

Virginia Woolf and Cinema

- David Trotter

Virginia Woolf's interest in the cinema has been a long-standing, if at best intermittent, preoccupation among her critics. The first book-length study of her work, by Winifred Holtby, published in 1932, devoted a full chapter to the topic.¹ There have been several recent investigations, some fruitful, some not.² And the idea that we should think of the movies when we read her experiments in fiction has been disseminated widely. Elaine Showalter, introducing the Penguin edition of *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), maintains that the novel's narrative technique is 'very cinematic'.



- The young Virginia Stephen.

Woolf makes use of such devices as montage, close-ups, flashbacks, tracking shots, and rapid cuts in constructing a three-dimensional story. Such transitional devices would have been familiar to her readers, who were flocking to the new cinema houses and seeing the latest American silent films.³

By this account, cinema has added a third dimension to the stories told in novels. Showalter's thesis is that the influx of 'American silent films' in the early 1920s helped to create an audience for literary experiment.

The argument Showalter advances is of a kind quite often advanced in relation to Modernism. It is an argument by analogy. Its basic proposition

is that some works of literature are structured like a film. Thus Holtby claims that Woolf 'chose' for *Jacob's Room* (1922) the 'cinematograph technique' she had already tried out in *Kew Gardens*.

There is no preliminary announcement, as on a film, 'Produced by . . . Scenario by . . . From the story of . . .' But the first chapter betrays her method. Its scenario might be summarised, 'Jacob as a small boy at the seaside in Cornwall,' and Mrs Woolf begins, as any producer might, by photographing a letter, word by word welling out slowly from the gold nib of Betty Flanders' pen. 'So of course there was nothing for it but to leave.' She shows us next the complete figure of the woman pressing her heels deeper in the sand to give her matronly body a firmer seat; then there is a close-up of her face, maternal, tearful, because Scarborough, where Captain Barfoot is, seems so far from Cornwall where she sits writing.⁴

Up to a point. Holtby has quite plausibly rewritten the opening of *Jacob's Room* as a fragment of scenario (most film-makers of the time would have started with an establishing long shot, and then cut in to a close-up of the letter, but there were other patterns available). In order to do so, however, she has had to overlook the order in which the words have been inscribed on the page. Here is the opening of *Jacob's Room*.

'So of course,' wrote Betty Flanders, pressing her heels rather deeper in the sand, 'there was nothing for it but to leave.'

Slowly welling from the point of her gold nib, pale blue ink dissolved the full stop; for there her pen stuck; her eyes fixed, and tears slowly filled them.⁵

The first thing to go, in Holtby's rewriting, is a literary technique perfected by Charles Dickens:

that of suspended quotation.⁶ “‘So of course,” wrote Betty Flanders, pressing her heels rather deeper in the sand, “there was nothing for it but to leave.”’ As Woolf wrote it, we do not get the image of some words on a piece of paper, and then the image of a woman settling herself. In her version, the force of a feeling strongly felt but not yet articulated (‘So of course’) informs a physical thrust, of heels into sand, which itself then informs the feeling’s full articulation. The opening sentence of *Jacob’s Room* is structured like a sentence in a Victorian novel rather than a sequence of shots in a film (though no Victorian novel would have opened with such a sentence).

Holtby and the critics who have followed her example are right to wonder about the relation between Woolf’s writing and the cinema. They may be wrong to pursue analogies between literary and cinematic form, and to identify one as cause and the other as effect. It is more likely to be the case that there was, for a period during the mid-1920s, a fund of shared preoccupation; and that Woolf drew on this fund in developing a particular emphasis in her novels. The emphasis would no doubt have been developed anyway. But it gained in definition and force because she was in the intermittent habit of going to the movies.

The emphasis I have in mind, reiterated at the conclusion of *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), is an emphasis on the ‘common life’ as the ‘real’ life.⁷ Gillian Beer dwells on it in the introduction to her book about Woolf, arguing that the work ‘declares’ a kinship which might be regarded as more fundamental even than family romance: ‘living in the same time, sometimes in the same place – whether or not you ever meet’.⁸ This formulation is helpful in two respects, I think. First, it insists that the principle upon which Woolf based her revisions of narrative form was not encounter, but co-existence, or co-observation. Secondly, it reminds us that in order to be properly encounterless, co-existence and co-observation must occur in a particular place at a particular time.

The preoccupation Woolf shared with some filmmakers was a preoccupation with the ways in which movement (and in particular casual

movement) defines space. The preoccupation is evident in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), and again in ‘The Cinema’ (1926), which was conceived and written at the same time as the ‘Time Passes’ section of *To the Lighthouse* (1927). I want to suggest that the understanding of cinema Woolf evolved in very specific circumstances during the early months of 1926 made it possible for her to say things about the common life which she had not quite been able to say in *Mrs Dalloway*.

American Movies

There is certainly cinema-going, if no particular grasp of or indebtedness to cinema, in *Mrs Dalloway*. Peter Walsh, lingering on the steps of his hotel, watches the office-workers, faces flushed with ‘joy of a kind, cheap, tinselly, if you like, but all the same rapture,’ head off after work for their two hours at the pictures (177). Peter himself will soon head off for Clarissa Dalloway’s party, where Lord Gayton and Nancy Blow engage in an animated discussion of ‘cricket, cousins, the movies’ (194).

The chances are that these would have been American movies, as Showalter suggests. By 1925, American movies were the norm. Hollywood dominated the international market. Cinema was a narrative art. It had had to become a narrative art in order to become a profitable mass-medium. The stories it told were tinsel not only for cinema’s original working-class audience, patrons of the music-hall, the fairground, and the nickelodeon, but for new audiences drawn in by the comfort and respectability of the proliferating picture palaces: Peter Walsh’s office-workers, and on carefully chosen occasion Lord Gayton and Nancy Blow.⁹ Cinema’s spectacular character-driven narratives had displaced (by wholesale incorporation) melodrama and slapstick, on one hand, and the well-made play or novel, on the other.

Hollywood gained control of the international market by mass-production of a distinctive and highly efficient style of filmmaking. The efficiency and the distinctiveness were the product of what has come to be known as the ‘classical continuity system’.¹⁰ At first, the term ‘continuity’

designated any kind of effort made to smooth the flow of the narrative. It came to refer to a specific set of guidelines for cutting shots together, whether by scene dissection or by montage. Continuity editing made it possible to situate the spectator at the optimum viewpoint in each shot, and to keep that viewpoint on the move as the story developed. The optimum viewpoint is not that from which an action can be seen in its entirety, but that from which it can be understood in its essence.

The continuity system, available by the early 1920s as a system, a way to make films, enforced some crucial (and it may be damaging) distinctions; none more crucial, and from a certain perspective more damaging, than that between movement and action. In his book on *Technique of the Photoplay* (1924), Frederick Palmer illustrated the differences between movement and action by devising a hypothetical scene. 'For instance, one might write: "The whirring blades of the electric fan caused the window curtains to flutter. The man seated at the massive desk finished his momentous letter, sealed it, and hastened out to post it."' According to Palmer, the fan and the fluttering curtain give movement only, while the writing of the letter constitutes an action. 'It is of action that photoplays are wrought.'¹¹ The spectator, grasping the significance of the letter, is absorbed into the narrative process.

Also at issue in the distinction between movement and action is a certain attitude to space. The aim of early films such as the 'actualities' produced by the Lumière brothers



• *Boat Leaving Harbour*, an early Lumière *vue*.

from 1896 was to show rather than to tell. Taken in long shot from a fixed camera, and lasting about 50 seconds, these early films comprised the totality of whatever it was that took place, staged or unstaged, during the 50 seconds. Visibility itself, the astonishing capture of the way things appear, was the point. 'Movement, without topical or dramatic interest, provided the necessary thrill to bring the first film audiences together.'¹² Workers pour out through a factory-gate; a train arrives in a station, and passengers alight from the carriages; a boat heading out to sea is suddenly caught by a wave, and almost overturned. All this movement is of interest only in itself, and for the space it demarcates, the space of that which is of interest only in itself, now uniquely occupied and made manifest. The actualities created a zone, or dimension, in which the 'common life' could come into its own as the 'real' life.

Cinema's increasing commitment to narrative, from around 1903 onwards, did not put an end to the pleasures of sheer visibility. The early chase films, for example, which are usually regarded as the first step towards a narrative cinema, still linger on movement as the occupation, or exposure from within, of a certain space. A primary convention of these films was that each shot should be held until all the participants in the chase, however many of them there might be, had disappeared from view; sometimes the shot is held for an instant or so *after* their disappearance, allowing us to take in the newness – as zone, or dimension – of the space made new by their passage through it. The 'cut on action', which is a feature of continuity editing, and which interrupts the perception of an event in order to generate suspense, was not yet in use. The cut on action eliminated the 'white space' surrounding entrances and exits in the earliest narrative films.¹³

The classical continuity system put an end to the pleasures of sheer visibility, in mainstream cinema. Hollywood method militated against any profound or durable enquiry into space, because attention devoted to space for its own sake, like attention devoted to movement for its own sake, is attention withheld from narrative or symbolic

meaning. In classical Hollywood cinema, the 'sheerly graphic space of the film image' became a 'vehicle for narrative'.¹⁴

Outside Hollywood, the pleasures of sheer visibility can be said to have survived, just about, the system's advent. While the system was forming, in the years between 1908 and 1917, a rival alternative narrative cinema flourished in Europe. This other tradition relied for its effects not on editorial process, but on long takes, staging in depth, and elaborate choreography.¹⁵ In Britain, the development of film theory in the late 1920s coincided with the arrival of sound, and a certain nostalgia for early cinema's exposition of space through movement. Dorothy Richardson, a contributor to *Close Up*, Britain's leading journal of film theory, continued to regard such expositions as the great achievement of film practice in the silent era. 'In life,' Richardson maintained, 'we contemplate a landscape from one point, or walking through it, break it into bits. The film, by setting the landscape in motion and keeping us still, allows it to walk through us.'¹⁶

This emphasis on film's ability both to 'record' and to 'reveal' the common life later found an echo in Siegfried Kracauer's *Theory of Film* (1960), a theory formulated in the light not only of developments such as Italian neorealism, but of Erich Auerbach's discussion, in *Mimesis* (1953), of the novels of Proust, Joyce, and Virginia Woolf. Kracauer made much of Auerbach's argument that in *To the Lighthouse* Woolf had dwelt on 'random occurrence' as an event in itself, rather than as background to a 'planned continuity of action'. For him, cinema's 'redemption of physical reality' depended on just such a grasp of random occurrence. At the very end of *A Theory of Film*, Kracauer returned once more to Auerbach: this time to his assertion that 'the random moments of life represented by the modern novel concern "the elementary things which men in general have in common".'¹⁷ Kracauer's ready agreement with Auerbach suggests that it is worth pursuing the possibility that Woolf's engagement with cinema, in the early months of 1926, enabled to say things about the common life which she had not been

able to say in *Mrs Dalloway*. But we need first to establish what she *did* say, in that novel, about the common life.

Life and Death in *Mrs Dalloway*

Mrs Dalloway, like the hypothetical scene outlined by Frederick Palmer, contains both the completion of a momentous letter and the fluttering of curtains. The letter is Lady Bruton's letter to the editor of the *Times* concerning emigration, completed, after a leisurely lunch, with the assistance of Richard Dalloway and Hugh Whitbread (120–1). It exemplifies, for Woolf, a certain claim to social and political momentousness: a narrowly ritualistic claim, but not altogether implausible. The curtain is one which blows out into the room at the start of Clarissa Dalloway's party, defining space. 'And Clarissa saw – she saw Ralph Lyon beat it back, and go on talking. So it wasn't a failure after all! It was going to be all right now – her party' (186). The novel attends both to action and to movement. Its design is such as to ensure that that former does not eclipse the latter, as it would uniformly in the kind of novel (and the kind of movie) that Woolf disliked.

Woolf's reflections on the ordinary life in *Mrs Dalloway* are attentive above all to movement which defines space.

Big Ben struck the half-hour.

How extraordinary it was, strange, yes touching to see the old lady (they had been neighbours ever so many years) move away from the window, as if she were attached to that sound, that string. Gigantic as it was, it had something to do with her. Down, down, into the midst of ordinary things the finger fell making the moment solemn. She was forced, so Clarissa imagined, by that sound, to move, to go – but where? Clarissa tried to follow her as she turned and disappeared, and could still just see her white cap moving at the back of the bedroom. She was still there moving about at the other end of the room. (139)

The reiteration, here, with the white cap moving at the back of the room in the house opposite, and then still moving at its other end, is an

attempt to grasp the ordinary life as the real life: a life stimulated by the momentous, perhaps, but only to a rhythm of its own. It does matter, undoubtedly, that the person Clarissa Dalloway sees in the room in the house opposite is an old lady: an image of what she herself may well come to. But the primary focus is on the movement, not the person moving. Clarissa discovers in the old lady's passage from chest of drawers to dressing-table a meaning and a value which is in no way momentous. 'Did religion solve that, or love?' (140). The episode demonstrates the validity of Gillian Beer's point that in Woolf the apprehensions of kinship which establish the ordinary life as the real life are always encounterless. It is crucial that Clarissa and the old lady should have been neighbours for 'ever so many years' without, as far as we can tell, having met.

Later, Clarissa's response to the news of Septimus Smith's death is framed by another look across the square, at the old lady going to bed. 'It was fascinating to watch her, moving about, that old lady, crossing the room, coming to the window' (204). The fascination, once again, is with space revealed by movement: the zone, or dimension, of the common life as the real life. It is a fascination in no way diminished by the presence of death. 'Suppose the idea of the book is the contrast between life & death,' Woolf had wondered in a note written on 9 November 1922.¹⁸ The book does indeed bring life, in the shape of Clarissa Dalloway, into stark contrast with death, in the shape of Septimus Smith. However, as has often been observed, the contrast depends upon an underlying affinity.

As the manuscript reveals, Woolf found it hard to formulate that sense of being-in-the-world which constitutes Clarissa Dalloway's claim to know the common life as the real life. 'But everyone [did that]; remembered; what she [did] <loved> was [to exist now. Lovelier than ever] this; in front of her; <now> [the very moment].'¹⁹ The published version keeps the demonstratives, but adds a detail. 'But everyone remembered; what she loved was this, here, now, in front of her; the fat lady in the cab' (9). The fat lady is a movement, or lack of

movement, occupying space. But being-in-the-world, it seems, cannot be grasped on its own terms. Clarissa's subsequent meditation on presence is from the point of view of absence. 'Did it matter, then, she asked herself, walking towards Bond Street, did it matter that she must inevitably cease completely; all this must go on without her' (9). It may be that in order to know what is happening in front of your eyes, now, at this precise moment, you have to imagine it as it would be if you were not there to see it. Clarissa, however, cannot quite hold on to the thought of her own necessary and constitutive absence: 'did she resent it; or did it not become consoling to believe that death ended absolutely? but that somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived' (9). The sentence vaulting its own question-mark, hurrying forward regardless, is a willed consolation. It may have been Woolf, as much as Clarissa Dalloway, who could not yet quite hold on to the thought of a constitutive absence.

'The Cinema'

In a letter of 13 April 1926, Woolf told Vita Sackville-West that her mind was 'awash with various thoughts': pre-eminently of Vita herself, but also 'my novel' (she was hard at work on the conclusion to the first part of *To the Lighthouse*), and 'the cinema'.²⁰ The product of those thoughts about the cinema was an essay on 'The Cinema' which appeared in the *New York Journal Arts* in June, and in the *Nation and Athenaeum* in July. The essay describes her response to three different kinds of film: documentary, mainstream narrative, and avantgarde.

Woolf begins with newsreel:

Yet, at first sight, the art of the cinema seems simple, even stupid. There is the King shaking hands with a football team; there is Sir Thomas Lipton's yacht; there is Jack Horner winning the Grand National.²¹

These images are, it now needs saying, freshly-minted. Jack Horner, ridden by Billy Watkinson, trained by Jack Leader, won the Grand National in 1926. A Pathé Gazette newsreel released on

March 29th includes shots of the race, and of horse and jockey enjoying their triumph. George V had been the first reigning monarch to attend an F.A. Cup Final, in 1914, but the only football matches at which he put in an appearance in March 1926 were of the rugby variety (England beat France 11–0, but lost to Scotland). Topical Budget's April 29th release featured the launch of the yacht 'Shamrock' at Southampton, in the presence of the proud owner, Sir Thomas Lipton, and a certain Captain Sycamore.

The point of the newsreel image is vivid topicality. All the more puzzling, then, that after a wonderfully incisive account of the metaphysical implications of such images, Woolf should suddenly start to speak of them in the past tense.

Further, all this happened ten years ago, we are told. We are beholding a world which has gone beneath the waves. Brides are emerging from the abbey – they are now mothers; ushers are ardent – they are now silent; mothers are tearful, guests are joyful; this has been won and that has been lost, and it is over and done with. (55)

Who are 'we'? And when were we told that 'all this' happened ten years ago? It sounds as though the new direction in Woolf's thinking was prompted by a specific event. There is certainly a change (it may just be an intensification) of emphasis. A further set of newsreel images, apparently of a sumptuous wedding, has supervened on Jack Horner, and the King shaking hands, and Sir Thomas Lipton. These images differ in that they are generic. They show brides emerging from the abbey, rather than Jack Horner, and the King, and Sir Thomas. And the events they record and reveal are over and done with in an absolute sense, Woolf notes, because the events they portray took place before the war 'sprung its chasm' (55). Her oddly dislocated approach to newsreel seeks to elicit its rendering both of constitutive presence (Jack Horner passes the post as we watch) and of constitutive absence (a world gone beneath the waves).

'But the picture-makers,' Woolf continues, 'seem dissatisfied with such obvious sources of interest as the passage of time and the

suggestiveness of reality' (55). The picture-makers have gone over to narrative. They have cannibalised literature.

Then "Anna falls in love with Vronsky" – that is to say, the lady in black velvet falls into the arms of a gentleman in uniform, and they kiss with enormous succulence, great deliberation, and infinite gesticulation on a sofa in an extremely well-appointed library, while a gardener incidentally mows the lawn. (56)

Anna Karenina had been filmed seven times in all between 1910 and 1919 (twice each in Germany and Russia, once each in American, France, and Hungary). I don't know which version Woolf saw (if any: she might have inferred the scene from her experience of movies in general). The result, at any rate, was a telling critique of the classical continuity system's insistence on action rather than movement. 'A kiss is love. A broken cup is jealousy. A grin is happiness. Death is a hearse' (56). What Woolf didn't like about films of this kind was what she didn't like about novels of a certain kind: their determinism, their reduction of suggestiveness to meaning. 'Indeterminism,' as Vladimir Nabokov put it in a story based in part on his experience of movie-going in the 1920s, 'is banned from the studio.'²²

The third and final part of the essay concerns what the cinema might achieve if 'left to its own devices'. 'For instance, at a performance of *Dr Caligari* the other day, a shadow shaped like a tadpole suddenly appeared at one corner of the



• *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, rarely shown by 1926.

screen' (56). This time Woolf's emphasis is quite explicitly on the occasion itself rather than on the film shown: Robert Wiene's Expressionist masterpiece *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, first released in 1920, which does not receive any further mention. On the occasion when Woolf saw *Caligari*, a flaw in the print cast a gigantic shadow on the screen: a shadow she proceeds to imagine as the beginning of a new cinematic language. 'For a moment it seemed as though thought could be conveyed by shape more effectively than by words' (56). This is cinema as it might yet be; not cinema as it then was, even in Expressionist Germany.

What connects the otherwise puzzlingly discrepant accounts of newsreel and avant-garde experiment is a sense of occasion. Somewhere, at some time, 'we' were told that all this happened ten years ago; somewhere, at some time, a shadow in the shape of a tadpole crept across the screen. I want to suggest that there was indeed an occasion. My claim is that Woolf attended a meeting of the Film Society in London on 14 March 1926.

The Film Society had been founded in 1925 at the instigation of Ivor Montagu, a journalist on the *Times* and an enthusiast for German cinema. Other founding members included the director Adrian Brunel, the actor Hugh Miller, and Iris Barry, film critic for the *Spectator*. Its purpose was to exhibit foreign films otherwise unavailable in Britain. The first screening, at the New Gallery Kinema in Regent Street, on 25 October 1925, was attended by 1400 people. During the fourteen years of its existence, the Film Society screened approximately 500 films from 18 different countries. The emphasis tended to be on the continental avant-gardes: German Expressionism, to begin with, then Soviet 'montage' films. By 1929, the Sunday afternoon shows had become so popular that they had to be transferred from the New Gallery Kinema to the Tivoli Palace in the Strand. Audiences began to drop off in the mid-1930s, and the Society was dissolved in 1939.²³

The Film Society was in effect the first step taken towards the establishment of an independent cinema circuit in Britain. It also

created a forum for discussions of film as an art. Pudovkin and Eisenstein both gave lectures there in 1929. Furthermore, the programme notes Ivor Montagu provided throughout the 1920s were often fairly technical in nature. Equally significant, to my mind, is the fact that the Society also undertook an archaeology of cinema in its so-called 'Resurrection Series': early Griffith and Chaplin shorts were a particular favourite. Already, in 1925, it was possible to return to an origin at once remote and full of as yet unrealised potential.

Leonard Woolf's memorandum books reveal that on 20 December 1925, Vita Sackville-West drove him and Virginia to London, and that Leonard at least went on to a Film Society showing. On 17 January 1926, Clive Bell was involved in a near-riot at a Film Society showing of René Clair's wildly experimental *Entr'acte*; Virginia and Vita dined with him on the following evening.²⁴ On 14 March 1926, the Society showed *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*. Montagu's programme note was sternly appreciative. 'Though its technique is in some respects old-fashioned (example, the continual use of iris in and iris out of scenes) in many respects it breaks new ground.'²⁵

'For instance,' Woolf was shortly to write, 'at a performance of *Dr Caligari the other day*.' Could the other day have been March 14th? There could not have been many occasions on which *Caligari* was shown in the early months of 1926. Woolf was certainly in residence at 52 Tavistock Square over the weekend of the 14th. There is no proof that she went anywhere near the New Gallery Kinema. The reason for thinking that she may have done lies in the Society's March 14th programme, which included, among other items, a resurrection of documentary shorts from *Williamson's Animated Gazette* of 1910–12.

The first British newsreel, *Pathé's Animated Gazette*, was released in June 1910, as a response to the new pattern of regular viewing created by the construction of purpose-built cinemas. Competitors soon emerged: *Bioscope Chronicle*, *Gaumont Graphic*, *Topical Budget*. James Williamson was a chemist and photographer who began to produce actualities

- Virginia Woolf and Cinema



- *Pathe Gazette* set the pattern for newsreels.

in 1897, but made his name at the turn of the century with some of the earliest and most adventurous multi-shot fiction films. The Williamson Kinematograph Company flourished for a while, but, like many other British companies, made little impact on the international market. By September 1910 the Company's Brighton studio was up for sale. The only form of production to which Williamson clung was the topical and 'interest' films which made up his *Animated Gazette*.²⁶ Could it have been a viewing of items from the *Gazette* at the Film Society which encouraged Woolf to associate documentary film not only with the topical and the immediate, but also with a world 'gone beneath the waves'? Was it there that the bride had emerged from the abbey who was now a mother? The ephemeral nature of newsreel as a medium means that we will probably never know.

What might matter, in the present context, is that the early newsreels had as much to do with the art of showing as they did with the art of telling. Each reel circulated for several weeks; the more out-of-date it was, the less cinema proprietors paid for it. Topics were chosen for their newsworthiness, to be sure, but also for the extent to which they permitted film to do what no other medium could. Parades, ceremonies, manoeuvres, launches, contests, arrivals and departures: in each case, movement defined a space. The early newsreels were not primarily a narrative medium. It was Williamson himself, speaking in 1926, who most vividly identified early cinema with the pleasures of sheer visibility.

'To see waves dashing over rocks in a most natural way, to see a train arriving and people walking about as if alive was admitted to be very wonderful.'²⁷

Woolf altered the emphasis slightly, but to profound effect. In documentary film, she wrote, in a passage which links her experience of newsreels produced in 1926 to her experience of newsreels produced in 1910, events are not more beautiful, but more real, or, rather, 'real with a different reality'.

We behold them as they are when we are not there. We see life as it is when we have no part in it. As we gaze we seem to be removed from the pettiness of actual existence. The horse will not knock us down. The King will not grasp our hands. The wave will not wet our feet. From this point of vantage, as we watch the antics of our kind, we have time to feel pity and amusement, to generalize, to endow one man with the attributes of the race. Watching the boat sail and the wave break, we have time to open our minds wide to beauty and register on top of it the queer sensation – this beauty will continue, and this beauty will flourish whether we behold it or not.

This seems to me to develop Clarissa Dalloway's meditation on being-in-the-world, and at the same time to take a risk she did not take. It celebrates the common life as the real life, but it does so by imagining what that life looks like when we are not there to see it. 'The horse will not knock us down. The King will not grasp our hands. The wave will not wet our feet.' Woolf can now take the risk because she has understood a fundamental fact about cinema. In cinema, unlike the theatre, actors and audience never coincide; for one party to be present, the other must be absent.²⁸ Encounterlessness within the mutually acknowledged relationship of viewer and viewed was the medium's founding principle. The continuity system could be thought of as an attempt to overcome this difficulty by staging a feature-length surrogate hermeneutic encounter in narrative form.

My hypothesis is that Woolf's viewing within the same period of newsreels from 1926 and newsreels from 1910 led her to realise that

documentary film is inherently archaic, because the encounter it postulates will always in some sense be missed. The 'queer sensation' induced by late arrival, by knowledge that the event began without us, that it does not need us, opens our minds wider to beauty than any sense of command, of being throughout fully present and correct, ever could. What Woolf saw in the newsreel images, what Clarissa Dalloway had not seen in the fat lady in the cab, is that this beauty will continue, and will flourish, whether we behold it or not. Cinema 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'.²⁹

Life and Death in *To the Lighthouse*

Woolf's brief but intense engagement with 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 the 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.

The novel Woolf was working on when she told Vita Sackville-West that her mind was 'awash' with various thoughts, including thoughts about the cinema, was *To the Lighthouse*.³⁰ In a diary entry of 18 April 1926, Woolf noted that she had just finished the novel's first part, and made a start on the second, 'Time Passes', which chronicles the abandonment of the Ramsay family's holiday home in the Hebrides during the period of the First World War, after Mrs Ramsay's death. The chronicle required, in her view, a radical

departure from the established methods of this (or any other) novel. 'I cannot make it out – here is the most difficult abstract piece of writing – I have to give an empty house, no people's characters, the passage of time, all eyeless & featureless with nothing to cling to: well, I rush at it, & at once scatter out two pages.'³¹ In the novel's first part, the choreography of points of view offers a great deal to cling to: an array of distinct but overlapping centres of consciousness. Its second part, by contrast, is 'eyeless': not rendered from any identifiable point of view. Constitutive absence, indeed; as subject-matter *and* method.

Woolf knew from the start that the theme of *To the Lighthouse* was to be absence in the form given it by death, and by mourning. A diary entry of 27 June 1925 states the theme, blankly. 'I have an idea I will invent a new name for my books to supplant "novel". A new — by Virginia Woolf. But what? Elegy?'³² The book in which Woolf mourned her father and mother, her brother Thoby, and her half-sister Stella Duckworth, is not quite a novel. But it is not quite an elegy, either. For the abstract writing of the second part removes from the scene not only the objects of mourning (Mrs Ramsay, Prue, Andrew), but its subject, as well. Those who will eventually come to terms with their grief (Mr Ramsay, his surviving children, and his house-guests, notably the painter Lily Briscoe) are reassembled for the purpose in the book's third and last section, 'The Lighthouse'.

If there is no mourner in 'Time Passes', there is at least someone who remembers. Laura Marcus argues that Woolf's engagement with cinema enabled her to conceive memory as projection. In 'Time Passes', the walls of the rooms in the abandoned house in the Hebrides become a picture-palace screen on to which the 'long stroke' of the lighthouse beam projects images of the past, and in particular of the dead Mrs Ramsay (180–1).³³ Seated in the picture-palace is the ancient care-taker, Mrs McNab, to whom, or for whose benefit, Mrs Ramsay appears.

She could see her now, stooping over her flowers;
(and faint and flickering, like a yellow beam or the

circle at the end of a telescope, a lady in a grey cloak, stooping over her flowers, went wandering over the bedroom wall, up the dressing-table, across the washstand, as Mrs McNab hobbled and ambled, dusting, straightening). (186)

It may be that Woolf substituted the telescope for the rather more cinematic yellow beam in order to indicate that Mrs McNab's memory of Mrs Ramsay is, after all, her own. But an examination of the terms in which that telescopic vision was framed in the original manuscript tends to strengthen Marcus's argument. 'It was [more] like an image seen through a rather feeble telescope; [it] was cut out like that – [a lady in a grey cloak]. The emphasis, here, is on a projected 'image' whose resemblance to what one might see through a telescope is fairly remote. This 'little picture', we are told, goes 'flickering about the bedroom for a moment', then vanishes.³⁴ There is more cinema in the draft, in the emphasis on the flicker of a cut-out image, than in the final version. It is worth recalling that a view through a telescope often provided the motivation, in early films, for a close-up. These films show a person looking through a telescope, and then, centred within a circular matte, what he or she saw. A *Variety* review of D. W. Griffith's *The Redman and the Child* (1908) described the 'clever bit of trick work' by which, when the 'Redman' looks through a telescope, 'immediately the field of the picture contracts to a circle,' and the scene is 'brought before the audience' as though we are seeing what he sees.³⁵ A close-up is indeed an image 'cut out like that'. In the published text of *To the Lighthouse*, though not as it happens in the manuscript, a 'ring of light' encircles Mrs McNab's subsequent vision of Mr Ramsay, 'lean as a rake, wagging his head, as she came up with the washing, talking to himself, she supposed, on the lawn' (190). It is quite possible that the experience of movie-going informed, even if it did not in the end shape, the conception of memory put forward in 'Time Passes'.

Did it inform Woolf's method, in *To the Lighthouse*, as well as her conception of

memory? 'In the absence of "plot" in "Time Passes",', Marcus argues, 'Woolf produces a form of experimental cineplay, using visual images to express emotions and animating objects into non-human life.'³⁶ For reasons put forward in my critique of Winifred Holtby's analysis of *Jacob's Room*, I wouldn't myself feel so confident in describing 'Time Passes' as a 'cineplay'. The inspiration behind the pages scattered out in Woolf's first rush at this new kind of writing would seem to be literary rather than cinematic. Consider, for example, the cadence needed to bring to a conclusion the prose poem about the 'little airs' permeating the empty house which makes up the second section of 'Time Passes'. 'At length, desisting, all ceased together; all together gave off an aimless gust of lamentation to which some door in the kitchen replied; swung wide; admitted nothing; and slammed to' (173). The cadence, if not the thought, derives from James Joyce's description of Leopold Bloom in church, in the 'Lotos-Eaters' episode of *Ulysses*. 'All crossed themselves and stood up. Mr Bloom glanced about him and then stood up, looking over the risen hats. Stand up at the gospel of course. Then all settled down on their knees again and he sat back quietly in his bench.' Indeed, Woolf's familiarity with another episode in *Ulysses* may have helped to shape the structure of 'Time Passes'. In 'Proteus', Stephen Dedalus crosses Sandymount strand, encountering on the way two women who climb down some steps on to the beach. 'Number one swung loudly her midwife's bag, the other's gamp poked in the beach.' Number one is 'Mrs Florence MacCabe, relict of the late Patk MacCabe, deeply lamented, of Bride Street'.³⁷ Woolf's Mrs McNab recalls Joyce's Mrs MacCabe; and she, too, has a companion, Mrs Bast. The section of 'Time Passes' which introduces Mrs McNab concludes with a description of a 'visionary' who, Daedalus-like, walks the beach asking 'What am I?' and 'What is this?' (177–9). Woolf took the plunge into abstract writing goaded by literature, not cinema.

However, it is important not to draw the distinction between literature and cinema in too absolute a manner. As Laura Marcus points out,

Woolf's belief that cinema allows us to behold things 'as they are when we are not there' finds a direct echo in *To the Lighthouse* in the account Andrew Ramsay gives Lily Briscoe of his father's philosophical work on 'subject and object and the nature of reality': "'Think of a kitchen table then," he told her, "when you're not there"' (33). Marcus shrewdly connects this concern for the way things are when we are not there with the anxiety Woolf felt about the 'Time Passes' section of the novel, which imagines what the world might look like in the absence of a 'perceiving consciousness'.³⁸

Film, I would argue, did not teach Woolf how to write eyelessly; but it did teach her how to imagine eyelessness as an element of the human condition. We must sometimes look without seeing, or see others not seeing us, if we are to miss our due proportion of encounters. The King will not grasp our hands, because, although he looks straight at us, he has not seen us. Woolf wants to say that his failure to see us, whenever we look at him looking, is in some sense necessary (part of being a monarch, a national figure). It is also frightening. It reminds us that too often in life we look without seeing, or are looked at without being seen. 'But the stillness and brightness of the day were as strange as the chaos and tumult of night, with the trees standing there, and the flowers standing there, looking before them, looking up, yet beholding nothing, eyeless, and thus terrible' (183). The eyeless flowers are immediately associated with Mrs McNab, who, 'thinking no harm, for the family would not come, never again, some said,' picks a bunch to take home with her (184). The manuscript, which inserts Mrs McNab's act of pillage parenthetically into the sentence about the flowers, denounces nature itself as 'eyeless, brainless, empty'.³⁹ Unlike Mrs Bast, who looks for and happily sees her son at work in the garden (191), Mrs McNab takes nothing in: 'and again with her sidelong leer which slipped and turned aside even from her own face, and her own sorrows, stood and gaped in the glass, aimlessly smiling' (178). The leer is an empty look. Mrs McNab's is the perceiving consciousness to whom the absent Mr and Mrs

Ramsay appear. In order to remove the mourner from the mourning, Woolf had to define even that minimal consciousness as an absence. Class-prejudice did part of the job, reducing the caretaker to the status of dumb animal. Cinema may have done the rest. It may have helped Woolf to imagine the eyeless leer.

By Tom Gunning's account, a distinguishing feature of the earliest films is that the participants happily engage with the camera. They know that they themselves are, by the fact of their visibility, the main attraction. They stare at the camera, or tip their hats to it, or wave, or even on occasion shed their clothes.⁴⁰ But what exactly are they looking at? At an absence, at someone who will not be present when their visibility is put to its proper use (when they become worth seeing). They see no more than themselves being seen, on some other occasion. Yuri Tsivian quotes a remark by the poet Konstantin Ldov to the effect that characters in films are not just mute, but blind as well.⁴¹

Tsivian briefly explores this 'phenomenological aspect' of early cinema with reference to Woolf's essay, and to an episode in Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, published in 1924, but set in the years immediately before the First World War. In this episode, entitled 'The Dance of Death', Hans Castorp, inmate of an Alpine sanatorium, makes the rounds of the terminally ill, before repairing with some other patients to the local 'bioscope', where the show includes a scenic short shot in Morocco.

A young Moroccan woman, in a costume of striped silk, with trappings in the shape of chains, bracelets, and rings, her swelling breasts half bared, was suddenly brought so close to the camera as to be life-sized; one could see the dilated nostrils, the eyes full of animal life, the features in play as she showed her white teeth in a laugh, and held one of her hands, with its blanched nails, for a shade to her eyes, while with the other she waved to the audience, who stared, taken aback, into the face of the charming apparition. It seemed to see and saw not, it was not moved by the glances bent upon it, its smile and nod were not of the present but of the past, so that the impulse to respond was baffled,

and lost in a feeling of impotence. Then the phantom world vanished. The screen glared white and empty, with the one word *Finis* written across it.⁴²

The scene's exoticism clearly includes the possibility, the promise, even, of sexual encounter. The young woman, her eyes full of 'animal life', engages with the camera. But she does so blindly. The audience knows, immediately, that the look and the wave are not for it. It feels bafflement, not arousal. Indeed, this missed encounter with a charming apparition prefigures, through its enactment of the power and the melancholy of constitutive absence, the blank screen (whitest of all white spaces) which brings each performance, whether at the bioscope or in the sanatorium, to an end.

What mediates literature and film, during the silent era, is literature about film. Insofar as that literature about film concentrates on eyelessness, it might be said to provide a context for Mrs McNab's leer. Such a concentration certainly informs the most prominent example of the genre in British literature, Rudyard Kipling's 'Mrs Bathurst' (1904). In 'Mrs Bathurst', four men – the unnamed narrator; Hooper, a railway inspector; Pyecroft, a petty officer in the Royal Navy; and Pritchard, a Sergeant of Marines – drink beer on a sultry afternoon shortly after the end of the Boer War, in a railway-siding near Simon's Bay, in Cape Province. The conversation turns to Mrs Bathurst, proprietor of a hotel in Auckland, whose integrity and 'blindish' way of looking at a person have made a deep impression on the susceptible Pritchard. There is some connection between Mrs Bathurst and a warrant officer named Vickery, who has recently gone missing. Pyecroft describes how for five nights running he accompanied Vickery to Phyllis's Circus, in Cape Town, where there was a cinematograph. The show included an actuality featuring Mrs Bathurst. 'Then the Western Mail came in to Paddin'ton on the big magic-lantern sheet,' Pyecroft recalls:

First we saw the platform empty an' the porters standin' by. Then the engine come in, head on, an' the women in the front row jumped: she headed so

straight. Then the doors opened and the passengers came out and the porters got the luggage – just like life. Only – only when any one came down too far towards us that was watchin', they walked right out o' the picture, so to speak. I was 'ighly interested, I can tell you. So were all of us. I watched an old man with a rug 'oo'd dropped a book an' was tryin' to pick it up, when quite slowly, from be'ind two porters – carryin' a little reticule an' lookin' from side to side – comes our Mrs Bathurst. There was no mistakin' the walk in a hundred thousand. She come forward – right forward – she looked out straight at us with that blindish look which Pritch alluded to. She walked on and on till she melted out of the picture – like – like a shadow jumpin' over a candle, an' as she went I 'eard Dawson in the ticky seats be'ind sing out: "Christ, there's Mrs B.!"⁴³

What Kipling does is to give a content (an emotional consequence) to the formality of cinema's constitutive missed encounter. Vickery is firmly convinced that Mrs Bathurst, looking from side to side, and then at the camera, was looking for him. He has put himself at the place where he might hope to be found, where he might understand her look as a look meant for him, a look seeking him out. The look, however, is blind, or blindish (eyeless, Woolf might have said). It is the look of someone who sees herself being seen, in the future, rather than that of someone who expects to be met. Vickery's mistake about cinema reproduces and is reproduced by a mistake about a woman: she is not there *for him*. After the circus has left town, Vickery deserts (he is only eighteen months away from his pension). He has been driven mad, in Pyecroft's view, by exposure to Mrs Bathurst's image, by the knowledge that the encounter he most craves is one he will forever miss.⁴⁴

I make no claim for these examples drawn from Mann and Kipling other than that they demonstrate that the writers of the period thought *with* as well as *about* cinema. Woolf did the same. In *To the Lighthouse*, she imagined constitutive absence effectively. A diary entry of 27 March 1926 records an attempt to finish the 'rather long drawn out dinner scene' which now forms section 17 of the novel's first part.⁴⁵ At its

conclusion, Mrs Ramsay rises and leaves the room. The moment, we realise, is a turning-point, and as she is leaving the room Mrs Ramsay turns to look back at a scene which continues, and will continue, and yet is already over (because it no longer contains her). The look back is a look forward to this same scene without her, as it will take place again and again, in her absence, after her death. Mrs Ramsay does what Mrs Dalloway could not do. She imagines her own constitutive absence.

Mrs Ramsay then goes upstairs to look in on the children, comforted by the sure conviction that Paul Rayley and Minta Doyle will marry, and that the specificities of place and time which ensure 'community of feeling' – 'and this, and this, and this, she thought, going upstairs, laughing, but affectionately, at the sofa on the landing (her mother's) at the rocking-chair (her father's)' – will reliably outlast her (153). She assumes too much, however. She has not gone all that far beyond Mrs Dalloway, because the future she imagines herself absent from is one she has done everything she possibly can to shape. Her hope is that the marriage she has brought about will be her monument.

It is the novel itself which removes Mrs Ramsay: which puts into effect a community of feeling predicated on her absence. In 'Time Passes', she continues to exist in the mind of a single human being only, Mrs McNab. The image projected of her during the years which elapse immediately after her death is almost no image at all. A brutal reduction to (almost) zero is the basis for her subsequent reconstitution, through ritual enactment, through loving memory, in the novel's final part. The absence that reconstitution is built upon, or around, now includes the knowledge that the Rayleys' marriage has been a disaster (235). What Lily Briscoe calls Mrs Ramsay's 'mania' for marriage (237) was one of the ways in which she had attempted to remain present: always there to behold things as they are. 'Time Passes' puts Mrs Ramsay's mania to the acid test of Mrs McNab's eyeless leer, embodiment of the principle of constitutive absence. That leer is an invention of cinema, or of the literature about cinema. 'Time Passes' is

not in itself cinematic; but cinema made it possible.

Notes

- 1 Winifred Holtby, *Virginia Woolf* (Wishart, 1932).
- 2 Laura Marcus amply demonstrates the significance of Woolf's interest in cinema, in a brief but perceptive discussion to which I shall return. *Virginia Woolf* (Northcote House, 1997), pp. 99–102.
- 3 *Mrs Dalloway*, ed. Elaine Showalter (Penguin Books, 1992), p. xxi. References will henceforth be included in the text.
- 4 *Virginia Woolf*, pp. 117–18.
- 5 *Jacob's Room*, ed. Kate Flint (Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 3.
- 6 Mark Lambert, *Dickens and the Suspended Quotation* (Yale University Press, 1981).
- 7 *A Room of One's Own* (Triad, 1977), p. 108.
- 8 *Virginia Woolf: The Common Ground* (Edinburgh University Press, 1996), p. 2.
- 9 Nicholas Hiley, "'At the Picture Palace": The British Cinema Audience, 1895–1920', in John Fullerton, ed., *Celebrating 1895: The Centenary of Cinema* (John Libbey, 1998), pp. 96–103; and "Let's Go to the Pictures", *Journal of Popular British Film*, 2 (1999), 39–53; Robert Murphy, 'Under the Shadow of Hollywood', in Charles Barr, ed., *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema* (British Film Institute, 1986), pp. 47–71.
- 10 David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (Routledge, 1985).
- 11 Quoted by Bordwell, 'The Classical Hollywood Style, 1917–60', in *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, p. 15.
- 12 Rachael Low and Roger Manvell, *The History of the British Film, 1896–1906* (George Allen & Unwin, 1948), p. 51.
- 13 Joyce E. Jesionowski, *Thinking in Pictures: Dramatic Structure in D.W. Griffith's Biograph Films* (University of California Press, 1987), p. 135. See also Noël Burch, *Life to Those Shadows*, trans. Ben Brewer (British Film Institute, 1990), pp. 148–50.
- 14 Bordwell, 'The Classical Hollywood Style', p. 50.
- 15 Tom Gunning, 'Notes and Queries about the Year 1913 and Film Style: National Styles and Deep Staging', in Thierry Lefebvre and Laurent Mannoni, eds, *L'Année 1913 en France* (Centre National de la Cinématographie, 1993), pp. 195–204; David Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style* (Harvard University Press, 1997), Ch. 6.
- 16 'Narcissus', first published in *Close Up*, in September 1931; in James Donald, Anne Friedberg, and Laura Marcus, eds, *Close Up 1927–1933: Cinema and Modernism* (Cassell, 1998), pp. 201–3, 203.
- 17 *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*

• Virginia Woolf and Cinema

- (Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 219, 298, 304, 310.
- 18 *'The Hours': The British Museum Manuscript of Mrs Dalloway*, ed. Helen M. Wussow (Pace University Press, 1996), p. 414.
 - 19 *'The Hours'*, ed. Wussow, p. 264. Square brackets indicate words under deletion; triangular brackets indicate words added above or below a line.
 - 20 *Letters*, ed. Nigel Nicolson, 6 volumes (Hogarth Press, 1975–84), pp. iii, 254.
 - 21 'The Cinema', in *The Crowded Dance of Modern Life*, ed. Rachel Bowlby, Penguin (1993), pp. 54–8. References will henceforth be included in the text. Leslie Kathleen Hankins has very usefully placed the essay in relation to a range of comment on film: "'Across the Screen of My Brain': Virginia Woolf's 'The Cinema'" and *Film Forums of the Twenties*, in Diane F. Gillespie, ed., *The Multiple Muses of Virginia Woolf* (University of Missouri Press, 1993), pp. 148–79.
 - 22 'The Assistant Professor', in *Stories*, Vintage Books, 1997, pp. 546–59.
 - 23 Jen Sansom, 'The Film Society, 1925–1939', in *All Our Yesterdays*, pp. 306–13.
 - 24 An episode summarised by Hankins, "'Across the Screen of My Brain'", pp. 154–5.
 - 25 *The Film Society Programmes 1925–1939*, ed. George Amberg (Arno Press, 1972), p. 23.
 - 26 Martin Sopocy, *James Williamson: Studies and Documents of a Pioneer* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1998).
 - 27 Quoted by Sopocy, *James Williamson*, p. 30.
 - 28 Christian Metz, 'Story/Discourse (A Note on Two Kinds of Voyeurism)', in *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier* (Macmillan, 1982), pp. 91–7.
 - 29 *Diary*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie, 5 volumes (Penguin, 1977–84), Vol. iii, p. 114.
 - 30 *Letters*, Vol. iii, p. 254.
 - 31 *Diary*, Vol. iii, pp. 75–6.
 - 32 *Diary*, Vol. iii, p. 34.
 - 33 *Virginia Woolf*, p. 102.
 - 34 *To the Lighthouse: The Original Holograph Draft*, ed. Susan Dick (Hogarth Press, 1983), pp. 226–7. Square brackets indicate words under deletion.
 - 35 Quoted by Tom Gunning, *D.W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film: The Early Years at Biograph* (University of Illinois Press, 1994), p. 72.
 - 36 *Virginia Woolf*, p. 101.
 - 37 *Ulysses*, ed. Jeri Johnson (Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 79, 38.
 - 38 *Virginia Woolf*, p. 106.
 - 39 *Holograph*, p. 223.
 - 40 'The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde', in Thomas Elsaesser, ed., *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative* (British Film Institute, 1990), pp. 56–67.
 - 41 *Early Cinema in Russia and its Cultural Reception*, trans. Alan Bodger (Routledge, 1994), p. 159.
 - 42 *The Magic Mountain*, trans. H.T. Lowe-Porter (Penguin Books, 1965), p. 318.
 - 43 'Mrs Bathurst', first published in *Traffics and Discoveries* (1904), reprinted in *Short Stories*, 2 vols, ed. Andrew Rutherford (Penguin, 1971), pp. ii, 73–92, 82–3, 85.
 - 44 There is also a sociological point, I think, to Kipling's story, which may be of interest in relation to the audience for early cinema. Pycroft's habits of speech mark him as lower-class, and his description of the scene at Paddington Station puts him (almost) in the state of unreadiness for the moving image of R.W. Paul's bemused yokel in *The Countryman and the Cinematograph* (1901). The middle-class Hooper, by contrast, takes it all for granted: "'Seen 'em all. Seen 'em all,'" said Hooper impatiently' (84). According to Pycroft, Vickery is 'what you call a superior man' (83); he can afford to treat Pycroft and himself to expensive (shilling) seats for five nights in a row (84). And yet, like Pycroft, he is not ready for cinema.
 - 45 *Diary*, Vol. iii, p. 72.