguistic art, cannot be based on the composition of its images but only on the movement of its plot. Shklovsky’s reluctance to define film in terms of its

---

22 It was an adaptation of Jack London’s –The Unexpected‖ (1906), a story about gold-mining in the Yukon, which opens by expressing its titular dramatic conceit, that we can best judge people not from what they are in daily life but who they are in extraordinary moments of crises, in terms that clearly reinforce Shklovsky’s understanding of art as estrangement, although in an entirely more individualist and wholly Darwinian idiom: –It is a simple matter to see the obvious, to do the expected. The tendency of the individual life is to be static rather than dynamic, and this tendency is made into a propulsion by civilization, where the obvious only is seen, and the unexpected rarely happens. When the unexpected does happen, however, and when it is of sufficiently grave import, the unfit perish. They do not see what is not obvious, are unable to do the unexpected, are incapable of adjusting their well-grooved lives to other and strange grooves. In short, when they come to the end of their own groove, they die.” Printed in *Love of Life and Other Stories* (New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1907), 125.

23 This qualification, especially his insistence that the script was the most important material of a film, and that film could not be made without plot, partly explains his disagreement with Eisenstein, registered in his 1928 contribution to a discussion of *October*, entitled –Sergei Eisenstein and the Non-Played Film‖ (*The Film Factory*, 161-162). Eisenstein, of course, also conceptualized film from the vantage point of language, and the –Japanese ideogram‖ in particular, but he took this point of origin in a vastly different direction, seeking to discover in language an archaic justification of the –depictability‖ of meaning.) –The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram‖ (1929) can also be read alongside Pound’s edition of Fenellosa’s infamous monograph, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*. See Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, trans. Jay Leyda (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1977), 28-44; and Ernest Fenellosa, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, ed. Ezra Pound (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 1968).

24 –Taking the representation out of its usual focus serves as that „chut-chut” which makes art. There is almost nothing in a novel that can be transferred to the screen—nothing, that is, but the bare plot,” *Literature and Cinematography*, 28. And further on, –There will never be a film of pure motion, to say nothing of a film of abstractions, as some German artists used to dream… The Poetics of the motion picture is a poetics of pure plot.” (32)
visual imagery, as in the similar reluctance to admit imagery a central role in literature, stems from his distrust of the promise of expediency held out by the image; and it is in this way that Shklovsky exiles cinema from art on Bergsonian grounds:

Human motion is a continuous magnitude; human thought represents continuity as a set of impulses, a set of segments infinitely minute, minute to the point of continuity… The cinema is a child of the discontinuous world. Human thought has created for itself a new non-intuitive world in its own image and likeness… A film does not move; it only appears to move. Pure motion, as such, will never be reproduced in cinematography. Cinema can only deal with the motion-sign, the semantic motion… The semantic motion-sign triggers our recognition; we complete it; it does not demand our attention… Fundamentally, cinematography is extraneous to art.  

In other words, the motion of cinematic images is always remembered, always a product of synthesis and reconstruction on the part of the viewer, and because of this Shklovsky holds that it can only approximate the rejuvenating function of art. Film —art,— in this sense, is defined as implicitly borrowed, and the primary source of its translations, he argues paradoxically, is literature (which offers, in its techniques of delay, a more true representation of human thought). The formalist attention to film thus locates it as the principle sign of growing confusion in the arts, a fact that is confirmed all the more by Shklovsky’s attempts to explain it according to a literary science.” Shklovsky’s ambivalent writings on film, however, ultimately testify to the failure to fulfill this ambition. As he writes in a 1927 article entitled The Temperature of Cinema,”

25 Literature and Cinematography, 30-31.
—Everything that I have written is disproved by cinema.” In his writing this is practically true—nearly all of his articles end in mid-thought, as if halted by the forms of discontinuity he sought to describe.

*  

H. D. reviewed Kuleshov’s *By the Law*, which was adapted for the screen by Viktor Shklovsky, for the July 1928 issue of *Close-Up*. All of Shklovsky’s care for the ordering of the plot, however, may have gone unnoticed—for H. D. arrived at the theater roughly twenty minutes late. Perhaps for this reason, but in any case in spite of it, her reading of the film has very little to do with what happens, or with any of the elements of plot construction which so obsessed Shklovsky. Instead, H. D.’s reading of the film is focused precisely on the dispersed temporality of discrete images, which Shklovsky believed disqualified film from the realm of art. For H. D., film offers a vehicle for “abstract… remote… symbolical” meanings, suggestions of mythic or visionary parallels that bear only indirectly on the film’s plot (*CU*, 126). Such images stand apart, exerting a

---

27 The review is under the name *Expiation*, which is H. D.’s translation of the German title, *Suhne*. In the US, however, the film was known as *By the Law* or by the Latin title *Dura Lex*.
28 Or so she reports in her review: —Wll, it was hardly fair that after climbing up the narrowest of cinema theater stairs, I should find myself seated besides the _others_‘ who didn’t have a breath left to gasp _you’re late you fool, you’ve been missing it_‘ but one of them whispered like someone before the high altar explaining to a neophyte _it’s Russian—it’s Alaska_. ‘Someone had apparently killed someone,’ from *Expiation*” in *Close-up, Cinema and Modernism*, ed. James Donald, Anne Friedberg, and Laura Marcus (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 125. Hereafter abbreviated as *CU*.
29 Bryher gives a more focused reading of the narrative arc in her account of *By the Law*, but clearly incorporates the imagistic analysis suggested by H. D.’s review. *By the Law*, she says, —is great and imperfect and chaotic. It is not a pleasant film to watch because, as in all Russian films, one is caught up into it as if one were already there, watching these events, having to decide one’s self if this is justice or that cruelty.” Bryher, *Film Problems of Soviet Russia* (Territet: POOL, 1929), 23.
cryptic power upon their viewer and on the extra-filmic preparations” of the viewer—that time spent before entering the theater, wandering the streets. H. D. views film as addressing itself to the gap between the ordered time of the film’s narration and the erratic time of viewing, a gap in which the image becomes subject to variable intentions.”

“Someone had apparently killed someone,” she writes of her confusion at arriving midway through the film,

Someone was heaving a weight of something and against an upright ledge of mud, the rain poured and soaked and ran and gorged runnels in the already over-soaked bit of bed earth. Bad lands, something wasted, wasteful, over-done and done with. Rain poured over a slab of earth and I felt all preparation of the extravagantly contrasting out of doors gay little street, was an almost ironical intention, someone, something “intended” that I should grasp this, that some mind should receive this series of uncanny and almost psychic sensations in order to transmute them elsewhere; in order to translate them. Rains soaked across a slab of mud, runnels bored and jabbed and pockmarked and gusseted it. There was never an earth that could be ever again so drab, so unproductive (CU, 125-126).

The process of singling out these “uncanny” details—images of waste and rain and mud—for a heightened attention serves a double function. It exaggerates the materiality of these shots, their recalcitrant resistance to narrativization, while at the same time leaving this wasted field of visual signs to be all the more completely subsumed—“transmuted… translated”—by the generality of reading in which such details are construed as merely occasions for imaginative expansion. Here we see H. D. straining
language to capture the elusive scintillesence of water on the screen during the film’s scene of burial—the rain poured and soaked and ran and gorged”; “runnels bored and jabbed and pockmarked and gusseted”—straining, in other words, to demonstrate the remote singularity of an image that cannot be translated, and which remains, from a narrative perspective, recalcitrantly unproductive.” At the same time, such translation involves a decontextualization, a stripping of content, that leaves such images tied only to “somewhere,” “someone,” “something.”

In becoming loosely symbolic, then, the images at once free themselves from the utility of narrative and open themselves to an unstable signification in the creation of an atmosphere that is partly depicted and partly imagined. The labor of such spectatorship consists in a heightened form of reading,” a recalibration of visual tropes into codes of reference and allusion. The effect of such reading, as H. D.’s criticism attests, is two-fold and contradictory: it lends emphasis to the fragmentary or non-narrative agency of images, while at the same time offering a form of interpretive consolidation that essentially looks beyond what is shown to discover a landscape of imageless truths and ancient types. This is what H. D. in effect elaborates as she continues with her description, employing the language of classical culture in order to characterize the wasteland that Kuleshov’s film presents:

Death and all its drab significance rose in its starkness to some almost Eleusinian note of purity. So abstract the land, so remote and symbolical the two figures of the living that dragged the two sacks or canvas sails that had been wrapped about the two long bodies of the slain, so heavy and dreary the rain, so slippery the mud, so terrible the lowering of the sky above the rain (which one sensed was there
simply for the re-harrowing of these living figures) that the spirit as in the Aeschuylean drama rose above, shouted almost audibly with the elements, *the soul, the soul survives*. The soul was embodied in two figures, man and woman, if that long ungainly creature with the hair whipped about lean, gargoyle face was a woman… like some wan and exquisite Persephone, crying to be buried, dragged in and taken back and back away from human consciousness, like those two others,… But the intention of the story, greater than its mere plot, could not possibly be misread; death and death and death and bad lands and waste and the Aeschuylean lowering of the blank skies (*CU*, 126).

What such a reading of cinematic images asks after, we might say, is the status of embodiment at the fragile edge of language. Where do the wasted fragments of rain and damaged earth end, and the Aeschuylean drama begin? It is as if, for H. D., the very qualities that detach these images from the film’s plot, and which define the material of their visual contours, in fact exacerbate the language of universality that finally sweeps in, overtaking them. Despite her protestations to the contrary, then, it would seem that any reading of film flirts with —*misreading,*” since it must reconstitute the dramatic movements of the screen into a chain of symbols.

The border between visual and textual representation is clearly porous for H. D., though in a different sense than we saw in Shklovsky’s theorizing. For H. D., writing and film share precisely what Shklovsky wished to remove from consideration: the image as the element of a work that stands eerily outside of its narrative strategies, thereby challenging any attempt to define art in terms of its —*intemal laws.*” The image—in writing as in film—opens the work to an intertextuality that grossly exceeds a particular narrative or
set of themes or motifs, for it always exists —outside” of its present usage. Images
—belong to no one,” as Shklovsky puts it, —they are the Lord’s.” For H. D.’s work this
statement rings doubly true; in this case, the particularity of the image is what withdraws
from the work, as well as what defines it, and H. D.’s articles can be read as an attempt to
make representation —minor” such withdrawal. Film, as it were, becomes the place where
writing loses itself in the shared —destiny” of the image.30

Figure 1. —Bad lands, something wasted, wasteful, overdone and done with” –
Kuleshov’s By the Law. Image courtesy of Grapevine Video.

30 The withdrawal of the image, as Eduardo Cadava notes, is part of its structure, since
—the image allows itself to be experienced only as what withdraws from experience,"
—Lapsus Imaginis: The Image in Ruins,” October 96 (Spring 2001), 36.
2. The Indeterminacy of Film

_That feeling of something within something, of something beyond something. Thin and tenuous and sometimes so near to breaking... It hints of world beyond world._

—H. D., "Boo" (1928)

H. D.’s criticism on film, it might be said, is always about something else, not about something other than film, but about the "something else" that constitutes film. To understand the uncanny nature of her writing about film, it should be noted that H. D. rarely refers to the most basic analyzable elements of cinematic composition. She doesn’t, for example, elaborate on the effects of lighting, or the dynamics of framing or mise-en-scene. For this reason Laura Marcus has observed that H. D.’s writing on film tends to take the form — at [of] retrospective judgment on a film, but a performative running commentary on the processes of spectating which became a form of ‘inner speech,’ acting as a screen onto which the film images could be projected.”

This is certainly true, although H. D. is less interested in recounting the waves of emotion and feeling that films might provoke (that is, less interested in using film as a springboard for the stream-of-consciousness model of criticism offered by Dorothy Richardson’s "Continuous Performance” column in the same journal) than in describing the impersonal terrain communicated by a film’s images. What interests her is how perceptions unite the

---

31 H. D., "Boo (Sirocco and the screen)” in _Close-Up, 2.1_ (Territet: Pool, 1928), 48-49.
visible register with something that also exceeds it—a hidden layer of reference and symbolization. In this sense, the model of spectatorship constructed by H. D. is non-subjective, or, if you prefer, it is constituted by a fantasy of non-subjectivity.

Her aggressive style of writing about film, then, becomes a strategy for creating the objectivity of such depersonalization. The act of writing about film is not obliged to help us understand it, she implies, but should make us see in a new way by foregrounding a sense of film's indeterminacy in the act of reception. This may be why H. D.'s essays on
film avoid speaking of characters, but describe instead the properties of face or profile, the imposing figures cut by the bodies on the screen. Such is her interest in “Edith” from *By the Law*, who assumes the role of a kind of cipher in place of any fictive personality:

The gestures of this woman are angular, bird-like, claw-like, skeleton-like and hideous. She has a way of standing against a skyline that makes a hieroglyph, that spells almost visibly some message of cryptic symbolism. Her gestures are magnificent. If this is Russian, then I am Russian. Beauty is too facile a word to discuss this; this woman is a sort of bleak young sorceress, vibrant, febrile, neurotic, as I say almost cataleptic… She is skeleton-like and death-like… Her teeth protrude, and her cheek bones are hollow, her skull is picked, so to speak, of its meat by misery and waiting. Her mind is on the raw edge of breaking, her eyes roll in terror and madness and numbness of misery… Her face can be termed beautiful in the same way that dawn can be termed beautiful rising across stench fever of battle… there is no word for such things. Her mind, her soul, her body, her spirit all vibrate, as I say, almost audibly. One is beyond personal discernment. This is psychic, compelling, in a way destructive. I could not see many of these Russian films if there are others like this…” (*CU*, 126-127).

In passages such as these, the field of visual detail begins to crumble away before a seemingly endless chain of description, analogy and comparison. Once a certain “vibration” is reached, H. D. suggests, cinematic representation begins to push in multiple directions at once, casting light on a cryptic symbolism.”

---

33 Jean Gallagher reads H. D.’s identification with these fixed cinematic stares as a self-conscious construction of lesbian identity in the image of classical aesthetics. See –H.
she notes, lies —beyond personal discernment,” in the domain of myth and sublimity. This perspective no doubt mystifies things, demanding of films nothing less than ecstatic revelation, in which, as she goes on to say, “I can ‘witness’ almost fanatically the ‘truth’” (CU, 127); and yet H. D. spiritualizes film precisely by highlighting its most ruined, “skeleton-like,” aspect. The dual emphasis on “withered” materiality and symbolic “life” indicates the way in which H. D. universalizes perception, though only at the cost of destroying its objects.

In a sense, H. D. is not far off from Woolf’s insight—in “The Cinema”—that cinematic perception maintains its effect of presence by presuming the loss of subjective life, presenting only “life as it is when we have no part in it.”34 Here the point is the same, except that for H. D. the recognition of loss does not carry an elegiac force. Rather, the loss of self is seen as the point of departure for an ecstatic vision that promises transcendental elevation. Kuleshov, she writes, “uses the screen almost as a psychic medium, art on the high almost un-natural level of Aeschylean trilogies” (CU, 127). The beauty offered by such exceptional films, she goes on to say, must of necessity “destroy” the sense of reality as such; “...it was my first Russian film and I have said that it is perhaps destructive. Beauty is that. This sort of raw picked beauty must of necessity destroy the wax and candy-box ‘realism’ of the so much so-called film art. It must destroy in fact so much that perhaps it does ‘go’ as one of our party said ‘too far’” (CU, 127).

But if the film destroys the reality of the world, or—what amounts to the same thing—subsumes the "presentness" of the world in the mythic reach of its symbolic movement, filmic "beauty" (a term she continues to use after signaling its insufficiency) remains irreducible to either visual surface or linguistic abstraction. From the skeleton to the symbol, H. D.’s contradictory aesthetics of the image straddles a heightened materiality.  

Figure 3. "There is no word for such things" – Aleksandra Khokhlova as "Edith." Image courtesy of Grapevine Video. 

---

35 The emphasis on this materiality suggests the relevance of Judith Brown’s argument about the centrality of sensation, as opposed to cognition, in H. D.’s consideration of film. “Borderline, Sensation, and the Machinery of Expression,” Modernism/modernity 14.4 (Nov. 2007), 687-705. Brown’s point that the discourse of sensation offers H. D. a fantasy of experiencing ourselves without the mediation of technology… as originals rather than copies,” is especially appropriate, but can be qualified (703). For it is precisely through the articulation of this immediacy in her criticism that H. D. constructs the saving power of language to counterbalance sensation; and it is in this construction of a language that the mediation of technology is most active.
In fact, what might be most distinctive about H. D.’s reading of film is her insistence on the restless antagonism and violence that underwrites cinematic spectatorship. Her essays on film constantly make reference to largely conventional categories of aesthetic judgment—beauty,” “truth,” the “classic”—and yet these categories are relentlessly qualified by her description, where “beauty” becomes “dawn… rising across stench and the fever of battle… there is no word for such things,” or “skeleton-like… death-like.” H. D. employs the language of idealism or spiritualism in order to describe a world that always seems to fall somewhat short of its exalted epithets. The importance of the iconic detail is that it encrypts a relation that is always “half-finished”—which in turn is “helped” and completed in the act of spectatorship.

The world of the cinema, the world of ghostly particularity, then, must be reconstructed. H. D.’s film criticism testifies both to the exalted claims for the power of spectatorship to evoke a “universal” community founded on a shared symbolic experience, and to the felt impossibility of sharing symbols whose erratic inscription in the material world makes their common legibility problematic. H. D. certainly subscribed to the utopian understanding of film as a “universal language,” and to its ability to reach across national boundaries. “The world of the film to-day,” she writes in her review of Russian cinema, “is no longer the world of the film, it is the world. It is only those who are indifferent to the world itself and its fate, who can afford to be indifferent to the fate

37 “I want to help to add imagination to a mask, a half finished image, not have everything done for me,” she writes of the all-too realized images of the Movietone which had begun utilizing sound technology, “I can’t help this show. I am completely out of it. This acting, singing, facial beauty is perfected. This screen projection is not a mask, it is a person, a personality. That is just it. Here is art, high art, but is it our own art? Isn’t cinema art a matter (or hasn’t it been) of inter-action?” (CU, 116).
of the film industry and the fate of the film art... We are no longer nations. We are or should be a nation” (CU, 135-136). If film sustains sociality through the creation of or reference to common memory, this utopian aim can only be ambivalently aided by H. D.'s sense that “classicism” is the name for this shared form of remembrance. The vocabulary of classicism may only be a name for what is most —universal” in cultural memory, but it highlights the naiveté of a desire to consolidate the world in the image of the West. What is powerful about her writing on film, however, is the eloquent imbalance between a language that prioritizes universality—and so turns everything and everyone into symbols—and a language that nevertheless emphasizes the allure of film’s broken details.

H. D.’s film criticism replays this drama of referentiality as the tragic intersection of image and commentary, of verbal and visual representation. The question of what gives the new medium value, what gives it specificity, is constantly displaced by an implicit recognition of the susceptibility of perception to the starker agencies of representation which animate image and text alike. For H. D., the world of film is traversed equally by the names of classical references (Aeschylus, the Eleusinian mysteries, etc.) and by the images which they mime and obscure. What needs to be stressed is that, precisely due to this ambiguity, H. D.’s speculations are grounded in an awareness of the permeability of our overlapping experience of these media in the moment of spectatorship. The act of viewing a film, she implies, involves not just our perception of it but an active process of mutual mediation. If there is a formalism to H. D.’s work, then, it refers not to the advocacy of the virtues of a specific medium, or the
“in-itself” of aesthetic experience; rather, it follows from her insight that we cannot escape the loss of history foretold by our means of accessing it.

3. The Usual Star—Multiple Eyes

To look at a star by glances—to view it in a side-long way, by turning toward it the exterior portions of the retina (more susceptible of feeble impressions of light than the interior), is to behold the star distinctly—is to have the best appreciation of its lustre—a lustre which grows dim just in proportion as we turn our vision fully upon it.

—Edgar Allan Poe, “The Murders of the Rue Morgue” (1841)\textsuperscript{38}

The language of depersonalized spectatorship with which H. D. analyzes By the Law and other films helped to shape her contemporaneous fiction, which frames cinematic and literary practices in parallel ways. The narrator of HER (1927), for example, anachronistically refers to the “precinematographic conscience” of the young Her Gart, suggesting that the novel’s backward-looking perspective into the as yet undeveloped mind of its protagonist is itself predicated on cinematic modes of consciousness.\textsuperscript{39} In her novel Palimpsest (1926), the palimpsest, as a model of ancient textual history, is repeatedly paired with the cinematic language of superimposition in ways that describe the ecstatic “interwashing” of modernity and the ancient past.\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{38} Edgar Allan Poe, Poetry and Tales (New York, NY: Library of America, 1984), 412.
\textsuperscript{40} “Pictures were superimposed and showed dark shadows where the outlines held,” she writes, “Personalities at best left a shadowing outline on that substance that was modernity. Personalities at best left a false impression and... and the whole went on and on like some swift cinematograph.” H. D., Palimpsest (Boston, MA and New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1926), 231. These metaphors reflect the novel’s ecstatic temporal structure, which mixes present-day narratives with those of the Alexandrine period.
The most substantive form of incorporation, however, is not reflected so directly. As I have suggested, H. D. drew less on the figurative meanings of film’s material mechanisms than on the narrative detachment implied by cinematic spectatorship. In her fiction, H. D. treats characters and events of her own creation as if they were projections from a film, subject to the same fog of reconstruction and remembrance as the images described in her reviews. Her novella, –The Usual Star,” (dated 1928, but published 1934) is illustrative in this respect. It concerns the love triangle of a poet and aspiring novelist, Raymonde Ransome, her lover, Daniel, and prospective suitor, Marc. H. D.’s narrator, however, is blithely unconcerned with developing the relationships of the central characters through the action of plot and dramatic scenes. Instead, the novella conjures a constellation of erotic potentialities, which then are viewed abstractly from a series of slightly adjusted comparative viewpoints.41

It seemed that they were one pin-point… one star-point, to let some sort of outer light into this cumbrous city consciousness. –We see beyond this, but we must be in it, to see it.” They were nothing, being a flaw in the solid substance of it. –We are a sort of pin-prick.” Daniel felt as she felt (pin-prick of Danielraymonde) saw as she saw.42

The novella’s reality is reconstituted, not by the characters themselves, but by the voice of the narrator, who hovers behind their statements. Indeed, the narrator of this passage

42 H. D., The Usual Star (Dijon: Imprimerie Darantiere, 1934), 21. Hereafter abbreviated as US.
is not a person, per se, but a point in space where images, characters, and phrases erratically intersect.

The organization and construction of this impersonal perspective—or at least the novella’s desire for such a perspective—through the “pin-point” or “star-point” in the world’s fabric, requires an impersonal way of seeing. Such a form of collative visuality becomes a model for the novella’s detachable “subjectivity” which imitates, but doesn’t exemplify, traditional omniscience.

I want to see all sort of things with all sorts of eyes set sideways. I want to see Lila with the eyes of Ermy, I want to see Daniel with the eyes of Marc de Brissaic. Eyes that could be borrowed, clapped over one’s own eyes like protective blinkers (Ermy’s odd eyes were a sort of protective blinker) or carefully refocused and carefully re-adjusted, one-eye, two-eye, three-eye. I want all the odd eyes to shuffle about on the table, matching odd eye to odd eye… I wish I had odd eyes that could see the thing as one thing (US, 63-65).

The multiplicity of perspectives that Woolf, for example, realizes in *Mrs. Dalloway*, is here reduced to a perverse and impossible fantasy. The emphatically material tone of the passage seems meant to disturb precisely the narrative authority that would make such devices as “point-of-view” appear transparent. H. D.’s narrative concerns, among other things, the desire for omniscience, and, in formulating it as an object of desire rather than as a medium of knowledge, she conceives of omniscience as a kind of grossly exaggerated fetish. “That is what it is to be a novelist,” the narrator reflects at one point, “isn’t that what she [Raymonde] was always after? To see what it is to be. I want to be what Ermy is, see what Ermy sees, be and see with one focus, not this always measuring
and weighing and seeing things distorted, themselves and the, so to speak, reflections of themselves, like ghost things seen in water” (US, 53). And yet, novelistic perspective—that elusive synthesis of seeing and being—with one focus—is precisely what eludes H. D.‘s novella, which remains mired in the circuitous distortions described here, reflections… ghost things seen in water.”

In contrast to traditional novelistic omniscience, “The Usual Star” suggests that the perspectival morass of the novella (imagined as the borrowing of eyes) is indebted to cinematic sight, in which vision appears to have been disembodied and made fragmentary. Indeed, the language of film comes to substitute and stand in for the combinatory textuality so relentlessly pursued by H. D. The palimpsest style, which turns characters into perpetual conduits for anarchic associations, displays a mixing of mediums, as we might infer from the passage in which the narrator describes the bizarre likeness of her lover, Daniel, to the Swedish film star” Freda Berling.43

Incandescence of Nordic beauty that was the Swedish film star. Daniel was staring at her… Freda Berling, if Freda Berling had a mind, incandescence of mind, to cauterize the open swan-thing wounded, that her eyes were, would be a sort of Daniel… Freda Berling was a dead swan gilded with garish grease paint.

Snow shrugged snow shoulders, detached triangulated white on white… swan’s wings. Freda Berling, was to Raymonde’s apprehension, swan wings, beauty that had condescended, chosen the despised screen for its shadow medium. Freda Berling of last night’s screen, stayed with her. “I am haunted by the Berling.” Daniel was like the Berling. Daniel was like the Berling… if Freda

43 Undoubtedly, Freda Berling is modeled after Greta Garbo, whose role in Gosta Berling (1924) had first garnered her attention.
Berling would cauterize, "fix" so to speak the rolling thing her odd inhuman eyes were, she would be a sort of Daniel. "Her eyes look out at nothing." People criticize, say her eyes look too far inward. They are simply ice-bergs rolling." The eyes of remembered blatant screen wax beauty were projected there before them. The gods choose curious mediums. The gods chose Freda Berling, Daniel, herself and some others. mediums. They were all sort of mediums. "We're all sort of mediums… the Berling is a doped swan. You're a sort of real one... without grease paint" (US, 22-23).

The impersonality of the cinematic "star" provides a crucial comparison for the action of the narrative voice, in which the confusion of interior and exterior speech, dialogue and narration, becomes doubled by the cryptic figure of cinematic eyes which appear to "look too far inward" but which in fact "look out at nothing." The eyes of the film star Freda, who is also a kind of Leda here, betray the visitation of some "beauty that had condescended, chosen the despised screen for its shadow medium." The mark of this godly visitation, "the open swan-thing wounded" which Raymonde wishes to "cauterize" and "fix," (and which is apparently shared by Daniel as well as the narrator) is that perception has already been, in a way, disembodied. These "odd inhuman" eyes do not lead back to the self, but spread around them a winter of impersonality ("detached triangulated white on white"). Later, the narrator wonders whether her affair with Marc has injured Daniel, asking "Did he feel that? Did his odd eyes in the dusk see or simply was he? Did he resort to some old old Greek trick?" (US, 68). Not being able to tell, the narrator concludes that Daniel is distant, like a star or like a starlet. But if this distance results from being possessed by a "beauty that had condescended," Raymonde’s response
is not to assume the typical aesthetic stance of disinterestedness. Rather, her erotic attention becomes a textual mirror to his odd withdrawal of personality.\textsuperscript{44} Weaving through repetitions between dialogue and interior notations, H. D. emphasizes the materiality of literary representation in order to insist that romance is always a matter of mutual mediation. The story’s central relationship—between Raymonde and Daniel—is never fully established, in part because H. D. does not depict characters so much as \textit{mediums},” mercurial figures of likeness and analogy through which the narrative can offer textual constructions in lieu of erotic resolution.

Daniel (star, eyes, cinema) and Raymonde (poet, narrator) do not meet in any final scene of intimacy, rather the novella posits its own textual agency as a substitute. In \textit{The Usual Star},” the meeting of literature and cinema provides the formal conceit for staging this romance. \textit{People and things make patterns on the mind},” the narrator writes, independent of the place, the time, the people, the things themselves. What good then is unity, is cohesion, is time and place, sequence, the brave beginning, the sustained middle, the bold climax and the inevitable end?” (\textit{US}, 79). \textit{The Usual Star”} can make this claim in part because the action of the narrative has been supplanted by a receptive gaze, a mode of discursive reflection that seems to mimic the spectatorial epistemology of H. D.‘s writing on film. In this way, the novella’s use of cinematic tropes suggests a crucial analogue to the processes by which the story makes claims about the ecstatic \textit{identities” of romance. To desire another person, or to \textit{like” them, we infer, is also to}

\textsuperscript{44} In this sense, H. D. plays on the astral resonance of celebrity as the figure of eroded identity. As Eduardo Cadava observes, the star is always a figure for the withdrawal of identity since \textit{starlight names the trace of a celestial body that has long since vanished. The star is always a kind of ruin. The light is never identical with itself…is always inhabited by a certain distance or darkness,}” \textit{Words of Light: Reflections on the Photography of History} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 30.
uncover the way in which intimacy is deferred along a chain of likenesses. “The Usual Star” supports this insight in part by exploring the ways in which literary and cinematic representation share modes of reference. But if H. D.’s fiction finds the two “ mediums” in a carefully constructed balance, her writing on film often betrays the fact that in many ways such a relation could only ever be partial, and perhaps unsatisfactory.

4. Film’s Nonexistence

In the cinema, the actor is merely a live symbol. He alone is the stage, the author’s idea, and the sequence of events. That is why we do not think about him... They are the film. It would be inconceivable without them. They are in the foreground where they do not get in anybody’s way. That is why they do not exist.

—Antonin Artaud, “Reply to an Inquiry”

In a way, the very transferability of H. D.’s notion of cinematic consciousness to literary texts points to its problematic constitution. Indeed, the most remarkable text in her film criticism comes at the moment when she articulates the limits of her identification with film; or more exactly when she indicates an incongruity of sorts between the technical elements of film style and what she consistently identifies as its spiritual potential. As we have seen, the value of the cinema very often consisted in a strange kind of disembodied expression that never quite coincides with film itself. In her critique of Dreyer’s The Passion of Joan of Arc, however, this tension or latent incompatibility takes on its most striking formulation; for though H. D. acknowledges the stylistic success of the film and the enormity of its achievement as a purely technical artifact, she cannot admit to enjoying it. Admiring the film while registering a distance

from it, H. D. attempts to justify her poetics of spectatorship in a perverse way by articulating the reasons why the film fails to move her despite fitting every criteria which she can name. In this way, H. D. implicitly reasons, her failure to appreciate the film is a necessary consequence of understanding it—and she casts her emotional remove from the film’s dramatic world as a fantastic extension of its very logic, so that in seeing the film, and in disliking it, the viewer assumes the role of Joan herself, subject to the impersonal designs of Dreyer’s torturing force.

—*The Passion and Death of a Saint* is a film that has caused me more unrest,” H. D. begins her review, “more spiritual forebodings, more intellectual racking, more emotional torment than any I have yet seen” (*CU*, 130). Commenting on the film some months later, H. D. recalled that “I have written about *Jeanne d’Arc* a little spitefully and a little unharmoniously. *Jeanne d’Arc*… set me out of key. It positively bullied me as no film has yet done. I was forced to pity, pity, pity. My affections and credulity were hammered. I was kicked. I was throttled. I was laid upon a torture rack. Quite solemnly I was burned at the stake and lifting eyes to heaven I had forgiven my malefactors. Yes, the magnificent technique of Dreyer did that for me. But was I moved?” (*CU*, 143). The farther away H. D. claims to have been driven from Dreyer’s film, the more completely her writing seems to have been drawn into it and permeated by its figures. Again and again, she complains of a sense of “claustrophobia” created by the film, an objection precisely inverse to those she makes of other films. For whereas other films fail to create such a compelling sphere of identification, pity or compassion for their characters (which function only as so many moving parts in a great narrative machine), *The Passion of Joan of Arc* establishes these responses so effectively and indeed so inescapably that one feels
trapped within its perfection. “I am shut up in here,” H. D. writes, “I want to get out. I want to get out” (CU, 132).

H. D.’s critique of Dreyer’s film, however, is mitigated by her sense that it is the total realization of film as an art. That is, what she perceives as the purity of the work, its typification of film itself (or as she puts it, the film’s “sheer perfection of the medium,”) contributes to her perception of its problems (CU, 143). “The Jeanne d’Arc of the incomparable artist Carl Dreyer is in a class by itself,” she writes at the conclusion of her review, “And that is the trouble with it. It shouldn’t be” (CU, 133). This is a tricky claim, and perhaps insupportable. Nevertheless, a case can be made for seeing in H. D.’s reading of Dreyer’s film not simply a general misrecognition of the film’s aims, but an inevitable and essential misrecognition of certain consequences of cinematic form. In the end, H. D.’s dislike of *The Passion of Joan of Arc* may speak less to the film itself, or to any deficiencies which it might contain, than to the instability of H. D.’s reading of film more broadly. What fascinates her about film, at least, is not what defines it as film, or

---

46 Indeed, many of H. D.’s criticisms of Dreyer’s film are in fact in resistance to concepts which she herself advocates, and very often the same language returns almost symptomatically in her critique. Praising a cinema of “stark reality” in the essays on the “Cinema and the Classics,” for example, she goes on to criticize Dreyer for fostering a film that is “real, real beyond realism” (CU, 113; 132). And even as she comments that Kuleshov uses the screen “like a psychic medium,” H. D. takes issue with various aspects of the performances in Dreyer’s film, in which Falconetti is said to have dispatched herself “almost mediumistically” (CU, 127; 130).

47 Even Pabst disagreed with H. D.’s assessment of the film. “Herr Pabst, it appeared,” she writes of her interview with him, “had just come from the early evening performance of *Jeanne d’Arc*, or *Johanna von Orleans*, at the Gloria Palast just round the corner. Well, was that it? *That*—it appeared to me—was ‘nothing to write home about’. Mr. Pabst thought otherwise… He lifted a priestly and solemn hand, he would hear nothing, no, nothing whatever against that film. That film was perfect, such technique, such originality, such grandeur, such _prickle_ (does that mean sparkle or merely stickle?), such strength, such beauty, yes, beauty” (CU, 140).
what separates it from other arts. Instead, H. D.’s reviews suggest that film can be read alongside literature, so long as one approaches spectatorship symbolically.

Her aggressively tropological reading of film suggests that, for H. D., the very intensity with which *The Passion of Joan of Arc* succeeds in creating a significant atmosphere works paradoxically against it. “For being let into the very heart, the very secret of the matter,” she writes, “we are let out of... something” (*CU*, 130). This “something,” her review goes on to suggest, is the spiritual side of Joan’s character, her visionary essence. Dreyer, on the other hand, depicts only Joan the sufferer, the martyr whose passive grace inspires sympathy, but in a way that leaves off any indication of the presumed divinity of Joan as prophet. This exaggerated personality—the mystic persona of Joan which had been popularized in the romantic tradition and which H. D. seems to have adopted wholeheartedly—this is what Dreyer failed to convey, reducing both Joan and spectator alike to, in H. D.’s words, a “senseless animal” (*CU*, 132).

There is some slur on the whole of human consciousness, it is necessary to stress and stress and stress the brute side of mystic agony this way. Somehow, something is wrong here. An incomparable art, an incomparable artist, an actress from whom any but praise were a blasphemy... and what happens?

I do not mind crying (though I do mind crying) when I see a puppy kicked into a corner but I do mind standing aside and watching and watching and watching and being able to do nothing. That is something of the antagonism that I think crept in, that is something of the something that made me feel I ought to go again, to be fair, to be sure what it was that upset me, perhaps a cowardice on my part, some deep sub-conscious strata or layer of phobia that I myself, so un-
Jeanne like, was unwilling to face openly… This is perhaps the last and greatest tribute to the sheer artistry and cunning of the method and technique of Carl Dreyer. I pay him my greatest compliment. His is one among all films, to be judged differently, to be approached differently, to be viewed as a masterpiece, one of the absolute masterpieces of screen craft. Technically, artistically, dramatically, this is a master piece. But, but, but, but, but… (CU 132, italics mine).

Dreyer’s —slur on human consciousness,” it seems, derives in part from the tragic consequences of any film—that we are unable to act in it, along with it, and that we are reduced to a form of passivity ourselves—standing aside and watching and watching and watching and being able to do nothing.” If Dreyer’s film depends on this passivity to heighten our sense of her vulnerability, and if he accentuates and attempts to glorify a corresponding helplessness in his portrayal of Joan—who after all was a military as well as visionary figure—H. D. seems to suggest that this has something to do with the perfection of the film itself, which leaves nothing of substance to be added by the spectator.

If the passivity of film viewing never caused H. D. any concern in the past, it is in part because, as we have seen, she openly advocated a method of creative spectatorship. Reading mythological analogues and symbolic likenesses into the texture of films like By the Law, H. D. developed a reading of film that depended on the forms of visionary consciousness that the viewer could bring with them. This spectatorship completes the suggestiveness of film. In this way, H. D. positions Joan of Arc as an inevitable model of the visionary consciousness of film viewing. Just for this reason Dreyer's film would
seem to provide an apt example for her film theory in general—or at least this would have been true, if not for the stubborn silence with which Dreyer treats Joan not as a dynamic visionary agent but rather as a figure of piety and submission, innocence and suffering.

H. D. sees in Dreyer’s film precisely an absence of the ecstatic modes that she desires of film in general, and it is telling that her only moments of allusive embellishment—so characteristic of her criticism in general—come when attempting to note what is missing from the film.

We are allowed no comfort of mere beatific lilies, no hint of the memory of lover-comrade men’s voices, the comrades that Jeanne must have loved loyally, the perfect staunch child friend, the hero, the small Spartan, the very Telisila upon the walls of Argos, that is just it. This is no Telisila upon the walls of Argos, no Athene who for the moment has laid aside her helmet for other lesser matters than that of mere courage and fidelity. This is an Athene stripped of intellect, a Telisila robbed of poetry, it is a Jeanne d’Arc that not only pretends to be real, but that is real, a Jeanne that is going to rob us of our own Jeanne (CU, 131).

Whether or not Dreyer’s film presents Joan’s martyrdom without poetry, of course, is open to debate, though even this is not the main claim of H. D.’s criticism. Certainly she does not deny that such poetry exists in the film, although she calls it, a little roughly, “artistry,” and tends to imply that that the film is technically proficient but emotionally lacking. This is not the case, however, and H. D.’s rhetoric may only signal the difficulty of identifying and articulating two separate orders of success or failure.
Certainly one could argue that H. D. simply fails to see the complexity with which Dreyer dismantles the very realism for which she critiques him, and that she fails to comprehend the significance of what he called the film’s “realized mysticism.” The truth, however, is that H. D. understands very well the spirituality of the film, as well as its appeal to subjectivity. The real crux has less to do with the film itself, than with certain inconsistencies in H. D.’s film theory more generally—especially the form of subjectivity it prescribes for film, which always refers to the relational process of a decoding spectator, rather than to the finality of the self-contained drama of the film. In Dreyer’s film the very fullness of the vision leaves no place for the viewer. Accordingly, Dreyer’s film makes H. D. question the very grounds on which such a visionary consciousness might meet up with the logic of pictorial manifestation.

I do not mean to say that there could have been any outside sort of beatific screen craft of heavenly vision. I don’t mean that. But Jeanne kicked almost, so to speak, to death still had her indomitable vision. I mean Jeanne d’Arc talked openly with angels and in this square on square of Danish protestant interior, this trial room, this torture room, this cell, there was no hint of angels. The angels were there all the time and if Jeanne had reached the spiritual development that we must believe this chosen comrade of the warrior Michael must have reached, the half-hypnotized numb dreary physical state she was in, would have its inevitable psychic recompense. The Jeanne d’Arc of the incomparable Dreyer it seems to me

---

was kicked toward the angels. There were not there, nor anywhere, hints of the angelic wing-tip, of the winged sandals and the two-edged sword… Such psychic manifestation I need hardly say, need in no way be indicated by any outside innovation of cross lights or of superimposed shadows. It is something in something, something beyond something. It is something one feels… For all our preparation, we are unprepared. This Jeanne d’Arc is sprung upon us and why should it be? There is a reason for most things. I think the reason is that it doesn’t link up straight with human consciousness. There is a gap somewhere (CU, 133).

How does psychic consciousness manifest itself? By what sign or process of even partial signification may the visionary aspect of Joan’s consciousness become palpable, visible? H. D. certainly doesn’t call for Joan to become “psychologized” through what she calls an “outside sort of beatific screen craft of heavenly vision”—she does not, in other words, believe that the film’s characterization would be improved by “seeing” what Joan saw.49 The soul cannot be reduced to any “outside innovation of cross lights or of superimposed shadows” but rather through the evocation, as she says, of “hints.” What is called for, then, is a special form of non-depiction that can only be named as a “link… to human consciousness,” something to bridge the “gap” left open by the impoverished reality of cinematic representation. This missing psychic “recompense” would not necessarily be something that is positively registered. Rather we might say that H. D. demands of the film a “sign” in much the same way as do Joan’s interrogators. Her purpose, however, is not to guarantee the dogmatic truth of these visions with respect to the Church, but rather to serve as an indication, even if indirect, of the poetic aspect of

49 As we are made to do in Luc Besson’s 1999 absurdity, The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc.
her consciousness, to signal that it exists behind the material surface of Falconetti’s
umb dreary physical state.”

In this respect, however, H. D.’s complaint seems especially precarious—since
Dreyer deliberately taunts the viewer with tight close-ups of Joan’s face, substituting this
exterior perception for an approximation of Joan’s point-of-view. The viewer, in this
way, is emphatically placed outside of her visionary consciousness, even while she is
clearly in the throes of ecstasy. Although Dreyer intended Falconetti’s face to act as a
medium for her faith, a window into her soul, such a strategy clearly threatens to negate
the primacy of the viewer, who is held at bay from this drama by the very technique that
was to have mediated its proximity. We may long for Falconetti’s interiority, or for
Joan’s, H. D. observes, but we are never satisfied of that desire, and instead of Joan’s
luminous grace, Dreyer has forced us to accept our own longing sent back to us is in
amplified form.

Of course, this formal difficulty may be said to arise from the film’s structuring
principle: namely that rather than provide a fanciful visualization or dramatization of the
myth of ‘the maid,” The Passion of Joan of Arc was to take the trial proceedings
themselves as the starting place for the film’s events (although condensing the timeline
from a month into a single day). The film’s first shot, fittingly enough, is not of Joan’s
oracular face, but of the damaged binding of the trial proceedings themselves, as the
hands of a narrator-figure leafs briskly through the pages as if the existence of the text
could prove that such things really happened.\(^{50}\) There is a mysticism in Joan’s face

\(^{50}\) As Karen Sullivan argues, however, belief in the ‘pure means of access’’ offered by the
court transcripts was the guiding ideology invoked by her accusers in order to provide
throughout the film, to be sure, but Dreyer makes clear that whatever we can know of her, or of her visions, comes to us through a parallel "miracle," that of the survival of the text of the trial.\textsuperscript{51} At the Bibliothèque de la Chambre des Deputes in Paris resides one of the most extraordinary documents in the history of the world," the film begins, "the record of the trial of Joan of Arc, the trial that ended in her death. The questions of the judges and Joan's responses were recorded with great exactitude. Reading it we discover Joan as she was—not in armor—but simple and human... a young woman who died for her country, and we are witness to an amazing drama: a young, pious woman confronted by a group of orthodox theologians and powerful judges."\textsuperscript{52} In this way, \textit{Jeanne d’Arc} exploits the documentary aspect of cinema in order to play upon our consciousness of the film's textual mediation.

\textbf{Figure 4. —On of the most extraordinary documents in the history of the world...” Images courtesy of the Criterion Collection.}

\footnotesize

\begin{itemize}
\item evidence of her heterodoxy. \textit{The Interrogation of Joan of Arc} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), xv.
\item And in this the survival, through various rounds of censorship, and in fact having itself been consumed in multiple fires, and only in 1981 discovered in a Norwegian mental institution, the film, like the text, can be said to restage the myth of Joan herself.\textsuperscript{52} \textit{The Passion of Joan of Arc}, DVD, directed by Carl Dreyer (1928; Boulogne-Billancourt, Hauts-de-Seine: Janus Films, 1999).
\end{itemize}
The images are not meant to be fanciful extrapolations, recreations of the epic siege on Orleans or any of Joan’s participation in the royal intrigue and affairs of state, such as Cecil B. DeMille’s 1917 film contained. In exclusively focusing on what had been recorded of Joan’s own speech (or at least its reconstruction by the court scribes), Dreyer suggests that the film itself can testify more forcefully to the story’s “simple, human” elements. Further, by making the film an elaboration of the trial, or an elaboration of a text (which is always true of a film’s relation to its screenplay), the film asks us to consider the role of mediation as an integral part of the film’s dramatic principles.

The relation of the film’s main action to the text of the trial is significant, then, because it contextualizes H. D.’s sense that the viewer remains hopelessly outside of the visionary heart of the protagonist. In fact, this distance from the content of Joan’s subjectivity is shown to be endemic to the text of the trial itself, in which Joan notoriously refused to make an unqualified oath to tell the truth to the court about her visions, making it clear at the beginning of each day of examination that whatever she told would not be the entire truth. Concerning her revelations, especially, Joan refused to give any details, and those which do emerge are emphatically vague. As Karen Sullivan notes in her study of the interrogations, Joan’s unwillingness to give any signs as to the veracity of her claims to divine knowledge all but guaranteed an unfavorable verdict:

The visionary who insists upon her subjective impressions of a spirit, impressions that are by definition inaccessible to others, cannot convince others of what she perceives as its identity, nor can she be convinced by a more expert third party,
such as a theologian, that she is mistaken. She remains alone, unjudged and unjudgeable, in her inner perceptions.\textsuperscript{53}

If the text of the trial promises a greater proximity to the reality of Joan’s story, it almost ensures a corresponding distance from the “subjective impressions” that constitute the living text of her revelations and visionary consciousness, for this is the one area that she was most protective of, and which therefore the texts illuminate the least. For this reason, the close-ups in the film reflect on this tangled relation all the more acutely. The close-up models the film’s reliance on its textual foundation because it arrogates itself as a technique of intimacy and direct address, while showing us with startling clarity the limits of such knowledge and the remoteness of Joan’s consciousness. For despite all the time that her face spends at the center of the frame, or just for this reason, the close-up images reveal that her eyes are always looking somewhere else.

H. D.’s sense that the film failed to live up to the “truth” of Joan’s visionary personality, then, reflects the insistent incongruity between the film as emotional spectacle and the film as object. This is in part due to the fact that H. D. sees herself as a visionary figure,\textsuperscript{54} and assumes that a “true” representation of Joan’s saga will not only conform to her own understanding of ecstatic consciousness, but will do so by unifying the expectations and emotions of the spectator with the film itself. That is, the form of Dreyer’s film posits Joan’s subjectivity as dependent on its destruction or its

\textsuperscript{53} Sullivan, The Interrogation of Joan of Arc, 35.
\textsuperscript{54} Joan of Arc recurs many times in H. D.’s fiction in peripheral roles, including in — the Usual Star.” Her identification with Joan is made particularly apparent in the \textit{roman à clef} Asphodel (1921-1922), when Hermione and Fayne visit Rouen, the site of Joan’s execution, and become haunted by the unreality of the scene. “I don’t want to be burnt, to be crucified just because I see things sometimes. O Jeanne you shouldn’t ever, ever have told them you saw things. You shouldn’t have… But it was a story. Something out of a book.” Asphodel, ed. Robert Spoo (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), 10.
disarticulation. And while the film provides the sympathetic monk Massieu (famously played by Antonin Artaud) as reassurance that something of Joan’s character is not entirely lost, H. D. maintains that such a sense of identification is made thoroughly unstable.

Joan, in H. D.’s review, becomes a figure for interiority itself, for what cannot be shared without violation or loss, without rendering it unrecognizable. Implicit in her critique of the film is the assertion, odd coming from H. D., that language violates subjectivity less (or perhaps violates it better). This is why Joan’s name, which H. D. renders affectionately “Jeanne” (and only once “Johanna,” as it exists in the only written document bearing her signature), plays such a heavily repetitive and symptomatic role. Such repetition indicates something of the desperation with which H. D., turning away from the implied absence of cinematic representation, asks language to bear, in the increasingly empty space of a name, the burden of identity.

I think it is that we all have our Jeanne, each one of us in the secret great cavernous interior of the cathedral (if I may be fantastic) of the subconscious.

Now another Jeanne strides in, an incomparable Jeanne, indubitably a more Jeanne-ish Jeanne than our Jeanne but it isn’t our Jeanne. Worse than that it is a better, more authentic Jeanne than our Jeanne; scathing realism has gone one better than mere imaginative idealism. We know we are out-witted. This is a real, real, Jeanne (poor Jeanne) little mountain Newfoundland puppy, some staunch and true and incomparably loyal creature… This is Athene stripped of intellect, a Telisila robbed of poetry, it is a Jeanne d’Arc that not only pretends to be real, but that is real, a Jeanne that is going to rob us of our own Jeanne.
Is that the secret of this clenching of fists, this sort of spiritual antagonism I have to the shaved head, the stares, defiant bronze-statue, from the poster that I pass on my way to market? Is it another Jeanne in me (in each of us) that starts warily at the picture, the actual portrait of the mediæval girl warrior? The Jeanne d’Arc of Carl Dreyer is so prefect that we somehow feel cheated. This must be right. This must be right… therefore by some odd equivocal twist of subconscious logic, I must be wrong (CU, 131).

The very “authenticity” of Falconetti’s mediumistic performance, H. D. argues, negates Jeanne’s hidden subjectivity, her own recursive “Jeanneness.” The film achieves this, perversely, by convincing the audience that nothing of such interiority remains undepicted. In so doing, the film also negates the subjective structure of cinematic spectatorship in general, replacing the anarchic trail of association and fantasy with the “claustrophobic” unfolding of the film’s restricted universe (“This must be right… I must be wrong”). In the face of such “perfection,” language seems paralyzed, trapped inside the impotent gesturing of naming.

Joan is, paradigmatically, called “incomparable,” in the same way that H. D. refers to the film as a piece of “incomparable art,” and to Dreyer as an “incomparable artist.” This damaging singularity denies both art and experience, insofar as H. D. understands them according to the ecstatic logic of likeness, metaphor, and comparison. Despite her enthusiasm for the felicitous interrelation between literature and film, H. D.’s layered disavowal of Dreyer’s Jeanne d’Arc (in spite of all of the ways in which it is structured by a reconstruction of textual modes) reveals her sense that in its “perfect” expression film needs literary consciousness to restore the “poetry” and “intellect”
missing from the bare image. In this respect, H. D.’s reading of Jeanne d’Arc unexpectedly echoes Shklovsky’s sense that film cannot be understood outside of a literary grammar. The fiction of “pure” cinematic form, nevertheless, plays a crucial role in H. D.’s theorization of film, as well as in her fictional practice, for it sustains her sense that art thrives on its impurity, and that the truly “incomparable” art denies itself because it denies what is not itself.
Chapter 4:

Henry Green and the Infinitely Remote

What name is to be given to that which notes that a room is empty? This presence certainly requires a name, for without a name what can exist? And how can silence or emptiness be noted by that which has no existence? ...Certainly it is difficult to find a name for that which is in a room, yet the room is empty; for that which perceives pictures....describes them; and not only perceives but partakes of them, and has access to the mind in its darkness. And further goes from mind to mind and surface to surface, and from body to body creating what is not mind or body, not surface or depths, but a common element in which the perishable is preserved, and the separate become one. Does it not by this means create immortality?

— Virginia Woolf, from the early typescripts of Between the Acts

...the writer, who has no business with the story he is writing, intrudes like a Greek chorus to underline the meaning. It is as if husband and wife were alone in the living room, and a voice came out of the corner of the ceiling to tell them what both were like, or what the other felt. And do we know, in life, what other people are really like? I very much doubt it. We certainly do not know what other people are thinking and feeling. How then can the novelist be so sure?

— Henry Green, from “A Novelist to his Readers: I”

1. “the oldest gesture...”

Narrative authority may be considered either a fiction or an absurdity, but it cannot practically be renounced. One cannot write without thereby assuming, even if clandestinely, the precarious authority which the writer wields over the imagined reader. This is the source of writing’s power, but it is also, for those who wish to escape the dead-ends of such communication, a source of embarrassment. Just for this reason, though, fiction which attempts to evacuate novelistic address of its authority tends to construct a vision of what literature is by seeking to embody what it is not. In the above passage from the typescript of Between the Acts, Woolf calls attention to the unreal
disembodiment of narrative agency, not in order to annul its claims, but to exaggerate them, and in so doing to heighten our sense of the odd spectrality of form. For Henry Green, on the other hand, this gesture of authorial self-consciousness carries a pronounced sense of self-denial. The writer, Green claims, “has no business with the story he is writing” and cannot justify the implausibility, the inherent fictionality, of his “intrusions.” Such disavowal on Green’s part may not seek to abolish art as such, but it does seek to wrench its modes of communication away from their perceived authority, and to restore literature to the common uncertainties which occur “in life.” Life, for Green, takes its meaning from the experiential limits of knowledge, from our inability to know “what other people are really like,” and literature must withdraw its claim to this specious “ability” if it is to remain living.  

Criticism has tended to treat Green’s writing on fiction in two different ways. Critics like Rod Mengham and David Deeming find Green’s theorizations to coincide with an aesthetic decline in his own work, and therefore to be fundamentally unreliable descriptions of his earlier work (see Deeming: “Henry Green’s War: „The Lull” and the Postwar Demise of Green’s Modernist Aesthetic,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 44.4 [1998], 881; and Mengham: *The Idiom of Time*, [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982] 209). This reaction recapitulates Robert Phelps’s earlier observation that his later theories constitute a “wrongheaded purification of his means,” (“The Vision of Henry Green” *Hudson Review* IV. 4 [Winter 1953] 620). Stokes agrees to the extent that this theory seems to be applied to *Nothing* and *Dotting*, where he considers that Green has “deliberately strapped himself into a straight-jacket” and that “through rigorously denying himself the use of almost all the traditional methods of the novel, he has failed to make the most of his subjects,” (Edward Stokes, *The Novels of Henry Green* [London: The Hogarth Press, 1959], 68). Barbara Brothers, on the other hand, views the later articles as “commentary on the novels he wrote” (‘Blindness: The Eye of Henry Green,” *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol.29 No.4 Henry Green (Winter 1983), 405). Andrew Gibson similarly extends his interpretation of Green’s “abdication of authority” across all of his novels, finding in the application consequences essentially discrete from those Green himself explicitly outlined (“Henry Green as Experimental Novelist” *Studies in the Novel* 16.2 [1984]). Clive Hart is more directed in his evocation of these later texts. In his article on *Party Going*, to which I will refer later, Hart shows how Green’s later treaties on the “abnegation of authorial control” intimately inflect the structure of the 1939 novel even in its principally descriptive rather than dialogic modes (“The Structure
This is the view that Green advanced in the early 1950’s, when he wrote a series of articles and radio addresses aimed at defending the lack of narrative description in his later novels and their increasing use of dialogue. “Life itself is capable of several meanings,” he writes in “The English Novel of the Future,” “Therefore the future function of narrative prose is not to be clear. The old definition of good writing—that it should mean what it says—has gone overboard. Narrative prose in future must be as diffuse and variously interpretable as life itself.”

Fiction, for Green, should not strive to clarify the world’s impenetrability, but rather seek to embody the obscurity of life, and actually “be as diffuse” as life can’t help but seem. This means abandoning a claim to moral or political resolutions: “[N]arrative is not a medium,” he writes, “for the proselytizing of readers to the writer’s personal point of view” (“ENF” 24). Literature should not tell us what to think about the events it presents. It should simply present, without describing, without narrating, a world overflowed with competing interpretations to which we hazardously add our own.

and Technique of „Party Going,” Yearbook of English Studies, 1 [1971]). Michael North’s definitive reading of Green makes no direct argument about the usefulness of applying the articles to prior works, but his treatment of earlier novels is entirely consistent with the interpretation of literature gleaned from the articles, which North takes to suggest not just an emphasis on the technique of dialogue as such, but a broader attention to the “fictionalizations” that occur in everyday and debased forms in life (Henry Green and the Writing of His Generation [Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1982], esp. 200). Donald Taylor, whose 1965 article is still the longest sustained treatment of the theory, considers the articles to be mainly “an apologia” for Nothing and Doting, but nonetheless sees the prior novels as anticipating the ideas whose final expressions would be Doting (“Catalytic Rhetoric: Henry Green’s Theory of the Modern Novel, Criticism 7:1 [1965: Winter], 81).


3 Here, Green moves away from the Lukácsian model of realism, as well as from a Woolfian model of modernism. This sense of the detachment of literature’s descriptive performances played, as we have seen, a significant role in Woolf’s fiction, where the
The fantasy of representational neutrality which Green’s article expresses, while not aspiring to an unmediated realism per se, posits the fulfillment of literature as an escape from the “personalism” of narrative voice. Green’s fiction inhabits a world in which even the lyrical version of omniscience conjured by modernism fatally betrays its resemblance to the Victorian modes that preceded it, a world in which even the subtlest forms of narration have become indistinguishable from “proselytizing.” The fact that Green’s “novel of the future” cannot either rely on a previous tradition or point to contemporary work in support of its aims means that literature must take its lesson from the developments of modern life which have changed the consistency and rhythm of experience as such. It is in this spirit that Green credits cinema with having exposed the artificiality of literary conventions:

If then, as I believe, art is not likely to go further along the road taken by Joyce or Picasso, what will be the next trend? Hardly a return to the Victorian three-decker or long novel. …Moralizing and philosophy as in these large books, the last great example of which was Proust, is also unlikely. The reason for great tracts of prose in narrative was that the cinema, which has taught the modern novelist to split his text up into small scenes, had not in the days when Proust was writing and before yet exerted its influence. Accordingly, the novelist in those days, who had twenty, thirty pages or more to cover in a chapter, needed bridges to carry him from one moment of action to another, and the only reasonable appeal to metaphor both constructs and supplants the self through the work of likeness. In questioning the usefulness of description, then, Green neither wishes to return fiction to a higher omniscience through a “truer” form of ordered reportage, nor simply to reinvent a new version of modernist impersonality. If Roger Fry had insisted on seeing art as a form of detachment from life, Henry Green seems to wish for something more nuanced: an image of “life” conceived as an aesthetic detachment from art.
bridge was a spate of moralizing and philosophy. …And while the cinema has had its influence, it is more than likely that in five years’ time television will have a profound effect on novelists, and that narrative already split up into small scenes, will be split still further (“ENF” 22).

We can understand Green’s comment in two ways. On the one hand, film provides an analogue for a depersonalized art, which renders the forms of “commentary” common to the nineteenth century novel unnecessary. Literature that is written in the shadow of film, Green suggests, replaces discursive transitions with a technique of juxtaposition akin to the filmic cut. This is the sort of cinematic style that the critic R. N. Linscott described in his 1929 review of Living, entitled “Cinematograph.” “The manner [of the novel] is cinematographic,” he wrote, “a constant flicker of abruptly shifting scenes, a page or two in length, leaping from one group of characters to another.”

Linscott clearly intends the analogy to film as an implicit criticism of what he considers Green’s “over-obtrusive technique”; still, such an assessment corresponds to Green’s own sense that narrative abridgement might be modeled on cinematic practices: “It’s written in a very condensed kind of way in short paragraphs,” he wrote to a friend of Living, “A kind of very disconnected cinema film.” From this perspective, film affects literature by altering the sense of what counts as narrative continuity, modeling for it a new sense of sequential

---

5 “[Mr. Green’s] novel does not grow like a tree, nor run like a river, but is put together like one of the thoroughly modern products of the Dupret works. I wish that he would write a story that would be an organic growth instead of a piece of engineering” (Linscott, “Cinematograph”).
rhythm which places emphasis on “action” rather than on the drawn-out “moralizing and philosophy” of narration.

And yet, if Green is interested in how cinematic tropes have altered the grammar of narrative sequence and its relation to the unfolding of plot, he also suggests that film alters not only the pace of narration and continuity, but what counts as presentation as such. It would be entirely incorrect to say that Green’s works free themselves from description in order to let the action of the plot speak for itself. Rather, in Green’s novels the scenes of dialogue between characters, in which constant failures of mutual understanding reveal these characters to be hopelessly at the mercy of the most banal fictions, doubles for narration rather than simply replacing it. Scenes of dialogue, in this way, do not represent a more immediate method for conveying the actions of plot, but indicate the ways in which people in everyday situations strive and fail to become the “narrators” of their own lives. This sense of failed narration embodied by Green’s novels is significant as a contrast to the forms of “authoritative” narration employed by previous writers, as we will see, because in this contingency Green sees a productive connection to the stubbornly voiceless conditions of life. Cinematic representation inspires a formal “splitting” in which literature does not so much emulate common notions of montage technique as identify “the scene” of dialogue as the essence of literary address.7

---

7 This can be seen in the strange way in which, directly following the already quoted reflection on cinema’s influence on literature, Green uses a discussion of the “materials” of literature (“these symbols, the letters”) in order to support his argument about dialogue. “And if the materials of narrative, and by materials we mean here the means of communication, are a series of sound symbols which create words of no precise meaning outside their context, surely the means of communication between writer and reader in narrative should be dialogue, the reason being that we do not have time to define what we mean in conversation and that we thereby arrive easier at a conventional understanding of what is being said. The communication between writer and reader is thus easier in
In what follows, I argue that what Clive Hart calls Green’s “abnegation of authorial control” found a forceful example in cinematic tropes, and that the explication of this connection sheds significant light on how Green’s version of formal innovation differed from the modernist paradigms he at once inherits and disavows. When asked in an interview with Terry Southern whether film and television would have any influence on novelistic form, Henry Green responded by observing that “It might be better to ask if novels will continue to be written. It is impossible for a novelist not to look out for other media nowadays. It isn’t that everything has been done in fiction — truly nothing has been done as yet, save Fielding, and he only started it all. It is simply that the novelist is a communicator and must be interested in any form of communication. You don’t dictate to a girl now, you use a recording apparatus; no one faints any more, they have blackouts… Media change. … we must all be ever on the lookout for the new ways.”

The very self-evidence of media’s influence on literary forms, for Green, indicates a nonchalance about this relationship at variance with the contentious debates that characterized earlier responses to film’s emergence as an “art.” Gone is any trace of the formalist arguments concerning the “aesthetic” suitability of cinema for representing dialogue and in fact, since the introduction of the telephone, it is now almost the only communication there is between human beings. We do not write long letters any more, we pick up the telephone instead. Instead of reading, we listen to the wireless or watch television” (“ENF” 22). Green suggests that the indirect character of dialogue allegorizes something essential about the artifice of writing, which due to the arbitrary nature of language depends upon “the piling up of the context of words” (“ENF” 22). Conversation presents a mode of discourse in which such context can never be clarified absolutely but only suggested in an ad hoc manner, and for this reason is at once a “shortcut” to communication and a way of preserving its indeterminacies. In this way, conversation becomes at once the symbol of all literary communication and the “equivalent” of cinema’s freedom from commentary.

life—film has overcome that impasse simply by becoming part of life itself, by
infiltrating not only its daily practices but the metaphorical imaginary according to which
these practices are reflexively constituted. Film, like other technological innovations, has
become simply another part of vernacular experience, making the question of its
“influence” appear inevitable.

Indeed, it was in part the banality of film, rather than its grammar of shock, that
captured the interest of many writers of Green’s generation, for whom it functioned
largely as an organ of mass culture that promised a vicarious access into ordinary, or at
least non-intellectual, life. Louis MacNeice, for example, argues in his “In Defence of
Vulgarity” (1937) for an emphatically non-aestheticized mode of film-going. “One of the
most concentrated kinds of snobbery is what you find flourishing in film societies,” he
writes.

The film snob goes to the pictures—not that he calls them pictures—for the ideas
and for the photography, particularly in films German or Russian. The man-in-the-street
and his young woman go to a film to see the stars, and to be excited by the story and to enjoy
the good looks of their favorite heroes and heroines. Here I’m all with the man-in-the-street.
I look on cinema as a frivolity. I don’t want to be very serious and intense about it. I have no aspirations to become a
connoisseur of the camera. I don’t want to go to films to get a criticism of life. I
like best very slick films made at Hollywood, and I like to see them from a plush
seat in an old-fashioned, vulgar, heavily ornamented cinema, redolent of scent and cigarette smoke.\textsuperscript{10}

MacNeice’s emphasis on the gross materiality of the theater marks the film’s images as an only incidental background to the primary social encounter. What counts in film is not what’s on the screen, but the casual pleasures that can be found adjacent to the film, in the seats, in the smoke. Film-going functions as an index of identity and social position, offering MacNeice a chance to throw off his pretensions and embrace the same frivolities enjoyed by the “man-in-the-street.” The image of the cinema as a lurid space of vulgar pleasures was perhaps not greatly exaggerated in its decor, but such descriptions certainly recall with keen nostalgia the sense of class stigma attached to film before the 1920’s.\textsuperscript{11}

In George Orwell’s satirical 1936 novel, \textit{Keep the Aspidistra Flying}, even the beleaguered protagonist, Gordon Comstock—despite his disdain for commercial society— is stirred by the narcotic allure of the film theater. Orwell describes the starving writer fighting to repress his desire to go and see a Greta Garbo film. “He yearned to go inside, not for Greta’s sake, but just for the warmth and the softness of the velvet seat. He hated the pictures, of course, seldom went there even when he could afford it. Why encourage the art that is destined to replace literature? But still, there is a kind of soggy attraction about it. To sit on a padded seat in the warm smoke-scented darkness, letting the flickering drivel on the screen gradually overwhelm you—feeling


\textsuperscript{11} Even in 1915, in Hugo Münsterberg’s an early essay on film—“Why We Go To The Movies”—he is obliged to apologize for what he considers his outdated snobbishness in thinking that “it was undignified for a Harvard Professor to attend a moving-picture show.” \textit{Hugo Münsterberg on Film}, ed. Allan Langdale. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 173.
the waves of its silliness lap round till you seem to drown, intoxicated, in a viscous sea.”

Framed in such terms, it would seem that the righteousness of abstaining from film could hardly justify the loss of its escapist pleasures which, however morally and aesthetically questionable in nature, are at least honest. The frivolity of film, its “soggy attraction,” promised a new authenticity in commonness. This desire for a cinema of authenticity, moreover, gained currency in part by distinguishing itself from the “snobbish,” overly aesthetic, modes of viewing modeled by Bloomsbury, or in journals like Close-Up.

Green’s own account of film-going—he was undoubtedly a more avid cinephile than his peers—conforms to the depiction of the film theater as primarily a threshold of social experience, though without the same preoccupation with class difference. As in Orwell’s novel, Green associates film with an intoxication, an atmosphere of drugged lassitude. However, whereas for Orwell such intoxication signaled a deplorable escape from reality into fantasy, Green portrays intoxication’s consoling fellowship with film as an experience of promised susceptibility and escape. Looking back at his time at Oxford in Pack My Bag (1940), Green recalls:

---

12 George Orwell, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1956 [1936]), 72. Elizabeth Bowen, too, calls attention to the importance of smoke in theaters as an index of film’s populist appeal, in her 1937 reflection “Why I Go to the Cinema”: having remarked that she goes to films “because I like sitting in a packed crowd in the dark, among hundreds riveted on the same thing…to have my general feelings played upon” (205), Bowen continues to observe “how important smoking is. I start slightly against the best film in a foreign cinema where I am unable to smoke. Very great films (generally Russian) and moments in any good film do suspend my desire to smoke: this is the supreme test” (211), in *Footnotes to the Film*, ed. Charles Davy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1937).

13 According to Anthony Powell, Green “made a point of watching a film every afternoon, and evening of his Oxford life; change of programme at the city’s three cinemas making this just possible without repetition.” Quoted in Treglown, *Romancing*, 48.
Those were the days of silent films when anyone with a hangover wept at words of his own he put onto the lips of the girl reproving her drunken lover on the screen, of Mary Pickford, „The World”s Sweetheart,” speechless yet or, for girls, of Valentino who never said a word in films. For me the darkness, that is the light subdued, the sniveling and soft laughs, those heads more intent on each other”s breath as in the oldest gesture they inclined one to the other against the lighted screen the orchestra played low to, here was the place in which to work out the sense of guilt, to conquer that nausea of lunch after the night before”s drinking.14

In bearing witness to the fantasy and regret of its audience, but doing so in the most generalized way, film mediates a community that is at once intimate and anonymous. The impersonality of film is related to the strange charm which celebrities wield over their fans. Figures like Valentino or Mary Pickford—“the world”s sweetheart”—offer their mythic silence as a solicitation for the sort of generic dreams that belong to no one in particular, revealing the extent to which moments of privacy are stubbornly shared. In the midst of the specific décor of the cinema—“the darkness…the light subdued, the sniveling and soft laughs, those heads more intent on each other”s breath”—film allows for a benevolent confusion in which it is possible to mistake individual fantasy for common consciousness. The cinema brokers a looser sort of intercourse with others than the more tightly managed dialogues that constitute the public sphere; dealing with individual exchanges of laughter and breath, its community is more immediate, but also more unintelligible. “Her head was leaning on his shoulder again,” Green writes of a couple going to the movies in Living, “like hanging clouds against hills every head in this

theatre tumbled without hats against another, leaning everywhere.”

The darkened space of the theater allows for a unique visualization of this form of communal romance in the leaning of the head—“the oldest gesture,” as Green puts it—in which a curious adjacency is elevated to a lyric power which is only mildly ironized by the recognition of its conventionality. As he goes on to say in Pack My Bag, Green imagines film as “the old kalaidescope …of fabulous relationships between people known to all of us with the spotlight of confidences” (PMB, 137). Significantly, the phrase “spotlight of confidences” does not refer to film’s mechanical projection of light onto the screen, but to the audience’s mode of perception. Or perhaps it would be better to say that, for Green, the material specificity of the cinema is inseparable from the ways that its calls its audience into being, and that the chief part of cinematic spectacle is the human participation it engenders. In the darkness of the theater, film (and the perception of the audience that attends it) manages something slightly more prosaic than the “company” of which Beckett’s narrator speaks when he describes “the fable of one fabeling with you in the dark”: not quite company, but, in the manner of the orchestra’s relation to the screen, something more like “accompaniment.”

What I would like to suggest is that Green’s assessment of the social experience of film-going ought to inform the way we understand his statements about film’s influence on narrative practices. Film, in other words, may have a distinct representational structure that eschews the more labored kinds of commentary that Green predicts the novel will soon leave behind, but this formal awareness has little to do with

the experience of viewing a film as Green describes it. No doubt there is a close correlation between the experience of film as a collective dream and its narrative strategies, but Green seems to be interested in the ways that films produce their audience in being forgotten by them. The disappearance of the individual into the audience, the transaction from head to shoulder, gives expression to a community from which the film itself is mysteriously distant, at least as far as its particular content is concerned. Especially in silent film, Green reminds us, much of this content is practically scripted by the audience, and it is in part by placing only peripheral demands upon viewers that film exacts its intangible conditions on their participation in the shadowy regions of social life. Film, in this way, can be taken to embody the chief promise of art to enliven its audience by denying itself.

Green’s insistence that the novelist not impose their view upon the reader, in this sense, amounts to a desire that literature remake itself in the image of cinema, not simply by splitting up its scenes into ever-diminishing units, but by emulating its wisdom in forsaking authority in order to facilitate the work of communication. This withdrawal of authority, by which the narrator achieves a position which I will call—in reference to the way in which the phrase is encoded in Party Going (1939)—the “infinitely remote,” leads both away from formalism and back towards it. That is, Green’s novels imagine in rather extreme ways the possibilities of detachment as a way of silencing the voice of the narrator, even as he comes to theorize silence as the essence of narrative address. Indeed, the terms which Green employed in his later essays to describe the ideal operations of fiction—“communication,” “dialogue,” “conversation”—are aggressively redefined by him in order to accommodate this negative intention. Such communication, he insists,
only refers in part to his stylistic decision to foreground dialogue between characters; it refers more fundamentally to what is really a form of expressive silence, what he calls the “unspoken communication between novelist and reader.” 17 The “silence” of Green’s novels recalls the silence of the cinema insofar as they aspire to a similar form of lyric commonness that is highly mediated but, at least in principle, undetermined. In this comparison, cinema does not provide a model for understanding the specificity of literary practice, it provides instead a model of what literature might gain in relinquishing such myths. It would seem, from this perspective, that the very uniqueness of the narrator as the bearer of fictions concealed certain illusions about the forms of power such rarity commanded. But as Green shows, the novel, in the absence of a personified narrator, is not given over to either realism or literalness, but becomes a medium through which we can recognize that the presence of narrative—the imaginary coherence of the world of others—is largely inevitable, utterly common, and comically mundane. We do not only encounter it as special circumstance of leisure or entertainment, nor does narrative help us to escape ourselves. Narrative, in Green’s hands, serves as a gentle reminder that escape is impossible. Of course, the same is also true of the conceit of authorial withdrawal.

Figure 5. Photos of Henry Green taken for Life Magazine, 1952.
2. The Giant’s Breath

Green’s sense of the disproportionate agency of traditional narration did not arise as a late development in his work, indicating, as some critics have suggested, that the increasing cynicism of his final two novels, *Nothing* (1950) and *Doting* (1952), had given way to a theory of the novel that bore little resemblance to the majority of his fiction. While the theories advanced in his essays lay a more absolute emphasis on the use of dialogue than his novels bear out, their underlying concern with the problems of authorial presence pervades his writing, and indeed mark its origin. Evidence of this is given in a uniquely allegorical way in a brief sketch dating from the early 1920’s, entitled “The Wyndham Family.”

This satirical piece, which is written as a play, features members of Green’s aristocratic extended family in a fictional encounter with an inquisitive giant who they discover peering at them through their window, and whose breathing leaves perceptible traces in the surroundings. “The windvane has been pointing N then S then N again at regular intervals and so on for some time.” Green writes in the stage directions for the scene, before poking fun at the stolid response of his relatives:

VIOLET

Charles do look at the windvane.

CHARLES

*(trying to be facetious)*

Bless my soul.

---

[MAUD]

Charles dear, isn’t that very extraordinary.

CHARLES

I have never known wind like that before.

EDWARD

How very interesting.

(Charles gets up and goes to the window, followed by Hughie and Edward. Humphrey picks up The Times and begins to read the leading article. Looking out the windows the others see the head of what is obviously a giant….There is a rapt expression on his face and he appears to be watching the White Library...)

("TWF,” 14)\textsuperscript{19}

After asking their servant, “Wickham,” to enter into negotiations with the unwanted creature (“tell him to go away at once or I will have the police on him”), the family members remain standing, as if transfixed by formulaic mannerisms from which they are incapable of deviating.

TINY

Above all we must keep calm.

[MAUD]

What would the parent have said?

CHARLES

(Labouring under a sense of injustice)

He would have been very angry and I don’t think anyone in the kingdom would have denied him the right to be.

\textsuperscript{19} The sketch only includes an abbreviation, “MVY,” for Henry’s mother, Maud.
MAGGIE

Is he advancing?

EDWARD

My dear he is stationary.

[MAUD]

He seems to be in an attitude of observation.

TINY

My dear do not let us act hastily, let us review the situation coldly.

HUMPHREY

I am very glad that Mother is not here (“TWF,”16).

Their exaggerated affectations make these characters easy marks for Green’s satire, which utilizes a fanciful situation in order to display the absurd fantasies of routine and order that are allowed to pass as ordinary life.

Most curious, of course, for a writer whose subsequent fiction may arguably be symbolic but which is very rarely anything but realistic, is the presence of the giant in the story at all. The character of the giant, in fact, appears in another of Green’s early sketches, (the much more somber “Monsta Monstrous”), indicating a sustained imaginative preoccupation with a figure whose perspective is out of scale with the surrounding world. In “The Wyndham Family,” the giant’s physical disproportion

---

20. “Monsta Monstrous” (dated 1923), in Surviving, 21-25. In this sketch, an unnamed giant falls from the sky, and wanders mournfully around a world in which he does not belong, and which is actually destroyed by his presence. Coming to a burning building, for example, he blows on it in an attempt to extinguish the flames, feeding the inferno. He later electrocutes himself from the cable at a lighthouse, which he exposes by snapping it in half.
causes particular havoc as the “unseen agency” of his breath sends one innocent bystander after another flying into a nearby lake.

Green’s presentation of these events emphasizes the separation between the space of the giant and that of the family, depicting them with great exactitude yet without clarifying their cause, leaving the job of interpretation to the characters themselves.

*Then outside down the hill come deer galloping and when in a line they have swept down it as if drawn by something they turn right-handed and gallop on and into the lake all except one which has tripped and lies with a broken leg at the foot of the hill. All the others have vanished in the lake.*

EDWARD

Charles the deer have galloped into the lake.

CHARLES

God damn.

HUMPHREY

I observe that the wings of his nostrils dilate and contract at regular intervals which correspond to the movements of the windvane.

HUGHIE

He is breathing (“TWF,” 17).

In calling attention to the faltering inferences of the members of the Wyndham family, Green turns them into readers of the effective text which the giant sketches, stumbling to connect the chain of cause and effect set in motion by the giant’s respiration. This relation is underscored by the increasing opacity of grammar in Green’s “stage
directions,” whose lack of punctuation seeks to place the reader of the sketch in the same relation to the events as the onlookers.

In this sense, the sketch’s theatrical conceit doubles as a reflection on the novelistic use of description. Leaving aside the purely technical difficulty of representing a group of deer being pulled into a lake by the respirations of a nearby giant on stage, Green’s parenthetical text addresses the reader as reader, rather than as the potential witness to its enactment. This is more pointedly true of the sketch’s final lines, “(And it was, and he was gone),” which behave more like the concluding gesture of a fairy tale than the closing curtain of a play. What the theatrical form insists upon, nonetheless, is the rigid separation of scenic and descriptive space that uncannily parallels the relation between the giant and the family members in their near refusal to admit that anything is out of the ordinary. Inside the house, in the confines of the “White Library,” members of the family trust in the banal coherence of a world whose physical laws are freely violated in front of their eyes. Outside the house, both the narrator and the giant organize zones of startling activity and effect that draw upon their distance in order to ironize and refocus the sad domestic life transpiring within.

Indeed, Green’s peculiar sketch suggests that both omniscience and gigantism share a similar monstrosity. The narrator, like the giant, cannot bear witness to the world without conspicuously intruding upon it, cannot offer description without in the process kindling the recursive mystery of their own independent presence. This homology is further reinforced by Green in the story’s final inversion, in which the giant reveals to the Wyndham family that he is there, not to harm, but only to observe them. “Be quiet,” he says when approached by a servant who has ventured outside to ascertain his intentions,
“I want to listen to the people in the house.” The members of the Wyndham family, complaining about the indecency of eavesdroppers, are roundly “cut short by the giant’s huge voice saying:

GIANT:

I have come and now I see that my breathing has put you to some inconvenience so that I shall now leave you not wishing to impose myself unduly upon your magnificent leisure. But you must understand that mine, being a comparatively modern race …is singularly lacking in the dignity of everyday conversation and having heard that at Petworth was to be found the phrasing of a golden age I came and have learnt much to my own profit even in so short a space of time. …So I am departing and would only remind you that good manners have occasionally to yield to some pressing need and while I return all the deer and the one man that my breathing drew into the pond I fear that this will be a poor return for my lack of savoir faire. I see a deer is hurt, but there, you see, it is well again.

(And it was, and he was gone) (“TWF,” 19-20).

In a sense, Green closes off the story by drawing together the giant’s perspective with our own, by making the giant’s polite embarrassment at having been unduly noticed seem equal to the unease of reading itself, as vicarious observation. Like the giant, and implicitly like the narrator (who, after all, titles the story “The Wyndham Family”) we have been watching the family members all along. The decoy of a plot which we may have thought involved something about a giant is revealed to have been only a convenient excuse for the pleasures of listening in, at a distance, to the “phrasing of a golden age.”
In this sense, then, the giant is only the grossly embodied double for the story’s narrative conscience. This is nearly a literal truth in the giant’s final address to the family, which, in both clarifying the effect of his breathing and leaving with the parting shot of a moral (“that good manners have occasionally to yield to some pressing need”), in effect serves the traditional role of the narrator in giving both an explanation and a meaning to the events which have transpired. Hence the close reciprocity of function between the giant’s words and the narrator’s account in the final lines—“I see a deer is hurt, but there, you see, it is well again. / (And it was, and he was gone)”—points to the fictive power of language, such that we read the giant’s mysterious ability to fix the deer’s broken leg as coextensive with his ability to tell us that it is well, just as the narrator sidesteps the reader’s lingering uncertainty in stating that the giant simply disappears. We know that it takes longer than this to heal a broken leg, just as we know that giants do not vanish suddenly (any more than they come journeying by large estates to listen to aristocratic chatter). Green’s story depends upon these suspicions in that it casts the act of authoritative narration as a form of enchantment that tends to disturb the world it describes. The story’s performative erasure of these disturbances, then, sustains the notion that an ideal narrative would leave the world just as it had been found, even as it makes us aware that such an ideal narration is about as likely as the existence of a disappearing giant.
3. A Sense of the Remote

“The Wyndham Family” is not especially representative, either generically or formally, of Green’s later work. What it provides is less a blueprint of Green’s future style than a singular statement of the unavoidable strangeness of style in general, its magic as well as its persistent distortions. The heightened levels of attention which descriptive language commands, in other words, at once cement and confound the observational agency of narration. For this reason description is held at bay, or set apart (as though parenthetically) from the world of characters, as it is in “The Wyndham Family,” but in its separation the author’s occasional description acquires a different quality. The writer, like the giant, “has no business in the story he is writing,” as Green will later claim, and must do all that is possible not to “set himself up as a demi-god, a know all,” but in Green’s fiction such abnegation of knowledge is punctuated by unaccountable bursts of awareness, if not quite of certainty.²¹

Take as an example the following passage from Living, which describes, or fails to describe, the thoughts of Hannah Glossop following a game of “hunt the slipper” at a party, thoughts which are offered as evidence by the narrator that, despite the erotically charged nature of the game, “there was nothing dirty in all this”:

Hannah, for instance, did not even long for Tom to be pushed over her, nor did she even think of it, it was all—how shall I say—all was like the clearness of an empty glass, with the transparency of light. Yet not transparent. You look into crystal globe and its round emptiness makes a core in it you can’t see

²¹ Henry Green, “A Novelist to his Readers: I,” in Surviving, 139.
through, there is nothing there only the transparency is confused. That was like
Hannah Glossop when someone wasn’t talking to her, inoculating ideas.

When she went to dress for dinner she told maid she had never laughed so
much in her life.  

The narrator here is like a disappointed fortune-teller, gazing into his “crystal globe” but
finding only the curious “clearness of an empty glass.” The fantasy of omniscience
which this description suggests is at once focalized and rebuffed in the luminous opacity
of Hannah’s mind: the empty glass at once aptly approximates the feeling of her
“inoculating ideas” (“That was like Hannah Glossop when someone wasn’t talking to
her”), and reminds us that such feelings gain their specificity from qualities that cannot
be readily stated. Green’s narrator is summoned to account for this embarrassment, in
which he must both explain Hannah’s thoughts to a skeptical reader (“there was nothing
dirty in all this”) and sketch the limits of his explanatory power (“—how shall I say—”).
In fact the passage ends with the narrator ceding authority back to the character of
Hannah herself, who forces our reading in an offhanded remark—“she told the maid she
had never laughed so much in her life”—out of the murky depths of narrative
epistemology and into the colloquial idiom of commonplace interaction. It is true that,
even in this final gesture, we are asked to trust that Hannah is the sort of person capable
of frankness when speaking to a maid, but the effect is to cast the project of omniscience
onto the same level as passing conversation. We do not even need to believe that
Hannah’s statement is accurate for it to possess authority; indeed, her remark exaggerates
by design, though it still suggests arguably as much of Hannah’s character in expressing

---

her desire for this exaggeration, as does the narrator’s labored description of the curved opacity of an empty glass.

In the vertiginous movement from one perspective to another, from the heights of lyric description to the casual rhetoric of night-life commentary, Green’s fiction plays up the distorting agency of language to cloud the world which it observes. Like Hannah’s mental “inoculations,” however, the uncertainty of the narrative voice is in a significant sense apt, if not strictly speaking objective. The transitions of perspective in evidence here are not, though, the same abrupt changes of scene that led Living’s reviewer to call the novel “cinematographic”; they reflect a desire to qualify literary address with the instability of non-authoritative speech. In these moments, Green’s qualified narration is ironized by its very distance from the colloquial landscape of its characters. Green’s narrator has not really given up the traditional project of imaginatively approaching his characters, or even of understanding them, but has rather discovered a more agile sort of knowledge that is the result of failing to exhaustively determine its objects.

Green will later identify this uniquely non-authoritative distance as the seal of novelistic maturity, referring to this quality in Pack My Bag as “a sense of the remote.” This designation comes in the context of an evaluation of his juvenile writing (though he does not mention “The Wyndham Family”), which Green uses as a parallel narrative of personal development to that which is offered by the memoir form. After excerpting three sketches from his youth written over a five-year period, Green remarks that “what interest they may have lies not so much in what they describe as how they are written. …What difference there may be, and it is obvious to me at least, between the first and third of these pieces is due to the five years which lie between” (PMB, 106). In claiming
that a transition from youth to adulthood is legible as a transition from poor writing to
good writing, Green does not seek to naturalize style as an expression of personal
development, but rather to mark the loss of self which attends adulthood as the key to a
writing which is more richly addressed to others. Unlike the Joycean model at work in
*Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*—in which the homology of stylistic evolution and
personal growth remains more or less authoritative and masterful throughout, culminating
in the co-presence of author and subject in Stephen’s diary—Green’s memoir
understands authority as a distance from the self, in which personality is more honored in
the recognition of its commonness than in the eloquent recollection of its lyric
singularity. “Any account of adolescence is necessarily an account of the fatuous,”
Green writes, referring to his own youth (*PMB*, 107). Such statements cannot be read
easily, because the refusal to mythologize the writer as privileged individuality also
erodes our implicit faith in their ability to speak dispassionately on our behalf.

In *Pack My Bag*, Green courts demystification by showing himself to have been
capable of great shallowness and awkward prose. The earliest passage [of his juvenile
writing] quoted by Green is given as evidence of self-absorption. “I determined to be a
writer, the diary I began to keep with this in view was full of loud shouts about it, and a
nom de plume was chosen, of all names Henry Michaelis. When I was photographed I
wrote as follows on one of the prints:

I flatter myself that this is not in the least like me: how could it be what with the
irritation at the photographer and the idiocy of being photographed. I resolutely
posed myself and looked out with an easily recognizable defiance at the paste
board I was to mesmerize. There is anger and resignation in that futile flabby
sneer of the lips, there is a terrible lankness, toughness almost in the figure.

Altogether a horrible photograph (PMB, 105).

The apparent “horror” of photography, its “idiocy,” is that it violates identity by reducing it to a pose, an “easily recognizable” surface. In writing, as if to cancel the photograph, on its back, Green’s youthful Michaelis²³ accepts the available aesthetic dictum such that, according to the Society of the Arts (for which he “fittingly” served as secretary), “art was not representation” and “photographs were abominations” (PMB, 116). Green presents the inaptitude of his youthful writing as a symptom of this defensive distrust of photographic likeness, and this faith in the unique centrality of the self in the act of writing. A later piece of prose, he says, although it is equally a “yell about the self,” shows an improved sensibility in which the value of the unique quality of experience has been exchanged for a newfound attention to the grammar of its typicality. I quote here both the later passage and Green’s analysis:

They have gone bed too early, there is no courtesy now in guests. For as the woman may lie awake after the man has finished, so we may be sent to our rooms by the empty chairs. Surely mind, animated by the unaccustomed flow of talk, may also have its consummation. Then when we feel there is no more to be said, then we may go and lie on our beds at ease. We have functioned. But tonight and on such nights as these, I am an unsatisfied lover.

[…] What difference there may be, and it is obvious to me, between the first and third of these pieces is due to the five years which lie between. There is already

²³ Green himself seems to be misremembering here: the early sketches bear the name Henry Michaels.
in the amount by which the style has varied a sense of the remote. The extent to
which that remoteness has settled in what I am writing here is the ten years lived
since the third piece was put down […] Before I had had a real exchange with
anyone I was writing on the back of a photograph what I thought of my face. Five
years later I had the sense to bring others in when I wrote about myself to blame
as much as possible on others. There is no excuse for sneering at the flabby lips
but the reader can have less cause to complain about the desertion of having to go
up to bed alone. Everyone has had that experience when they have been in love
as I was then. I was equally self-absorbed when both pieces were written but the
last is better done (PMB, 106-107).

The relative quality of these diaristic sketches notwithstanding, they locate a changed
way of thinking about what writing can achieve once it has side-stepped its delirious
obsession with the self-expression of the author. The “sense of the remote,” which Green
expands on here as “the sense to bring others in when I wrote about myself,” is the name
Green gives for the way that experience is at once enriched and transformed in the
process of being perceived by others. This perception is anticipated in a gesture of
preemptive comparison which attends writing as such. “Everyone has had that
experience when they have been in love as I was then,” Green writes. This is clearly a
fiction, or at least empirically so, but the legibility of the statement that “on nights such as
these, I am an unsatisfied lover,” insofar as it is legible, invites us to entertain a
commonality which is not so much granted by experience as managed in the silent
agency of grammar and metaphor. The earlier complaint against photography (“this is
not in the least like me”) in this sense does not simply give voice to a preference for
language over another media, or even a faith in language as a vehicle of self-expression and skepticism of the externality of photographic representation, so much as signal a resistance to writing as such.

Photography is another name for writing because it conditions the self’s conspicuous availability to a world external to it. This is also the function of a memoir, and Green’s canny use of citation to index his development already presumes a structural transaction between self and text. “My task,” he writes, “is to show how this came about, how the style, which changed as a girl’s complexion changes with the hours she keeps, emerged into 1928, the date beyond which I do not hope to go; how this self-expression grew and how it altered” (PMB, 107). We can track the narrative of this stylistic growth, running parallel to Green’s personal (although pseudonymous) narrative, in part by marking a shift in the sorts of materials which he cites. From the earliest excerpt presented—a youthful sermon written by Green to gain favor with his headmaster (on the subject of how Peter was helped by his denial of Jesus) (PMB, 15)—to his schoolboy

24 Green (Henry Yorke) famously chose not to include the names of his acquaintances in the memoir, out of a sense—at once aesthetic and ethical—that prose ought to be legible to strangers, not just to one’s friends. At the beginning of the eighth section, he writes: “Anyone who writes what he remembers of his own time is in a difficulty with names, he has to decide whether he will mention the living, if he is to call them by their real names when he does mention them and, if he chooses to alter the names they are known by whether he will disguise the place it all happened to him, and so perhaps find himself writing fiction. …The best way, and that which comes nearest to my style of living, is not to mention names at all. …Names distract, nicknames are too easy and if leaving both out as it often does makes a book look blind then that to my mind is no disadvantage. Prose is not to be read aloud but to oneself alone at night, and it is not quick as poetry but rather a gathering web of insinuations which go further than names however shared can ever go. Prose should be a long intimacy between strangers with no direct appeal to what both may have known. It should slowly appeal to feelings unexpressed, it should in the end draw tears out of the stone, and feelings are not bounded by the associations common to place names or to persons with whom the reader is unexpectedly familiar” (PMB, 55-56).
account of being photographed (PMB, 105), and sketches of a trip to Paris before leaving for Oxford, which also significantly invoke the trope of photography\(^{25}\) (PMB, 124), Green uses these passages to show that his style became more accomplished the more it effaced his own voice in order to “bring others in.” The very act of citation, of course, is a way of performing this desire, littering the text of Pack My Bag with excerpts that work to qualify the authority with which Green writes by inscribing this writing in an arbitrarily delimited history. It is fitting, then, that Pack My Bag ends with Green’s personal life almost in eclipse (the details of his romance and marriage condensed into a few short sentences) while he muses for long stretches about the “unheard of clarity” of workers’ speech (PMB, 156). The overheard speeches that he quotes at length—ranging from a

\(^{25}\) The passage—“on the whole not a bad piece of writing”—runs as follows: “He was alone for the moment. Nan had left him to take a cup of tea. The nurse was taking the daily walk that was necessary to her trade union health, and Mrs. Haye had gone up to the village to console Mrs. Trench, whose week-old baby was dying. Herbert, leaning on the sill of the kitchen window, was making noises at Mrs. Lane while she toyed with a chopper, just out of his reach. Weston was lost in wonder, love and praise before the artichokes, he had a camera in his pocket and had taken a record of their splendor. Twenty years on and he would be showing it to his grandchildren, to prove how things did grow in the old days. Twenty years ago Pinch had seen better. Harry was hissing over a sporting paper; Doris in an attic was letting down her hair, she was about to plait two soft pigtails. Jenny, the laundry cat, was very near the sparrow now, by the bramble in the left-hand corner of the drying-ground” (PMB, 124, my emphasis). The passage, which begins as the ostensible narration of a moment of solitude—“he was alone for the moment”—is in fact crowded with the activities of those absent, as if to suggest that the true narration of solitude is forcefully peopled with the imagined lives of others, rather than the isolated fantasy of the one left behind. The singular “he” is not named, but is animated by the seemingly endless proliferation of names of those who figuratively surround him. The synchronicity of this mode of writing finds a working parallel in the operation of Weston’s camera. Each sentence gives a kind of snapshot of the moment, imagined from a different angle, a cumulative “record of its splendor,” in a way parallel to the manner in which Weston documents the artichoke. Indeed, Green’s use of the passage as a whole in Pack My Bag is also akin to Weston’s photographs, since it is offered “to prove how things did grow in those days.” Green’s citations are photographs in this limited sense, pictures not so much of his own youth but evidence of the growth of his style.
laborer’s description of his dog to a long joke about the cow and the bee in a field of buttercups—parallels, and tacitly comments upon, the earlier citations of his juvenile writing. For the workers’ language, which Green values for being “unadulterated by literature,” is the exemplification of the ideal “remoteness” of writing according to which authority is predicated on accepting the voices of others that inhabit all language.

In Pack My Bag, Green anatomizes his own writing alongside this common language in order to create a form of dialogue mirroring that which might appear in one of his novels, actively distorting the generic conventions of the memoir form (he referred to the text as a “self-portrait”). This distortion echoes Green’s consistent refrain throughout Pack My Bag that his only reason for writing a memoir, rather than a proper novel, is his certainty that the coming war (Pack My Bag was written in 1938 and 1939) would prevent him from finishing in time, and that in spite of impending death the memoir might be a way to “pretend one had a chance to live” (PMB, 1). “All of these otherwise would be used in novels,” he writes on the opening page, “material is better in that form or in any other that is not directly personal, but we I feel no longer have the time. We should be taking stock” (PMB, 1). The memoir is imperfect but expedient, and the gestures of citation in which Green registers this generic unease can be read as an attempt to show narrative authorship as both the culmination of individual development and a mode of self-cancellation. Green’s anti-memoir, then, gives a story of the self’s felicitous disappearance into the shared world of speech that colors all self-reflection with an air of futility. The narrator of Pack My Bag may monumentalize the authority conferred by this disappearance as the precondition of his own speaking, but the book
equally strives to mark the partialness of the memoir as such, the fullest elaboration of which would be a novel that remains unwritten.

4. The Fog of Proximity

If *Pack My Bag* is haunted by the impersonal narration to which it aspires, but towards which it can only gesture, its imagination of this mode of communication is also materially marked by its proximity to Green’s previous novel, *Party Going*. That novel, which concerns a group of young socialites stranded by fog in a railway hotel before a trip to the continent, was written between 1931 and 1938, and published at the same time that *Pack My Bag* was being composed. Green’s memoir encrypts the relation between the two texts in a citation that, unlike the excerpts from his youthful writing, goes unremarked upon. Indeed, Green”s “sense of the remote,” the very quality invoked as a standard for appraising his past work, is constrained and complicated by the “infinitely remote” narrative practice of *Party Going*. These intertextual relays are especially important because *Party Going* is deeply uncomfortable with the rhetoric of aesthetic detachment—from the vantage points of which the world might be apprehended impartially—seeing in that distance a reproduction of the fantasies of class privilege. The narrator in *Party Going*, preoccupied with the incongruous relation to the represented world of characters and action, will at once attempt to exhibit the petty narcissisms that manage—and prohibit—social experience, and to give evidence of a more common world that becomes visible when these fantasies are frustrated. *Party Going* is by no stretch a utopian novel, but its despair is mitigated by a sense that social divisions have an obviousness which makes them eminently unstable. The strength of this insight,
however, means that the novel is not rescued by the conventions of irony and
omniscience, but in fact condemned by them. In this sense, a political reading of the
novel becomes possible only once we attend to the ways that its strategies of narration are
captured in the instabilities of social division, at once reduplicating the privileged
fantasies of its protagonists and providing a rhetoric by which those fantasies might be
disassembled.

In what is still perhaps the most useful and provocative reading of *Party Going*,
Clive Hart catalogues the variety of ways in which the novel freely employs narrative
distortions, “dislocations of the rational universe,” as a means to “the abnegation of
authorial control.”

“Uncertainty is an essential element of the book’s tone,” Hart writes,
referring primarily to what he calls its “shifting symbolic sub-structures” in which “the
novel itself warns us against accepting at face value its apparently omniscient
statements.”

Descriptions which seem to anchor us in the world of the novel’s action
are unmoored by being repeated, rescripted on a smaller or larger scale in echoing
phrases or images, “modulating analogies and chains of symbols,” “leitmotivs,”

---

applies a sort of Joycean vigilance to a novel that rewards and frustrates such attention in
equal measures. Indeed, Hart’s reading is made more trenchant because of the
impatience it displays towards the modes of unreliability which he so assiduously
documents. “Green has always tended to be an „invisible artist,”” Hart writes, “not quite
so detached, perhaps, as Stephen Dedalus’ nail-paring writer-god but, despite occasional
personal comment, usually withdrawn from the action and personalities of his book.
…But along with this detachment there goes a sort of artistic diffidence, a lack of
assertiveness, an unwillingness to be dogmatic, to claim omniscience” (185-186). Later
he seems to be losing confidence, “If the reader finds this uncertainty distressing and
annoying, it is apparently Green’s intention that he should do so” (190). This impatience
means that Hart has to work harder to find the “structuring” principles which he later
discovers, and from which he is able to construct a more satisfying and recognizable
model of textual intention. But it is the early, unsatisfied reading that does most justice to
*Party Going* because it sees more clearly the consolations which the novel fails to give.

27 Ibid. 187.
“correspondences,” and “image groups.”28 Because these repetitions often appear indiscriminately in the mouths of characters as well as in the ostensibly impersonal accounts of the narrator, Hart documents the tendency of the narrator’s description to be “assimilated to the point of view of the characters. Objective certainty is not at hand. The reader finds himself nervously guessing, watching the nuances of the surface, and hence a prey to the whims of the party-goers who in a sense become, as Green said, the reader’s audience.”29 The novel’s internal citations certainly conjure an authority in the very system of textual memory according to which such repetitions are recognizable, but this absent authority (besides being nearly indistinguishable from the reader) is also distinct from, and not reducible to, the descriptive text of the novel.

A case in point are a number of passages that cluster around the word “remote” during scenes of apparent romance. These scenes envelope the narrative voice in a language of fantasy and narcissism which we intuit to be the characters’ own, but which, by being lyrically amplified in metaphoric passages which point out the fault lines of that narcissism, also reflects on the condition of narrative detachment. In these scenes, the quality of the “remote” becomes a formula through which Green’s novel at once names and wards off the possible consolations of stylistic self-reflexivity. The first such

28 Ibid. 193, 190, 198, 190. For Hart these devices function as organizing, rather than destabilizing, forces, keys to symbolic coherence which allow him to reconstitute a familiar model of deific and ironic distance: “By means of such devices Green allows us to see his characters as futile, aimless, mechanical men and women, unaware that they inhabit a formalized world in which they are tried by events, found wanting, but compassionately permitted to carry on with their comparatively harmless stupidity” (191). In truth, these devices seem evidence of Andrew Gibson’s observation of Green’s work as a whole, that their “narrative idiom is not so much a new one as a familiar one that is constantly foundering, losing its power, being taken over.” Andrew Gibson, “Henry Green as Experimental Novelist,” 205.
29 Hart, 189.
instance finds Angela Crevy and “her young man,” later identified as Robin Adams, newly arrived in the throng of commuters filling the station where trains have been stopped due to heavy fog. Angela, we are told, is the image of spoiled indifference—“her face had an expression so bland, so magnificently untouched and calm she might never have been more than amused and as though nothing had ever been more than tiresome”—and if this is not the most inviting introduction, Green takes it upon himself to expand upon this characterization, until we can no longer comfortably see outside of it:

Like two lilies in a pond, romantically part of it but infinitely remote, surrounded, supported, floating in it if you will, but projected by being different on to another plane, though there was so much water you could not see these flowers or were liable to miss them, stood Miss Crevy and her young man, apparently serene, envied for their obviously easy circumstances and Angela coveted for her looks by all those water beetles if you like, by those people standing round.

Surrounded as they were on every side yet they talked so loud they might have been alone (PG, 395).

The language that inscribes these characters within the crowd shows the continual stress of contradictory demands. Angela and her young man, these two “lilies in a pond,” are singled out by the narrative, set apart as objects of a special attention, in the same manner that any character might be differentiated from the mass of other lives whose stories could be told. Green”s narrator reinforces this implied individuation by describing them at length, even as the very quality of expanded metaphoricity of his description flags the gesture as a kind of hyperbolic fantasy. Indeed, we might consider the description as a
version of free indirect discourse: This is really how Angela sees herself, as a flower amidst an anonymous group, “surrounded, supported, floating in it if you will, but projected by being different on to another plane.” The narrator’s statement, and cumulative restatement, of Angela’s self-image also empties it through gestures of exaggerated articulation (“though there was so much water you could not see these flowers or were liable to miss them”) and qualification (“if you will” or “if you like”).

In this way, the narrator gives voice to a thought which it simultaneously disavows, displaying Angela’s vanity as a willful distortion equivalent to the attempt to forget the existence of others simply by talking louder oneself. And yet, the language employed is not solely Angela’s: only two paragraphs earlier, the narrator had described an entirely different pair of characters “engulfed in swarming ponds of humanity” without any evident irony (#?). More than this, the narrator quickly resuscitates the metaphor of the pond and the lily a few lines later, in order to give the reader a more distant view. “If that swarm of people could be likened to a pond for her lily,” the narrator writes, “then you could not see her like, and certainly not her kind, anywhere about her, nor was her likeness mirrored in their faces. Electric lights had been lit by now, fog came in by the open end of this station, below that vast green vault of glass roof with every third person smoking it might have looked to Mr. Roberts, ensconced in his office away above, like November sun striking through mist rising off water”(PG, 396).

What would it mean to imagine, in a crowd of people, a person so singular that no one else could even be compared to them? What model of humanity does such a thought endorse? If we have accepted the plausibility of his previous description, the narrator tells us—quietly indicating that we might not want to have done so—then we have also
accepted a condition of blindness. The movement into figurative language organizes a broader reflection on likeness as such, though the narrator is not about to settle it for us. If metaphors simplify and distort, allowing for the myths of individuality that prevent Angela, and potentially the reader, from seeing her likeness mirrored in the faces of those around her, the narrator suggests that these myopic fantasies are general. Indeed, the metaphoric blindness is swiftly reinterpreted as possessing a kind of objectivity: one could not see her likeness, not because it does not exist, but because of the thick fog in the station. Even here, though, the narrator retracts the claim for objectivity, such that the distant perspective we thought we were enjoying becomes indistinguishable from that of Mr. Roberts, looking down on the station from his office. The confusions that result from his distance—according to which the fog can resemble cigarette smoke, the lamps resemble cold suns, or the crowd resemble a pond or a swarm—are not just shared by the narrator, they define the act of narration as such.

This should not be taken as either a mystification or a truism. In receding behind the perspectives of the characters, *Party Going*’s narrator does not disappear; if anything in these passages the narrator is outstandingly present to view, even uncharacteristically so. Nor is it the case that the recognition of the difficulty of representation leads to a sense of complacency about the inevitable misconstrual of experience: if anything, we are actively made aware that the simplest vanities conceal acts of aggression (“What targets,” someone is casually overheard saying later in the novel, while walking through the crowd, “what targets for a bomb” [PG, 483]). Rather, in the moments when elaborate metaphors illustrating the thoughts of a character stretch past the point of conviction, a crack appears in which Green’s novels touch powerfully on the sore point of a manifest
sociality that is constantly elided in the available narratives of individual or group identity, fictions of likeness or fictions of kind.

The false narratives of class division, such as Angela’s idea of being “infinitely remote” from the people around her, are instrumental precisely because unstable. In this sense, it is not evidence of bad faith, as critics have often assumed, that Party Going imagines social life through the lens of the youthful elite obsessed with their own complicated love lives. Fictions of elitism, like those of romance, are tenuous and desperately held, capable of being shown up simply by being stated. Later in the novel, Angela and her “young man,” Robin, reconcile long enough to briefly enjoy a kiss: Green describes them standing before a mirror into which they each discover that the other has meanwhile been looking. “As he did this [kissed Angela above the ear] he looked into the glass to see himself doing it,” Green writes, “because he was in that state when he thought it incredible that he should be so lucky to be kissing someone so marvelous. Unluckily for him she saw this in the mirror she had been watching his back in. She did not like it” (PG, 454). In the same scene, Green shows Robin contemplating their relationship in a moment of confused reflection: “He felt as though he was gazing into a prism, and he could see no end to it” (PG, 453). These scenes of spoiled romance offer abyssal gateways into the opacity of a social life outside the ready-made relations into which the characters are dropped. Narrative judgment, too, is subject to these abysses. Immediately following his long and nuanced analysis of the way that Amabel strategically manages her friendships in order to create infighting and jealousy among others, the narrator retreats from his statements. “No one can be sure they know what others are thinking,” he writes, “any more than anyone can say where someone is when
they are asleep. And if behind that blank face and closed eyelids and a faint smile on closed lips they are wandering it may be in Tartary, it is their stillness which makes it all possible to one’s wildest dreams” (PG, 463). To write about someone else is to dream oneself, to find in their stillness the decipherable hints of hidden intentionalities. This thought reflects upon the act of narration, but it is also a description of Alex’s loving attention to the “remote” Amabel. The passage clarifies this relation as it continues: “In her silence and in seeming unapproachable, although he realized it might be studied, and Alex admired her so much he was almost jealous of her, it seemed to him she was not unlike ground so high, so remote it had never been broken” (PG, 463). In the juxtaposition of these two types of uncertainty, Green reinscribes the omniscience of the narrator as the ordinary relation of not just speculation but of erotic fantasy—here likened to Alex’s hopeless admiration of the “unapproachable” Amabel. At the same time, we are not really able to naturalize this reading, arguing for example that the narrator’s uncertain description of Amabel is an indirect but accurate portrait of Alex’s perception of her. In point of fact, the two descriptions do not agree: for the narrator, Amabel quite consciously manages her friends to suit her needs (“her silence, which Angela might ignorantly call poise, was no more than wariness colored by distaste for her own sex” [PG, 463]); while Alex, although he entertains the possibility that her behavior might be “studied,” romanticizes her as a pure being gracefully isolated from those around her (“she was not unlike ground so high, so remote it had never been broken”). Still, the disagreement between the conflicting versions of Amabel (who will later gaze at herself in the mirror, adding to this confusion in her own romantic self-image) is significant because it casts narration not as a transparent access to the reality of other people, but as a
sort of uneasy and preliminary effect of their presence as objects of interested narration. The continual interruption of these narratives is the project of the novel because our cherished distance from others must meet with embarrassment before social or romantic relations can be earnestly affirmed.

In *Party Going*, the persistent distortions of amorous perception are constantly shadowed by the heightened visibility of class distinctions in the stalled railway station in which the novel”s protagonists are marooned. The quality of elevated poise which Alex desires in Amabel, and which Angela fancies she sees in herself, are made literal in the physical separation of the protagonists, leisurely settled in rooms overlooking the station, from the mass of commuters uncomfortably crowded in the area below. This fashionable vantage, as Clive Hart points out, is also a structural substitute for the Archimedean point of narrative omniscience. The triadic relation between the relative distances afforded by privilege, desire, and fiction is perhaps no more legible than in moments when characters alienated by love gaze longingly out onto the masses below. Julia and Max, for example, having “come to an end of talk and speeches, of his saying yes and of her saying no,” are shown looking out their window:

Looking down then on thousands of Smiths, thousands of Alberts, hundreds of Marys, woven tight as any office carpet or, more elegantly made, the holy Kaaba soon to set out for Mecca, with some kind of design made out of bookstalls and kiosks seen from above and through one part of that crowd having turned towards those who were singing, thus lightening the dark mass with their pale lozenged faces; observing how this design moved and was alive where in a few lanes or areas people swayed forward or back like a pattern writhing; coughing as fog
caught their two throats or perhaps it was smoke from those below who had put
on cigarettes or pipes, because tobacco smoke was coming up in drifts; leaning
out then, so secure, from their window up above and left by their argument on
terms of companionship unalloyed, Julia and Max could not but feel infinitely
remote, although at the same time Julia could not fail to be remotely excited at
themselves (PG, 466-467).

Seen from above, the crowd becomes a sea of resemblances, yielding chains of metaphor,
“pattern,” and “design” that are conditioned by the distance of Julia and Max”s
observation. As with Angela”s “pond,” the use of metaphor signals modes of social
imagination looming conspicuously beneath the language of narration. And yet, the
crowd shows itself as a kind of counter text, silently operating within the language that
articulates it: “woven tight” and punctuated by “bookstalls,” it offers “writhing” instead
of writing, a silent discourse that appears to comment on those who seek to define it from
a distance. In this way, Green shows there to be no way of thinking about the crowd
which is not also written from within it. This is why it is significant that the reader will
also be able to recognize the generic, repeated character of Julia and Max”s fantasy of
uniqueness. In feeling themselves to be “infinitely remote,” Julia and Max unknowingly
participate is a set of patterns which the novel is at pains to record. This sense of
ostensible security, the narrator suggests, they “could not but feel.” The automatic, pre-
formed character of these thoughts and desires show Julia and Max to be governed by
forces they cannot either perceive or preempt. Looking out of the hotel window, then, is
shown to be destabilizing, rather than a confirmation of their presumed “security,” not
just because they are precariously “leaning out” over the ledge, but because the very act
of observation puts them into proximity with a shared atmosphere that will never comfortably support the fictions of identity which they jealously guard.

The precariousness of observation is keenly registered by Green’s unstable narrator. The fluidity (or even inconsistency) of his voice, alternating sharply between moments of ironic distance and self-effacing uncertainty, at once inhabits characters and excoriates them. But even these comic reductions are dependent on a recognition of a shared position of speaking, and the thoroughly black comedy of Party Going is everywhere informed by Green’s sense that literary authority and social privilege share common conditions and equally common fallibilities. For this reason, the exposure of a character’s vanity consistently provides moments of reflection about the practice of writing and the work of language, little allegories of literature that are all the more rigorous for being unresolved. The narrator speaks in the language of his characters in the same way that they breathe the same air as those they observe from a distance “infinitely remote,” this air which at the same time “catches their throat.” The phrases that circulate throughout the book (the figure of the “remote” is simply one remarkable index) find themselves, like this foggy and diaphanous medium, in the mouths of many characters. These phrases show, in their indiscriminate circulation, the avid promiscuity of a language that will ultimately betray the fictions of identity it is taken to support.

Language, apprehended as breath or as fog, does not lend credence to the fantasies it is employed to legitimate: it communicates only a naked relation. “Coils of it reached down like women’s long hair,” Green writes of the fog in the station, “reached down and caught their throats and veiled here and there what they could see, like lovers’ glances. …So crowded together they were beginning to be pressed against each other, so
close that every breath had been inside another past that lipstick or those cracked lips, those even teeth, loose dentures, down into other lungs, so weary, so desolate and cold it silenced them” (PG, 495-496). Like the language of the novel, the fog of the station organizes the characters (it is the reason that all the trains are stopped, the principal occasion for the novel’s taking place), allowing them to be brought together, but also obscuring, through its opacity, the community it makes possible. This arrested community is finally not social in nature—it is what happens when the social machinery falters and people are suspended in their fantasies of individuation, made “silent” or “desolate” by their bare proximity to others.

The fog of Party Going is finally indistinguishable from the novel itself, forming Green’s most idealistic formulation of the work of literature—it also directly bears on Green’s reading of cinema. With its darkness and cigarette smoke, “the sniveling and soft laughs, those heads more intent on each other’s breath as in the oldest gesture they inclined one to the other,” the space of the movie theater provided Green with a plausible vocabulary for thinking about a model of intimacy that is only legible outside the private fantasies of the self. The cinema is built upon those fantasies, but it also exposes their banal conventionality. Like the dreams of romance entertained by Max’s party, cinematic fantasy is denatured by its commonness. Like the theater, the crowded train station facilitates a more complicated articulation of social life precisely by holding in abeyance its most identifiable forms. The cinema is hardly mentioned in Party Going (unlike in Living where it is pervasive), but Green’s novel—with its highly charged scenes of observation and group spectacle—would be unimaginable without it. This does not mean that Party Going is in any reducible sense “cinematic,” or that it exhibits the
sorts of abrupt juxtaposition of scenes which are the hallmark of literary montage (although a case could probably be made for this). Green’s novel shows the influence of film precisely by incorporating its logic (or Green’s reading of that logic) into a particular relation to language and the act of narration.

When Green writes with the utmost simplicity, in his articles of the ’50’s, that film’s influence on literature has been to make traditional models of omniscience obsolete, it seems like a truism unworthy of further comment. The abyssal complexity of the thought, however, is legible in the largely unstable role of narration in Green’s actual fiction. In texts like Party Going, the conspicuous visibility of the narrator in moments of description, like the clumsy presence of the giant in his early sketch whose breath disturbs the world he observes, becomes the precondition for deconstituting its authority. Party Going doesn’t realize this authorial withdrawal—it is unclear from a practical perspective what such a realization would look like—but suggests instead that authorial omniscience is never self-evidently more than a fantasy about the lives of others. Where narrative authority is shown to be inoperable, where it is caught in the “infinitely remote” relations of observation and language, Green makes us remember that literature’s inability to fully account for other people is positive proof that the most powerful fiction is that of our isolation.
The intersecting histories charted in these pages should not be taken as a record of film’s critical “reception” in the period, nor even as an account of cinema’s status as an art—though in a limited sense both are correct. Instead, I have meant to inquire into the sorts of interpretive problems that are raised wherever the word “cinema” (or its many cognates) is taken up, and to show how discussions of cinema were also something other than that; they were errant reflections on the mediation of language and of visual forms, which is to say, reflections on the basic communicability of human experience. These conditions of discourse were historically determined, which is to say that they are expressed by the apparent unavailability of coherent history. And in the absence of history, we find recourse to tropes, metaphors, narratives which manifest the troubled historicity of concepts. ¹ Though the approach throughout has been literary, I have also meant to interrogate the mutually reinforcing dependency of both fictions—“literature” and “film”—as well as the disarming prescience of metaphor to state the foreignness of these identities. In this sense, this inquiry does not mean to contribute to the traditional literature of inter-art comparison, which, as W. J. T. Mitchell puts it, concerns itself chiefly with “sorting out the differences and similarities not only between various kinds of cultural objects, but between the critical languages that are brought to bear on them.”²

¹As Paul de Man has observed, “as soon as one is willing to be made aware of their epistemological implications, concepts are tropes and tropes are concepts,” see “The Epistemology of Metaphor,” Critical Inquiry 5.1 (Autumn 1978), 23.
Such comparative ordering of discourses—which Mitchell calls “a kind of intellectual housekeeping”—is, in fact, part of the story I am trying to tell. But its chief “character” is a more surprising housekeeper than Mitchell means to invoke: it is the one cryptically named “Mrs. Filmer” that Virginia Woolf includes in her biography of Roger Fry. Unlike most housekeepers, Mrs. Filmer, we are told, “obeyed the command on the placard „Do not touch.”” Leaving the room untouched, as Fry requests, Mrs. Filmer keeps watch over the disorder of his rooms, as a living, cluttered artifact of the way art and life, theory and experience, interpenetrate and blur in the sight of a perceptive narrator.

“Were they distinct?” the narrator asks of Fry’s infamous categories, “It seems as if the aesthetic theory were brought to bear upon the problems of private life. Detachment, as he insisted over and over again, is the supreme necessity for the artist. Was it not equally necessary if the private life were to continue? That rhythm could only grow and expand if it were detached from the deformation which is possession. …[A]nd the room was if possible still more untidy. Mrs. Filmer had obeyed the command on the placard „Do not touch.” Mrs. Filmer had not touched. Rows of dusty medicine bottles stood on the mantelpiece; frying pans were mixed with palettes; some plates held salad, others the scrapings of congealed paint. The floor was strewn with papers…”

Like Mrs. Filmer, let us leave them there.

---

Bibliography


—. Let’s Go To The Movies! New York: Payson & Clarke, 1926.


—. “Art and the Cinema: A Prophecy that the Motion Picture, in Exploiting Imitation Art, will Leave Real Art to the Artists.” Vanity Fair 19, no. 3 (November 1922): 39-41.


Bennett, Arnold. “The Film „Story”.” Close-Up 1, no. 6 (December 1927): 27-32.

1975.


—. “The Movies versus The Motion Pictures.” *The Century Magazine* 102, no. 6 (October 1921): 889-892.


Cixous, Hélène. “The Character of Character.” *New Literary History* 5, no. 2 (Winter


Eidsvik, Charles. “Demonstrating Film Influence.” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 1, no. 2 (Spring 1973): 113-121.


—. Introduction to *The Poems of Mallarmé*. Translated by Roger Fry. Edited by...

—. *A Roger Fry Reader*. Edited by Christopher Reed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.


George, Frank L. “Towards an Art of the Photodrama.” *Out West Magazine* 44, no. 6 (1916): 249-255.


1978.


Grundy, J. B. C. “Language and Film: A Prophecy.” *Sight and Sound* 2.6 (Summer 1933): 45-46.


—. “Beyond the Screen.” *The Seven Arts* (December 1916): 165-170.


—. “What is an Image?” New Literary History 15, no. 3 (Spring 1984): 503-537.

Morris, Adalaide. How to Live/What to Do: H. D.’s Cultural Poetics. Urbana and


*The Passion of Joan of Arc*, DVD, directed by Carl Dreyer (1928; Boulogne-Billancourt, Hauts-de-Seine: Janus Films, 1999).


—. “‘Art’ in the Movies.” *The Nation* 121, no. 3134 (1925): 148.


Steiner, Wendy. *The Colors of Rhetoric: Problems in the Relation between Modern*


—. *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf.* Edited by Susan Dick. Expanded
—. The Death of the Moth and Other Essays (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1942.

Wussow, Helen. “Virginia Woolf and The Problematic Nature of the Photographic