

ATTENTION AND DISTRACTION: CINEMATIC PERCEPTION AND

SPECTATORSHIP IN MODERNIST TEXTS, 1897-1941

A Dissertation

by

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## ABSTRACT

Tracing sensory and affective experiences associated with cinematic modes of perception in modernist literature, this study reveals how modernist writers embraced the medium of cinematic language as a means to examine new forms of subjectivity, and how through this appropriation they attempted to reconfigure culture's audiences by situating both author and reader in the position of spectator. Drawing on methodological approaches such as early cinema studies and reception theory, this study performs a comparative reading of modernist texts that feature spectator characters and that speak to issues of spectator/spectacle relations. Previous scholarship has regarded literary modernism as an elite craft refined in secret, inattentive or hostile to audiences, and modernist attributes as what makes an artist figure in the face of modernity. However, moving beyond the field's focus on the relationship between the artist and the artwork, this study highlights the presence of art spectators both inside and outside of the textual space to redefine literary modernism as an active exchange between artists and audiences.

By focusing on three different types of spectators that are seemingly vulnerable, uncritical, and passive—a child, a woman, and the masses, respectively, this study shows that modernists' preoccupations with spectatorial subjectivity are not only indicative of their susceptibility to the rise of cinema spectatorship in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century but also promote a new method of reading that is audience-oriented and receptive to the effects of media change. As a response to the emerging media

culture in the late 1890s, Henry James foregrounded spectatorial experiences and employed the language of early film to expose the gap between the old assumptions of literary readership and the actual culture's audience. Dorothy Richardson used the silent cinema spectatorship in the 1920s as an essential backdrop for her feminist strategies to express critical dissent from dominant narratives of gender. Conceiving the masses as a new type of art spectators in the 1930s, Virginia Woolf valorized contingency and distraction, both of which she discovered from her own cinematic experience, to achieve a strategy that confronts the crisis of language in the age of machines.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

This dissertation investigates representations of spectatorial subjectivity and affective experiences associated with cinematic modes of perception in modernist texts. For most of its history as a discipline, modernist studies has focused on the exclusive relationship between the artist and the artwork. Only in the 2000s did it broaden its scope by including media and technology studies and by shedding light on how modernism built its audiences. While the new modernist studies has existed for more than two decades, literary modernism is still understood as an elite craft refined in secret, inattentive or hostile to mass audiences. This dissertation bridges the gap between recent considerations of modernism in relation to mass media and the pressing need for redefining literary modernism. It questions preconceived notions about literary modernism as high art or elitism and broadens the field's focus beyond the relationship between the artist and the artwork to include and highlight the presence of art spectators both inside and outside of the textual space, so that literary modernism can be redefined as an active exchange between artists and audiences.

Encompassing works published between the end of World War I and the beginning of World War II, the term "high modernism" is closely connected to the idea of modernism as mass culture's other and as adversary culture (Huysen, "High/Low" 366). Recent modernist literary scholarship has worked to revise the definition of modernism by troubling the high/low divide, or the gap between high art and mass



culture; particularly, recent considerations of modernism in relation to mass media—including telegraph, radio, cinema, advertising, and new forms of journalism— can “be viewed as part of [the] larger inquiry into how modernism built its audiences” (Mao and Walkowitz 744). However, many critical examinations of literary modernism’s relation to early cinema have neglected the existence and nature of the spectator that formed the central nerve of modernist culture, instead focusing on filmic and literary representations of modernity or on differences and affinities between literature and film as different art forms. When we consider only these elements, our efforts to identify the connections between literary modernism and early cinema are limited to projecting analogies between film and the modern environment, or between textual representations of modern life and the culture of modernity, without solving the problem of theorizing art spectatorship in the age of technological reproducibility. As Michael Levenson has put it, “Modernism needs to be understood not as an elite craft refined in secret but as a complex exchange between artists and audiences” (*Modernism* 3). The spectator’s multiple positions as a common denominator between modernist literature and early cinema are key to understanding modernism’s engagements with its audiences and with issues of modern subjectivity.

Due to a philosophic empiricism confirmed by post-Darwinian science and the development of aesthetic “impressionism” in the late nineteenth century, “*experience* became an essential category of being, where the term especially connoted heightened responsiveness, attentiveness, and susceptibility” (Levenson, “Novelty” 665). In this cultural milieu, artists, regardless of genre, began to put more emphasis on mediating

subjective perceptual experience and finding new languages adequate for their expressions. Literary modernists' desire to discard established conventions can be understood in this way, too. In his essay "The Art of Fiction" (1884), Henry James, in an attempt to position the novel as a legitimate art form, argues that experience is vital for novelists and that there is a close connection between experiences and impressions, saying, "Experience is never limited, and it is never complete" (*LC-I* 52), and continuing, "If experience consists of impressions, it may be said that impressions *are* experience" (53). According to James, an artist's personal impression functions to give her the "power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern," and such power constitutes experience. Virginia Woolf, in her essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" (1924), expresses her concern that accepted literary "convention ceases to be a means of communication between writer and reader, and becomes instead an obstacle and an impediment" (*Mr. Bennett* 21). A year later, Woolf noted in "Modern Fiction" (1925) that "life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end" (*Essays* 160). Woolf argues that "the task of the novelist [is] to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit" (160) and that "the proper stuff of fiction is a little other than custom would have us believe it" (161). If we see these modernist aspirations for formal innovations as efforts to reach the contemporary audience by sharing a changed perceptual experience, modernism can be understood as an exchange between artists and audiences, not as an elite craft refined in secret.

Modernist formal innovations coincide with manifestations of the impact of technological change—mainly involving industrialization, urbanization, and the advent of film—upon modes of perception. Critics such as Wolfgang Shivelbusch and Georg Simmel point out that industrialization and urbanization caused changes in our perception of the world as we learned to adapt to changing environments. Indeed, from the late nineteenth century onward, readers began to witness the increasing use of visual tropes in literary texts, a development which calls attention to the technologically mediated nature of reality. Henry James frequently uses tropes of optical manipulation, such as phantasmagorical projections of images and magic lantern associations, in his fictional writing published in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For instance, in “Crapy Cornelia” (1909), one of his last short stories, James uses the word “cinematograph” to describe the protagonist’s visual experience by comparing a “little sparsely feathered black hat” to “an ornament [. . .] that grew and grew, that came nearer and nearer, while it met his eyes, after the manner of images in the cinematograph” (*CS-II* 199). Many of H. G. Wells’s science fiction short stories in the late 1890s depict new kinds of subjective perceptual experience by imagining the manipulatability of space and time thanks to certain kinds of media, which directly and indirectly reflect the characteristics of the film medium. In Wells’s stories, protagonists experience dramatic changes in space and time, and their perceptual—mainly visual—experience is completely subject to those changes. In “The Remarkable Case of Davidson’s Eyes” (1895), the title character’s vision is temporarily divorced from his location, and his temporary blindness causes limited mobility. While “Crystal Egg” (1897), one of *The*

*Tales of Space and Time* written between 1897 and 1898, tells a story of an egg-shaped crystal's magical projection of the moving images of an "other" world, "The New Accelerator" (1901) contains the narrator's shared experience with his scientist friend of taking a drug that endows them with "the power to think twice as fast, move twice as quickly, do twice as much work in a given time" (298). In these stories, readers encounter cinematic ways of perceiving the world, which often involve the sense of shock and uncanny feelings that film gave to the first generation of its audience.

The rise of cinematic modes of perception has much to do with the changes in the nature of aesthetic experience in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Walter Benjamin stated in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" that two manifestations in the beginning of the twentieth century that have influenced traditional art forms, that is, the reproducibility of works of art and the advent of film, brought about changes in human sense perception and aesthetic experience. Benjamin contends that viewing art is no longer an individual, middle-class activity, in which the viewer is absorbed by the work of art; rather, the mass as a new type of spectator absorbs film art as though the mass is hit by a bullet, and the act of viewing is done by habit, not by concentration. Thinking about cinema spectatorship, however, leads us not only to think about early cinema's impact on modes of sensory perception and on the formation of a new subjectivity, but also to consider how the emergence of new public spheres, such as movie theaters, department stores, and amusement parks, engendered heterogeneous audiences for art. It is especially noteworthy that cinema spectatorship involves the movie theater as a new public sphere for marginalized groups including

women and working-class immigrants in the early twentieth century. Miriam Hansen calls the movie theater in that period “an alternative public sphere.” According to Hansen, the movie theater had the subversive power to erode old notions of the public sphere—which were gender- and class-biased— by enabling women and working-class immigrant groups to have access to it. Among literary modernists, Richardson is the one who most actively participated in the discussion of cinema spectatorship. In her regular column “Continuous Performance,” which she wrote for the film magazine *Close Up* between the years of 1927 and 1933, Richardson examines aspects of cinema technology such as the use of slow motion and the coming of sound and exhibition practices such as the spaces of the new movie theaters and the demographic makeup of the cinema audience.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, cinematic modes of perception were often associated with states of attention and/or distraction by film theorists and cultural critics. They explored the ways in which cinema’s succession of two-dimensional moving images solicited spectators’ attention, involved the shifting of attention, or was received in a state of distraction with its shock effect. In *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* (1916), regarded as the earliest book of film theory, Hugo Münsterberg offered a view of our life as “a great compromise between that which our voluntary attention aims at and that which the aims of the surrounding world force on our involuntary attention” (80). Münsterberg argued that silent film has its distinctive expressive means to elicit and orient attention: “By the absence of speech everything is condensed, the whole rhythm is quickened, a greater pressure of time is applied, and

through that the accents become sharper and the emphasis more powerful for the attention” (83). By contrast, in “The Work of Art” essay Benjamin argued that “[r]eception in a state of distraction, which is increasing noticeably in all fields of art and is symptomatic of profound changes in apperception, finds in the film its true means of exercise” (240). According to Benjamin, the cinema spectator’s experience of viewing images was interrupted by “constant, sudden change,” which constitutes the shock effect of the film and thus “should be cushioned by heightened presence of mind” (238). Benjamin also paid attention to the affinities between cinematic experience and architectural experience, saying, “Architecture has always represented the prototype of a work of art the reception of which is consummated by a collectivity in a state of distraction” (239). Siegfried Kracauer made a similar argument in *The Mass Ornament*, claiming that large picture palaces are “places of distraction” in the sense that “the stimulations of the senses succeed one another with such rapidity that there is no room left between them for even the slightest contemplation” (326).

While much critical attention has been drawn to and based on the idea of cinematic reception in a state of distraction, attentiveness has often been considered the mode to which high modernists nostalgically aspired. However, when we place the question of the spectator at the heart of the discussion of the relations between art and perception, we can assume that both modes of perception intricately coexist in various forms of artistic representation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many literary texts produced in these periods include encounters with an artwork which take place within “a network of activities: making, exhibiting, publishing, performing,

selling, discussing, viewing, debating, studying, quoting, parodying” (Levenson, *Modernism* 9). In many cases, these aesthetic encounters in literary texts are depicted in terms of momentary contemplation, seemingly acontextual absorption, constant shift of attention, distraction, and so on.

When we take these findings into consideration, however, the following questions still remain. If there was a radical reframing of human sensorium and art practice due to the advent of film, as Benjamin said, how can literary and film audiences be two exclusive groups? When literary modernists tried to create “a receptive audience” for their art, did they exclude cinema spectators entirely (Wollaeger xiii)? When we consider the historical coincidence between literary modernism and early cinema and acknowledge the fact that both art forms actively pursued formal experiments and conceptualized their audiences, is there any way in which the formation of early cinema spectatorship applies to modernist literature’s conception of its audience?

In an attempt to find answers to the above questions, this dissertation concentrates on the works of modernists—Henry James, Dorothy Richardson, and Virginia Woolf—who were highly susceptible to changes in the nature of subjective perceptual experience, which I would call “cinematic perception,” and to the diverse (private and public) spaces where new kinds of aesthetic experiences occur. Responding to the culture of modernity, these writers often propose themselves and/or present their main character(s) as an observer, a spectator, a Baudelairean *flâneur/flâneuse*, and an eye—in other words, a perceptive subject with what Anne Friedberg calls “a mobilized virtual gaze” that embodies “a received perception mediated through representation” (2).

Their experiments in scale, space, time, and point of view attest to the immense effects that cinema spectatorship and cinematic modes of perception had on the established arts. Their experiments also involve shifts in scale that call attention to our mediated reality, and demonstrate the oscillation between attention and distraction, which, I think, characterizes our aesthetic experience since the advent of film.

Scholars have investigated the impact of visual technologies on the production of literature in the early twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Pointing out the fact that “modernism has commonly been studied in isolation from modernity” (7), Sara Danius, in her book *The Senses of Modernism: Technology, Perception, and Aesthetics* (2002), suggests a more dialectical relation between late nineteenth-century technologies of perception and modernist looking. Danius remarks that “the antitechnological bias of high-modernist art is in some sense a suppression, denial, or even a renunciation of the historical, social and institutional conditions that brought it into being” and that a “strong reading of

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, David Trotter, *Cinema and Modernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007); Laura Marcus, *The Tenth Muse: Writing about Cinema in the Modernist Period* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Andrew Shail, ed., *Reading the Cinematograph: The Cinema in British Short Fiction 1896-1912* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2010); Julian Murphet, *Multimedia Modernism: Literature and the Anglo-American Avant-garde* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Tim Armstrong, *Modernism, Technology, and the Body: A Cultural Study* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998); Michael North, *Camera Works: Photography and the Twentieth-Century Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Mark Wollaeger, *Modernism, Media, and Propaganda: British Narrative from 1900 to 1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Kendall Johnson, *Henry James and the Visual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Keith Williams, *H. G. Wells, Modernity and the Movies* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007); David Chinitz, *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Pamela L. Caughie, ed., *Virginia Woolf in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 2000).



modernism has to be based on a reconsideration of the relations of technology and aesthetics, technology being a fundamental, even constitutive, part of modernist culture” (40). In major European modernist fictions by Thomas Mann, Marcel Proust, and James Joyce, Danius reads “the increasing internalization of technological matrices of perception” (2), which she describes as “a transition from *prosthesis* to *aisthesis*” (194). Although Danius focuses on European male high modernist work—work that aspires to the status of high art—I find her radical revision of perception in modernist art, one that is neither anti-modernity nor anti-technology, applicable to my formulation of modernists’ embracing of cinematic language and their experimental representations of cinematic perception. Following Marshall McLuhan’s idea that “media alter sensory perceptions,” Mark Goble, in his book *Beautiful Circuits: Modernism and the Mediated Life* (2010), explores “literary modernism and its particular medium-specific tactics, values, and conventions in a culture of communications” (14) in a new perspective. Rejecting the notion of literary modernism as a mere “response to the power of media technologies in the twentieth century” (3), Goble argues that “this power was already modernism’s own” (3) and that the erotic possibilities of information technologies such as the telegraph, telephone, and sound recording shaped modernism’s formalist aesthetics as “modernism itself desired communication” (3). Among a number of case studies devoted to American modernist texts, Goble’s discussion of new information technologies and mediated sexuality in James’s late novels is worth noting: he argues that in James “an aesthetic devotion to another medium may lead not to an attempt to reproduce its limits and conceits but rather to an understanding of how literary form

itself might better reflect the felt intensities of modern communication” (20). By shedding light on the complex effects of new media on modernist literary production, Goble identifies a modernist fetish for media and attempts to shatter the dichotomy of high and low.

When it comes to examining the perceiving subject’s aesthetic experience in the culture of modernity, there has been an increasing interest in visual culture’s association with states of attention and/or distraction in recent modernist studies.<sup>2</sup> Pointing out that “[m]uch critical and historical analysis of modern subjectivity during [the twentieth] century has been based on the idea of ‘reception in a state of distraction,’” Jonathan Crary, in his book *Suspensions of Perception* (1999), argues that “modern distraction can only be understood through its reciprocal relation to the rise of attentive norms and practices” (1). Crary also contends that there is “the paradoxical intersection, which has existed in many ways since the later nineteenth century, between an imperative of a concentrated attentiveness within the disciplinary organization of labor, education, and mass consumption and an ideal of sustained attentiveness as a constitutive element of a creative and free subjectivity” (1-2). Crary’s argument leads us to rethink modernists’ paradoxical desire to secure the perfect state of attentiveness and at the same time to capture fleeting, transitory moments, which can only be received in a state of distraction.

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<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1992); Francesco Casetti, *Eye of the Century: Film, Experience, Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Jonathan Beller, *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle* (Hanover, New Hampshire: Dartmouth College Press, 2006); Anthony Vidler, *Warped Space: Art, Architecture, and Anxiety in Modern Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2000).

Joining the conversation, Levenson also sheds new light on the states of attention and distraction in aesthetic experience in the early twentieth century by rereading Benjamin's "Artwork" essay. In his recent essay "Novelty, Modernity, Adjacency," Levenson argues that what the early period of the twentieth century encountered was not an either/or question, but an unstable play between absorption and distraction. Addressing E. M. Forster's "Not Looking at Pictures" essay, Levenson states, "Despite the Benjaminian virtuosity in prying 'concentration' and 'distraction' apart—reserving the first for the experience of traditional auratic art, the second for the modernity of cinema and its mass audience— [...] absorption is always contaminated" (674). According to Levenson, "distraction lies always in the midst of concentration. Partly, this is simply because of the kinetics of attention, which ensures that no gaze can stay fixed for long, no mind kept from wandering" (674). "In looking," Levenson remarks, "there is always a looking away" (674).

Early cinema studies also provide valuable insights into the formation of a new subjectivity and spectatorial modes of perception.<sup>3</sup> Particularly, the ways in which early

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<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Linda Williams, ed., *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995); Thomas Elsaesser, ed., *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative* (London: British Film Institute, 1990); Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Wanda Strauven, ed., *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2006). Also, for audience reception studies directly related to this dissertation, see Ian Christie, ed., *Audiences: Defining and Researching Screen Entertainment Reception* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2012); Robert Stam, "The Birth of the Spectator," *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 229-34; E. Deidre Pribram, "Spectatorship and Subjectivity," *A Companion to Film Theory* (Malden: Blackwell, 1999), 146-64; Mark Jancovich, Lucy Faire, and Sarah Stubbings,

cinema attracts and addresses the spectator through spectacle help develop a critical discourse on the subject as spectator. As Tom Gunning argues in his famous essay “The Cinema of Attractions,” the ways in which cinema before 1906 related to the spectator differ from the relation to the spectator set up by narrative film after 1906, and the former’s relation to the spectator is similar to that of the avant-garde. He calls this earlier conception of cinema “the cinema of attraction,” one that “directly solicits spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle” (Gunning, “Cinema” 58). Borrowing the term “attraction” from Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein’s notion of a “montage of attractions” in which “[a]n attraction subject[s] the spectator to ‘sensual or psychological impact’,” Gunning emphasizes “the relation to the spectator that [. . .] later avant-garde practice shares with early cinema: that of exhibitionist confrontation rather than diegetic absorption” (59). Gunning’s articulation of the relationships among early film, its spectators, and the avant-garde provides a helpful point from which to begin a discussion of the spectator as a critical perceiving subject, not as a “‘static,’ ‘stupid voyeur’” (59). In “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Althusser argues that the power of ideology constitutes our subjectivity by interpellating us, or hailing us as subjects and allows no freedom for us to get out of the trap of ideology. While Althusser’s notion of interpellation in the formation of subject has corroborated the ideologically reassuring function of classical narrative cinema, the ways in which early cinema solicits spectator attention can work for the spectator to be a

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*The Place of the Audience: Cultural Geographies of Film Consumption* (London: British Film Institute, 2003).

critical, active agent. That is, pre- and anti-classical cinema spectatorship is not fully engulfed by the hegemony of narrative films, or by “the textual homogenization of positions of subjectivity” (Hansen, *Babel* 105), but contributed to the production of heterogeneity that opens up new possibilities of the spectator’s freedom. My particular interest in the spectator as subject, therefore, draws on the structures of cinema spectatorship *before* “the true narrativization of the cinema,” which happened, according to Gunning, between 1907-1913, and on avant-garde/modernist artists’ conception of a new spectator as the subject who experiences the new aesthetics of film art.

Using such scholarly discussions as a theoretical framework, this dissertation (1) investigates the historical coincidence between literary modernism and early cinema, (2) applies the formation of early cinema spectatorship to modernist literature’s conception of its audience, and (3) analyzes literary experiments in relation to the effects of media change. Particularly, it focuses on modernist writers who were highly susceptible to changes in the nature of subjective perceptual experience and presented their main character(s) as an observer, an urban stroller who walks the city in order to experience it, art spectators, and an eye. By proposing the spectator, or the viewing subject as an archetype of modern subjects, this dissertation argues that, in contrast to long established notions of modernist writing as elitist and anti-technological, modernism is better understood as a set of cultural artifacts responsive to their audiences and to technological changes.

To that end, I conceive Edith Wharton’s 1905 novel *The House of Mirth* as a proto-(spectatorial-)modernist text. In this novel, Wharton foregrounds the dynamics

between spectacle and spectator through the relationship between Lily Bart and Lawrence Selden. Beginning with Selden's accidental encounter with Lily among the crowds at the Grand Central Station, an emblem of modernity in the early twentieth century, the novel portrays Selden as a perfect spectator who, detached from "external influences" (Wharton 225), enjoys contemplating Lily as "a wonderful spectacle" (53). The dynamic between spectator and spectacle culminates in the famous *tableaux vivant* scene, in which Lily reproduces a famous painting by Sir Joshua Reynolds by using her own bodily images. Lily's embodied "to-be-looked-at-ness" in this pre-cinematic entertainment not only touches "the vision-building faculty" (106) in the spectators at the party, including Selden, but also blurs the line between reality and illusion by making the painting and the tableau, real Lily and Lily's image, indistinguishable. While Selden remains "a detached observer" (76) who feels at ease with "the aesthetic amusement which a reflective man is apt to seek in desultory intercourse with pretty women" (55), his moral-aesthetic ambiguities endow Lily with a double standard about her own life, contributing to her demise. As making oneself conspicuous causes misfortune in the novel, Lily's gradual isolation and her eventual death, or Selden's helplessness against her demise, could be read as a critique of the spectacle highlighting its fatal, alienating function Guy Debord suggests in *The Society of the Spectacle*: "the more he contemplates, the less he lives" (Debord 23). Just as New York City's high society is full of spectacles and gossip, the novel employs the language of the mass press to capture "hyperstimulus," or "the sensory upheavals of modernity" (Singer 74), which

were often represented by images of car accidents and death personified in the early twentieth century's sensational press.

Highlighting male-centered spectatorship, the woman's to-be-looked-at-ness, the spectacle's effects on gender and subjectivity, modernity's fascination with the surface, and the cultural audience's familiarities with cinema and media technologies, the novel's significance and limitations serve as the grounds for comparison in this dissertation. The texts chosen in this dissertation, in a way, deviate from Selden's gendered spectatorship and delve into the issues such as the subject's multiple positions as a spectator, the limitations and possibilities in her agency as a perceiving subject, the challenges and benefits provoked by the development of media technologies and the consequent changes in sensory perception.

Chapter 2, the first full chapter of this dissertation, investigates the connection between Henry James's literary experiments in *What Maisie Knew* and his conception of the cultural audience in the late 1890s against the background of the emergence of cinema. By placing James and cinema spectatorship as a cultural phenomenon and as an institution side by side, this chapter reconsiders James in the late 1890s and offers an answer to the questions about the possible connection between James and early film. This chapter argues that in *What Maisie Knew*, James, unlike his old image as the master aloof from popular culture, actively interacts with early film culture by foregrounding spectatorial experiences in the intricate relationships among character, narrator, and readers. In the first section of this chapter, I read "The Art of Fiction" (1884) and "The Future of the Novel" (1899), and examine James's own cinema experience. In the

second half of this chapter, I analyze the protagonist's perceptual experience in James's *What Maisie Knew* (1897). In *What Maisie Knew*, where James's anti-mimetic, non-conventional narrative techniques were fully developed through his use of free indirect discourse, James reminds us of the cinema spectator's mediated experience of watching what the camera's eye sees. While James's use of free indirect discourse evokes sympathy for the protagonist from the reader, his young protagonist Maisie shows a vast gap between her perception and understanding, and her limitations as an observer call our attention to the mediated nature of a reality where information flow is always framed, limited, and controlled. My argument is that by applying multiple modes of perception evocative of viewing practices of early cinema to his narrative techniques, James attempts to configure the media environment of early cinema for his readers and re-navigate his relation to the audience.

Exploring the representation of spectatorial practices in Dorothy Richardson's oeuvre, Chapter 3 focuses on a particular mode of perception Richardson emphasizes throughout her theory of writing/reading and film-viewing. Conceiving both reading and film-viewing as "aesthetic exercise," Richardson suggests that both literary devices and filmic techniques should work to achieve readers'/spectators' "creative collaboration" by activating the mode of contemplation. Drawing attention to Richardson's valorization of sustained attentiveness and contemplation, Chapter 3 explores the border-crossing aspects of the "Continuous Performance" column Richardson wrote for *Close Up* magazine and her representations of spectator-subjectivity in *Pilgrimage*. In particular, this chapter analyzes the spectator-subjectivities of three figures—a Richardsonian ideal



reader she postulates in her theory of writing/reading, Richardson's protagonist and alter ego Miriam Henderson in *Pilgrimage*, and cinema audiences as the object of her observation in the "Continuous Performance" columns—and the ways Richardson has rendered their relationships intimate, interconnected, and interchangeable while (self-) effacing the author figure. The first section investigates the cultural discourse of attentiveness and its inevitable relation to distraction in the early twentieth century. The second section examines the ways in which her cinema writing anticipates and contributes to an alternative tradition of filmmaking. The third section focuses on Richardson's valorization of slowness and depth and revisits reading scenes in *Pilgrimage* to understand her suggestion for modernist readership. The last section analyzes Miriam Henderson, the protagonist of *Pilgrimage*, as the modern (in)attentive subject. It compares *Pointed Roofs* (1915), the first chapter-volume of *Pilgrimage*, and the fourth chapter-volume *The Tunnel* (1919) to discuss the changes in the nature of Miriam Henderson's aesthetic encounters and how her changing relation to attentiveness works to organize her subjectivity.

Chapter 4 examines Virginia Woolf's stake in the relationship between the impact of the advent of new technologies on human perception and new formations of subjectivity. It explores Woolf's embracing of contingency and distraction through the lens of her speculation, in her 1926 essay "The Cinema," about the possibilities for a new artistic language. In "The Cinema," the issues Woolf touches on encompass the discordance between the eye's perception and the brain's reception in film spectatorship, her ambivalent attitude toward filmic art, that is, her antagonism towards films that

imitate literature, her enthusiasm for abstract moving images in cinematic texts, and her conjecture about the avant-garde aesthetics of contingency—the accidental, the unintentional, and the momentary—as crucial to film’s potential. The first section of this chapter reads Woolf’s short story “The Mark on the Wall” (1917), one of her earliest works, to trace her rejection of attentiveness. The second section focuses on the motor-car scene and the subsequent sky-writing scene in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) as Woolf’s earlier representation of distracted spectatorship. The third section reads her essay “The Cinema” to examine Woolf’s own encounter with contingency and her discovery of a new cinematic language. The last section focuses on *Between the Acts* (1941), in which the nature of distracted spectatorship, spectators’ new relation to both artwork and artist, and new aesthetic functions of media technologies discovered by accidents are represented. Regarding *Between the Act* as a meditation on spectatorship, this chapter reads the novel as a site for exploring complex relations among art, its spectators and the avant-garde Woolf hinted at in “The Cinema.”

Throughout the discussion of these writers, this dissertation traces the rise of cinematic perception in modernist fiction ranging from James to Woolf; in so doing, this dissertation ultimately aims to propose an alternative, “spectatorial” modernism where the perceiving subject’s aesthetic experience is technologically mediated, where the status of heterogeneous audiences for art is heightened, and where the relationship between high art and mass culture, between authors and readers, and between artists and audiences become intimate.

## CHAPTER II

### SHOCK AND ASTONISHMENT: HENRY JAMES'S *WHAT MAISIE KNEW*

#### AND THE RISE OF CINEMA SPECTATORSHIP

On December 22, 1895, about eleven months after the London premiere performance of *Guy Domville*, Henry James recorded in his notebooks that he had put his pen to what he called “the little subject of the child” (*What* 276). “Make my point of view,” James wrote, “my *line*, the consciousness, the dim, sweet, sacred, wondering, clinging perception of the child, and one gets something like *this*” (277). Based on a true story he heard in 1892 at a dinner party, the project he initially conceived as “a fresh source of dramatic situations” (275) turned out to be his 1897 novel *What Maisie Knew*. In the same entry in which he sketched out his conception of the novel, James told himself that “EVERYTHING TAKES PLACE BEFORE MAISIE. That is a part of the essence of the thing—that, with the tenderness she inspires, the rest of the essence, the second of the golden threads of my *form*” (279). On December 28, 1895, Auguste and Louis Lumière introduced their newly invented *Cinématographe*, the first motion-picture apparatus that combined a portable camera for recording movement, a printer, and a projector, to a group of paying spectators at the Salon Indian of the Grand Café in Paris, by projecting a series of short films on a wide screen. Lasting less than a minute, each film was shot by Louis who set up the tripod in front of objects that move; the results were single-shot recordings of scenes of everyday life, including a moving image of a train arriving at a station and factory workers streaming out of the factory gate.

Although there is no first-hand written evidence of that day, it is reported that the spectators screamed at the projected image of a train, which was first static like a still photograph, and then suddenly started to move.

My inquiries begin with the contemporaneity of the invention of a literary method by a novelist preoccupied with technical experimentation and the invention of a visual apparatus that revolutionized ways of seeing. It is not a mere coincidence that only six days after James expressed his writerly ambition for a new literary method to “show” to his readers what takes place before a child through the child’s eyes, the Lumière brothers, with their newly invented *Cinématographe*, showed projected moving images to the public. The last five years of the nineteenth century for James were punctuated with failure in the theatre, the subsequent return to fiction writing, and experimentation with narrative techniques and with modes of writing that eventually embodied the iconic Jamesian style. The very same period marked the emergence of cinema. Within two years after their introduction of the *Cinématographe* to the public, the Lumière brothers had made “over a thousand films, taken at numerous international locations, and displayed them in hundreds of cities all over the world” (Littau 48). Near the end of the nineteenth century, cinema was fast becoming the new popular entertainment in cities and towns across Western Europe and the United States, attracting a wide crowd of spectators across class, gender, age, and ethnicity.

This chapter investigates the connection between James’s literary experiments in *What Maisie Knew* and his conception of the cultural audience in the late 1890s against the background of the emergence of cinema marked by new ways of seeing, a new art

form, a new kind of public sphere, and the formation of a new regime of spectatorship. By placing James and cinema spectatorship as a cultural phenomenon and as an institution side by side, this chapter reconsiders James in the late 1890s and offers an answer to the questions that many James scholars have asked in recent years: “What did Henry James have to do with early film? And what does early film have to do with Henry James?” (Freedman 255) To discuss the suggestive intersections between James and early cinema more comprehensively, I will use the term “mediascape” coined by Arjun Appadurai in his essay “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy,” in which the term denotes both “the distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information (newspapers, magazines, television stations, film production studios, etc.)” and “the images of the world created by these media” (198-99). What I am drawing attention to by using this term is the obvious yet often neglected fact that the author Henry James, his contemporary readers across the U.S. and England, and cinema spectators in the same period all inhabited and were being engulfed by the same mediascape. In *What Maisie Knew*, James, as this chapter will argue, does actively interact with early film culture by foregrounding spectatorial experiences in the intricate relationships among character, narrator, and readers—that is, by portraying a child protagonist whose consciousness is “cinematographic,” by relegating the traditionally authoritative, omnipotent, and omniscient narrator to the role of early film lecturer, and by situating readers in the position of spectators who share Maisie’s cinematographic modes of perception. By applying multiple modes of perception evocative of viewing practices of early cinema to his narrative techniques, James

attempts to configure the media environment of early cinema for his readers and re-navigate his relation to the audience.

## **II.1. James in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction**

As Walter Benjamin has remarked in his famous 1936 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” the technological reproducibility of the artwork and the advent of film as a reproducible work of art *par excellence* are two major manifestations at the beginning of the twentieth century that have influenced traditional art forms immensely. Benjamin contends that around the late nineteenth century, the revolution of print technology that made arts reproducible began to replace artistic value by exhibition value, resulted in the decay of the aura—the unique presence in time and space supposed to be retained in a single work of art—, and brought about the transformation in spectators’ makeup and their ways of receiving the arts; unlike traditional art forms such as painting, which regard middle-class subjects as viewers, new forms of art such as films began to attract the mass and include them as new art spectators. There is no doubt that the technological transformations of print culture in the late 1890s made a great impact upon a literary figure like James, who aspired to innovate the novel form and elevate it into a work of art. The demise of the three-volume novel around 1895, the subsequent development of the modern form of paperback, and the ebb and flow of various literary journals all affected James. As Michael Anesko has put it, “The rapid rise and expansion of the reading public, the proliferation of periodicals and the development of the modern publishing firm all contributed to the making of Henry

James” (33).

To understand James’s elevation of the status of the novel and his changing conception of the reader, we need to circle back to his famous 1884 essay “The Art of Fiction,” in which he works to position the English novel as a legitimate art form by revealing the limitations imposed by old assumptions of Victorian readership. James saw that the established form of the English novel represented by Dickens and Thackeray presupposed “a comfortable, good-humoured feeling [. . .] that a novel is a novel, as a pudding is a pudding” and therefore it was expected for readers just “to swallow it” (*LC-I* 44). Challenging the Victorian conception of fiction readers, James proposes the novel as a site for art which lives “upon discussion, upon experiment, upon curiosity, upon variety of attempt, upon the exchange of views and the comparison of standpoints” (44-45), thus encouraging active, intellectual participation of readers rather than easy digestion or passive reception. Such a contention directly goes against Victorian writers’ tacit assumptions that “the average reader of novels is not a critical person, cares little for art for art’s sake, and has no fixed ideas about the duties and responsibilities of an author” (Flint 20). Asserting that “The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life” (*LC-I* 46), James persuades readers to notice the inadequacy of the conventional realist practices of didactic Victorian novelists and to consider the ways in which the novel represents and speaks to the myriad diversity of lived experience.

In “The Art of Fiction” James suggests that when novel ceases to be “a pudding” and attempts to take up the position of a serious art form, “impressions” become the

most important vehicle for writers and readers to share experience through textual space. James's conception of the novel as an art form derives from his likening a novel to a human impression: "A novel is in its broadest definition a personal impression of life," which "constitutes its value [...] according to the intensity of the impression" (50). In his emphasizing "a capacity for receiving straight impressions" (59), James establishes a new relationship between the novel and its readers that highly resembles that of impressionist painting and its viewers.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, as Paul Armstrong suggests in his book *The Phenomenology of Henry James*, if the novel begins with the author's impressions in the creative process in James's theory, in the reading process the novel "achieves the ends of representation by evoking impressions in its audience" (37). Through his constant likening of the novelist to a painter in their common duty to "represent life," and through his use of the trope that a novel is impressionistic, James suggests that the relationship between novelist and reader resembles that of painter and art spectator. In proposing a new impressionistic aesthetic of the novel, James attempts not only to resuscitate the waning auratic experience quintessential in traditional art forms, but also to create his own audience whose capacity for impressions should keep pace with the novelist.

If James in the 1880s, with his essay "The Art of Fiction," "intended to prepare

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<sup>4</sup> James illustrates the working of impressions in fiction writing through the example of an English female novelist, Anne Thackeray Ritchie, who succeeded in turning a momentary impression captured during her travel experience into a concrete image, a fresh reality produced for fictional writing. In this process, James asserts, having "the advantage of having seen" is crucial for Ritchie (and possibly for James's ideal readers, too) to have "[t]he power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern" (53).



the reading public for the new kind of fiction that [he] was about to attempt” (Anesko 88), James’s conception of the relationship between artist and the public in the 1890s showed highly contradictory imperatives. While he made his efforts to appeal to the crowd by venturing into the realm of the theatre and desired popular success from it, his authorial ambitions in this period were often expressed through his fictionalization of the distance between the solitary artist and the “vulgar” public.<sup>5</sup> The various types of literary venues in which he published his work during this period reveal that he oscillated between the elite readership of avant-garde periodicals such as *The Yellow Book* and the audience that enjoyed popular art such as the theatre (Salmon 61). James, in fact, was never inattentive to the reception of his work. After the opening night of *Guy Domville*, on January 5, 1895, which ended with jeers and booing from the audience and arguably marked a turning point in his career as a playwright thereafter, James wrote to his friend William Dean Howells that he made a private success by appealing to the “moderately cultivated, civilised and intelligent *individual*, [. . .] ‘people of taste’ in short, of almost any kind, as distinguished from the vast English Philistine mob—the regular ‘theatrical public’ of London, which, of all the vulgar publics London contains, is the most brutishly and densely vulgar” (qtd. Jacobson 95). In distinguishing his “private” success from “public” failure, James seemingly sets up a binary opposition

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<sup>5</sup> For example, in “The Next Time” (1895), one of his short stories published during the late 1890s, James depicts the life of a solitary artist/novelist, Ralph Limbert, who is incapable of appealing to the masses. Working as a journalist to support his family, Limbert publishes a number of critically-acclaimed books, but his elitist writings do not yield any commercial success. Economically distressed, the writer dies before getting another novel published.

between “people of taste” and “the regular public,” thus drawing the dividing line between high and low. Regarding James’s (vain) attempt to be a popular playwright, early critics tend to find the reason in James’s psychological problem, interpreting it either as a “self-therapy” for his own “spiritual illness” (Leon Edel 15, 14) or as “a ‘schizophrenic’ self-division in [his] authorial ambitions” (qtd. Salmon 61) (Anne Margolis).<sup>6</sup> However, such interpretations do not take account of the impact of cultural transformations upon an individual artist; as Richard Salmon contends, James’s oscillation in the 1890s should be understood in terms of “a general cultural anxiety” (62), an anxiety that a radical transformation brought about by technology, urbanization, and mass culture generated. As hinted in James’s remark above, a general cultural anxiety many artists in this period experienced is deeply associated with the encounter with the scene of “the vast mob,” or with the rise of the mass as typical cultural audiences whose presence and role in society were increasingly becoming the subject of study. Literary figures’ anxiety about their marketability in the newly formed mass print culture led to the recalibration of their audiences. As the masses began to become potential consumers for the literary market, many writers might have realized that they could not assume the relatively small number of educated, cultivated middle-class

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<sup>6</sup> Leon Edel, in his biographical account of James’s theatrical years, sees that the years between 1895 and the beginning of the twentieth century mark for James a kind of “nervous breakdown” involving “a failure of confidence” and “the death of childhood,” yet his firm belief in his art kept him at writing and led him to heal “his wounds” (15, 16). On the other hand, Anne Margolis, focusing on James’s “changing *perceptions* of the reading public” (xv) in this period, underscores his “vacillating theatrical and literary intentions and the contrast between his relationship with ‘common’ or conventional readers and his increasing following among the English-speaking avant-garde” (xv-xvi).

readers to be their sole target audience.

As Nancy Bentley has pointed out, James was “both repelled and intrigued by the ‘mere mass and bulk’ of the new print industry and a mass reading public that ‘grows and grows each year’” (40). Bentley contends that literary authorities in America in this period “experienced a literal kind of disorientation” at the transformation of American life into a mass society, “in the contours of culture, a version of cultural vertigo they were capable of experiencing somatically” (41). It is evident that in his 1898 essay “The Question of the Opportunities,” James acutely sensed a transformative cultural force in the unprecedentedly fast-growing reading public in America, finding it massive and homogeneous. Watching “more people than ever before buy and sell, and read and write, and run about,” James was struck by the sheer scale and the pressure of the new reading public: “their scale, in the great common-schooled and newspapered democracy, is the largest and their pressure the greatest” (*LC-I* 651-52). In particular, James expressed concerns about the homogenizing power of the American public over English, their “predominant and triumphant” language, especially when “the variety of races and idioms” from diverse immigrant groups began to contribute to the communicative norms of social language (652). English, James saw, was “taking so much, suffering perhaps even so much, [. . .] but giving so much more, on the whole, than it has to ‘put up’ with, that the elements are ground into unity” (652).

What James saw from the American public and what took place in the emerging film culture all suggest that both English and silent film functioned to serve as a dominant communicative means for a conglomeration of new populations of diverse

linguistic backgrounds. As film scholar Miriam Hansen remarks in her discussion of spectatorship in American silent film, in the first decade of cinema history, journalists and literary intellectuals often called film a new “universal language,” in the sense that film utilized “the utopian vision of a means of communication among different people(s)” (76). “In the American context,” Hansen observes, “the universal language metaphor assumed a particular significance, especially with the rise of the nickelodeon, considering the cinema’s appeal to recent ‘foreigners’ unfamiliar with the English language or illiterate” (77). Many filmmakers, commentators, and intellectuals advocated film, using metaphors such as a universal language, a “visual Esperanto,” or “democratic art” for its nonverbal mode of signification and its wide appeal to all different kinds of audiences. On the other hand, the metaphor of a universal language also “foreshadows the subsumption of all diversity in the standardized idiom of the culture industry” (76) that the Frankfurt theorists later criticized, which is not very far from what James anticipated in terms of the rise of a mass readership and its impact on English. The analogy between film and language even indicates cinema’s potential as an enemy of the literary market, as the connotations of the metaphor include the claim that “the invention of cinema not only equaled but transcended that of the printing press” (77).

Indeed, the close linkage between the formation of a mass audience and the ambiguous metaphor of film as a universal language helps us to better understand cultural anxieties literary intellectuals like James would have felt. James was among many literary figures who sensed how “in supplanting the centrality of the literary, mass

culture threatened a category long taken as a central repository of both knowledge and moral value” (Bentley 41). Although he never mentions cinema until 1898, his essays written in the late 1890s reveal that he was highly conscious of the ever-increasing mass audience and the changing mediascape’s impact on the literary scene. In the aforementioned essay, James speaks of new “opportunities” that the rise of a mass audience can engender with the expansion of the mass market, by stating that

It is assuredly true that literature for the billion will not be literature as we have hitherto known it as its best. But if the billion give the pitch of production and circulation, they do something else beside; they hang before us a wide picture of opportunities – opportunities that would be opportunities still even if, reduced to the *minimum*, they should be only those offered by the vastness of the implicated habitat and the complexity of the implied history. It is impossible not to entertain with patience and curiosity the presumption that life so colossal must break into expression at points of proportionate frequency. These places, these moments will be the chances. (*LC-I 653*)

In his overview of the rise of the mass market, James not only expresses concerns, but also anticipates that the expansion of the mass public could, in turn, offer chances for contemporary writers to find new forms of expression and new ways of representation. A new art form represented by “literature for the billion” can refer to cheap forms of literature such as the dime novel or illustrated magazines, but perhaps also to cinema, which, threatening to transcend the printing press, emerged as a new counterpart of

literature.

James, witnessing the cultural transformations, was highly aware of how new media attracted the mass as well as how the mass received new media. A year later, James makes a similar contention in another essay, “The Future of the Novel” (1899), in which he once again suggests the novel’s self-conscious endeavor to make up for “lost opportunities,” but with more emphasis on the population of women and children as a new cultural force shaping media consumption. “The public that subscribes, borrows, lends, that picks up in one way and another, sometimes even by purchase—grows and grows each year,” James observes, and “the larger part of the great multitude that sustains the teller and the publisher of tales is constituted by boys and girls; by girls in especial, if we apply the term to the later stages of the life of the innumerable women who, under modern arrangements, increasingly fail to marry—fail, apparently, even, largely, to desire to” (*LC-II* 101). In James’s eyes the increasing number of young women who no longer feel obliged to marry and the rise of their power as consuming subjects are significant factors for social change. James also acknowledges that the presence of women and children, in conjunction with their increasing familiarity with new communication technologies, is integral to the literary market: “The high prosperity of fiction has marched, very directly, with another ‘sign of the times,’ the demoralisation, the vulgarization of literature in general, the increasing familiarity of all such methods of communication, the making itself supremely felt [. . .] of the presence of the ladies and children—by whom I mean, in other words, the reader irreflective and uncritical” (103). Calling the novel “the prose picture,” James remarks, “if we are [. . .]

asked why the representation should be required when the object represented is itself mostly so accessible, the answer to that appears to be that man combines with his eternal desire for more experience an infinite cunning as to getting his experience as cheaply as possible” (102-103). While James seems to denigrate the newly formed readership of women and children as lacking critical reflection, he at the same time requires novelists to understand the audiences’ strong appetite for a picture and desire for more experience.

James’s observation of the rise of new cultural audiences, who are mostly female, irreflective and uncritical, yet who have strong appetite for a picture and eternal desire for more (represented and mediated) experience, significantly corresponds with the makeup of emergent cinema spectatorship. There is a possibility that such an observation was activated especially when he ventured into a new cultural experience such as attending films at the cinema. It is reported that James went to the movies at least two times during his years in London around the turn of the century. The film he saw in 1898 — “cinematograph — or whatever they call it” (qtd. Edel 175) as he put it — is *The Corbett-Fitzsimmons Prize Fight*, a feature-length filmed record of the heavyweight championship match between James Corbett and Robert Fitzsimmons in Carson City, Nevada. In a letter to one of his friends Mrs. Wister, James wrote that he “quite reveled” (175) in his first cinematic experience. In 1900 he saw a program of Biograph actualities about the Boer War at the London Alhambra with his 13-year-old niece. Afterwards he wrote to his niece, “I hope [. . .] that some of the rather horrid figures and sounds that passed before us at the theatre didn’t haunt your dreams. There were too many *ugly* ones. The next time I shall take you to something prettier” (qtd.

Tintner 189). Involving feelings of excitement, bewilderment, shock, and astonishment, James's remark on his own cinematic experience as a spectator manifests typical reactions of early film audiences. Both of the films James saw exemplify early filmmaking and exhibition practices, drawing in large audiences. The cultural significance of *The Corbett-Fitzsimmons Prize Fight* is that it attracted large audiences, especially including large numbers of women, who gained the first access to such a visceral spectacle due to the cinematic mediation of the sport event. "Abstracted into visual terms," as Hansen remarks on the film, "it afforded women the forbidden sight of male bodies in seminudity, engaged in intimate and intense physical action" (1), thus gratifying their desire for more (indirect) experience. Furthermore, the Boer War actualities James saw in London are among the first motion pictures the British public actually saw. As Nicholas Daly notes, Boer War actualities, exhibiting the close association between the new medium and the war which "came only three years after the first commercial display of the cinematograph in England," "held considerable appeal for the jingoist audiences of fin-de-siècle musical halls in which early films were often shown" (62). So it is even possible that what James calls "horrid figures and sounds" in his letter to his niece might refer to the audiences in the theatre, reminding him of the jeering mob he faced on the opening night of *Guy Domville*. Considering the cultural significances of such filmic representations around 1900, one can surmise that in both of his cinematic experiences the ways in which cinema appealed to the mass public might have caught James's eye and influenced his critical view on emerging cultural audiences.

When we take James's conception of the mass public into consideration, it is not



surprising that the ways in which James relates to his audience in *What Maisie Knew* are highly ambivalent. As Margolis notes, writing *Maisie*, James “was placing himself (as well as his characters) in an intensely curious if not conspicuously awkward position in relation to the Anglo-American reading public” (118). With its over-cultivated style deliberately separated from generic conventions and its subject matter such as a divorce suit brought from popular literature, *Maisie* is located at the very junction between James’s contradictory conceptions of the readership. On the one hand, with this novel James accomplished his aim to elevate the novel form by intensifying the function of impressions, by presenting *Maisie* as “a register of impressions” (James, *What* 291). However, the formal and stylistic innovation in *Maisie* is not a strict adherence to James’s literary impressionism as delineated in “The Art of Fiction,” but his attempt to alter, complicate, and extend his version of it, reflecting the impact of the changing mediascape upon sensory perception. Because of his highly experimental style, around 1897, by the time *The Spoils of Poynton* and *What Maisie Knew* were published, “to be a ‘reader of Henry James’ began [. . .] to mean something significantly different [. . .] from one who was a reader of novels” (McGurl 76). On the other hand, it is possible that the contemporary reading public’s comprehensive experience of the mediascape might have filled the omissions and ostensible gaps in the novel. Marcia Jacobson speculates that “James’s original readers would have come to the novel after having read [. . .] surprisingly detailed newspaper accounts of recent divorce trials and after having seen the numerous Marriage Question plays where they, as members of the audience, watched and speculated on someone else’s behavior in much the same fashion that James’s

Maisie does” (110). Such divergent motives and historically specific cultural influences are among many variables that make it hard to pin down *Maisie*’s readership.

That the novel was serialized in two different literary magazines before book publication complicates James’s conception of *Maisie*’s readership, too. Daniel Hannah, in his investigation on *Maisie*’s public, sheds light on the novel’s initial serialization in two different literary journals, the Chicago journal *The Chap-Book* from January to May in 1897 and the British *New Review* from February to September of the same year.

Reflecting the changing trend in the literary market, the two journals help us to understand the unstable nature of *Maisie*’s (targeted and actual) readership: emerging as part of a wave of “little magazines,” Hannah explains, both journals “sought, through competitive pricing and through imitation of both the more expensive monthly reviews and the cheaper illustrated magazines, to capitalize on a growing body of economically limited readers hungry for affordable encounters with the discourse of taste” (95).

Hannah’s point that the literary marketplace constituted by myriads of magazines in this period gave shape to James’s vision of his own marketability is noteworthy; it is also highly possible that James might have been aware that in such a “fluctuating” marketplace, “the name of ‘Henry James’ trades on uncertain value” (94). If we assume that James himself took account of the literary journals’ readership and the changing print culture as he wrote *Maisie*, his well-known difficulties should be discussed in a new perspective. The following section will scrutinize James’s construction of narrative strategies against the backdrop of the changing mediascape. It will investigate the connection among James’s narrative strategies, his attempt to elevate the novel form,

and his endeavor to challenge, educate, and acculturate the readers.

## **II.2. The *Cinématographe* as Jamesian Representational Technology**

In *What Maisie Knew* James's thematic concerns revolve around a perceiving subject's initiation into the knowledge of adult behavior. Set in turn-of-the-century London, the novel begins with the divorce litigation of a young couple, which heralds their six-year-old daughter's predicament. In showing the corruptions of the modern age punctuated with remarriages, flirtations, cheatings, and re-divorces, and in portraying the child whose fate is to see much more than she can understand and to see in an unprecedented manner, James's representational strategy challenges readers by restricting narrative information. That is, readers are informed of what takes place in front of the child from her point of view through the voice of the third person narrator, but are so informed in an imperfect way due to the vast gap between her perception and her ability to understand and express and, subsequently, to the narrator's articulated inability to fathom her knowledge. James, in the preface to the 1908 New York Edition volume containing *Maisie*, notes that what Maisie saw, "a great deal of which quantity she either wouldn't understand at all or would quite misunderstand," is crucial to his design of the novel, in which he decides not to give it all, but to give it "only through the occasion and connexions of her proximity and her attention," creating both "perceptive gain [and] perceptive loss" (*What* 294). This strategic intention caused many contemporary reviewers' scathing criticisms when the book was first published, mainly because they were unable to appreciate the difficulties of the novel. A reviewer in *Pall*

*Mall Gazette* (11 October 1897) wrote that *Maisie* is “a work very difficult to criticize, very perplexing to appraise” (268); the reviewer found the narrative “preposterous,” stating that “this medley, these intricacies of motive, this tangle and confusion of emotion, are all transmuted, reflected, determined through the mind of a little girl of eight years” (269). Another commentator in *Literary World* (11 December 1897) criticized “the style of the book [as] jerkily incoherent” so that “the readers of the story – may they be few – will probably never understand exactly what any one concerned said or did or meant” (273). Contemporary reviewers’ inability to appreciate the novel led them to hastily conclude that Maisie just “knew nothing” (270). They largely lamented James’s abandonment of his own earlier realist practice epitomized by the critically and commercially successful novel *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881). As the reviewers’ perplexities testify, the intrinsic difficulties in his representational strategy make the story hard to follow. For this reason, James’s changing aesthetic, the “overcultivation” of his style developed in the late 1890s, has long been considered by many critics a major factor of “James’s inability to find a receptive audience for his novels” or a symptom of his “sense of helplessness in the face of widespread social change” (Jacobson 103).

To see stylistic difficulties as flaws, however, tends to ignore James’s struggle to adapt his aesthetic to the changing circumstances of modernity. Through his writing strategy, James reveals the limitations of Victorian literary conventions in representing life and calls readers’ attention to the fact that immediacy in communication is increasingly impossible. James’s work in the late 1890s, including texts such as *Maisie* and *The Turn of the Screw*, manifests his preoccupation with a general epistemological

condition in which perceptual experience is severing its relation to an exterior world, or what Jonathan Crary termed in his book *Suspensions of Perception* “a general epistemological uncertainty in which perceptual experience had lost the primal guarantees that once upheld its privileged relation to the foundation of knowledge” (12). According to Crary, there was a notion among scientists, philosophers, psychologists, and artists from the second half of the nineteenth century on that vision, or any of the human senses, could be faulty and unreliable and thus no longer able to serve as objective criteria for human knowledge. Crary calls this “[t]he idea of subjective vision—the notion that our perceptual and sensory experience depends less on the nature of an external stimulus than on the composition and functioning of our sensory apparatus” (12). This sudden emergence in the second half of the nineteenth century of subjective, autonomous vision is distinctively modern as it signals a rupture in human understanding of the world; the experience of subjective vision is manifested only in a constant state of perceptual transformation, or through “external techniques of manipulation and stimulation” (12), which constituted the central nerve of modern spectacular culture.

In his attempt to break away from conventional Victorian style, James develops his representational strategy by reducing the traditional omniscient narrator to the one who embodies the subjective vision, who, just like Maisie and the readers, feels unsure and perplexed about what he sees, that is, Maisie’s consciousness in a state of transformation. While the narrator plays a pivotal role in the narrative construction, his power is unprecedentedly limited in the sense that he is incapable of fully taking account

of his protagonist's consciousness. For this reason, criticism that explores James's representational strategy in *Maisie* has generally been limited to intra-textual relationships based on new critical theory—focusing, for example, on the ways in which James or the narrator as his delegate is related to Maisie.<sup>7</sup> As Sheila Teahan points out, the representational strategy that produces Maisie's ambiguous knowledge deeply implicates the narrator “in the construction of that knowledge” (127). However, as Julie Rivkin observes, “the narrative strategy imposed on him is necessarily an ironic one; the narrator ‘knows’ more than the child whose experience he represents, and the narrator uses terms that are beyond the vocabulary of the child” (113). James's representational strategy scrutinizes the sudden emergence of subjective vision by deliberately revealing limitations in the representation of consciousness and the inevitable gap between the narrator's words and Maisie's. The narrator manifests James's self-conscious differentiation from the traditional model of third person omniscience which presupposes that “the narrator knows all.”

Through the narrator's collaborative relation to the readers, James reveals that omniscience as a narrative technique is no longer adequate to represent the increasingly

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<sup>7</sup> Critics in the 1970s and 1980s focused on James's relation to Maisie. For example, William L. Nance argues that James “has made [Maisie] his collaborator in the creation of the novel” (88), whereas Merla Wolk points out James's integration of his own childhood experience into the narrative and his strong identification with Maisie (205). Sheila Teahan and Julie Rivkin are among the critics in the 1990s who scrutinized James's representational strategy through the lens of poststructuralism. They both are interested in the relationship between the narrator and Maisie. Teahan argues that James sets up “a symbiotic narrative relation in which her knowledge depends on its articulation by the adult narrator” (128). Rivkin contends that the narrator's relation to Maisie is like father-daughter: “As attendant of the child—amplifier of her experience and translator of her perceptions—the narrator sounds very much like a caretaker” (133).

mediated nature of modern experience. The narrator positions himself close to the readers and becomes the readers' collaborator. In the Prologue to the novel where readers are given the history of the divorce litigation, the narrator establishes his relationship with readers as if they sat in the public gallery, watching the divorcing couple and the child together. The narrator does not exert his omniscience from a privileged position, but instead claims that he only reports what is apparent and "clear to any spectator" (5) in the courtroom, evocative of "surprisingly detailed newspaper accounts of divorce trials" (Jacobson 110) which James's contemporary readers might find familiar. The narrative technique becomes distinctively modern especially when he confesses his inevitable technical limits in tracing Maisie's consciousness. From Chapter 22 on, the narrator's presence becomes ironically visible with the increased use of "I" in such sentences as "It was granted her at this time to arrive at divinations so ample that I shall have no room for the goal if I attempt to trace the stages" (149), "Oh, decidedly, I shall never get you to believe the number of things she saw and the number of secrets she discovered!" (151), and, finally, "I so despair of tracing her steps that I must crudely give you my word for its being from this time on a picture literally present to her" (206). Such remarks are ironic because the more the narrator articulates his inability to translate Maisie's perceptions, the more readers sense the narrator's presence in the textual space.

While critics almost unanimously agree that the essence of James's formal innovation lies in the narrator's focalization of the story through Maisie's limited consciousness, the seemingly abrupt shift in the narrator's strategy in the middle of the story yielded different interpretations; some critics deemed the narrator's articulated

inability as a flaw or an inconsistency. For example, Teahan asserts that when the narrator becomes “unable to report directly the contents of Maisie’s consciousness, [he] can only articulate his inability to answer for her knowledge and its uncanny effects” (131). On the other hand, Rivkin argues that when the initial strategy is exhausted, the narrator “would himself have to undergo an education analogous to Maisie’s—one that would lead him to adopt ‘another perspective’ and speak from ‘a new centre’—in order to continue as her narrative guardian” (161). However, such observations overlook the ways in which the narrator relates to the readers; by telling what he knows and does not know to the readers from his “subjective” point of view, the narrator maintains the initial “spectatorial” position he establishes in the Prologue.

James not only reveals the preposterousness of the idea of omniscience through the role of narrator, but also devises a new linguistic style strikingly akin to the modern spectacular culture to capture the emergence of subjective vision. The linguistic style has caught several critics’ attention in recent scholarly discussion. Some James scholarship has sought to show that James’s formal and stylistic innovation is not a limited practice of artistry but something that intersects with distinct characteristics of modernity, attempting to place his work “in a dynamic, rather than purely formal, relation to modernity, identifying an urgent concern with the cultural transformations brought about by technology, urbanization, and mass culture” (Britzolakis 369). Reexamining James’s aesthetics in terms of the sociocultural context, critics like John Carlos Rowe, David McWhirter, Christina Britzolakis and Mark Goble disagree with the view that James rejected the new social and individual circumstances of modernity. Specifically, Rowe



notes that in *Maisie* James attempts to adapt his aesthetic values to the conditions of modernity, which Rowe defines as “a social world of utter flux and instability—one commonly figured in the novel with metaphors of the puzzle, game, circus, exhibition, and show” (124). McWhirter highlights the suggestive link between the conditions of modernity and Jamesian figurative representation. Calling attention to a new emphasis on “the mediating linguistic and representational forms through which bodies, desires, materiality, and actions—the self and the world—are inevitably experienced” (239) in James’s work in the late 1890s, McWhirter argues that what James evokes with his representational strategy in *Maisie* is the increasing tendency that “we can know anterior reality only through the representational technologies that both restrict and construct whatever view of life we have” (240). Goble makes a similar contention by stating that James masters “a certain language of mediated experience in his later fiction, where experience itself is, by definition, circuitous and indirect,” in hopes of capturing a variety of mediated experiences, “from the give-and-take of language and dialogic gamesmanship that defines his ‘scenic’ method to the massively articulate shows of thinking and reflection that are made to index consciousness” (34). As these critics suggest, in capturing the unstable and indirect nature of modern experience James’s linguistic style imitates the technologically mediated nature of a reality where information flow is always framed, limited, and controlled. James’s strategic difficulties are not intended to perplex his readers; rather, he works to represent the way in which perception is experienced in a reality newly formed due to the sudden emergence of subjective vision.

Evocative of the Lumières' *Cinématographe*, the way in which Maisie perceives her external world resembles the way early cinema spectators perceived the images provided by the Lumière machine:

It was to be the fate of this patient little girl to see much more than she at first understood, but also even at first to understand much more than any little girl, however patient, had perhaps ever understood before. [. . .] She was taken into the confidence of passions on which she fixed just the stare she might have had for images bounding across the wall in the slide of a magic-lantern. Her little world was phantasmagoric—strange shadows dancing on a sheet. It was as if the whole performance had been given for her—a mite of a half-scared infant in a great dim theatre. (8)

As Maisie's epistemological condition is compared to staring at the "images bounding across the wall in the slide of a magic-lantern," the novel itself, as Juliet Mitchell has intuited, becomes "in an important sense, a shadow-puppet show or [. . .] a film" (170).

As James put it in the Preface to the novel that "Small children have many more perceptions than they have terms to translate them" and that "their vision is at any moment much richer" (*What* 294), his choice of a child consciousness suggests the consciousness's function to highlight visual intensity and thus reveals his own awareness of its filmic potential. It is James's contemporary Henri Bergson, in his 1907 book *Creative Evolution*, who remarks that there is a parallel between the working of our knowledge and that of the *Cinématographe*:

We take snapshots, as it were, of the passing reality, and, as these are

characteristic of the reality, we have only to string them on a becoming, abstract, uniform and invisible, situated at the back of the apparatus of knowledge, in order to imitate what there is that is characteristic in this becoming itself. Perception, intellection, language, so proceed in general. Whether we would think becoming, or express it, or even perceive it, we hardly do anything else than set going a kind of cinematograph inside us. We may therefore sum up [. . .] that the *mechanism of our ordinary knowledge is of a cinematographical kind*. (306)

Evocative of the *Cinématographe*'s lens that admits light during filming and projects light during projection, Maisie's consciousness functions as a camera to record her external world as a series of moving images. Since the new arrangement her parents' divorce sets up is given to her as something "inevitably confounding to a young intelligence" (James, *What* 8), successive changes in her whereabouts foreground her artificial epistemological condition. Just as in the mechanism of the *Cinématographe*, it is Maisie's major task to receive successive fragments of movement and process them as continuous action through visual making. By delving into Maisie's consciousness, James calls our attention to the artificial, "cinematographic" nature of human consciousness in general.

That Maisie's way of relating to an exterior world is "phantasmagoric" is significant. Encapsulating a modern exhibitionist phenomenon, the word "phantasmagoria" references an earlier form of entertainment developed in the late

eighteenth century that features projections of fast moving images and optical illusions.<sup>8</sup> In comparing Maisie's epistemological condition to a child spectator before such a pre-cinematic apparatus, James's figurative use of visual technology signals the advent of a modern consciousness whose knowledge acquisition through external shocks resembles the cinematographic mechanism. James's use of the trope also highlights the inevitable indirectness of written language as a means of expression, especially when language's prime role is to index the invisible, impalpable world of knowledge and consciousness. With this word "phantasmagoria," James begins to reveal his increasing tendency to use visual tropes to represent immateriality.

As the ways in which Maisie's consciousness relates to her outside world emulate cinema spectatorship before the apparatus, James's narrator performs a new role freed from its traditional model and becomes resembling that of a commentator or a lecturer beside the screen in the late 1890s, when film editing techniques were not yet available.

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<sup>8</sup> As a key trope to figure Maisie's predicament, the word "phantasmagoria" has a culturally specific origin. The first OED entry states that a phantasmagoria is a form of entertainment, "an exhibition of optical illusions produced chiefly by the use of a magic lantern," "featuring projections of figures which moved or changed shape rapidly (often accompanied by sound effects)." The word derives from optical experiments made by its inventor Étienne Gaspar Robert (Robertson) who gave "fantasmagorie (magic-lantern) performances at the Pavillon d'Echiquier in Paris by 1799" (Musser, *Emergence* 24). As the first commercially successful deployment of the magic lantern emerged at the turn of the eighteenth century, fantasmagorie/phantasmagoria showed a variety of spectacles ranging from shadows and apparitions, to the spectre of Robespierre wanting to return to life, to phantoms "of the cherished dead [including] Voltaire, Lavoisier, Rousseau, and other heroes of the bourgeoisie" (24). Robertson, by creating "the effect of optical, dioptrical, or catoptrical illusions" (28), intended to play upon "the simultaneous realization that the projected image was only image and yet one that the spectator believed was real" (24). The phantasmagoria became a popular form of amusement in both England and America throughout the nineteenth century, especially for urban audiences.

Situating himself close to Maisie's consciousness while supplying commentary, the narrator's relation to Maisie is reminiscent of the lecturer's relation to the screen. As Germain Lacesse's delineation of the lecturer's roles informs us, like the lecturer the Jamesian narrator brings narrative continuity to fragmentary footage by supplying context, explaining the sources and specific qualities of the recorded materials, and sometimes taking on a translating job and dramatizing the narrative (487). Certainly, James brings a new kind of narration to the realm of novel through the narrator's self-consciously articulated mediating roles, roles that highlight the technologically mediated nature of reality.

### **II.3. Display, Diversity, Shock: Maisie's Spectatorship and the Aesthetics of Astonishment**

What is the cultural significance of James's setting up Maisie's sense of spectatorship as her main support in the construction of her subjectivity? In the novel, the changing realities that generate the dissociation between seeing and knowing compel Maisie to be a "spectator."

So the sharpened sense of spectatorship was the child's main support, the long habit, from the first, of seeing herself in discussion and finding in the fury of it—she had had a glimpse of the game of football—a sort of compensation for the doom of a peculiar passivity. It gave her often an odd air of being present at her history in as separate a manner as if she could only get at experience by flattening her nose against a pane of

glass. (James, *What* 80-81)

As suggested, in the narrative of Maisie's initiation, James foregrounds that Maisie's being a spectator, or being "a person who is present at, and has a view or sight of, anything in the nature of a show or spectacle" (OED), is constitutive of the formation of her subjectivity. By endowing Maisie with the sense of spectatorship as "a sort of compensation for the doom of a peculiar passivity," James proposes the spectator-subject as an active agent of her own history who exerts her agency through a mediating surface. In the beginning of the novel the seemingly vulnerable, naïve child's limitations are considered to be derived from her being a passive spectator of the indecipherable phantasmagoric world of adults, yet as the novel proceeds her spectatorship enables her to capture "an instant in which [she] fully saw" (James, *What* 165) and "to receive new information from every brush of the breeze" (206), which facilitates her decision about her own position.

In showing how a seemingly passive spectator-subject becomes an active agent of her own history, James draws attention to the crucial relations between visual representation and human subjectivity. Principally, James depicts Maisie as a modern subject in the sense that her perceptual experience in the urban setting mirrors individuals' common reactions to the shocks of modernity. By setting the novel in London, a metropolis where the "modern perception of the world as ephemeral, fugitive, and contingent" (Littau 46) became commonplace, James reveals his own awareness of modernity's transformative impact on the working of impressions. As James's contemporary Georg Simmel elaborated in his 1903 study "The Metropolis and Mental

Life,” in the metropolitan setting impressions can no longer “take a regular and habitual course,” as urban perceptual experience is characterized by “the rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions” (175). In depicting Maisie’s reactions to the shocks of modernity, however, James also reveals that this type of modern life characterized by the “intensification of nervous stimulation” (175) is becoming inherently and inevitably “cinematic.” As Littau notes, the relentless nature of visual stimuli in modern life is key to understanding Benjamin’s thesis that “film itself is a response to modernity” (Littau 47). Benjamin remarks, “There came a day when a new and urgent need for stimuli was met by the film. In a film, perception in the form of shocks was established as a formal principle” (*Charles* 132). To be sure, in applying his own literary impressionism to a metropolitan setting, James takes the form of shocks as a formal principle of the narrative. Accordingly, Maisie’s affective experiences— involving feelings of astonishment, bewilderment, and curiosity— as responses to modernity are strongly suggestive of cinematic modes of perception.

It is film historian Tom Gunning who has coined the phrase “an aesthetics of astonishment,” in which “[s]hock becomes not only a mode of modern experience, but a strategy of a modern aesthetics of astonishment” (“Aesthetics” 128), to describe early cinema’s spectatorial relations as distinguished from those of classical narrative cinema. According to Gunning, unlike the narrative absorption of later cinema, the first modes of filmic exhibition, following the tradition of turn-of-the-century visual entertainments, were received as a series of visual shocks and caused for the spectator “a pleasurable

vacillation between belief and doubt” (117). By drawing attention to the reportedly terrified reaction of spectators to the screening of the Lumière brothers’ *Arrival of a Train at the Station* and revising the dominant image of early cinema audiences as naïve and savage-like, “submitting passively to an all-dominating apparatus, hypnotized and transfixed by its illusionist power” (115), Gunning reimagines the first spectators’ experience which is not based on a childlike belief, but on “an undisguised awareness (and delight in) film’s illusionist capabilities” (129). Maisie’s somatic experience of acquiring knowledge inevitably resembles early film spectator’s “vertiginous experience of the frailty of our knowledge of the world” (122), yet the very power of visual illusion makes both Maisie and the film spectator aware of the nature of illusion. Maisie’s sharpened sense of spectatorship, represented as a countermeasure of her vulnerability, shows how she, while adapting the mode of early film spectator, “does not get lost in a fictional world and its drama, but remains aware of the act of looking, the excitement of curiosity and its fulfillment” (121).

When we place *Maisie* within the historical context and read Maisie’s spectatorship through the lens of Gunning’s model of the non-passive, incredulous early film spectator, one can argue that the novel’s form as well as its tactics for representing the formation of subjectivity stylistically mimic the aesthetics of early film form. As many film historians inform us, early film before narrativization took a particular format of programming called “the variety format.” Part of a tradition of turn-of-the-century mass amusements, the variety format was prevalent before the rise of classical narrative cinema and takes a form where diversity and heterogeneity predominate over coherence



and linearity. Instead of a coherent narrative, the variety format promises “a short-term but incessant sensorial stimulation, a mobilization of the viewer’s attention through a discontinuous series of attractions, shocks, and surprises” (Hansen 29). This principle of short-term and excessive stimulation is not only prevalent in early film form, but also, as Hansen points out, “elaborated by the media of an emerging consumer culture from about the mid-nineteenth century on, whether in advertising and shop-window display or in a whole range of consumption-oriented spectacles—from the World Fairs and Pan-American Expositions, through the Panoramas and Dioramas, to amusement parks like Coney Island” (30). This type of reception, “perceived very early as a specifically modern form of subjectivity” (29), pretty much describes Maisie’s process of initiation intersecting with a number of encounters with consumption-oriented spectacles such as the streets in London, shop-window displays, “the great Exhibition” strongly reminiscent of the World Fairs and Pan-American Expositions, and foreign tourist attractions. When the narrative foregrounds the ways in which Maisie receives the spectacles engendered by the media of an emerging consumer culture, its form not only reflects the impact of urbanization and industrialization upon human perception, but also resembles, if not appropriates, early film’s variety format.

Indeed, in chronicling a series of episodes that shape Maisie’s experience, James stylistically mimics dominant modes of cinema of the late 1890s in the sense that “[d]isplay, diversity, and shock trumped narrative coherence” (Bentley 289). Above all, the acquisition of new parents is enforcing variety on Maisie within the domestic sphere, thereby transforming family into the site of excessive variety rather than the site of

continuity. Maisie's phantasmagoric world of adults is full of images on display, thus preventing Maisie from comprehending its principle of causality. They are presented to Maisie, whose eyes function as a kind of representational apparatus for readers. From the onset, Maisie's divorced parents, especially Ida Farange, are depicted as "awfully good-looking" and "a social attraction" (James, *What* 5-6) for their extravagant beauty, producing "everywhere a sense of having been seen often, the sense indeed of a kind of abuse of visibility" (6). Ida's "huge panted eyes" looking like "Japanese lanterns swung under festive arches" (107) and Beale's beard, described with such words as "vast," "fair," "wonderful," and "lustrous," all make their appearances conspicuous yet, for the same reason, reduce them into mere images or shadows, gruesome, uncanny and almost devoid of human quality. Not only her abusive and incapable parents, but her other protectors, too, produce the sense of excessive visibility. The first governess Miss Overmore's "extraordinary prettiness" strikes Maisie's mind as deeply as the second governess Mrs. Wix's "dingy figure." Sir Claude's photograph put on display on Maisie's schoolroom mantelpiece is presented to her (and to Mrs. Beale as well) "to exhibit a fresh attraction" (40), making her lose "herself in admiration of the fair smooth face, the regular features, the kind eyes, the amiable air, the general glossiness and smartness" (38). It is remarkable that no adults in Maisie's orbit look ordinary; their conspicuousness easily makes them become objects of attention, whether they are good looking or not. As Maisie perceives the adults consisting of her little phantasmagoria as a series of displayed images from the introductory chapter through Chapter 7, their excessive visibility serves to characterize the highly exhibitionist nature of her world.

If Maisie's spectatorship prefigures shock as a predominant mode of modern experience, her way of acquiring knowledge is evocative of early film audiences' sense of shock in which "[t]he jolt experienced becomes a shock of recognition" (Gunning, "Aesthetics" 129). Maisie's impression is experienced through a "moment of checked concussion" that always happens "too soon for comprehension and too strangely for fear" (James, *What* 128). As Maisie is constantly exposed to the assaultive nature of modern visual culture, bewildering and muffled shocks of being laughed at and harassed by adults oddly give shape to the construction of her knowledge. During her first term with her father, Maisie herself is put on display and is physically and verbally abused by her father's friends: puffing their cigarette smoke onto her face, "Some of these gentlemen made her strike matches and light their cigarettes; others, holding her on knees violently jolted, pinched the calves of her legs until she shrieked—her shriek was much adored—and reproached them with being toothpicks" (9). Upon hearing this remark Maisie tries to associate the word "toothpicks" with her own body part, and thus to learn the language, but there is no adult around her who enables her to grasp the literal meaning of the word. The violent shocks experienced somatically as physical danger and nervous stimulation are embodied in Maisie's imagination through "the image of the little dead Clara Matilda, who, on a crossing in the Harrow Road, had been knocked down and crushed by the cruelest of hansoms" (20). Reflecting modern urban fascination with sensory assaults and traffic accidents, the death of Clara exemplifies images of children in danger of being hit by trolleys and carts in the illustrated press such as comic magazines and sensational newspapers in the turn of the century, which, according to

Ben Singer, conveyed “a historically specific hyperconsciousness of physical vulnerability in the modern environment” (79). Maisie deeply absorbs the image of Mrs. Wix’s dead daughter and connects herself with this image of “little mutilated life”; as Mrs. Wix declares, “She’s your little dead sister” (20).

Through his scenic method “showing” each scene in which the give-and-take of dialogue takes place, James plays multiple roles that are different from conventional novelists’, roles that parallel those of early film exhibitors in the variety format. As Charles Musser notes, in certain programs in the 1890s the film exhibitor was basically the creator of narrative, or “the author of the show” (Musser, *Emergence* 223), playing a number of authorial roles ranging from determining the length of shot being shown, forming variety programs, to arranging sound accompaniment; their roles even encompass juxtaposing shots to create contrast and selecting/arranging images and scenes to construct multi-shot narratives. Evoking the heterogeneous nature of the variety format, James’s scenic method creates contrast in a symmetrical way. For example, James juxtaposes two scenes in which Maisie encounters Ida and Beale, respectively, at unexpected places during their absences while she is with each parent’s spouse. Interestingly, both scenes take place in urban public spaces as sites of random encounters. While strolling in Kensington Gardens together, Maisie and Sir Claude catch “a couple who, side by side, at the end of the glade, were moving in the same direction as themselves,” and deem “these distant figures” (James, *What* 104) as their object of amusing contemplation. By commentating on the scene with an allusion to “the Forrest of Arden” from Shakespeare’s pastoral comedy *As You Like It*, Sir Claude frames it and

imaginatively transforms it into a sort of “tableau vivant” or living picture, a popular amateur entertainment form during the mid-1890s that “involved the restaging of well-known paintings and statuary as performers assumed frozen poses within an oversized picture frame” (Musser, “Cinema” 164). Their contemplative amusement in blurring the boundary between the imaginative and the real ceases when they discover that “a lady who looked tall, who was evidently a very fine woman,” turns out to be Ida (James, *What* 104). With this scene in which a spectacle of attraction momentarily holds the viewer’s attention and then releases the narrative progress, in which Maisie and Sir Claude’s amused spectatorship is activated and then ends up discovering Ida’s scandal, James integrates into his own narrative urban strollers’ increasing tendency to be spectators and spectacles to be seen at the same time.

By juxtaposing “the Forrest of Arden” scene and “the Flowers of the Forest” scene in which Maisie, this time with Mrs. Beale, encounters Beale and his mistress, James appropriates the highly exhibitionist style of the variety format. In particular, James stylistically imitates the illusionist power of a visual apparatus by testing the limits of an intellectual disavowal in mediated visual experience. Similar to the encounter with Ida and the Captain at Kensington Gardens, the moment of Maisie’s bumping into Beale and his mistress, who is deemed as the Captain’s counterpart or “Papa’s Captain” (143) in Maisie’s permutation, at the Exhibition at Earl’s Court is presented to her as a pure spectacle of attraction, involving curiosity, shock, and astonishment and creating illusory and fantastic effects “through a blur” (127). When Maisie and Mrs. Beale, in search for Sir Claude, hover around the Exhibition at Earl’s

Court, they pause “before the Flowers of the Forest, a large presentment of bright brown ladies—they were brown all over—in a medium suggestive of tropical luxuriance” (127). This “magnificent” “yet oddly [. . .] confus[ing]” spectacle is immediately followed by “the aspect of a gentleman who at that moment, in the company of a lady, came out of the brilliant booth,” so that Maisie immediately associates the two images: “The lady was so brown that Maisie at first took her for one of the Flowers” (127). While the living tableau is described literally through the lens of Maisie, reminding readers of the narrator’s role to just “show” what Maisie sees and the limit of the extent to which she can understand, James’s arranging the two very similar images causes an optical illusion for both Maisie and readers.

James plays upon uncertainties and ambiguities in the nature of human perception and confuses readers who attempt to identify the mysterious American Countess. The dialogue between Maisie and Mrs. Beale causes even greater confusion: when Maisie observes, “She’s almost black,” Mrs. Beale retorts, “They’re always hideous” (128), indicating Beale’s mistresses as a whole yet alluding to hidden racism in conjunction with racial tensions in the 1890s<sup>9</sup> as well. Because of such visual approximation, readers are likely to project “primitive” images of bright brown ladies onto their imagination of the Countess, despite her “civilized” taste represented by the

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<sup>9</sup> For extensive discussions of the sociocultural significance of the racial representation of the American Countess, see Walter Benn Michaels’s “Jim Crow Henry James?” (*Henry James Review* 16.3 [1995]: 286-91) and Kendall Johnson’s “The scarlet feather: Racial Phantasmagoria in *What Maisie Knew*” in his book *Henry James and the Visual* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007).

interior of her drawing room. Maisie, by calling the woman “the brown lady,” confirms her perception with renewed astonishment.

Maisie in truth almost gasped in her own; this was with the fuller perception that she was brown indeed. She literally struck the child more as an animal than as a ‘real’ lady; she might have been a clever, frizzled poodle in a frill or a dreadful human monkey in a spangled petticoat. She had a nose that was far too big and eyes that were far too small and a moustache that was, well, not so happy a feature as Sir Claude’s. (142)

While the re-emergence of the Countess arrests Maisie’s (and readers’) attention, the Countess’s racial otherness is represented by Maisie’s reminiscence of weird spectacles of late nineteenth century mass entertainments—sideshow freaks or animals such as “a clever, frizzled poodle in a frill or a dreadful human monkey in a spangled petticoat.” Given the tendency that “James’s heroines are nearly all representative of the American girl” (Wicke 117), and given the pervasive commodification of the image of the American girl at the turn of the century, the American Countess is indeed a queer deviation from James’s American female characters. With “a nose that was far too big and eyes that were far too small and a moustache” (James, *What* 142), the American Countess seems to be less a real person than a highly sensationalized caricature from popular magazines of the age witnessing cultural heterogeneity, social disorientation, and the rise of American capitalist culture.

Significantly, James uses this modern type of a large public exhibition to shed light on a subject’s spectatorial experience of encountering the other and to make Maisie

grapple with the culture of consumption-oriented spectacles. Recalling the first international exhibition that took place in Hyde Park, London in 1851, the Exhibition at Earl's Court is offered as a kind of lowbrow version of world's fair exhibitions, a highly popular nineteenth-century cultural practice of looking. Presented as "a collection of extraordinary foreign things, in tremendous gardens, with illuminations, bands, elephants, switchbacks and side-shows, as well as crowds of people among whom they might possibly see some one they knew" (123-24), the Exhibition is a site full of possibilities, possibilities not only for education and entertainment, but for random encounters with people and chance events, with the exotic and foreign, and with new technologies celebrating European civilization. Specifically, the exotic display of bright brown ladies that caught Maisie's eyes exemplifies spectacular displays of foreign goods at imperial expositions in the late nineteenth century, which, as El-Rayess points out, reveal "how the imperial spectacle can blur the dividing line between human, animals and other commodities" (120).

Writing that "everything she had missed at the side-shows was made up to her by the Countess's luxuries" (132), James presents the American Countess's drawing room manifesting the Countess's conspicuous consumption as an extension of those imperial expositions. Its display of "palm-trees drooping over brocaded and gilded nooks" and "little silver boxes scattered over little crooked tables and little oval miniatures hooked upon velvet screen" (130) is strongly reminiscent of the window displays of the new department stores that emerged in the late nineteenth century, which, according to Judith Walkowitz, "served as imperial expositions of the 'exotic' and 'sensuous' luxuries of the



colonies, with Liberty's Eastern Bazaar leading the way in marketing the 'romance' of the East to metropolitan customers" (48). Maisie also sees in the Countess's drawing room "the almost blinding whiteness of the light that sprang responsive to papa's quick touch of a little brass knob on the wall, in a place that, at the top of a short soft staircase, struck her as the most beautiful she had ever seen in her life" (James, *What* 145). As Kendall Johnson notes, with fully operational electrical lights that embody an "almost blinding whiteness" the Countess's drawing room evokes the so-called "White City" of the Chicago Columbian Exhibition in 1893, where "electric-bulb lighting symbolized the coherence of America's economic expansion" (138). While the brightly lit drawing room filled with luxuries manifests the Countess's monetary power to transform night into day and the even greater potential suggested by Beale's comment that there is "[n]o end of money" (James, *What* 141), the lure of great wealth affects Maisie, whose developing consumer consciousness gradually notices the impact of poverty upon her life. In her consideration of the Countess as her possible stepmother, the question becomes whether she chooses what she perceives as wealth, spectacular modernity and vulgarization over poverty, moral conservatism and refined taste. She draws her own conclusion: "There was something in the Countess that falsified everything, even the great interests in America and yet more the first flush of that superiority to Mrs. Beale and to mamma which had been expressed in silver boxes. These were still there, but perhaps there were [sic] no great interest in America" (145).

Speculating about the effects of visual culture on viewing subjects, James's work, as Jennifer Wicke contends in her investigation of the relationship between

advertising spectacle and James's aesthetic and moral concerns, "in its own thematic and structural arrangement [. . .] records a developing narrative [of] spectatorship" (88). As soon as Maisie becomes able to quickly absorb the accumulated shocks, "the increase of the alarm that had most haunted her meditations" precipitates "a high quickening of [her] direct perception, of her gratified sense of arriving by herself at conclusions" (James, *What* 75). In that process, Maisie's intellectual activities highlight how spectators are "not just given over to visceral states of astonishment or contemplation," but "critically active" (Musser, "Cinema" 170). Film historian Charles Musser, in his account of Gunning's notion of cinema of attractions, remarks that "[e]arly film spectators performed significant intellectual activity involving comparison, evaluation and judgment – as opposed to (or simultaneously with) either the enraptured spectator passively contemplating a beautiful picture or the 'gawker [. . .] held for the moment by curiosity and amazement'" (170). In contrast to her parents' perception of her as "a little idiot" (James, *What* 13) for her seeming stupidity, Maisie's astuteness exceeds all of the adults' expectations; she quickly learns how to read nonverbal signs such as "the unmistakable language of a pair of eyes" (15) and practices "the pacific art of stupidity" (53) while silently comparing, evaluating, and judging the things happening around her.

Maisie grows into a discerning spectator by observing the spectacles, by (re)configuring her relation to her knowledge, and by internalizing the feeling "as if she were flattening her nose upon the hard window-pane of the sweet-shop of knowledge" (103). James's frequent use of the metaphor of the shop window indicates that, as her relation to her knowledge is compared as that of window shopper and displayed goods,

Maisie looks, contemplates, and voraciously desires what is behind the window. Maisie develops her consumer consciousness with the help of Sir Claude, who, by enabling the viewing subject to shop, travel, and gratify her desire for “more” experience, serves as “showman of the spectacle” (104). In contrast to her previous shopping experience with Moddle, under whose system “no dawdles at shop-windows” (44) are allowed, shopping excursions with Sir Claude in the form of “combined amusement and instruction” (82) give her unprecedented freedom of mobility and pleasure: “They rode on top of ‘buses; they visited outlying parks; they went to cricket-matches where Maisie fell asleep; they tried a hundred places for the best one to have tea. [. . .] They dropped, under incontrollable impulses, into shops that they agreed were too big, to look at things that they agreed were too small” (82). Rambling through the city of London with Sir Claude in a leisurely mode of transport enables Maisie to enjoy a variety of urban architectural forms such as the National Gallery, Kensington Gardens and many other parks, teashops and shop windows. Deviating from “the prototype of the swift, decisive, rational male shopper” (El-Rayess 126) of the nineteenth century, Sir Claude’s non-purposeful, impulsive shopping facilitates Maisie to practice an unprecedented form of mobilized gaze—the shopper’s gaze—, which, according to Anne Friedberg, was encouraged by “the coincident development of department store shopping, packaged tourism, and protocinematic entertainment” in the mid-nineteenth century and empowered consumer-spectators (especially women) “with new forms of social mobility as shoppers, as tourists, as cinema-goers” (4). Maisie more and more familiarizes herself with a mode of consumer contemplation, “a speculative regard to the mise-en-scène of the display

window without the commitment to enter the store or to make a purchase” (68), and reconfigures her own relation to “the sweet-shop of knowledge.”

In relating Maisie’s spectatorship to his thematic concerns of initiation and knowledge, James indeed conceives of a parallel among the visual practices of shopping, tourism, and film-viewing. As her fate is to see constantly while not being allowed to have access to the scenes she is passionately and patiently looking for, the accumulated practices of the mobilized virtual gaze work to facilitate her coming to knowledge. Maisie’s spectatorship now takes the form of cultural tourism when Sir Claude, as an impulsive strategy to counterplot Ida’s and Beale’s cheating, takes her to Folkstone and then to Boulogne. At both touristic locations, Maisie’s act of sight-seeing intersects with climactic moments to “see through” her mother, Sir Claude, Mrs. Beale and Mrs. Wix; she gets to “see” things as a tourist-spectator as much as she gets to “discover” the adults’ secrets as a spectator of their game until they finally ask her to join it.

As she actively engages with such activities as observing the manners and art of the places at Boulogne, her touristic spectatorship is somewhat evocative of the Grand Tour, a cultural tour of Europe for young aristocrats that served as their educational rite of passage, enabling her to feel “the great ecstasy of a larger impression of life” (James, *What* 170). As many critics suggest, Maisie in Boulogne especially evidences James’s identification with her, reflecting his visits to Boulogne in his early adolescence, which he wrote in the closing chapter of *A Small Boy and Others* (1913). Upon her arrival at Boulogne, Maisie, just like young James, gains a new perspective that allows her to have access to “a part of [herself] previously unvisited” (*SB* 224).

She was 'abroad' and she gave herself up to it, responded to it, in the bright air, before the pink houses, among the bare-legged fishwives and the red-legged soldiers, with the instant certitude of a vocation. Her vocation was to see the world and to thrill with enjoyment of the picture; she had grown older in five minutes and had by the time they reached the hotel recognized in the institutions and manners of France a multitude of affinities and messages. Literally in the course of an hour she found her initiation. (*What* 170)

Strongly evocative of James's own transformative experiences while walking the old streets of Boulogne,<sup>10</sup> Maisie's arrival at Boulogne marks a vital transition in her way of perception; as soon as she finds her "vocation," she no longer perceives the world as shocks but as something that can give her satisfactions. As Marjorie Kaufman notes in her talk "Beside Maisie on that Bench in Boulogne," Maisie's "discovery of her calling as an attentive and appreciative world traveler" functions to compensate for "the uncertainties and dangers of the circumstances of her life, over which she . . . has no control" (260-61). It is especially when Maisie makes multiple visits to the ramparts of

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<sup>10</sup> In *A Small Boy and Others*, James reminisces about his memories of Boulogne as follows: "This experience was to become when I had emerged from it the great reminiscence or circumstance of old Boulogne for me, and I was to regard it, with much intelligence, I should have maintained, as the marked limit of my state of being a small boy. I took on, when I had decently, and all the more because I had so retardedly, recovered, the sense of being a boy of other dimensions somehow altogether, and even with a new dimension introduced and acquired; a dimension I was eventually to think of as a stretch in the direction of essential change or living straight into a part of myself previously unvisited and now made accessible to me as by the sharp forcing of a close door" (*Autobiographies* 238).

the *haut ville* of Boulogne with Mrs. Wix during Sir Claude's absence that her vocation is activated.

[. . .] the quaint and crooked rampart, with its rows of trees, its quiet corners and friendly benches where brown old women in such white-frilled caps and such long gold earrings sat and knitted or snoozed; its little yellow-faced houses that looked like the homes of misers or of priests and its dark chateau where small soldiers lounged on the bridge that stretched across an empty moat and military washing hung from the windows of towers. This was a part of the place that could lead Maisie to inquire if it didn't just meet one's idea of the middle ages; and since it was rather a satisfaction than a shock to perceive, and not for the first time, the limits in Mrs. Wix's mind of the historic imagination, that only added one more to the variety of kinds of insight that she felt it her own present mission to show. (196)

Maisie's self-assigned vocation to "show" not only gives her unprecedented satisfactions but also reminds her of Mrs. Wix's limitations, which eventually affect her upcoming decision whether to choose Mrs. Wix as her life companion. On the next day, they make another visit to the rampart.

They went back to the rampart on the second morning; the spot on which they appeared to have come furthest in the journey that was to separate them from everything that in the past had been objectionable: it gave them afresh the impression that had most to do with their having worked

round to a confidence that on Maisie's part was determined and that she could see to be on her companion's desperate. She had had for many hours the sense of showing Mrs. Wix so much that she was comparatively slow to become conscious of being at the same time the subject of a similar process. The process went the faster, however, from the moment she got her glimpse of it; it then fell into its place in her general, her habitual view of the particular phenomenon that, had she felt the need of words for it, she might have called her personal relation to her knowledge. (197)

As Kaufman argues, "the bench on the ramparts looms as the setting for Maisie's braver and braver confrontations with what it is finally open to *her* to be" (261). Indeed, with the rampart scenes James proposes a travelling subject's impression at work as a source of empowerment for non-passive spectatorship. Maisie's newly endowed tourist-spectatorship gratifies her desire for "more" experience and mobilizes the sophisticated viewing habits of one who now has attained fluency in the realm of the visual. It increases her "capacity for receiving straight impressions" (*LC-I* 59) so that she is able to turn this momentary impression into her own initiation, which leads her to a sense of empowerment: "she recognized, she understood, she adored and took possessions[,] feeling herself attuned to everything and laying her hand, right and left, on what had simply been waiting for her" (*What* 171). With these scenes, James furthers the literary impressionism he suggested more than a decade earlier and proposes this heightened capacity for impressions not only as a prerequisite for one's self-cultivation but also as a

remedy for modern vertigo, a way to avoid being hypnotized or transfixed by the illusionist power of an all-dominating-apparatus-like world.

If we, like Mrs. Wix, see Maisie's whole history as "the successive stages for her knowledge," it is notable that "the very climax of the concatenation" (206) comes with her articulated desire for (more and infinite) mobility; upon arrival at Boulogne Maisie stops being a patient little girl and expresses her desire for Paris as the "real" destination of her tour, her road to knowledge. Maisie intuits that as she walks and habituates herself to the mobilized gaze, she should go to Paris for her endless *flânerie*<sup>11</sup> as a mobile subject. By placing the departure of the train in the climactic scene of the novel, James poaches in the realm of the *Cinématographe* and sheds light on her wanting to become a spectator-traveler in the sense that, as Christa Blümlinger notes, "railway and cinema converge most precisely in the modes of perception of spectator and traveler: both create a tourist, a visual consumer, a panoramic observer, a deeply unstable subject" (247). On their walk as Maisie contemplates her last-minute decision, a decision whether to live with Sir Claude and now divorced Mrs. Beale, as Sir Claude proposes, or to be with Mrs. Wix, Sir Claude asks Maisie to go to the railway station under the pretense of purchasing

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<sup>11</sup> Vanessa R. Schwartz argues that Paris's burgeoning mass culture encompassing the Paris Morgue, wax museums, and panoramas in the late nineteenth century rendered accessible to the masses the cultural activity of *flânerie* or "the new, mobilized gaze of the precinematic spectator" (88), which as a cultural phenomenon points to the birth of cinema spectatorship. Schwartz's argument helps us to see turn-of-the-century Paris as an apt place for Maisie the prototypical spectator to desire to visit for its many attractions that stimulate motion: "Between 1892 and [ . . . ] 1900, [ . . . ] Parisians could see the 'Pantomimes Lumineuses' at the Musée Grévin starting in October 1892. In 1894, they could see moving photographs in Edison's Kinetoscope, and as of December 1895, the Lumière Brothers' films could be seen at the Grand Café" (109).



the Paris papers. They hover at the restless platform and bump into a train that stands waiting to depart, in two minutes, for Paris. Reminding us of the Lumière spectators' being overwhelmed by the *Cinématographe's* affects, the dramatic tension of the scene reaches a climax as the train starts moving: "'It's going – it's going!' cried Maisie. / They watched it move, they watched it start; then the man went his way with a shrug. 'It's gone!' Sir Claude said" (James, *What* 252). Upon the train's departure Maisie feels "a real fright" (252), yet she soon recovers; her fear is gone, as if the train carried it away, while Sir Claude's remains. Indeed, Maisie's looking at moving objects expedites her own vision, in contrast to Sir Claude's static, absent gaze and his helpless "stillness" in fear of his own weakness. Maisie now fully takes account of and takes in constant movement, instability and uncertainty as essential parts of her life, and transforms herself from a moving object such as "a ready vessel for bitterness" (5) and a "little feathered shuttlecock" (12) into an unstable yet active subject with freedom of mobility.

The ways in which Maisie relates to her phantasmagoric world throughout the novel correspond to how early film spectators received the new medium, in the sense that both integrate their bodily experience of the shocks of the new into their own knowledge while remaining aware of the act of looking. Like the early film spectator, Maisie not only experiences shock in her quotidian life, but also learns to master how to exploit, appreciate, and appropriate this strategy called the aesthetics of astonishment through her spectatorial experience. As Giuliana Bruno argues in her account of Gunning's aesthetics of astonishment, strong curiosities ignited by perceptual shocks "draw the viewer toward unbeautiful sights, for this noncontemplative mode entails an

attraction for the dark sides of the visible” (*Streetwalking* 59), about which Maisie’s lustful eyes to pry into the secrets of adults in her orbit make a telling case. Both James and Gunning show us that spectators are not doomed to be (cultural) dupes but have the potential to be critical subjects who do not get lost in an illusory world. In line with the tradition of visual technologies and mass entertainment of the nineteenth century, their spectatorial positions in constituting subjectivity encompass multiple dyads such as spectator-consumer, spectator-tourist, and spectator-traveler.

If James conceived the novel as a site for the discourse of taste, he posits Maisie Farange as a prototype of his ideal reader who, despite the vulgarizing conditions of modernity, ends up cultivating herself and drawing her own understandings of taste, social decorum, and morality. James does so by making the contrast between Maisie and the adults who represent poor taste/superficiality (Mrs. Wix who is introduced as “a person addicted to extremes”) (James, *What* 66), impropriety (Ida and Beale), and dubious morality (Sir Claude). With her impressionist potential, Maisie paves the way for a Jamesian ideal reader whose reading purpose is different from that of Victorian fiction readers, and who, as a member of a broader cultural audience, aspires to and is fated to figure out how to cultivate her own taste in the maelstrom of modernity. James, by representing spectator-subjectivity putting up with as well as seeking pleasure from modern spectacles, reveals his own ambivalent and ambiguous attitudes toward modernity and attempts to propose to his readers and, by extension, to cultural audiences of his time a tactic appropriated from his adversary. As James’s textual space stylistically mimics the variety format of early film practices, readers share Maisie’s

affective and epistemological experience and are invited to exploit contemporaneous cinema-spectating modes through their interaction with the text.

CHAPTER III  
ATTENTION AND CONTEMPLATION: DOROTHY RICHARDSON'S  
FEMINIST SPECTATORSHIP AND *PILGRIMAGE*

Cinema profoundly ruptured the nineteenth century notion of “spectatorship”—the act of contemplating spectacles and urban strolling/exploration with freedom of access to the divided spaces of the metropolis— as a constituent of bourgeois male subjectivity. As Rita Felski points out, “Many of the key symbols of the modern in the nineteenth century—the public sphere, the man of the crowd, the stranger, the dandy, the *flâneur*—were indeed explicitly gendered” (16). While spectatorial practices such as viewing, walking, listening, and contemplating are characteristic features of the experience of modernity that constitutes the modern subject, those activities exclusively belonged to a realm of bourgeois male pleasure until the dawn of the twentieth century. The cinema, for the first time in the history of art, began to interpellate those who had not had access to the public sphere—women, children, working-class men and women, immigrants— as its spectators and, by eroding the demarcation between public and private that had governed everyday life and leisure, transformed the bourgeois public sphere into a more inclusive one, or to borrow Hansen’s words, into “an alternative public sphere.”

Throughout the column she wrote for the film journal *Close Up* (1927-1933) and her epic novel *Pilgrimage* (1915-1938), Dorothy Richardson committed herself to exploring the constructions of female subjectivity and gendered spectatorship emerging

in the silent period. In her representation of female experience in *Pilgrimage* and her work on cinema spectatorship, Richardson challenges the dominant discourses of male-centered spectatorship by exploring female counterparts of “the public sphere, the man of the crowd, the stranger, the dandy, the *flâneur*” (Felski 16). In her *Pilgrimage* project aiming to “produce a feminine equivalent of the current masculine realism” (Richardson, *P-I* 9), Richardson portrays the consciousness of a protagonist, Miriam Henderson, who aggressively seeks out spectatorial experiences; throughout the novel, Miriam remains a perpetual stranger who constantly travels, desires to contemplate life as a spectacle, enjoys walking on the streets of London at night, and, by espousing the New Woman’s lifestyle, violates the demarcation between public and private. In her *Close Up* articles, Richardson writes from the perspective of one of the spectators seated in a movie theatre and presents “the film spectator as *flâneur*” (Marcus, *Close* 158). Throughout the articles, Richardson revises the dominant imaginative mappings of London through her discussion of the spaces of the movie theaters and the demographic makeup of the cinema audience by taking up a position similar to that of the nineteenth-century male urban investigator.

Exploring the representation of spectatorial practices in Richardson, this chapter focuses on a particular mode of perception Richardson emphasizes throughout her theory of writing/reading and film-viewing. Conceiving both reading and film-viewing as “aesthetic exercise,” Richardson suggests that both literary devices and filmic techniques should work to achieve readers’/spectators’ “creative collaboration” by activating the mode of contemplation. For Richardson, an ideal prose style should demand “a

perfection of sustained concentration” through innovations such as the idiosyncratic use of punctuation, which she believes encourages readers to slow down their reading speed and contemplate the pages they are reading. In her “Continuous Performance” column, twenty-one entries in total, Richardson’s major concerns in charting variable factors that determine the quality of cinema experience lie in the extent to which they challenge spectators and whether they are helpful or detrimental to “the concentration that is essential to collaboration between the onlooker and what he sees” (Richardson, *Close* 163). Throughout the column, Richardson quite consistently contends that “the whole power of the film” lies in “the reduction, or elevation of the observer to the condition that is essential to perfect contemplation” (203).

Drawing attention to Richardson’s valorization of sustained attentiveness and contemplation, this chapter explores the border-crossing aspects of Richardson’s representations of spectator-subjectivity in *Pilgrimage* and her “Continuous Performance” column. As Laura Marcus points out, “the relationship between her film writing and her fiction is one of the most telling and compelling examples of the film-literature nexus in twentieth-century literature” (*Tenth* 350). While many critics have noticed the influence of the cinema on her writing, they have omitted the possibilities that her “cinematic” writing would anticipate and contribute to an alternative tradition of filmmaking. In order to shed new light on Richardson’s contribution to filmic aesthetics and better understand the comprehensive effects of what Richardson calls “aesthetic exercise” on readers/spectators, this chapter relates Richardson’s film writing and her fiction to issues of cinematic perception, which many film theorists and cultural critics in

the early twentieth century have associated with attention and distraction. Situating Richardson in the cultural discourse of attention and its inevitable relation to distraction, this chapter analyzes the spectator-subjectivities of three figures—a Richardsonian ideal reader she postulates in her theory of writing/reading, Richardson’s protagonist and alter ego Miriam Henderson in *Pilgrimage*, and cinema audiences as the object of her observation in the “Continuous Performance” columns—and the ways Richardson has rendered their relationships intimate, interconnected, and interchangeable while (self-) effacing the author figure.

### **III.1. The Crisis of Attentiveness and the Implausibility of Absorbed Subjects**

Before moving on to Richardson’s representation of spectator-subjectivity, it is necessary to provide a theoretical framework of the mode of contemplation she valorized in her representation of reading, viewing, and listening. Although the aesthetic of astonishment characterized by “a marked encounter, a direct stimulus, a succession of shocks” (Gunning 124) was adopted by early cinema in its first decade (roughly before 1906), many critics inform us that prevailing turn-of-the-century norms of artistic reception were the ideals of detached contemplation, which were still frequent in receiving traditional art forms such as realist paintings and classical music. Benjamin, in his “Artwork” essay, calls this kind of reception an exclusively middle-class activity distinguished from the mass’s distracted way of receiving fragmentary, technologically reproduced art such as film. Benjamin contends that looking at paintings involves distance from reality and a heightened state of concentration through which the viewer is

absorbed into works of art. Following Benjamin, critics such as Michael Fried and Garret Stewart focus on a state of contemplative absorption represented in eighteenth and nineteenth-century art. In his book *Absorption and Theatricality* (1981), Fried argues that absorption was the dominant tendency in realist paintings emerging from the late eighteenth century, standing in stark contrast and responding to the “theatricality” of Rococo, in which figures are self-consciously posed and displayed. Not just figure paintings, but nature and landscape paintings, involved an absorptive mode of perception. Drawing on Diderot’s criticism, Fried accounts for the working of absorption in the sublime experience of looking at nature and landscape paintings: “In that state of mind and body a wholly passive receptivity becomes a vehicle of an apprehension of the fundamental beneficence of the natural world; the subject’s awareness of the passage of time and, on occasion, of his very surroundings may be abolished; and he comes to experience a pure and intense sensation of the sweetness and as it were the self-sufficiency of his own existence” (130-31). Through absorption, the viewer acquires “passive receptivity” and momentary forgetfulness about time and space, which renders her/his relation to the painted subject ever more intimate.

Stewart makes a similar contention in his book *The Look of Reading* (2006), yet he calls attention to the impact of modernity on the centeredness of absorption and the consequently changed cultural significance of absorption. Agreeing with Fried by saying that “Absorption was for decades an implicit double law of realist painting,” Stewart defines absorption as



what happens to you when you gaze upon what is happening to those painted people (in) there. Everything gets concentrated at once, as one mutually realized and reflectively extended moment, a moment given over to duration in response. But duration gets sped up by modernity. The centeredness of absorption, as a humanist benchmark in its own right, grows harder to come by a society on the run, technologically abetted and commercially managed as all movement, even eye motion, had grown. The picture of preoccupied concentration, in other words, no longer looks so real under the sway of modernity. (134)

According to Stewart, from the mid-nineteenth century on, absorption in many forms of representation looks more and more unrealizable because of the accelerated, fragmented, and highly commercialized nature of modernity; consequently, viewers no longer paid full attention to painted absorption but were more likely to glance at “in distracted passing” (134). Particularly, Stewart observes that in the epoch of impressionism, scenes of reading were deemed as something “calculated to put at least momentary brakes on the contingent glimpse of [the impressionist’s] own visual treatment” (135). That is, painted preoccupied concentration “in the volatile efflorescence of the new impressionist view” (134) serves to offer “a cultural counterweight to the bombarded eye of extratextual perception: not in the supposed serenity or cerebral purity of its ‘interiority’ any longer, but in its hard-won, and fully physical, act of concentration” (135). While represented absorption captured on canvas was “fetishized as a compensatory reflex against all the distraction to which the new specular culture so eagerly submits the

subject” (136), the ideal of detached contemplation was becoming more and more something unachievable and implausible.

Jonathan Crary investigates this ongoing crisis of attentiveness as a crucial aspect of modernity in *Suspensions of Perception* (2001). Urging us to shift attention from the idea of “reception in a state of distraction” as the basis of understanding modern subjectivity to “the rise of attentiveness norms and practices” (1), Crary observes that “in the late nineteenth century attention became a problem alongside the specific systemic organization of labor and production by industrial capitalism” (30). He also notes that many artists, writers, and philosophers in this period cherished absorption as a precious and rare experience in artistic reception. Indeed, the mode of contemplation, or the modes that it accompanies such as attentiveness, concentration, and absorption, was integral to early twentieth-century debates about the effects of mass culture, which involved distraction as opposed to high art’s valorization of contemplation.

Not just in the realm of visual art but also in the context of music, absorption had become something hard to achieve. For example, the German composer Richard Wagner, among many, was an artist who, making “a distinction between ‘higher’ (deeply attentive) and ‘lower’ (distracted) forms of listening” in the mid-nineteenth century, “clearly advocated the former as purified and ethically superior perceptual engagement” (Crary 249) and deplored “the pervasiveness of distracted modes of cultural consumption” (248). Even English novels in the 1900s present aesthetic experiences that can no longer be characterized as acts of purified perception. For example, E. M. Forster’s 1910 novel *Howards End* features a scene where listening to

classical music is already contaminated with distraction. In the famous scene set in the Queen's Hall in Chapter 5, the narrator calls Beethoven's Fifth Symphony "the most sublime noise that has ever penetrated into the ear of man" (26) and remarks that "such a noise is cheap at two shillings" (27). While the novel values the cheapness that allows educated working-class (or lower middle-class) audiences represented by Leonard Bast to have access to high art, it also reveals the impossibility of contemplation through the well-educated, middle-class character Helen Schlegel, whose "attention wandered" (27) constantly as she gazes at "the audience, or the organ, or the architecture" (27) while listening to Beethoven.<sup>12</sup>

When we acknowledge that contemplation is no longer a prevailing mode of perception in technologically abetted modernity, Richardson's preoccupation with the mode of contemplation and her persistent representation of absorbed subjects in scenes of reading, listening, and film-viewing are noteworthy; indeed, her case complicates the

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<sup>12</sup> Forster records Helen Schlegel's mental distraction in a very detailed manner and with a playful tone:

she heard the tune through once, and then her attention wandered, and she gazed at the audience, or the organ, or the architecture. Much did she censure the attenuated Cupids who encircle the ceiling of the Queen's Hall, inclining each to each with vapid gesture, and clad in sallow pantaloons, on which the October sunlight struck. 'How awful to marry a man like those Cupids!' thought Helen. Here Beethoven started decorating his tune, so she heard him through once, more, and then she smiled at her cousin Frieda. (27)

With respect to this scene, Levenson, in his reconsideration of modernism's acontextualism, notes that although Forster does not give up exploring "an ideal of special aesthetic attention" through a character such as Helen's brother Tibby Schlegel, who is a musical connoisseur and a formalist, the writer ultimately reveals and confirms that "the moment of aesthetic engagement is a kind of vanishing point, one that, under scrutiny, disappears into its complex attending conditions. You want to see only the music, but you end by noticing the accidents of your surroundings or you impose a story on your sensations or you talk to your neighbor" (Levenson, "Novelty" 673).

prevailing understanding of aesthetic contemplation in multiple ways. First, in contrast to many theorists and cultural critics who saw filmic reception as distraction, Richardson seeks the mode of contemplation from intense film-viewing experiences in the silent era. Unlike many critics' agreement that contemplative immersion is an exclusive bourgeois activity, Richardson expands its full effect to plebeian cinema spectatorship. Second, she associates the heightened mode of concentration with a sort of aesthetic slowness as opposed to velocity, which allows readers/spectators to pay close attention to the detail. According to Naomi Schor, the detail has been not only "gendered and doubly gendered as feminine" (4) throughout the history of aesthetics but also menacing to hegemonies due to "its tendency to subvert an internal hierarchic ordering of the work of art which clearly subordinates the periphery to the center, the accessory to the principal, the foreground to the background" (20). Schor's argument lets us see Richardson's narrative strategies that call attention to the detail, the detail that demands the perceiving subjects' attention as potentially subversive. Third, in her preoccupation with representing female counterparts for predominantly male urban spectators, attentiveness becomes a pressing issue for constructing female subjectivity in her everyday life. In *Pilgrimage*, the protagonist Miriam Henderson deals with the ongoing crisis of attentiveness in her persistent pursuit of two kinds of freedom, one financial and the other spiritual. Striving to be a perfect aesthete and a financially independent woman, Miriam, while representing an ever more implausible absorbed subject in the scenes of modernity, gets caught with a historically specific problem of attention, that is, a problem that comes "alongside the specific systemic organization of labor and production by industrial

capitalism” (Crary 30). Coping with the drudgery of modern life as a working woman, Miriam raises potent questions about what constitutes a female subjectivity in the early twentieth century when women enter the workplace and public sphere for the first time, and when labor becomes “a key site of women’s emancipation” (Shiach 7). In the following sections, I will scrutinize the ways in which Richardson reconsiders this somewhat outdated mode of aesthetic perception with focus on the close linkage between Richardson’s feminist agenda and her account of cinema spectatorship.

### **III.2. “A Place Like Home”: Richardson’s Alternative Spectatorship**

Richardson’s contribution to the film journal *Close Up* as a whole constitutes an unprecedented form of film writing. As Marcus notes, Richardson “had no contacts with the professional world of film, and was not drawn, as many other modernist writers were, to experimental and avant-garde cinema” (*Tenth* 350); “she implicitly refused the position of the film critic, who must venture forth to see new films, rather than waiting for what comes to the local cinema” (353). In her letter to Bryher, one of the journal’s editors, in Spring 1927, she expressed enthusiasm for its upcoming publication; yet she was a little reluctant about her own contribution to the journal, which Bryher requested, writing, “I can’t however see myself contributing, with my penchant for Wild West Drama & simple sentiment” (Richardson, *Windows* 134). “However,” she goes on, “I know I have some notes somewhere & will look them up. But I fancy they are simply about seeing movies, regardless of what is seen” (134).

Although she keeps this amateurish stance throughout her column, Richardson daringly challenges gendered notions of spectatorship by strategically appropriating the position of *flâneur*. While she observes, glimpses at, and contemplates her fellow spectators, the interior of movie theaters in various locations around London, and what is being seen on the screen, her portrait of movie theaters is dominated by “the *flâneur*’s attention to the spectator’s subjectivity” (J. Walkowitz 17) and the capacity of the cinema to stimulate. Understanding an analogy between the city and the cinema,<sup>13</sup> she especially mimics nineteenth-century male urban investigators such as “Frederick Engels, Charles Dickens, and Henry Mayhew,” who “roamed the city with [ . . . ] earnest (if still voyeuristic) intent to explain and resolve social problems” (18). Similar to her male counterparts, Richardson attempts to remap London through the different sites of movie theaters ranging from the West End to the slums and the suburbs. Especially in articles such as “The Front Rows” and “Cinema in the Slums,” she directly addresses the issues of juvenile vagrants and urban slums marked by “disease and crime, and the

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<sup>13</sup> For example, in her article “A Tear for Lycidas,” she deliberately blurs the distinction between the *flâneur*’s idle strolling in the city and spectator’s physical experience of film-viewing:

Wander at large, we found ourselves unawares, not by chance, we refuse to say by chance, in a dim and dusty by-street: one of those elderly dignified streets that now await, a little wistfully, the inevitable re-building. Giving shelter meanwhile to the dismal eddyings and scuttlings of wind-blow refuse: grey dust, golden straw, scraps of trodden paper. Almost no traffic. Survival, in a neglected central backwater, of something of London’s former quietude.

Having, a moment before, shot breathless across the rapids of a main thoroughfare, we paused, took breath, looked about us and saw the incredible. A legend, not upon one of those small, dubious façades still holding their own against the fashion, but upon that of the converted Scala theatre: Silent Film. Continuous Performance. *Two Days. The Gold Rush.* (Close 200)

endless procession of half-starved labourers of all ages and both sexes available for exploitation in the basements supporting the British empire” (*Close* 180). However, her urban spectatorship makes a big difference from her male predecessors who, according to Judith Walkowitz, “not only distanced themselves from their objects of study,” but also “felt compelled to possess a comprehensive knowledge of the Other” (20). Unlike nineteenth-century urban explorers who never walked or rode into the slums, yet who just desired to “penetrate” slums and transform “what appeared to be a chaotic, haphazard environment into a social text that was ‘integrated, knowable, and ordered’” (18-19), Richardson maintains her non-condescending point of view by focusing on restful spectatorial experiences she shares with the people she observes in movie theatres. Instead of othering and treating them as objects of knowledge, her strong interest firmly lies in how the cinema can offer the underprivileged “many kinds of salvation” by endowing them with richly imaginative experiences through illustrations, by fulfilling “mankind’s demand for pictures” (Richardson, *Close* 181). Acknowledging social commentators’ concern about the dangers of the cinema for the physical and moral welfare of the young generation—such as the theater’s ability to ruin children’s “nerves and eyesight” while “breathing stifling air” (172) and “spiritual degradation” (181) caused by the cinema, Richardson advocates the cinema’s function as a shelter and as a powerful “civilizing agent” (181) for the young and the weary.

Observing different kinds of spectators, Richardson self-consciously blurs the distinction between spectator and spectacle, the distinction that had long been gender sensitive in the formula where woman is spectacle and man is bearer of the look, by

highlighting that “the onlooker is a part of the spectacle” (176). In articles such as “Continuous Performance VII: The Front Rows” and “Continuous Performance VIII,” her objects of observation are actual spectators she encounters inside a movie theater. Rather than describing supposedly passive spectators who sit silent and still, Richardson spotlights boisterous and voluble spectators who might have had a disruptive influence on the rest of the spectators. For example, she reminisces about a moment when a boy in the front row let out a scream of terror that ruptured the silence in the hall, and “people behind craned forward hoping for a happy glimpse of the face of a child in transport” (173). Instead of saying the boy’s “shriek” was disturbing, Richardson posits that his reaction is “the kind of sound Chaplin listens for when he is testing a film” (173), believing that “the development of the front rowers” would lead to “their growth in critical grace” (173).

In addition, Richardson deduces signs of female empowerment from her encounter with a young woman who is “by no means silent” (175), who is now able to remain “self-centred and serenely self-expressive” (175) while sitting in this new public sphere. A “spectatrix,” or what Richardson proposes as the epitome of the female spectatorial subject, is finally “upon the path that men have reached through long centuries of effort and of thought” and able to instinctively balance between “the thing perceived and herself perceiving” (176). Her perceptual ability is heightened so that “she takes all things currently. Free from man’s pitiful illusion of history, she sees everything in terms of life that uncannily she knows to be at all times fundamentally the same” (176). As Richardson imagines the ways in which spectators’ “audible running



commentary” works to empower them in an unprecedented way, her alternative spectatorship surpasses and subverts limitations in nineteenth-century spectatorship as a bourgeois male pleasure.

One of the most radical aspects of Richardson’s theory of film-viewing is the connection she made between absorptive, contemplative modes of perception and female, working-class spectatorship. In her first column entry entitled “Continuous Performance,” which she thereafter kept for her entire column, she describes one of her many visits to a movie theatre in London:

It was a Monday and therefore a new picture. But it was also washday, and yet the scattered audience was composed almost entirely of mothers. Their children, apart from the infants accompanying them, were at school and their husbands were at work. It was a new audience, born within the last few months. Tired women, their faces sheened with toil, and small children, penned in semi-darkness and foul air on a sunny afternoon. There was almost no talk. Many of the women sat alone, figures of weariness at rest. Watching these I took comfort. At last the world of entertainment had provided for a few pence, tea thrown in, a sanctuary for mothers, an escape from the everlasting *qui vive* into eternity on a Monday afternoon. (160)

Drawing attention to working-class mothers as “a new audience,” her description of the scene clearly evidences how the cinema served as “a place women could frequent on their own, as independent customers, where they could experience forms of collectivity

different from those centering on the family” (Hansen 118). Richardson highlights the quiet, restful atmosphere that allows this place to be “a sanctuary for mothers” burdened by domestic labor, which provides them with a momentary escape from the toilsome realities of life. Through this scene of tired yet resting mothers, Richardson reveals how the cinema eroded “the gendered demarcation between private and public spheres” and “provided for women, as it did for immigrants and recently urbanized working class of all sexes and ages,” as a heterotopia,<sup>14</sup> or “a site for the imaginative negotiation of the gaps between family, school, and workplace, between traditional standards of sexual behavior and modern dreams of romance and sexual expression, between freedom and anxiety” (Hansen 118). In the column “The Increasing Congregation,” for example, Richardson proposes the cinema as an alternative home to “happy youth, happy childhood, weary women of all classes for [whom] at home there is no resting-place” (*Close* 171). In “There’s No Place Like Home,” she calls the movie palace a place like home, a place where “we are full citizens of the spirit, free from the tyranny of

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<sup>14</sup> Heterotopias, the term coined by Michel Foucault in his famous essay “Of Other Spaces” (1986), can be understood as “something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (Foucault 24). Foucault himself identifies the cinema as an example of heterotopias that are “capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible,” in the sense that “the cinema is a very odd rectangular room, at the end of which, on a two-dimensional screen, one sees the projection of a three-dimensional space” (25). Richardson’s use of spatial metaphors, in “The Increasing Congregation,” in that cinemas’ functional and architectural resemblance is illuminated, manifests strong similarities between her conception of cinemas and Foucault’s notion of heterotopia: “Refuge, trysting-place, village pump, stimulant, shelter from rain and cold at less than the price of an evening’s light and fire, [. . .] [s]chool, salon, brothel, bethel, newspaper . . .” (*Close* 171).

circumstance and always and everywhere perfectly at home” (168). This therapeutic, emancipatory function of the cinema as a heterotopia for women and the working class reverberates throughout her column.

A number of feminist critics have discussed the ways in which Richardson reconsiders contemplation in relation to her conception of female spectatorial subjectivity. Jenelle Troxell, for example, interprets Richardson’s valorization of a contemplative, absorptive mode of perception as her defense of “a mode of looking which is denigrated as uncritical, apolitical, sentimental, in short as ‘feminine,’ in much historical film criticism,” which values sympathetic identification rather than defamiliarization, concentration over passivity, and contemplation over distraction, thereby forging “an alternative model of spectatorship” (52). Troxell, however, distinguishes Richardsonian contemplation from “the wholly passive, absorptive spectatorship typically associated with female viewers” (65): “compelled by the power of silence and stillness and the mystical states they induce, . . . she promotes a state of active contemplation, through which spectators can harness a deeper level of experience” (65).<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, Antonia Lant and Ingrid Periz, in their edited book on women’s writing on film, entitled *Red Velvet Seat* (2006), see the coming of sound as a major driving force of Richardsonian contemplation: “The closing of the

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<sup>15</sup> As a rationale, Troxell underscores the influence of the Quaker “tenets of mysticism, in which absorption in the image is sought after and cultivated” (52), noting that Richardson herself was “a long-time devotee of numerous Quaker teachings, from which she derives much of her literary technique and innovative film theory” (53); by the strong analogy with Quaker meetings, or a congregational church, the cinema, in Richardson’s conception, transforms itself into “a quiet space for contemplation” (53).

silent era provoked Richardson, retrospectively, into defining contemplation as a specifically feminine pleasure in cinema (one now ruined), a pleasure which resided, Richardson suggested, in the spectatrix's scanning of the screen, her eye wandering across it as if aggregating details across a surface, without direction or plan" (57-58). Lant and Periz's argument that Richardson's vindication of contemplation serves as her warning against the coming of synchronized sound in the late 1920s on the ground that "the linearizing, plot-regulating forces of synchronized sound were not channeling and constraining these feminine habits" (58) only makes sense when we understand contemplation as a specifically feminine pleasure.<sup>16</sup>

Adding to such feminist perspectives on Richardsonian contemplation, I argue that Richardson, in her forging of an alternative spectatorship promoting the cinema small and silent, reconsiders this seemingly outdated perception in order to highlight and (re)discover the cinema's restorative, therapeutic function to offer a counterweight to the culture of distraction in the early decades of the twentieth century. Throughout her *Close Up* articles, Richardson consistently proposes that contemplative and intense film-

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<sup>16</sup> Richardson, in her 1932 article "The Film Gone Male," describes the film as producing a consciousness close to that of memory, explicates that the film, regarded as a medium of communication, in the day of its innocence, in its quality of being nowhere and everywhere, nowhere in the sense of having more intention than direction and more purpose than plan, everywhere by reason of its power to evoke, suggest, reflect, express from within its moving parts and in their totality of movement, something of the changeless being at the heart of all becoming, was essentially feminine. In its insistence on contemplation it provided a pathway to reality. (*Close* 206)

Heightening the sense of "the changeless being" rather than that of "becoming," Richardson cautions the film against becoming audible and particularly becoming a medium of propaganda, assuring, "It is a masculine destiny" (206).

viewing experiences are only available at a small, garage-like theatre accompanied by simple, improvised piano music, as opposed to gigantic, garish movie palaces that house orchestrated music and would soon incorporate synchronized sound. Unlike many male critics who make analogies between cinematic perception and modernity's distraction, Richardson conceives the cinema as an antidote to the experience of modernity characterized by the acceleration of life, barrages of stimuli, distraction, and enforced industrial productivity. Particularly, Richardson contradicts Siegfried Kracauer's conception of picture houses in Berlin, in his collection of Weimar essays, *The Mass Ornament*, as "palaces of distraction" marked by "elegant surface splendor," "costly interior furnishings," and "a well-wrought grandiosity" (323, 324). Arguably, Richardsonian spectatorship and her model of the movie theater itself are a strong response to Kracauer's contention that "the stimulations of the senses succeed one another with such rapidity that there is no room left between them for even the slightest contemplation" (Kracauer 326). She insists that the movie palace should be small, simple, and plain, so that what matters outside the theater should not be of concern: "Small enough to be apprehended at a glance. And plain. That is to say simple. The theatre may be as ornate, as theatrical as it likes, the note of the cinema is simplicity. Abandon frills all ye who enter here," so that "[o]ne cannot show off one's diamonds in the dark. Going to the cinema is a relatively humble, simple business" (Richardson, *Close* 169).

Simple, continuous music plays an important role in forging this alternative spectatorship. In the 1927 article "Continuous Performance," Richardson highlights the

function of the accompanying music in small movie theaters as crucial to spectators' creative co-operation:

The music is not an alien sound if it be as continuous as the performance and blending with it. That is why, though a good orchestra can heighten and deepen effects, a piano played by one able to improvise connective tissue for this [sic] varying themes is preferable to most orchestral accompaniment. Music is essential. Without it the film is a moving photograph and the audience mere onlookers. Without music there is neither light nor colour, and the test of this is that one remembers musically accompanied films *in colour* and those unaccompanied as colourless. (161)

Richardson extends her discussion of music in the following article "Musical Accompaniment" and brings up the problems of orchestrated music's replacement of vanishing pianists, and of monthly programs' substitution for "continuous performance": "The total result of these efforts towards improvement was a destruction of the relationship between onlookers and film" (162). She believes that improvised music played by a solo pianist endows fragmented, black-and-white moving images with continuity and liveliness (which she calls "light" and "colour" in the above quotation), thereby sustaining spectators' concentration: "With the help of the puff of smoke and our pianist's staccato chord we can manufacture our own reality" (163). Film historians inform us that live music was integral to silent films, sometimes serving as a "primary motivation for going to the cinema" (Jancovich et al. 97); notably, the coming of sound

not only hastened “the demise of the music hall and the variety show,” but also made cinemas “less dependent on live entertainment” (97-98). Richardson’s preference for simple, live music corresponds with her belief that while “cinematography is a visual art reaching the mind through the eyes alone—by means of the necessity for concentrating upon hearing the spoken word” (Richardson, *Close* 194), musical accompaniment vouchsafes to spectators liveliness and freedom, which can be kept only when film is free from “the restrictions of language” (“Films” 24). In “A Tear for Lycidas,” she once again emphasizes this close linkage between spectators’ collaboration and silent film’s formal aesthetics: “sight *alone* is able to summon its companion faculties: given a sufficient level of concentration on the part of the spectator, a sufficient rousing of his collaborating creative consciousness. And we believe that the silent film secures this collaboration to a higher degree than the speech-film just because it enhances the one faculty that is best able to summon all the others: the faculty of vision” (*Close* 197).

Indeed, for Richardson, concentration and freedom go hand in hand in the ideal state of cinematic perception. Richardson thinks that an ideal artistic reception is achieved through “the co-operation of the creative consciousness of the audience,” which enables not only an escape from reality, but also the spectator’s “forgetfulness of itself as an audience” (160). Rebecca Egger, one of the early feminist critics who scrutinized the entirety of Richardson’s *Close Up* articles, calls it “cinematic forgetfulness,” arguing that Richardson throughout this column refuses “the ideological trajectory that ties cinema to the salutary production of knowledge” and “instead attempts to reconceive cinematic spectatorship as a model form of epistemological

liminality, in which the viewer relinquishes conceptual security and takes up a position of suspended knowledge” (Egger 7). Richardson’s conception of cinema as “sanctuary” and “escape” that allows its spectators to forget “their roles as aesthetic consumers and classed, social subjects” (9) is represented not only in her observation of working-class mothers, but also in her discussion of the cinema in the suburb, where she encounters “people of village and hamlet” (Richardson, *Close* 185). They find in the cinema “their only escape from caseless association, their only solitude, the solitude that is said to be possible only in cities” (185); as a result, cinema encourages them to adopt a cosmopolitan perspective in which “they become for a while citizens of a world whose every face is that of a stranger” so that “the mere sight of these unknown people is refreshment” (185). Richardson posits that cinematic experience not only educates village people to have such a cosmopolitan perspective, but also leads them to a transcendental experience: “To cease for a moment to be just John or Mary carrying about with you wherever you go your whole known record, to be oblivious of the scene upon which your life is lived and your future unalterable cast, is to enter into your own eternity” (185).

Richardson’s cinematic forgetfulness also “calls for a shifting of discursive agency” (Egger 9) from text/film to reader/viewer. In the column “Captions,” Richardson states:

For the present we take captions for granted. But we are ready to try doing without them. Now and again a film gathers us in without any clear hint beyond the title. This we love. We love the challenge. We are



prepared to go without a hint even in the title. We are prepared for anything. We trust the pictures. Somewhere sooner or later there will be a hint. Or something of which we can make one, each for himself. The absence of any hint is a hint we are ready to take. (Richardson, *Close* 165)

Arguing that spectators need “only the minimum of informative accompaniment” (165), Richardson urges them “to reclaim interpretive control” and calls upon “filmmakers to produce more enigmatic, less overtly suturing texts” (Egger 9). In her discussion of slow motion photography, Richardson makes a clear distinction between “derisive and jaded viewers” who just laugh at the film technique without understanding its revelatory secrets and “sensitive” viewers who can fully appreciate and who are “hopeful of discovering the hidden charm” (*Close* 182) of filmic art. Calling slow motion “another revelation of the cosmic possibilities of the film” (183), Richardson especially applauds the early high-speed camera’s capacity to record high-speed events such as the motion of athletes, which leads spectators to an *auratic* aesthetic experience, a revelation: in a slow motion photography of a runner, for example, she discovers “on his face the look of blissful concentration given in religious art to saints whose battles are won. [. . .] Its beauty and its wonder were imperious demands, overwhelming” (183). With this remark, Richardson shares her ideas with Benjamin, who also thought slow motion revealed reality’s “optical unconscious,” allowing “another nature” to speak to the human observer (Benjamin, *Work* 37). However, Richardson’s significant difference from Benjamin, who deemed distraction as the ultimate mode of cinematic perception,

lies in that such an awe-inspiring revelation derives from a rare encounter with an absorbed subject displayed on the screen, which spectators, too, receive in the state of concentration: “the revelation bestowed by the ecstatic face, of the spirit withdrawn, within the body it was operating, to the point of perfect concentration, showing this business of athletic achievement as one with every kind of human achievement, with that of the thinker, the artist and the saint, is one of the most priceless offerings to date of the film considered as a vehicle for revealing to mankind that in man which is unbounded” (Richardson, *Close* 183). The next section will discuss her theorization/representation of reading subjects, focusing on Richardson’s ongoing preoccupation with active contemplation, with the perceiving subject’s discursive agency in textual production, and with aesthetic slowness.

### **III.3. “The slow, attentive reading”: Punctuation, Depth, and Scenes of Reading in *Pilgrimage***

While the writer’s status as artist in literary modernism has been considered an important subject in modernist studies, less attention has been paid to the modernist reader’s subject position. In fact, modernist attributes such as an obsession with the idea of art’s autonomy (“art for art’s sake”), a rejection of conventions and morality, valuing form and style over message and wisdom, and the pursuits of self-consciously international cosmopolitanism and spiritual exile all contributed to what makes an artist figure in the face of modernity. In the early twentieth century, textual space became a battlefield for readers to secure a hard-won concentration against the outside world’s

stimuli. In contrast to Victorian novel reading as a mode of consumption and as a practice to “consolidate one’s sense of belonging” to society and to “confirm one’s belief in the security, rightness, and communality of the life one led” (Flint 34), modernist reading practices purposefully question norms and social regulations and impel readers to discover the meaning of the text on their own. Roland Barthes’s remark that “The reduction of reading to a consumption is clearly responsible for the ‘boredom’ experienced by many in the face of the modern (‘unreadable’) text, the avant-garde film or painting,” that “to be bored means that one cannot produce the text, open it out, *set it going*” (Barthes 163), might serve as a starting point to formulate what might constitute a modernist reader. Barthes reminds us of the fact that while modernist writers achieved their artistic aims with their experiments with language, form, and style, modernist readers encountered unreadably difficult texts and were required to adopt a new reading strategy in order to overcome boredom and appreciate aesthetic values of new modes of writing through active participation in textual production.

As evidenced in her many essays and novels, Richardson was preoccupied with the reading subject’s position more than many writers in the early twentieth century. In her theory of reading and writing, Richardson elevates a reading subject into an aesthetic one, who should conceive the act of reading not as a mode of consumption but as an artistic exercise that requires heightened concentration. Richardson’s theory of reading and writing corresponds in many ways to Barthes’s notion of “the Text” as opposed to that of “the Work,” in which “the distance between writing and reading” is abolished “by joining them in a single signifying practice” (162), by asking of the reader “a practical

collaboration” (163). Interestingly, she begins theorizing modernist readership by giving credit to Henry James. In her 1924 essay “About Punctuation” published in the literary journal *Adelphi*, Richardson eulogizes the prose of Henry James as follows:

Of the value of punctuation and, particularly, of its values as pacemaker for the reader’s creative consciousness, no one has had a keener sense than Henry James. No one has more sternly, or more cunningly, secured the collaboration of the reader. Along his prose not even the most casual can succeed in going at top-speed. (“About” 341)

Richardson argues that, by slowing down the reading speed with intricate punctuation and thus strengthening “the reader’s creative consciousness,” James’s prose transforms the act of reading into “aesthetic exercise,” “a spiritual Swedish Drill”<sup>17</sup> (342). “Gently, painlessly, without shock or weariness,” Richardson remarks, “as he carries us unhasting, unresting, over his vast tracts of statement, we learn to stretch attention to the utmost” (342). In the 1938 foreword to her life-long, multi-volume work *Pilgrimage*, Richardson, calling James the “pathfinder,” once again, extols his prose style, “a prose style demanding, upon the first reading, a perfection of sustained concentration [. . .] and bestowing, again upon the first reading, the recreative delights peculiar to this form of spiritual exercise” (*P-I* 11). In claiming herself as James’s legitimate successor for a new tradition of the English novel, Richardson valorizes sustained concentration, or

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<sup>17</sup> Ross and Thomson, in their Broadview edition of *The Tunnel* in which Richardson’s major essays are included, give a definition of the word as “A form of light physical exercise akin to calisthenics or yoga, emphasizing grace, balance, and attention, popular in the first quarter of the twentieth century” (342, footnote 1).

stretching one's attention to the maximum, as ideal modes of reading. As Susan Gevirtz has put it, "To Richardson, the spiritual exercise of James's technique is a function of the attention James pays to the relationship between reader and writer" (Gevirtz 20). By drawing in a Jamesian attention, Richardson attempts to figure out "the way in which she wished her work to be read" (20).

In "About Punctuation," Richardson criticizes "the machinery of punctuation" embedded in nineteenth century writing, which, "while lifting burdens from reader and writer alike and perfectly serving the purposes of current exchange [. . .] devitalized the act of reading" ("About" 340). Instead, she suggests that modern, non-mechanical, organic prose should be unpunctuated, or should experiment with punctuation, thereby enabling "the slow, attentive reading" through which "the faculty of hearing [. . .] is enhanced until the text *speaks* itself" (340). As Annika J. Lindskog points out, here "listening" to a text does not necessarily mean that "it should be spoken out loud, or that the reader should focus on its aural qualities and rhythms" (9). Instead, it rather suggests a newly-formed intimacy between reader and text as if text directly speaks to reader, which can be achieved through the reader's deliberate attempt to draw attention to the text's stylistic devices such as punctuation and blank space. With her use of idiosyncratic punctuation, Richardson attempts to reconfigure "the borderline between inertia and attention" by encumbering "an easy-going collaboration" (Richardson, "About" 340) between the reader and the text. When unpunctuated modern prose facilitates readers to adopt "the slow, attentive reading," readers are able to dissent from "a deliberate conformity to tradition," which, in Richardson's opinion, is maintained

through readers'/writers' conformity to standard punctuation. That is, sticking to punctuation rules may result in control of liberty in human expression: "so charming is convention," she remarks, "that it is easy to forget that the sole aim of law is liberty; in this case, liberty to express" (340).

By promoting "the slow, attentive reading," Richardson showcases how slowness and depth created by readers' creative consciousness allows them to have access to an alternative experience marked by non-homogeneous temporalities and spatialities. Richardson postulates that throughout the enhancement of attention produced by the use of non-standard punctuation, "the strange lost charm is born" (340). As investigated in the earlier section, Richardson's discussion of slow motion and the function of active contemplation in her *Close Up* articles provides ample evidence that she values depth and continuity over surface and fragmentation. These suggested border-crossing aspects about her theorization of reading/film-viewing become ever clearer when we look through some recent modernist scholars' approaches to aesthetic affinities between film and literature. In his recent account of modernism, Michael Levenson discusses the integration of filmic aesthetics into literary modernism of the interwar period and makes a distinction between "montage modernism" and "deep modernism." Understood as practices "to construct complex artifacts by reassembling the smaller units—impressions, frames, images, sounds" (*Modernism* 242)—, montage modernism coincides with the works of the Soviet filmmakers, especially Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* and Dziga Vertov's *The Man with the Movie Camera*, and encompasses major modernist works in the 1920s such as T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*,

Ezra Pound's *The Cantos*, and the "Wandering Rocks" episode of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. This notion is now widely accepted and circulated in modernist studies, yet the term "deep modernism" he coins is somewhat new. Drawing on André Bazin's theory of the history of film, Levenson calls our attention to what Bazin claims as two important film techniques led by directors such as Jean Renoir and Orson Welles, the techniques central to a decisive change in the history of film: "the new *depth of visual field*, which opened a spatial volume containing more information, and the *long take*, which let the eye linger over the image" and "offered the absorption of gazing" (242, emphasis original). Levenson applies this concept of depth for cinematographers and camera operators to modernist literary works that provide a sort of "depth of field spreading through time," presenting life as "a long circuit moving backward as it moves forward, a cycle of repetitions and returns, a continuous process of amplification and revision" (243-44). While montage modernism turns to "speed, discontinuity, and juxtaposition" and emphasizes "construction and assemblage," deep modernism, Levenson states, "sustains its attentions" (243). That is, while the montage aesthetic leaves ostensible gaps between fragments for the spectator to construct the synthetic view, the aesthetic of depth renders the spectator's relation with the image intimate and maximizes the spectator's contribution to the meaning construction.<sup>18</sup> By implication, Levenson's deep

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<sup>18</sup> Bazin, in his essay "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema," argues that depth of field works better for the spectator than montage on the ground that the former induces "a more active mental attitude on the part of the spectator and a more positive contribution on his part to the action in progress" (35-36). Bazin affirms that "while analytical montage only calls for [spectator] to follow his guide, to let his attention follow along smoothly with that of the director who will choose what he should see," the

modernism looks toward slowness, continuousness, and simultaneity (as opposed to speed, discontinuity, and juxtaposition) as essential sources of meaning and highlights sustained attention, or contemplation, as the mode of perception for the reader, the viewer, or the listener to fully “absorb” artifacts.

Lutz Koepnick, in his book *On Slowness* (2014), more extensively discusses positive aspects of modernist aesthetics characterized by slowness. Pointing out limitations in the view of many modernists in the early 1900s who saw slowness as “antiprogressive and anti-Enlightenment, privileging static over dynamic interrelations, binary oppositions over dialectical energies, mindless contemplation over critical engagement, escapist flight over nonsentimental commitments, nostalgia over activism” (17), Koepnick sheds new light on the ways in which modernist slowness participates in recent scholarly conversations about “the heterogeneity and plurality of aesthetic modernism” (18). Koepnick asserts that modernist slowness complicates and disrupts the unequal, antagonistic relationship between time and space embedded in “the normative association of Western modernism with pleasurable speed and ceaseless movement” (18). Modernist slowness, he goes on, “far from inviting readers, viewers, and listeners to hang on to bygone traditions, rhythms, and identifications” (19), is not anti-modern, nostalgic, nor anti-aesthetic, and thus should not be thought as “a corrective to the presumed modernist privileging of the temporal over the spatial, as an attempt to play out what might be homogeneous, stable, and tame about space against the rapid and

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depth of field spectator “is called upon to exercise at least a minimum of personal choice: It is from his attention and his will that the meaning of the image in part derives” (36).



discontinuous pace of modernity's clocks, vehicles, and tools of telecommunication" (19). Instead, Koepnick reminds us that modernist slowness emphasizes "the coeval, imbricated, and indeterminate relationships of the temporal and the spatial" by activating "a peculiar mode of engaging with the various temporalities and trajectories that energizes the spaces of modern life" (19); in this version of modernism, space is redefined as "a dynamic simultaneity of disparate trajectories and dissonant narratives," and time as "a dimension whose emphasis on change required open interactions between discrete elements and agents" (20).

Notably, both critics' arguments are based upon their full acknowledgment of cinema's infiltration into human perception and its fostering of the modern concept of life, "a concept of life as movement, change, chance, and process" (Koepnick 150). By fully recognizing the ways in which modernist aesthetics gains the spectator's attention through intensification of the perception of time and space, Levenson and Koepnick encourage us to switch our attention from artistic creation to reception. In doing so, they recognize the boundary-breaking potentials of modernist aesthetics that would be otherwise treated as boring and static, potentials to disrupt binary oppositions between space and time, movement and stasis, interior and exterior, depth and surface, and speed and slowness, which have resonated with the monolithic conceptions of modernity.

Richardson's thirteen-volume novel *Pilgrimage*, more than 2,000 pages in length and written between 1912 and her death in 1957, presents a single character's life as a continuous process without offering any traditional sense of resolution or ending. Since Richardson had never declared an official end to this novel in serial form, the unfinished

form tellingly corresponds to “the endless patience of the narrative” (Levenson, *Modernism* 243), insisting on the “ongoingness of the everyday” (Langbauer 165). As Richardson herself observes that “the swarming detail [. . .] is the basis of daily life” (“Women” 373), her pages are filled with minute details that make everything on those pages equally trivial and equally meaningful at the same time. This hyper-realist style creates a new depth of field that activates the absorption of gazing and thus encourages us to take up slowness as a method of reading. While the narrative does not move toward an ending and resists the linear movement of time, the depth of visual field generated by an enormous array of details intensifies both temporal and spatial experiences and lets the reader participate in the meaning construction.

Richardson’s deep modernism is significantly manifest through the representation of the protagonist Miriam Henderson’s acts of reading in *Pilgrimage*. Serving as an extension of Richardson’s own ideas about creative collaboration, scenes of reading in *Pilgrimage* function to raise crucial questions about what might constitute the condition of modernist readers. Miriam the reading subject often muses on the reason why she reads books while others do not, and asks herself why reading from cover to cover should be the only legitimate way of reading a book. A big difference in her reading method lies in her resistance to linearity, in that “she could look at the end, and read here and there a little” (Richardson, *P-I* 384). Acknowledging people’s opposition to her reading habit, she asks back, then, what is the point of reading to reach an ending: “People thought it was silly, almost wrong to look at the end of a book. But if it spoilt a book, there was something wrong about the book. If it was finished and the interest gone

when you know who married who, what was the good of reading at all? It was a sort of trick, a sell. Like a puzzle that was no more fun when you had found it out” (384).

Instead, Miriam thinks that an alternative reading should attempt to feel the writing, feel “the sentences as if you were writing them yourself” (385). Her profound doubts about dominant narrative plots’ tendency to end in either marriage or death, which meets the need of a fast and easy reading method, correspond with *Pilgrimage*’s serial form.<sup>19</sup>

DuPlessis, regarding the novel as Miriam’s “booklong search for a healthy marginality” (144), observes that the novel’s quest plot incorporates “a critical response both to the ending in death and to the ending in marriage, once obligatory goals for the female protagonist” (142). As Miriam’s own acts of reading attempt to disrupt a linear, homogeneous temporality, readers are invited to read *Pilgrimage*, emulating Miriam’s reading method, and to experience non-linear, non-homogeneous temporalities that the novel form offers.

In addition, Miriam enters a new understanding of spatial experience through her acts of reading. A reading scene in *The Tunnel* serves as a supreme example of how

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<sup>19</sup> *Pilgrimage*’s serial form has been a telling case for many feminist critics who discuss the significance of non-traditional endings in women’s literature. It is Elaine Showalter who, in her influential book *A Literature of Their Own: British Woman Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (1977), remarks that “Richardson’s art is afraid of an ending” (261). In response to Frank Kermode’s notion in *The Sense of an Ending* (1967) of a fictional ending as men’s obsession with their incomprehensible fear of their own deaths, Showalter argues that Richardson’s “inability to finish is a statement in itself, a response to the apocalyptic vision of” male contemporary writers such as H.G. Wells and D.H. Lawrence. Similarly, Laurie Langbauer, in her investigation of “the serial impulse” in Victorian fiction as “the refusal of closure,” observes that *Pilgrimage*’s serial form “puts into question a literary history that wants to impose stable meanings on periods and forms” (41).

Miriam, by activating creative collaboration, breaks away from Victorian readership and enters into a transformative relation to space. It occurs when Miriam visits her newfound friend Eleanor Dear, who is sick in bed, and is asked to read to her while having supper. The book Miriam is reading to her is Charlotte Brontë's 1853 novel *Villette*, which she has been reading over and over since she was fifteen. Instead of providing the content of the book Miriam is reading out loud, Richardson lets us pay attention to the effect Miriam's act of reading creates:

The familiar words sounded chilly and poor. Everything in the room grew very distinct. Before she had finished the chapter, Miriam knew the position of each piece of furniture. Miss Dear sat very still. Was she listening patiently like a mother, or wife, thinking of the reader as well as of what was read, and with her own thoughts running along independently, interested now and again in some single thing in the narrative, something that reminded her of some experience of her own, or some person she knew? No, there was something different. However little she saw and heard, something was happening. They were looking and hearing together . . . did she feel anything of the grey . . . grey . . . grey made up of all the colours there are; all the colours, seething into an even grey . . . she wondered as she read on almost by heart, at the rare freedom of her thoughts, ranging about. The book was cold and unreal compared with what it was when she read it alone. But something was happening. Something was passing to and fro between them, behind the text; a

conversation between them that the text, the calm quiet grey that was the outer layer of the tumult, brought into being. If they should read on, the conversation would deepen. A glow ran through her at the thought.

(Richardson, *P-II* 260-261)

Repeatedly stating that “something was happening,” Richardson calls our attention to Miriam’s heightened sense of space enabling her to experience something transformative. Miriam’s act of reading turns everything in this room into grey. In a 1921 letter to her friend E. B. C. Jones, Richardson mentions this color with respect to her reviewers’ scathing criticism about *Pilgrimage*’s style: “The voices of my reviewers are now an almost universal groan of ennui. Some of them shriek with rage & disgust at the awful unending greyness” (*Windows* 52). Although Richardson associates greyness with “ennui” in this letter, she at the same time implies that “the awful unending greyness” is essential to understanding the reading method she aspires, which Miriam actualizes in this scene. As Miriam reads on, the room reverberates with “the calm quiet grey,” which makes her feel that “something [is] passing to and fro between” her and Eleanor Dear. Her act of reading not only activates her readerly collaboration, but also creates a sense of unexpected intimacy with a friend who has no idea what *Villette* is about.

By situating this homosocial reading scene in “a tiny room” of a single impoverished woman, Richardson significantly emancipates readers from Victorian ways of reading. This point even gets clearer when we compare this scene and another reading scene from the same chapter-volume, in which Miriam overhears her employer

Mr. Orly reading a book to his wife. According to Kate Flint, in the Victorian era reading fiction, especially reading aloud to someone, “was associated, above all, with the domestic environment” and regarded as “a common sociable family activity within the middle-class home” (24). As the middle-class home has long been “associated with conformity and tradition, with family and marriage, with leisure and private life” (Rosner 127), the act of reading aloud was also part of domestic activities that upheld these middle-class ideologies. Considering that, Miriam’s reading in Eleanor Dear’s cupboard-like room, a space for a single, sick woman who works as a nurse to earn her living, profoundly ruptures such Victorian values. While Miriam goes on reading, she momentarily feels that she is “like a man reading to a woman” (Richardson, *P-II* 261). Reminding readers of Mr. Orly’s reading aloud in Chapter Three, in which a man reading to a woman is enacted, her sense of performing a man’s reading signals a dim connection to the vestige of Victorian ways of reading Mr. Orly’s represents. The Orlys borrows books from Mudie’s Lending Library, one of the major circulating library proprietors in the nineteenth century. Overhearing Mr. Orly’s reading, Miriam intuits that “the sound of reading” represents “An Early Victorian voice, giving reproachful instruction to a child” (61), associating Victorian ways of reading with patriarchal ideology. In her own reading moment, Miriam quickly dispels the feeling as though she mimics a man’s reading. Refusing authoritarian, masculine forms of reading that separate reader from text,<sup>20</sup> Miriam thinks that

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<sup>20</sup> Critics such as Jean Radford and Susan Gevirtz call attention to how Miriam distinguishes her reading as “a quest” from man’s reading as “a habit” (Richardson, *P-II*

A man's reading was not reading; not a looking and a listening so that things came into the room. It was always an assertion of himself. Men read in loud harsh unnatural voices, in sentences, or with voices that were a commentary on the text, as if they were telling you what to think . . . they preferred reading to being read to; they read as if they were the authors of the text. Nothing could get through them but what they saw. [. . .] Perhaps that was why husbands so often took to reading to their wives, when they stayed at home at all; to avoid being in the room listening to their condemning silences or to their speech, speech with all the saucypan and comfort thought simmering behind it. (261)

Through Miriam's voice, Richardson carefully and resolutely distinguishes her own theory of collaborative reading from masculine, Victorian ways of reading. It is also evident that Richardson, with the passage above, makes a continuous argument highly close to what she proposes in her *Close Up* articles: her alternative readership/spectatorship is based upon the profound appreciation of silence, the intensification of a single faculty, and direct collaboration between reader/viewer and

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279), connecting Richardson's theory of punctuation with Miriam's subversive reading represented in *The Tunnel*. Radford observes that in this novel Miriam recognizes "the materiality of language" (13), which "brings about an epistemological shift" (13) and leads her to realize that male readers "assume a position of authority in relation to language" (11). Gevirtz, who sees both Richardsonian reading and writing as a quest, gives an account of Miriam's gender sensitive distinction that "in order for writing or reading to be a quest, to serve as a means of discovery, [. . .] one's habits must be disturbed" (21). Gevirtz interprets Richardson's theory of punctuation as "an attempt to produce a disturbance in the reader's habits that echoes the disturbance of habit that Miriam desires and that Richardson herself must have experienced when reading in the mode of quest" (21).

text/film. The reading scenes also insinuate that in order for a female subject to indulge herself in spectatorial experiences, she must symbolically and literally escape from Victorian middle-class home.

#### **III.4. Miriam Henderson, the (In)Attentive Modern Subject**

As Richardson's biographer Gloria Fromm states, "One of Richardson's principal aims in writing *Pilgrimage* was to chart—with the utmost fidelity—the education of her heroine's sensibility in the late Victorian and Edwardian world of her own youth" (xix). In depicting the female subject's symbolic departure from the Victorian middle-class home, the narrative offers scenes of Miriam's reading, viewing, and listening as integral to the construction of Miriam's subjectivity, a feminist subjectivity that attempts to break away from sexual and gender roles and social norms of the Victorian era. In the early chapter-volumes of *Pilgrimage* that cover the years between her late teens and early twenties, young Miriam (albeit sporadically) enters an abstract world, a world that liberates her from social regulations restraining women's lives, and begins to give shape to her yet formless feminist thoughts. Indeed, Miriam's aesthetic experiences are not only constitutive of her self-education to be an autonomous being, but also something that she always aspires and struggles to secure. In her pursuit of independence and aesthetic pleasure that will eventually lead her to become a writer/artist, young Miriam oscillates and seeks balance between her professional self and private self, between the one whose world consists of duties, responsibilities,



sociability, and decorum and the other who cherishes artistic and spectatorial activities including reading, listening, viewing, performing, and walking.

My discussion in this section is largely based on *Pointed Roofs* (1915) and *The Tunnel* (1919), the two chapter-volumes which, while delineating the early stage of Miriam's quest, show contrast in aspects and trajectories of modern life and the modes of perception highlighted. My focus on the two novels derives from the notable transition in the nature of Miriam's aesthetic experiences from a purified aesthetic perception to a more distracted one, and the ways in which her perceptual modes engage with the modern culture of attention. With these novels, Richardson engages the issues of attention's peculiar role in modern Western culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Miriam's pursuit of art and autonomy is deeply caught in what Crary terms "the paradoxical intersection [. . .] between an imperative of a concentrated attentiveness within the disciplinary organization of labor, education, and mass consumption and an ideal of sustained attentiveness as a constitutive element of a creative and free subjectivity" (1-2). In his outlining of a genealogy of attention from the mid-nineteenth century on, Crary argues that "the very possibility in the late nineteenth century of concepts of a purified aesthetic perception is inseparable from the process of modernization that made the problem of attention a central issue in new institutional constructions of a productive and manageable subjectivity" (2). While Miriam's absorption in music in *Pointed Roofs* leads her to transcendental experiences of time and space that momentarily emancipate her from social regulations, her body at work

struggling with a deficiency of attention in the work day chapter of *The Tunnel* evidences how attention now functions as a disciplinary power of self-regulation. Miriam's case is especially telling because the nature of her daily work as a dentist's secretary bespeaks "the vulgar boredom of daily drudgery" (Kracauer, *Mass* 331) that makes it hard for her to concentrate and contemplate. Miriam's problem with attention—a problem that poses questions about seeking to secure an ideal of sustained attentiveness and about conforming to a disciplinary regime of attentive capacities in the workplace as well—embodies a modern subject's dilemma by exposing that in a capitalist society, an individual's pursuit of freedom and creativity based on financial independence is inevitably inseparable from the new imperatives of attention regulating a worker's productivity and orderliness.

#### **III.4.1. "German music, a line of German poetry, a sudden light on Clara's face": Aesthetic Encounters in *Pointed Roofs***

*Pointed Roofs*, the first chapter-volume of *Pilgrimage*, begins with Miriam's leaving home and records her new life as a teacher of English at a girls' school in Hanover, Germany. During her time in Germany, Miriam's unsociable, self-effacing tendency is often at odds with her responsibilities as a teacher under the supervision of the headmistress Fräulein Pfaff. Solely composed of Miriam's oscillating thoughts, dreams, perceptual experiences, and emotional responses to the external world, *Pointed Roofs* exemplifies Richardson's highly impressionist style. Like Henry James's *Maisie*, the narrative only allows us to enter Miriam's consciousness and see the world through

her perspective. If the destination of Maisie's impressions in James's novel is her own knowledge (about the self, reality, and the future), however, Miriam's impressions at work neither seem to relate to any specific form of knowledge, nor to head towards a telos; the novel ends when Miriam leaves Hanover for family reasons, her inner conflicts still unresolved. After reading the first three chapter-novels of *Pilgrimage*, May Sinclair wrote in her 1918 review, "Nothing happens. It is just life going on and on. It is Miriam Henderson's stream of consciousness going on and on. And in neither is there any grossly discernible beginning or middle or end" (6). When the novel first came out, her consciousness that flows without an anchor was understood as a sign of unfledged forms of experience at best, as a failure of sophisticated, critical thinking, or as a symptom of mental illness. H. G. Wells, in his introduction to Frank Swinnerton's *Nocturne* (1917), criticized Richardson in a derogatory tone by saying that although she "has probably carried impressionism in fiction to its furthest limit," "her heroine is not a mentality but a mirror" and "[h]er percepts never become concepts" (qtd. Metz 83). A reviewer in *Saturday Review* even stated that *Pointed Roofs* is "a charted dissection of an unsound mind. It lays bare the workings of a sick imagination" ("Reviews"). The anonymous reviewer reports that s/he found Miriam's "self-absorption," "egoistic consciousness," and "atrabilious eyes" simply repulsive.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Such a view corresponds to the psychopathological discourse in the 1890s that linked unrestricted consciousness to a deficiency of attention. Max Nordau, one of the many thinkers who linked the two, argues in his book *Degeneration* (1892) that consciousness floating around without aim is a sign of degeneration:

Untended and unrestrained by attention, the brain capacity of the degenerate and hysterical is capricious and without aim or purpose. Through the unrestricted

If we pay attention to the scenes of Miriam's aesthetic encounters in this chapter-novel, however, one can notice that Miriam's self-centeredness is often, if not always, counterbalanced by her spectatorial modes of absorption activated through encounters with music. In the novel Miriam is depicted as a devotee of music, an enthusiastic listener of music and also herself a player, and the scenes of her aesthetic encounters capture her propensity for contemplating life with great intensity. Unlike many reviewers' view that Miriam's mentality is unwholesome, those scenes clearly evidence a highly attentive operation of the mind. Highlighting new experiences accompanied by music and the act of listening, Miriam's encounters with artworks in this novel involve "an aesthetically determined contemplation or absorption" (Crary 8), which was widely accepted in the nineteenth century as a crucial element in constructing a free, creative subjectivity.

Reaching "the pinnacle of its development in the age of impressionism" (Hauser 170) and representing the ideal of the *fin de siècle*, aestheticism, in its radical attitude that strives to turn life into a work of art, associated contemplation with spectatorship. Defining late nineteenth-century aestheticism's characteristic criteria as "the passive, purely contemplative attitude to life, the transitoriness and non-committing quality of

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play of association representations are called into consciousness and are free to run riot there. [. . .] Weakness or want of attention, produces, then, in the first place false judgements respecting the objective universe, respecting the qualities of things and their relations to each other. (56)

In this view that "attention" is a disciplinary defense against unrestrained consciousness, Miriam's consciousness can be considered as something that "acquires a distorted and blurred view of the external world" and therefore indicates "the consequence of defective attention" (56).

experience and hedonistic sensualism” (170), Arnold Hauser asserts that “Aesthetic culture implies a way of life marked by uselessness and superfluosity, that is to say, the embodiment of romantic resignation and passivity” (171). Preoccupied with memory, vision, and aesthetic experience, proponents of aestheticism clung to their position that “We live our experiences with the greatest intensity not when we encounter men and things in reality—the ‘time’ and the present of these experiences are always ‘lost’— but when we ‘recover time,’ when we are no longer the actors but the spectators of our life, when we create or enjoy works of art, . . . when we remember” (171). Hauser sees this artistic attitude as a revolt against “the ordered security of bourgeois life” (175), which can be marked by values such as thriftiness, usefulness and a strong work ethic.

Evoking turn-of-the-century aestheticism, Miriam’s spectatorship in this novel epitomizes the characteristics of the *fin de siècle* modern aesthete, who treats the work of art as “an end in itself” and “the most beautiful gift which life has to offer” (Hauser 170). As Stephen Ross, one of the co-editors of the recent Broadview edition of *Pointed Roofs*, points out, the novel’s close focus on perception and contemplation aligns with the aestheticist privileging of intense experience, which the late Victorian writer Walter Pater advocates in his book *The Renaissance* (1873) by stating that “Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end” (1512). Pater continues,

A counted number of pulses only is given to us of a variegated, dramatic life. How may we see in them all that is to be seen in them by the finest senses? How shall we pass most swiftly from point to point, and be

present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy?

To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life. (1512)

Ross observes that the very effort “to maintain this ecstasy” Pater describes is “one of the guiding principles of Miriam’s quieter moments, and a good deal of her frustration in *Pointed Roofs* stems from the distractions that keep her from doing so” (Ross 20).

Indeed, while the narrative alternates between her pursuit of quiet contemplation and the distractions triggering her frustration, she constantly refuses to view life in terms of means or ends; instead, she maintains a contemplative approach to beauty grasped in contingencies and wants to treat life as a spectacle, not as a battle. Miriam’s view especially corresponds with what R. V. Johnson calls “contemplative aestheticism,” or aestheticism as a view of life as opposed to “art for art’s sake.” In his account of Pater’s aestheticism, Johnson distinguishes the two versions of aestheticism: while the former stresses the aesthetic approach to life that is contemplative, not active, the latter serves as a kind of policy for active practitioners of art. Contemplative aestheticism treats life as a spectacle and believes that “Only by detachment can the aesthete ‘appreciate’ life as a spectator” (Johnson 20). While commanding a rich and varied experience, it also prompts “a retreat from life – from what most people, pressed by circumstances, involved in personal relationships and engaged in definite occupations, would regard as life” (22). It “presupposes leisure and a freedom from humdrum pressures” and “reflects

a common Victorian aspiration after personal culture” (22) as the result of the cultivation of sensibility.

From the onset of her life in Hanover, Miriam’s self-claimed unsociability is counterbalanced by the unexpected encounter with music and with an absorbed subject. Leaving home for a new job to lighten the family burden due to her father’s bankruptcy, seventeen-year-old Miriam pursues a financially independent life, which accompanies an inevitable and unsolvable inner conflict, the conflict between her extreme privacy and her social position as a teacher. For Miriam, taking a social position means being in “a false position,” for she thinks that any kind of social position always involves “lying and pretending and keeping up a show” (Richardson, *P-I* 31). She anticipates that her life in Germany will be difficult because of her unsociability and misanthropy: “I *am* unsociable, I suppose—she mused. She could not think of any one who did not offend her. I don’t like men and I loathe women. I am a misanthrope” (31). It is interesting then that the very first thing she encounters on the morning after her arrival at Waldstrasse, Hanover, is not a human being but the sound of music heard from the wall, which immediately brings up a “radiance [that] came for a moment behind the gravity of her face” (35). Listening to the piano music played by one of the German girls, she is impressed by a quality “she had only heard occasionally at concerts,” and by the way the little girl’s intense look “remained unconcerned” (35) in spite of her entering the playing room. The spectacle of the absorbed subject gives Miriam an effect similar to that of the look of absorbed reading scenes in impressionist paintings in the late nineteenth century; the spectacle attracts her because of its rarity and offers her a momentary serenity. The

combination of the music, “the easy range of the child’s voice” that smoothly slides “from bird-like queries and chirpings to the consoling tones of the lower register,” and “a shy, firm hug” from the child gives Miriam the sense of “sudden little embrace” and “warm nearness” (36) she would have never expected, and serves as an antidote to her misanthropy.

Aesthetic resources in Germany ignite an absorptive mode of perception, thereby offering Miriam “a particular mode of experience—aesthetic, contemplative, epiphanic” (Watt 8). In the recital scene on the evening of her arrival, Miriam experiences “the transformation of [her] English ideas of ‘music’” (Richardson, *P-I* 36). It is when she listens to the little girl Emma Bergmann’s playing Chopin’s Fifteenth Nocturne that she feels “her fatigue forgotten” and “a featureless freedom” (43). Listening to Emma’s playing, Miriam activates a special absorptive mode of perception, which allows her to overcome her fear and anxieties about her initiation into the foreign world:

It seemed to her that the light with which the room was filled grew brighter and clearer. She felt that she was looking at nothing and yet was aware of the whole room like a picture in a dream. Fear left her. The human forms all around her lost their power. They grew suffused and dim. . . . The pensive swing of the music changed to urgency and emphasis. . . . It came nearer and nearer. It did not come from the candle-lit corner where the piano was. . . . It came from everywhere. It carried her out of the house, out of the world. (43)



Listening to Emma's playing, Miriam enters what Fried describes as the state of absorptive contemplation in which "the subject's awareness of the passage of time and [her] very surroundings may be abolished" and in which only "a pure and intense sensation of the sweetness" and "the self-sufficiency of [her] own existence" remain (Fried 130-131). As Emma's sister Clara Bergmann's playing follows, Miriam feels the special light she sensed in Emma's playing is rekindled. Music, once again, allows her to forget about her present and summons "a mysterious vision of a mill-wheel from her English childhood" (Katz 146): "She heard the soft swish and drip of the water and the low humming of the wheel. How beautiful . . . it was fading. . . . She held it—it returned—clearer this time and she could feel the cool breeze it made, and sniff the fresh earthy scent of it, the scent of the moss and the weeds shining and dripping on its huge rim" (Richardson, *P-I* 43). As witnessed in the two consecutive musical encounters, listening to the music played by the German girls activates a special absorptive mode that enables subjects to engage with a non-homogeneous temporality and to transcend spatial limits.

With respect to Miriam calling this experience "a featureless freedom," many feminist critics interpreted its meaning as her momentary emancipation from the phallogocentric world where linearity, monotony, industrialism and heterosexuality take the reign. For example, Tamar Katz, indicating that "This sort of epiphanic access to 'featureless freedom' recurs increasingly often in *Pilgrimage*" (146), argues that Miriam's emancipation obtained through such musical encounters, in return, "allows her to create art, 'the art of making atmospheres' (qtd. Richardson, *P-III* 257)" (143).

Allison Pease, who sees Miriam's "pilgrimage" as "a quest to avoid boredom, the middle-class woman's life" (78), asserts that Miriam's freedom is secured "by introducing discontinuity into time's continuity," so that "the disconnected moments by which she connects to herself place her outside" a continuous temporality associated with "conventional meaning" and "boredom" (91). Pease's comment is highly relevant to Miriam's having access to her childhood memory while listening to Clara's music. Exploring the novel's experimental forms, Kristin Bluemel points out the function of music "as a positive, nondivisive language," which allows Miriam to "avoid the trap of heterosexual assumptions and structures while preserving the opportunity to explore the dilemma of language" (62). According to Bluemel, in such scenes of musical encounters, nonrational, nonlinguistic rhythms music creates "allow us to see Miriam's unconscious responses controlling her conscious thoughts" (63).

Bluemel's argument gains ground especially when we consider Miriam's making a contrast between unconscious absorption associated with German music<sup>22</sup> and what she terms "English self-consciousness." In the following recital scene, Miriam listens to the playing of two English girls who are also students of the school, which brings "back the familiar feeling of English self-consciousness" (Richardson, *P-I* 44). Miriam's explicit discomfort in listening to the piano performance of the English girls, who, as

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<sup>22</sup> On Miriam's embrace of German high culture while critiquing "English self-consciousness," Carol Watts comments that, in this novel, Germany is represented "through the 'kind of therapeutic liberal tolerance and self-critique' that Fredric Jameson finds in *Howards End*" (8). In his famous essay "Modernism and Imperialism," Jameson briefly remarks that Forster's Germans, represented by the Schlegels, in *Howards End* "function to reverse the xenophobia" about Germany, the pervasive view to see the Germans as alien, terrifying, barbarous, and uncivilized in Europe during this time (156).

Miriam observes, think not only about the music they are playing but also about themselves too much, paradoxically reveals what Miriam seeks from music: “a retreat from life—from what most people, pressed by circumstances, involved in personal relationships and engaged in definite occupations, would regard as life” (Johnson 22). It is evident then that her contemplative aestheticism works to escape from the English self-consciousness she is desperate to overcome. Indubitably, Miriam’s contemplative aestheticism contradicts middle-class Victorian ways of life upheld by social tenets of nonconformist Puritan ethics, which have a tendency to treat life as a battle.

In another intense musical scene, Miriam herself transforms into an absorbed subject. Right after her provisional success as a new teacher on her first day of class, she reaches the quiet *Saal*, where

stood the great piano, its keyboard open under the light of the French window opposite the door through which she came. Behind the great closed swing doors the girls were talking over their *raccomodage*. Miriam paid no attention to them. She would ignore them all. She did not even need to try to ignore them. She felt strong and independent. She would play, to herself. She would play something she knew perfectly, a Grieg lyric or a movement from a Beethoven sonata . . . on this gorgeous piano . . . and let herself go, and listen. That was music . . . not playing things, but listening to Beethoven. (Richardson, *P-I* 56)

The concentration of mind attained as a hard-won reward for her work, as well as the fact that she can finally “play [. . .] to herself,” makes her feel “strong and independent”

(56). By equating playing with the act of listening, by enhancing music's appeal to the single faculty of listening, Miriam is able to forget "her wretched self" (56) and (re)connect herself with bodily sensations. While Miriam gradually regains her self, her playing is scrutinized focusing on her delicate bodily movement: "She feel[s] for the pedals, lift[s] her hands a span above the piano," "come[s] down . . . on to the opening chord," and immerses herself in music until she "slacken[s] the muscles of her arms and of her whole body" (56-57). As Bluemel has put it, with this ample reference to Miriam's body, Richardson encourages us to see how music functions to "escape from the gaps in conscious language and provide a glimpse of a great unnamable, unknowable expanses hidden within the text's ellipses and within Miriam's soul" (Bluemel 63). In this moment of her transformation into an absorbed subject, contemporary readers are endowed with "a compensatory reflex against all the distraction" (Stewart 136) they encounter in their everyday lives.

Miriam's irreconcilably strong spectatorial desire is also expressed through her abhorrence of being reduced to a spectacle on the streets of Hanover. As a regular school event, the school girls accompanied by their teachers go "methodically out and promenad[e] the streets of Hanover for an hour" (Richardson, *P-I* 90) every non-rainy Saturday. While walking with her students and fellow teachers, Miriam's "longing to go leisurely and alone along these wonderful streets, to go on and on at first and presently to look, [. . .] give[s] way to the necessity of keeping [the girls] in sight" (90). Her desire for sightseeing is discouraged by the fact that, though they walk "relentlessly through the Saturday throng along the great Georgstrasse—a foreign paradise, with its great bright

cafes and the strange promising detail of its shops—” the street is always “tantalisingly half seen” (90). As soon as she realizes that these walks are “supposed to be her and her pupil’s opportunity” to give a demonstration of their English conversation to be heard and seen, she senses that her silence would result in “a complete failure of her role of English teacher” (91). As she feels bounded by the increased self-consciousness about appearances, her discomfort grows into a conviction that she hates to belong to “a spectacle she could not escape” (91). With her strong inclination for *flânerie* and her natural unwillingness to be “in high focus” (36), Miriam sums up the Saturday walks as “a recurring humiliation” (90). This experience constantly reminds her that walking on the street to be a perfect spectacle is such a daunting, if not impossible, task for women. Through this scene, Miriam reveals her negation of playing woman’s traditional role as image, in which “women are simultaneously looked at and displayed” and reduced to a state of “to-be-looked-at-ness” (Mulvey 11).

Despite all the distresses, however, Miriam expresses her unabated love for “German music, a line of German poetry, a sudden light on Clara’s face” (Richardson, *P-I* 82). In *The Tunnel*, she reminisces that “the whole of the time in Germany was beautiful,” calling it “a party, a visit, a gift” (*P-II* 214) filled with music and its related auditory perception: “golden happy light, and people happy in the golden light, garlands of music, and the happy ringing certainty of voices, no matter what they said, the way the whole of life throbbed with beauty when the hush of prayer was on the roomful of girls” (214). Although by the end of the novel she is going home with nothing achieved, feeling that she is “just nothing again” (*P-I* 183), artistic resources in Germany in

*Pointed Roofs* function to invigorate Miriam's otherwise monotonous life, bespeaking her ability to "discover sites of recreation that allow her to escape from both her place of work and her estranged home" (Bronfen 14).

### **III.4.2. A Promiscuous Style of Attention in *The Tunnel***

*The Tunnel*, the fourth chapter-volume published four years after *Pointed Roofs*, signals drastic changes in the modes of perception activated and the kinds of aesthetic experiences represented. Miriam, after having worked as a resident teacher at a North London school (*Backwater*) and a governess in a rich country household (*Honeycomb*), both of which were "fully socially accepted roles for a young middle-class woman" (Pease 94) during the nineteenth century, now works as a dentist's secretary at Wimpole Street in London and leads a lifestyle of the New Woman with her newly acquired freedom and mobility. Amidst Miriam's hectic, dynamic, and adventurous everyday life in an urban setting, moments of aesthetic engagement come as fleeting, not allowing even a momentary absorption, and are contaminated by mental distraction. Unlike *Pointed Roofs* in which music and its related auditory perception mostly constitute Miriam's aesthetic experiences, Miriam's encounters with artifacts in *The Tunnel* are distinctly visual and highlight Miriam's both conscious and unconscious acts of looking.

While Miriam's perceptual experience revolves around the visual, musical encounters in *The Tunnel* no longer function to comfort her. Instead, music and auditory experiences serve to trigger her increasing skepticism about traditional gender roles. For example, when she is invited by her sister Harriett, she socializes with a man, who

considers her as his potential spouse, and plays the piano in a social setting. While playing Mendelssohn, her mental distraction leads her to compare her piano playing to playing traditional female roles: “She felt herself and Mr Tremayne as duplicates of Harriett and Gerald, only that she was a very religious, very womanly woman, the ideal wife and mother and he was a bad fast man who wanted to be saved. It was such an easy part to play. She could go on playing it to the end of her life” (Richardson, *P-II* 27). Instead of invigorating her creative contemplation, musical encounters and other spectatorial activities such as reading and going to the theatre in *The Tunnel* often make her question gender norms and conclude that gender is performatively constituted.

As Deborah Parsons points out, as this chapter-volume begins, Miriam’s life is immediately “defined in terms of three distinct urban spaces; her cupboard office, attic room, and the adjoining stretch of the Euston Road” (Parsons 114). First and foremost, she finally secures her own room to serve as a space for her creative contemplation. Her room is not a confined space, but a porous space as an extension of London: “London, just outside all the time, coming in with the light, coming in with the darkness, always present in the depths of the air in the room” (Richardson, *P-II* 16). Resembling a small movie theater in Richardson’s ideal, Miriam’s room is a small rectangular space where silence, light and darkness coexist, where reading would always be fruitful and “real” by yielding “a free attractive *meaning*” (17), enabling her to tell herself, “I left home to get here” (13). Unlike in *Pointed Roofs*, Miriam is now able to enjoy the freedom of strolling the streets of London as much as she wants. She feels relaxed when walking, “finding that observing the multiplicity of the city streets distracts her from facing the

enormity of the ego” (Parsons 114). Emancipated from “the sheltered life” (Richardson *P-II* 90) that she associates with the Victorian middle-class home, she obtains a new job as a dental assistant, walks alone at night, dines alone at an A.B.C. restaurant populated with city men, cultivates her own cosmopolitan perspective, attends a public lecture on photography, wears trousers that make her feel empowered, and goes to the theater. She also learns to ride a bicycle, which symbolically serves as a kind of prosthesis to complete her freedom of movement. As her spectatorial desire is met by her dynamic cultural activities, she actualizes the potential of the New Woman who is free, mobile, independent, and autonomous.

Representing Richardson’s radically experimental style, *The Tunnel* received more critical attention than any other chapter-volumes of *Pilgrimage*. As John Mephram informs us, contemporary reviewers attacked the novel by pointing to “its slowness, its accumulation of trivia, its tiresome attention to superficial detail” that cause “unnecessary and unrewarding difficulty” (Mephram 452). Virginia Woolf, who wrote a review anonymously in *Times Literary Supplement*, remarks that Richardson’s method “demands attention” (325) yet only because of its ineffectiveness, its “discrepancy between what she has to say and the form” (326). Woolf states that although in the novel Miriam’s “senses of touch, sight, and hearing are all so excessively acute, [. . .] sensations, impressions, ideas and emotions glance off her, unrelated and unquestioned, without shedding quite as much light as we had hoped into the hidden depth” (327). Katherine Mansfield, in her review in a literary magazine *Athenaeum*, simply calls Richardson’s method “a machine” (329) for a similar reason. Their criticism attributes



the novel's shortcomings to the lack of depth and a mass of detail that readers encounter instead.

I propose to consider such a predominance of attention-demanding superficial detail that slows the reading speed as an adequate choice for Richardson to represent Miriam's increased surface-level experiences in her modern lifestyle and her consequent struggle with attentiveness. In her account of Kracauer's Weimar essays, Giuliana Bruno highlights that "the most revelatory aspects of modern life lie on the surface" (*Surface* 56). According to Bruno, such "a fascination with the surface which emerged with modernity" (56) is met by "the architectural surface-effect of the cinema" (55). In one of her *Close Up* articles "The Front Rows," Richardson also expresses her interest in surface-level experiences in film-viewing, especially through the front row's relation to the screen: "There [is] indeed no possibility of focusing a scene so immense that one could only move about in it from point to point and realise that the business of the expert front-rower is to find the centre of action and follow it as best he can. Of the whole as something to hold in the eye he can have no more idea than has the proverbial fly on the statue over which he crawls" (Richardson, *Close* 172). Although Miriam does not go to the movies in this novel per se, the ways in which Miriam relates to her own attention resemble those of a film spectator. Miriam's "cinematic" perception corresponds with surface-level experiences of the film spectator who is "suspended in tension between absorption and dislocation" and "is attracted to the surface, encountering herself in the sheer externality of impressions and sensory stimuli" (Bruno, *Surface* 58).

Instead of failing to connect form and content, Richardson establishes a sort of “promiscuous style of attention,” to borrow Rebecca Walkowitz’s term in her account of Joyce’s aesthetics of triviality, with her emphasis on everyday experiences, minutiae of spatial description, a succession of transient impressions, and phonetically rendered accents. Such a stylistic triumph is especially evident in Chapter Three, the longest chapter in *The Tunnel*, where one of Miriam’s many workdays at Wimpole Street is chronicled from 9 to 6 in great detail. As Bryony Randall observes, in this specific chapter, “Miriam, like the reader, is caught up in the details of her work” (82); “by being ‘about’ working,” this chapter “focuses Miriam’s attention, and that of the reader, with its details of the state of the address books, a broken denture, and so on” (85). As Miriam’s work involves “the technologies of modern labor” (Shiach 96) such as clerical work, dental assistance, and (later) typing, she experiences attentiveness as “generally synonymous with an observer who was fully embodied and for whom perception coincided with physiological and/or motor activity” (Crary 42). The chapter itself manifests that Miriam’s life at work oscillates between attention and distraction, as her surface-level experiences involve a roaming eye, drudgery, and gazing at the interior of the dental office.

In Chapter Three, Miriam’s eye is always roaming and is associated with her anxieties about “something to be done” (Richardson, *P-II* 37). As soon as she hurriedly arrives at the dental office, her daily task begins with checking inventory and whether everything is in place by scanning the office: “The instruments were all right . . . the bottles—no chloroform, the carbolic bottle nearly empty and its label soaked and

defaced. Gathering the two bottles in her hands, she turned to the instrument cabinet, no serviettes, no rubber dam, clamps not up from the workshop. The top of the cabinet still to be dusted. Dust and scraps of amalgam were visible about the surfaces of the paper lining the instrument drawers. No saliva tubes in the basin. She swung round to the bureau and hurriedly read through the names of the morning's patients" (33). While her eyes repetitively "roam over" (37) her table rapidly only to find out things placed on the table to be organized, recorded, packed and delivered, she thinks to herself, "If everything were absolutely up to date, and all the cupboards in perfect order and the discounts and decimals always done in the depot-books to time, there would be time to do something" (38). This enormous attention to surfaces suggests that Miriam the modern subject "*inhabit[s] time* as disempowered" (Crary 3), failing to fully connect her sense of self with the present.

Miriam's boredom increases as the "tedium of the long series of small, precise, attention-demanding movements" (Richardson, *P-II* 40) dominates her task. Not only clerical work, but also drudgery such as cleaning, polishing, tidying, and replenishing, are her main tasks. In one of his Weimar essays entitled "Boredom," Kracauer makes a distinction between "the vulgar boredom of daily drudgery" making people yawn and "real boredom" which is synonymous with restful free time (or contemplation) that awakens people to new life (*Mass* 331-32). Miriam's drudgery involves inertia, drowsiness, "a horrible torpor" (Richardson, *P-II* 65), and on top of it, mental distraction that leads her to question the nature of her task and, by extension, modern drudgery itself:

The tedium of the long series of small, precise, attention-demanding movements was aggravated by the prospect of a fresh set of implements already qualifying for another cleansing; the endless series to last as long as she stayed at Wimple Street . . . Were there any sort of people who could do this kind of thing patiently, without minding? . . . the evolution of dentistry was wonderful, but the more perfect it became the more and more of this sort of thing there would be . . . the more drudgery workers, at fixed salaries . . . it was only possible for people who were fine and nice . . . there must be, everywhere, women doing this work for people who were not nice. They *could* not do it for the work's sake. Did some of them do it cheerfully, as unto God? It was wrong to work unto man. But could God approve of this kind of thing? . . . was it right to spend life cleaning instruments? . . . the blank moment again, of gazing about in vain for an alternative . . . all work has drudgery. That is not the answer. . . Blessed be Drudgery, but that was housekeeping, not someone else's drudgery. . . . (40)

Miriam's mental distraction exposes a dilemma for financially independent women in the early twentieth century, as Felski notes, whose emancipation is "inseparably linked to their movement into the workplace and public sphere" (qtd. Shiach 7). As Morag Shiach points out, for Miriam work and freedom are "in a complex dialectic" because "work enables freedom, but also negates it" (98), in the sense that women "become the servant in the office to men" (98). When Miriam's drudgery encompasses all the extra

labor three male dentists have to do, Miriam's body is reduced to "the oil that keeps the machinery of the business moving" (Bluemel 104). However, as evident in the passage above, her thoughts are unable to find a way to reconcile "divided identities" and "dissolve into ellipses" (Bluemel 106). By suppressing mental distraction ("I mustn't stay here thinking these thoughts" [Richardson, *P-II* 42]) and focusing on her own efficiency ("I must stop thinking, from now, and be fearfully efficient" [43]), Miriam internalizes attentiveness as a (self-)disciplinary mechanism.

Miriam's surface-level experiences are heightened especially when she observes the interior of divided spaces in her workplace such as Mr Hancock's office and the Orlys' den. Woolf complains in her review that "We find ourselves in the dentist's room," yet "never, or only for a tantalizing second, in the reality which underlies these appearances" (Woolf 327). To be sure, Richardson records the detail that calls attention to everything that appears on the page. The following passages, one about the paintings on the walls of Mr Hancock's office and the other about the interior design of the Orlys' room, that evidence Miriam's intense surface encounters are rather long, yet worth attention:

She glanced about at [the pictures], enclosed in her daily unchanging unsatisfying impressions—the green landscape plummy with meadow-sweet, but not letting you through to wander in fields, the little soft bright coloury painting of the doorway of St Mark's—San Marco, painted by an Englishman, with a procession going in at the door and beggars round the doorway, blobby and shapeless like English peasants in Italian clothes . . .

bad . . . and the man had worked and studied and gone to Italy and had a name and still worked and people bought his things . . . an engraving very fine and small of a low bridge in a little town, quiet, sharp cheering lines; and above it another engraving, a tiresome troubled girl, all a sharp film of fine woven lines and lights and shadows in a rich dark liny filmy interior, neither letting you through nor holding you up, the girl worrying there in the middle of the picture, not moving, an obstruction . . . Maris . . . the two little water-colours of Devonshire, a boat with a brown sail and a small narrow piece of a street zigzagging sharply up between crooked houses, by a Londoner—just to say how crooked everything was . . . that thing in this month's *Studio* was better than any of these . . . her heart throbbed suddenly as she thought of it . . . a narrow sandy pathway going off, frilled with sharp greenery, far into a green wood. . . . Had he seen it? The *Studios* lay safely there on the polished table in the corner, the disturbing bowl of flowers from the country, the great pieces of pottery, friends, warm and sympathetic to touch, never letting you grow tired of their colour and design . . . standing out against the soft dull gold of the dado and the bold soft green and buff of the wall-paper. (Richardson, *P-II* 48-49)

The interior of Mr Hancock's office reveals his pursuit of privacy as the modern subject whose "private environment represents the universe"; in the room "he gathers remote

places and the past” (Benjamin, *Reflections* 154).<sup>23</sup> Miriam thinks that all the decorative items in this room belong to his “daily life here, secure from censure” (Richardson, *P-II* 50). In the afternoon tea time scene, Miriam’s eye records the interior of the employer couple’s dining room “jammed with artifacts that evince British imperialism” (Ross and Thomson 113, footnote 1) as follows:

. . . she browsed rapidly, her eyes roaming from thing to thing . . . the shields and assegais grouped upon the raised dull gold papering of the high opposite wall, the bright beautiful coloured bead skirts spread out amongst curious carved tusks and weapons, the large cool placid gold Buddha reclining below them with this chin on his hand and his elbow on a red velvet cushion, on the Japanese cabinet; the Japanese cupboard fixed above Mrs Orly’s writing table, the fine firm carved ivory on its

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<sup>23</sup> In his essay “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century” Walter Benjamin states: “For the private person, living space becomes, for the first time, antithetical to the place of work. The former is constituted by the interior; the office is its complement. The private person who squares his accounts with reality in his office demands that the interior be maintained in his illusions. This need is all the more pressing since he has no intention of extending his commercial considerations into social ones. In shaping his private environment he represses both. From this spring the phantasmagorias of the interior. For the private individual the private environment represents the universe. In it he gathers remote places and the past. His drawing room is a box in the world theater” (*Reflections* 154). Extending Benjamin’s notion of the interior, Victoria Rosner, in her book *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life* (2005), highlights the double meaning of the word “interior” as “both one’s inner nature or being and the inside of particular space” (129) and asserts that “the increasing symmetry between these two senses of the interior is part of the advent of modern life” (129). While the interior of Mr Hancock’s office somewhat deviates from Benjamin’s rather dichotomous idea of the interior (“living space becomes [ . . . ] antithetical to the place of work”), *Pilgrimage* itself manifests Richardson’s own understanding of “the increasing symmetry between” one’s private, interior space of the mind and her physical private space by detailing both kinds of space.

panels; the tall vase of Cape gooseberries flaring on the top of the cottage piano under the shadow of the gallery; the gallery with its upper mystery, the happy clock fastened against its lower edge, always at something after four, the door set back in the wall, leading into her far-away midday room, the light falling from the long high frosted window along the confusion of Mr Orly's bench, noisy as she looked at it with the sound of metal tools falling with a rattle, the drone and rattle of the motor lathe, Mr Orly's cheerful hummings and whistlings. Mr Orly's African tobacco pouch bunched underneath the lamp on the edge of the bench near the old leather arm-chair near to the fire, facing the assegais; the glass-doored bookcase on either side of the fireplace, the strange smooth gold on the strips of Burmese wood fastened along the shelves, the clear brown light of the room on the gold, the curious lettering sweeping across the gold.

(Richardson, *P-II* 68)

Purely consisting of material façade, both passages manifest Richardson's experimentation with the detail. As Jean Radford observes, in such scenes Miriam "scans the particular world about her in an attempt to dissolve the old generalities, to find new meanings and new ways of reading" (17). But Radford's suggestion that "Richardson's use of detail is a device to delay or impede meaning-construction" (19) and "produce a resistance to meaning" (18) differs from my understanding. While slowing down the reading, Richardson enhances Miriam's spectatorial perception associated with surface-level experiences in film-viewing by emulating cinema



language's indexicality, which, according to Mary Ann Doane, is a linguistic "function that is essentially without content. Essentially contentless, it is free to convey anything and everything" (25). Instead of reflecting "a coherent, familiar, and recognizable world" (25), or creating the "reality effect" which Barthes calls the detail's traditional role, Richardsonian detail purposes to pass the written language's limit and embrace "the concept of the filmability" of everything "without limit" (25). Reminding us of the depth of field Bazin celebrates, the detail enhances readers' autonomy, autonomy to choose their own reading pace and to choose what they should see so that "It is from [their] attention and [their] will that the meaning of the image in part derives" (Bazin 36). Like the spectator's relation to the image in the depth of field, Richardson's use of nonhierarchical detail brings readers into a new relation with the written language similar to that which spectators enjoy with cinema.

Indeed, Richardson applies the spectator's surface-level experience with the screen to Miriam's with the interior. Instead of being overwhelmed by distracting surfaces, however, Miriam's roaming eye functions as the reflector of Richardsonian detail imbued with depth. Her roaming eye is also strongly reminiscent of that of a *flâneuse*, whose aimless wandering allows her to contemplate any spectacle at any moment. Although Miriam's oscillation between attention and distraction is inseparable from her dilemma as a working woman, Richardsonian detail allows her (and readers) to have full access to spectatorial experiences. The nature of Miriam's attention in the workday chapter is deeply cinematic, in the sense that "cinema and its succeeding (if still simultaneous) formations [. . .] are deterritorialized factories in which spectators work,

that is, in which we perform value-productive labor” (Beller 1), and in the sense that spectators “must confront and process new orders of spatiality and temporality that are technologically enabled and were previously impossible” (3).

The active mode of attention that Richardson highlights renders the aesthetic experiences of three subjects—the spectator, the reader, and Miriam Henderson—indistinguishable. Meanwhile, the spectatorial subject’s increased surface-level experience manifests that distracted modes of perception in one’s everyday life become inevitable. Richardsonian detail, her aesthetic slowness, and her eventual attraction to the surface work toward a new form of contemplation, which is non-hierarchical, spectator-oriented, full of depth, machine-mediated, and distinctly modern. When traditional practices of contemplative absorption are no longer valid, Richardson’s aesthetics work to settle the conflict between the traditional and the new, thereby attempting to reconcile the tension between “traditional art’s quest for contemplation and modern media’s emancipatory power of distraction” (Koepnick 21).

## CHAPTER IV

### DISTRACTION AND CONTINGENCY: THE MASSES, TECHNOLOGY, AND NATURE IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *BETWEEN THE ACTS*

The shift from aesthetic contemplation to new prevailing modes of distraction has much to do with the advent of filmic art and a transition from aestheticism in the first two decades of the twentieth century to the politicization of art in the 1930s hinging upon Europe's rising concerns about fascism and about the outbreak of World War II. Writing in the 1930s, Benjamin claims in his "Artwork" essay that "the masses seek distraction whereas art demands concentration from the spectator" (*Illuminations* 239) and that "[r]eception in distraction—the sort of reception which is increasingly noticeable in all areas of art and is a symptom of profound changes in apperception—finds in film its true training ground" (240). While Benjamin notices the increasingly antagonistic relationship between the masses and high art, he makes a careful distinction between passive spectators who are destined to be dupes of the culture industry and critical collective subjects. In fact, Benjamin believes that through close-ups and slow motion—cinematic techniques that reveal the "optical unconscious" enabling spectators to discover "the hidden details of familiar objects" (236), filmic art has its potential to make "the critical and the receptive attitudes of the public coincide" (234). This redemptive potential becomes especially significant in his discussion of fascism in the last section of his essay; he warns that the danger of fascism, especially its

propagandistic use of art for its own end, comes from its transforming politics and war into aesthetic spectacles and its reducing the masses to uncritical subjects.

Responding to the politico-cultural milieu of the 1930s,<sup>24</sup> Virginia Woolf's last novel *Between the Acts* (1941) foregrounds distraction as a major way of receiving art and features the masses, or the collective subject, as its main character. While the novel depicts the dynamics between a constantly distracted and dispersing audience and a frustrated artist whose experimental pageant play fails to captivate her audience, its pages are filled with unfinished sentences, cacophonies, and decentered voices so that readers can only receive its fragmentary form in a state of distraction. Provoking questions about the nature of artworks in the age of technological reproducibility, *Between the Acts* revolves around an uneasy relationship among art, artist, and spectator. In particular, the novel illuminates what occurs when art becomes out of control and thus accidental, that is, when obstacles such as a malfunctioning gramophone, fickle weather, and clumsy actors constantly prevent the artist from achieving her intentions. In representing distracted spectators, Woolf frequently makes both her spectator characters and her readers encounter moments of contingency.

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<sup>24</sup> Alex Zwerdling, who pioneered the study of Woolf's socio-political intervention through a historical lens in his book *Virginia Woolf and the Real World* (1986), argues that "In none of her other novels is Woolf as conscious of and responsive to contemporary events as in *Between the Acts*" (302). He points out that the novel reflects "the impact on her of the extraordinary circumstances of the time—the Munich crisis, the declaration of war, the fall of Paris, the preparations for a German invasion, the Battle of Britain, the Blitz—moments in the history of her country and her civilization in which the threat of catastrophic ruin was constant" (302).

This chapter explores Woolf's embracing of contingency and distraction through the lens of her speculation, in her 1926 essay "The Cinema," about the possibilities for a new artistic language. In this essay, Woolf, engaging with contemporary discourses of film theory and film criticism, raises issues about cinema and its related modes of sensory perception. The issues Woolf touches on in this essay encompass the discordance between the eye's perception and the brain's reception in film spectatorship, her ambivalent attitude toward filmic art, that is, her antagonism towards films that imitate literature, her enthusiasm for abstract moving images in cinematic texts, and her conjecture about the avant-garde aesthetics of contingency—the accidental, the unintentional, and the momentary—as crucial to film's potential.

Reconsidering the linkage between cinema/media technologies and Woolf's work, this chapter examines her experimentation with the aesthetic possibilities of distraction and contingency. Ranging from the publication of *Virginia Woolf in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (2000) to *Virginia Woolf: Twenty-First Century Approaches* (2015), recent Woolf scholarship has worked to shed light on Woolf's stake in the relationship between the impact of the advent of new technologies on human perception and new formations of subjectivity, and to rediscover the subjective, provisional, and contingent nature of her work. Pointing to strong affinities between Woolf's literary aesthetics and Benjamin's notion of distraction, Pamela Caughie, in her introduction to *Virginia Woolf in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, points out that Woolf's work shows how distracted reception can serve as "an antidote to war" (xxiii) and how media technologies can "be used to disrupt the formation of a national identity

and a unified sensibility” (xxiv). With that in mind, the first section of this chapter reads Woolf’s short story “The Mark on the Wall” (1917), one of her earliest works, to trace her rejection of attentiveness. The second section sheds light on the motor-car scene and the subsequent sky-writing scene in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) as a case study on Woolf’s earlier representation of distracted spectatorship. The third section reads her essay “The Cinema” (1926) to examine Woolf’s encounter with the accidental and the uncertainty in her film-viewing experience in terms of contingency as integral to cinema. The last section focuses on *Between the Acts*, in which the nature of distracted spectatorship, spectators’ new relation to both artwork and artist, and new aesthetic functions of media technologies discovered by accidents are represented.

#### **IV.1. Woolf’s Rejection of Attentiveness in “The Mark on the Wall”**

Written in the midst of World War I, “The Mark on the Wall” (1917) is Woolf’s first published story that marks the beginning of her career as a professional fiction writer. Opening with an unnamed narrator’s reminiscence of her discovering and contemplating on an unidentifiable black mark on a white wall (“Perhaps it was the middle of January in the present year that I first looked up and saw the mark on the wall” [77]), the story records her streaming thoughts derived from her looking at the mark. Remarking “How readily our thoughts swarm upon a new object” (77), the narrator persistently speculates about what the mark is—whether it is a nail, a hole, a rose leaf, or a crack in the wood—while sitting on her chair, but remains hesitant to get up and take a close look at it. To readers’ relief, the story concludes with someone else’s voice

identifying the mark as a snail (“I don’t see why we should have a snail on our wall” [83]), but only “after several pages of digressions—on history, reality, society, art, writing, and life itself” (Cyr 197).

In this story, Woolf refuses to follow traditional narrative aims and recalibrates conventional scales of significance, making small events seem big and big events small. E. M. Forster, in his 1919 review, calls Woolf’s writing style in this story “of a very unusual type,” and states that “It has no moral, no philosophy, nor has it what is usually understood by Form. It aims deliberately at aimlessness” (“Visions” 69). It is not surprising that the story’s deliberate aimlessness was attacked by her early critics in the 1930s, such as R. D. Charques, Wyndham Lewis, and Q. D. Leavis, who believed that “art should be unwaveringly attentive, that any failure of attention led [. . .] to bad writing” (R. Walkowitz 83); they asserted that “Woolf seemed too various in her sympathies, too distracted in her commitments, and too cosmopolitan in her analogies between the psychology of marriages and the philosophy of treaties, between the world of parties at home and the wars of fascism abroad” (82-83) and that her writing “lacks the characteristics of true argument” (82). Repeatedly celebrating the freedom one can taste in “a pleasant track of thought” (Woolf, *Haunted* 79), the narrator valorizes the process of free association rather than teleological thinking: “I want to think quietly, calmly, spaciouly, never to be interrupted, never to have to rise from my chair, to slip easily from one thing to another, without any sense of hostility, or obstacle. I want to sink deeper and deeper, away from the surface, with its hard separate facts” (78-79). The narrator’s mental distraction, however, later shows how this act of thinking aimlessly not

only allows her to feel “an intoxicating sense of illegitimate freedom” (80), freedom from “the masculine point of view which governs our lives, which sets the standard” (80), but also leads her to “contempt for men of action--men, we assume, who don’t think” (82). The narrator goes on,

The Archbishop of Canterbury is followed by the Lord High Chancellor; the Lord High Chancellor is followed by the Archbishop of York. Everybody follows somebody, such is the philosophy of Whitaker; and the great thing is to know who follows whom. Whitaker knows, and let that, so Nature counsels, comfort you, instead of enraging you; and if you can’t be comforted, if you must shatter this hour of peace, think of the mark on the wall. (82)

By using the word “peace” ironically in this passage, the narrator reveals how the masculine point of view encourages people to believe that not objecting to the male-dominant society is a way to maintain peace. As Walkowitz suggests, the underlying logic of this passage is that “thinking of the mark on the wall provides not a refuge from discomfort but an alternative, implicitly superior way of shattering peace” (R. Walkowitz 88). The seemingly passive act of thinking aimlessly now turns into a political action, a way of shattering peace.

Considering that the story was written during wartime, some might say that the story is “a tale about a woman who is trying not to think about the war” because “the context of wartime is announced only at the end of the story, when a comment disrupts the narrator’s thinking about the mark” (R. Walkowitz 86). Indeed, Woolf broaches the



issue of war in the penultimate short paragraph by borrowing the voice of an anonymous commentator in a coarse tone: “Curse this war; God damn this war!” (Woolf, *Haunted* 83). Woolf’s strategy of deliberate aimlessness, however, is tainted with radicalism when the same commentator continues to say after a short pause, “All the same, I don’t see why we should have a snail on our wall” (83). By juxtaposing war and a snail, Woolf not only subordinates “the very big to the exceptionally small” (Kern 50) but also attacks traditional narratives’ realism in that hierarchical social order takes the reigns. In her 1925 essay “Modern Fiction,” Woolf revealed her interest in the importance of recalibrating scales by saying, “Let us not take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small” (*Essays* 161). As Stephen Kern suggests, “By beginning and ending with a seemingly trivial inquiry about a tiny mark, which slides repeatedly into conventionally important matters such as social rank and warfare, this story shows how such trivial matters may embody unsuspected significance” (51).

The story’s assumptions that thinking of small, trivial things such as a snail can be joined with one’s concerns about war, and that such a combination can engender some unconventional significance, are radical. Through these assumptions, Woolf attempts to foster a complicated understanding of war by illuminating a dim connection between official history recorded in “the masculine point of view” (Woolf, *Haunted* 80) and represented by Whitaker’s Almanack and the logic of war. When the narrator acknowledges “Nature’s game—her prompting to take action as a way of ending any thought that threatens to excite or to pain” (82), what the narrator calls “Nature”

connotes convention in a male-dominated society, which women might “think” about questioning its naturalness, yet which shushes them and stops “any thought that threatens to excite or to pain” (82).

Regarding evasiveness as a prominent characteristic of Woolf’s style, Walkowitz reads this short story as “a metaphor for evasion (evading the ‘fact’ of the mark on the wall; evading the ‘fact of the war’)” and as “a story that considers directly what evasion evades” (86). Indeed, the story can be read as Woolf’s own formulating questions, or her attempt to find an answer to these questions, as oscillation and uncertainty characterize the nature of the narrator’s digression. To be sure, the narrator does not want to remove the uncertainty about the mark: “as for that mark, I’m not sure about it [. . .]. I might get up, but if I got up and looked at it, ten to one I shouldn’t be able to say for certain” (Woolf, *Haunted* 77-78). As the story proceeds, her streaming thoughts even lead her to be skeptical about the purpose of identifying the mark:

[. . .] nothing is proved, nothing is known. And if I were to get up at this very moment and ascertain that the mark on the wall is really—what shall I say?—the head of a gigantic old nail, driven in two hundred years ago, which has now, owing to the patient attrition of many generations of housemaids, revealed its head above the coat of paint, and is taking its first view of modern life in the sight of a white-walled fire-lit room, what should I gain? Knowledge? Matter for further speculation?” (81)

Here, the narrator’s skepticism reverberates with Woolf’s own artistic questions.

Walkowitz contends that, with this story, Woolf begins to engage questions such as “Is it

more appropriate for artists to rectify the confusion of tones by representing only the direct, violent experience of war in the trenches? Or should artists represent a more expansive, more entangled conception of war, one that includes the spaces of newspaper, gentleman's club, trench, and racetrack?" (80) Walkowitz postulates that one of Woolf's points, which is also noticeable in her other works such as *To the Lighthouse*, *The Voyage Out*, *A Room of One's Own*, and *Three Guineas*, is to "create a new ideal of attentiveness" (83) by representing "conflicts about international action and national culture as conflicts about literary forms of attentiveness" (83).

Although I agree with Walkowitz's insight that the story itself is a metaphor for evasion as Woolf's tactic, I argue that this story and Woolf's later works as well rather testify that Woolf's main concerns less lie with creating a new ideal of attentiveness than creating a new ideal of distractedness, and that in "thinking of perception as a social process" (Walkowitz 82), Woolf valorizes distraction more than any forms of attention, especially when it comes to the question of disrupting the regime of literary forms of attentiveness. This point becomes clearer if we compare her and Dorothy Richardson. Compared to Richardson's life-long project to reconsider aesthetic contemplation and create a new ideal of attentiveness, Woolf's work seems to incline to the view that one can achieve "an illegitimate freedom" only when one gets distracted and loses anchor, so that "one could slice with one's thought as a fish slices the water with his fin, grazing the stems of the water-lilies, hanging suspended over nests of white sea eggs" (81). Furthermore, when comparing Miriam Henderson's mental distraction in Richardson's *The Tunnel* and the narrator's in "The Mark on the Wall," one can see that the latter is

quite deliberate and purposeful; the narrator is resolute in her refusal of being attentive. Revealing Woolf's initial interest in the subject's encounter with the uncertain, the story shows that such an encounter can lead to some joy of freedom, and that even seemingly trivial events such as gazing at a small object cannot be reduced to insignificance, or passivity.

#### **IV.2. Distraction in the Age of Machines in *Mrs. Dalloway***

In the special issue of *Virginia Woolf Miscellany* on the topic of "Virginia Woolf in the Modern Machine Age," the guest editor Ann Martin observes that technologies and machines in Woolf's work call attention to "the delicate tension between individual and community" (Martin, "To the Readers" 1) and are often "used by individuals to negotiate identity in private and public space" (1). While technology's state in many other modernist works generates questions about whether it draws "the individual into a renewed harmony with an established, traditional communal order" or accords "an enforced and mechanistic orthodoxy" (1), everyday machines in Woolf's work are often deemed as "the properties through which the shifting nature of group identity and relatedness is performed, restaged, and critiqued" (1). Representing "the embeddedness of the mechanical" (1) in everyday modernity, the famous motor-car scene on Bond Street and the subsequent sky-writing scene in Woolf's 1925 novel *Mrs. Dalloway* show us how the crowd receives the spectacle produced by everyday machines in a state of distraction. Far from mere representations of distraction caused by the shock associated with urban life, the scenes reveal how the spectacles and their shock effect transform

passers-by into collective spectators, whose shared experience enables them to organize a transient community, and whose encounter with the machines leads them to a defamiliarizing moment.

In the scene where a motor-car backfires on Bond Street in *Mrs. Dalloway*, the spectacle momentarily disrupts the urban rhythm by arresting the crowd's attention. The sudden violent noise like "a pistol shot" coming from "a motor car which had drawn to the side of the pavement precisely opposite Mulberry's shop window" (Woolf, *Mrs.* 12) not only ruptures Clarissa Dalloway's pleasant consumer contemplation at Mulberry's florist, but also makes passers-by on Bond Street stop and stare "to see a face of the very greatest importance against the dove-grey upholstery" (12). As several critics point out, the impact of the motor-car is closely related to its function as "an emblem of the disruptive forces of the 'new'" (Martin, "'Unity—Dispersivity'" 93) and as a symbol of wealth and power in the early twentieth century. While the passers-by make assumptions about the identification of the passenger, whether the person is "Queen, Prince, or Prime Minister" (Woolf, *Mrs.* 14), the spectacle gives them "something of a cloud's sudden sobriety and stillness upon faces which a second before had been utterly disorderly" (12) and creates an effect of the "gradual drawing together of everything to one centre" (13). The motor-car not only links "the spectators on the city streets through a common focal point" (Martin, "'Unity—Disparity'" 102), but also allows them for a moment to graze "something very profound" (Woolf, *Mrs.* 15) beyond "the surface agitation of the passing car" (15). Woolf states:

For thirty seconds all heads were inclined the same way—to the window. [. . .] [S]omething had happened. Something so trifling in single instances that no mathematical instrument, though capable of transmitting shocks in China, could register the vibration; yet in its fullness rather formidable and in its common appeal emotional; for in all the hat shops and tailors' shops strangers looked at each other and thought of the dead; of the flag; of Empire. (15)

Although the passenger remains unidentified, the mysterious car carrying a personage “of the very greatest importance” (12) engenders a collective idea that “the car could restore the national unity symbolized by the flag and the national prestige embodied in the Empire” (Kern 207).

The spectators on the streets, however, are soon distracted by a new stimulus, by the sound of the sky-writing plane advertising “Kreemo,” and becomes completely oblivious about the car (as the narrator reports in parentheses that “the car went in at the gates [of Buckingham Palace] and nobody looked at it” [Woolf, *Mrs.* 18]). Once again, the sound of the plane and the way it moves “letting out white smoke from behind” (17) solicit the attention of “all people in the Mall, in the Green Park, in Piccadilly, in Regent Street, [and] in Regent's Park” (18). Yet the plane's sky-writing is illegible and thus incomprehensible, causing great uncertainty:

Dropping dead down, the aeroplane soared straight up, curved in a loop, raced, sank, rose, and whatever it did, wherever it went, out fluttered behind it a thick ruffled bar of white smoke which curled and wreathed

upon the sky in letters. But what letters? A C was it? an E, then an L?  
Only for a moment did they lie still; then they moved and melted and  
were rubbed out up in the sky, and the aeroplane shot further away and  
again, in a fresh space of sky, began writing a K, and E, a Y perhaps?  
(17)

Once again, while it remains uncertain what exact word the plane writes on the sky, the sky-writing makes its spectators try to spell words such as “Glaxo” or “Kreemo” “in a strained, awestricken voice” (17) and murmur “like a sleepwalker” (17). By doing so, the spectacle suddenly transforms the passers-by into “the consumers who are interpellated by the advertisement” (Martin, “To the Readers” 1).

Regarding these scenes, Martin observes that it is evident that the car provides the spectators on the streets with a focal point, but “the scene ends with uncertainty about its passenger’s identity and inconclusive interpretations of the sky-writing before the crowd disperses” (Martin, “Unity—Disparity” 102). Martin asserts that although “‘interconnectedness’ is evident on the level of the narration, as thoughts and actions stream together,” “the hollow spectacles of car and airplane seem to ‘underline the citizens’ alienation from each other” (102). Though I concede that the way in which the passers-by receive the spectacles manifests an interesting interplay between unity and disparity, I cannot fully accept Martin’s conclusion that the spectacles are essentially hollow and just underscore social alienation. Caughie, on the other hand, interprets the shock effect of the machines in a more positive way. Drawing upon Sunny Stalter’s argument, Caughie notes that the distracted spectatorship rather evinces that “looking in

*Mrs. Dalloway* is no longer a privileged activity nor a unifying one,” but “a concrete art that brings viewers together without necessarily unifying them,” highlighting that “Now the pleasures of viewing are connected with the distractions of everyday life” (Caughie xxiv).

Agreeing with Caughie’s point that the act of looking is elevated into a concrete art in *Mrs. Dalloway*, I argue that chance encounters with the machines, or with the spectacle generated by the machines, in the novel allow the crowd to experience a defamiliarizing moment, which echoes spectators’ viewing experience of early cinema before around 1908. As Leo Charney has put it in his essay “In a Moment,” “The most overt form of film’s defamiliarizing moment appeared in what Tom Gunning has called the ‘cinema of attractions’ of the period before 1908” (288). Recognizing 1920s’ avant-garde artists’ enthusiasm about the radical possibilities of the cinema, its power to make images seen, and its ability to solicit the spectator’s attention, Gunning argues that cinema before 1906 was much more effective and capable in these respects than later narrative films. According to Gunning,

Attractions both mime and compete with the succession of shocks and distractions of modernity through an equally aggressive purchase on the spectator. [. . .] Attractions trace out the visual topology of modernity: a visual environment which is fragmented and atomized; a gaze which, rather resting on a landscape in contemplation, seems to be pushed and pulled in conflicting orientations, buried and intensified, and therefore less coherent and anchored. (“The Whole” 193-194)



Gunning implies that the cinema of attractions encourages distraction, cultivating a “less coherent and anchored” gaze. In a different essay, Gunning underscores that the attraction is “limited to a sudden burst of presence” (“Now You” 76), hence “[t]he temporality of the attraction itself [. . .] is limited to the pure present tense of its appearance” (77). Highlighting the arresting spectacle’s function as display rather than storytelling punctuation, Gunning argues that “the attraction invokes an exhibitionist rather than a voyeuristic regime” (75). The way in which Woolf relates to exhibitionist culture in *Mrs. Dalloway* corresponds to Gunning’s ideas in several respects.

Representing distraction, Woolf encourages us to glimpse a possibility that a gaze could be non-hierarchical, exempt from power dynamics, and thus could be a democratic art especially when multiple gazes coexist. Woolf also suggests that through “the surface agitation” of the car and the plane, through intensive experience with “a sudden burst of presence,” spectators are able to have access to “something very profound” in no time. Far from emphasizing the linkage between the spectacle and alienation, Woolf, with these machine-mediated scenes, attempts to devise a new public art adequate for the masses and advances her concern with a new ideal state of distractedness, which has the potential to catalyze change.

### **IV.3. “A shadow shaped like a tadpole”**

The suggestive connection between Woolf’s representation of distraction and the cinema of attractions becomes more evident if we understand the fact that in the mid-1920s cinema was a matter of real interest to Woolf. It is known that Woolf was a

regular moviegoer and that her choices of movies were eclectic (Humm 75-76).<sup>25</sup> Reflecting the film culture of the 1920s, when many intellectuals and literary figures started to think seriously about film, the essay entitled “The Cinema,” Woolf’s sole essay on the subject, was published in several venues in the year of 1926 with slightly different titles. In her essay on Woolf’s relation to visual culture in *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, Maggie Humm informs us that the essay “appeared as ‘The Cinema’ in *Arts* (June 1926), in the *Nation and Athenaeum* (3 July 1926)[,] and as ‘The Movies and Reality’ in *New Republic* (4 August 1926),” and that “[t]he *New Republic* essay was published by prior arrangement (but without Woolf’s consent) from the *Nation and Athenaeum*’s page proofs” (222). Leslie Hankins, one of the pioneering scholars of Woolf’s engagement with cinema and film theory, notes that this range of publications “indicates film theory’s place as an interdisciplinary site in the literary journals, political newspapers, art magazines, and trade publications of the twenties,” and, by extension, “the freeing influence of the new field” in the 1920s (152). Similar to Richardson’s *Close Up* articles, Woolf’s strategy in this essay was “to adopt the persona of an intelligent and educated spectator akin to her ‘common reader,’ rather than that of a specialist referring to esoteric films identifiable by only a handful of viewers” (Hankins 161).

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<sup>25</sup> In her 2003 book *Modernist Women and Visual Cultures: Virginia Woolf, Vanessa Bell, Photography, and Cinema*, Maggie Humm chronicles Woolf’s diary entries in which her film-viewing experiences are recorded. Humm indicates that Woolf recorded her visits to “Picture Palaces” at least four times between 1915 and 1931. The genres of films Woolf saw include, but are not limited to, narrative films such as an adaptation of *Wuthering Heights*, French avant-garde films such as René Clair’s, and Soviet cinema such as Vsevolod Pudovkin’s.

As David Trotter suggests, despite the rigid limits of space, Woolf was able to respond to three different kinds of film genres dominant at that time: “documentary, mainstream narrative, and avant-garde” (165). For example, the fragmentary nature of newsreels, a popular form of documentary film in the early twentieth century, through which spectators encounter images of “the King shaking hands with a football team,” “Sir Thomas Lipton’s yacht,” and “Jack Horner winning the Grand National” (Woolf, *Essay* 348) side by side, made her think about the ways in which a human perception digests film’s mimetic faculty: “The eye is in difficulties. The eye says to the brain, ‘Something is happening which I do not in the least understand. You are needed.’ Together they look at the King, the boat, the horse, and the brain sees at once that they have taken on a quality which does not belong to the simple photography of real life. They have become [. . .] 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” (349). Woolf also raises the issue of an uneasy relationship between cinema and literature in the 1920s by giving an example of one of the film adaptations of Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*.<sup>26</sup> She asserts that as long as narrative cinema reduces literary language into “words of one syllable written in the scrawl of an illiterate schoolboy” by making simple formulas such as “[a] kiss is love” “[a] smashed chair is jealousy,” “[a] grin is happiness,” and “[d]eath

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<sup>26</sup> It is difficult to identify what version of *Anna Karenina* Woolf refers to. According to IMDb, a popular online database of information related to films, by the time of 1926, there were at least five different versions of its silent film adaptation internationally released in 1911 (a Danish film directed by Maurice Maitre), 1914 (a Russian film directed by Vladimir Gardin), 1915 (a Hollywood film directed by J. Gordon Edwards), 1918 (a Hungarian film directed Marton Garas), and in 1920 (a Swedish film directed by Frederic Zelnik), respectively.

is a hearse,” cinema would remain “a parasite” to literature, and that it should be left “to its own devices” in order to discover its own aesthetic possibilities (350).

However, as many critics put more emphasis on Woolf’s fascination with avant-garde films in this essay, one can say that the essay was triggered by her particular interest in the 1919 German film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, directed by Robert Wiene. As Laura Marcus points out, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* “had a significant role as the film that ‘converted’ many intellectuals to the cinema, elevating it from a mass or popular form to the status of high culture” (*Tenth* 124). Indeed, compared to her critical attitude toward newsreels and popular narrative films, Woolf describes her viewing experience of this film with great enthusiasm, as follows:

[. . .] 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, 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. (*Essays* 350)

Instead of discussing the film's specific scenes or its famous German Expressionist sets, Woolf is more intrigued by what she refers to as "a shadow shaped like a tadpole," which was made by accident. Never identified exactly, critics presume that the shadow could be "a flaw in the print cast[ing] a gigantic shadow on the screen" (Trotter 166) or a "fleeting accident of projection [. . .] caused by dirt caught in the projector gate" (Christie 20). Overall, critics tend to agree that the shadow is not something represented on the film, but is purely accidental. What we can see is how Woolf was intrigued by the unintentional effect the moving shadow created. Inspired and thrilled, she begins to make a conjecture about the possibility of a new language for art, a possibility in which "thought could be conveyed by shape more effectively than by words," in which "emotions that have so far failed to find expression" (Woolf, *Essays* 350) could find their means. The shadow provokes Woolf to reconsider the cinema's ability to render thought "visible to the eye without the help of words," so that, with the cinema's ability to manipulate "speed and slowness," emotions and thoughts can be expressed as moving images such as "dart-like directness and vaporous circumlocution" (351). It allows her to imagine "[s]omething abstract, something moving, something calling only for the very slightest help from words or from music to make itself intelligible," which the cinema may soon come to be composed of (351).

With respect to Woolf's suggestion for "a radical development of the subjective potential of the cinema" triggered by the tadpole-shaped shadow, Paul Tiessen argues that Woolf was probably "unaware of contemporary experimentation in abstract film on the Continent" (6). Tiessen informs us that "About a month following the appearance of

Woolf's essay in the *New Republic*, Gilbert Seldes noted that Woolf's desire for 'something abstract' in the cinema 'is apparently written without knowledge of the abstract films which have been made in Paris in the last two or three years, films which already make the conditional future unnecessary. At least a part of the films of tomorrow will be composed of the elements Mrs. Woolf mentions'" (9, endnote). However, Hankins disproves this argument by stating that it is highly possible that Woolf heard about René Claire's avant-garde film *Entr'acte* (1924) from Clive Bell, who went to the Film Society program of January 17, 1926, to watch the film, on the next day (January 18) when she dined with him and Vita Sackville-West (Hankins 153-54). My contention about this seeming anachronism is that Woolf might have been aware of this new trend, yet she was implicitly less interested in making a suggestion "for" the cinema, than interested in discovering aesthetic possibilities of something contingent, something abstract for the sake of her own literary art. I argue that such conjectures and artistic questions ("For what characteristics does thought possess which can be rendered visible to the eye without the help of words?") helped her find a way to experiment with language in her later work.

Regarding this moment when Woolf was distracted from the film's diegesis, Ian Christie explicates that "For Woolf, willingly distracted from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* by this fleeting accident of projection, [. . .] the experience [. . .] could almost be considered as a recurrence of the pre-cinematic—recalling informal shadowplay and the Phantasmagoria—erupting into the ordered representation of narrative film, for which she felt little enthusiasm" (20). Christie's point reminds us of contingency's

indispensable contribution to the cinema's development into an established form. In her book *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, Mary Anne Doane states that "the emerging cinema participated in a more general cultural imperative, the structuring of time and contingency in capitalist modernity" (3-4). That is, modernity, while promoting the "smooth narrative of a successful and progressive rationalization" in that everything must be meaningful, "is also strongly associated with epistemologies that valorize the contingent, the ephemeral, chance—that which is beyond or resistant to meaning" (10), epistemologies that critics such as Baudelaire, Lukács, Karacauer, and Benjamin grapple with to discover the meaning of "the heightened power of contingency and chance in modernity" (15). Doane argues that the significance of the cinema "lies in its apparent capacity to perfectly represent the contingent, to provide the pure record of time," and that "this effort is particularly legible in the most dominant genre of the early cinema—the actuality, which appeared to capture a moment, to register and repeat 'that which happens'" (22). That is to say, "The actualities of early cinema" made the contingent legible by presenting "themselves as the potential catalogues of everything—from scenes of daily life to natural catastrophes, executions, parades, and spectacles" (230). Doane goes on to suggest that,

For the first time, an aesthetic representation—previously chained to the idea of human control—could be made by accidents. This strengthened the medium's alliance with contingency. Film was perceived as the imprint of time itself [. . .], a time unharnessed from rationalization, a

non-teleological time in which each moment can produce the unexpected, the unpredictable, and temporality ratifies indeterminacy. (22)

Doane allows us to conceive contingency as a common denominator between the aesthetics of the actuality before 1907, in that it promoted “the idea of the filmability of the contingent without limit” (230), and Woolf’s fascination with the tadpole-shaped shadow. Indeed, Woolf’s celebration of a chance event that happened on the screen and produced unpredictable effects reopens the stage for contingency, which was rejected by classical narrative films after around 1907. Apparently, the early cinema and Woolf seem to share the same drive: they both celebrate the possibility that an aesthetic representation could be made by accident, which was available due to the advent of new media technologies; their conceptual ideas also serve to emancipate artistic representations from rationalization and human control. However, what is more interesting to me is the difference between the early cinema and Woolf in their treating the nature of contingency. While the actuality celebrates its ability to “represent” real time and its reproducibility, contingency is deemed as something to be fixed, archived, and reproduced. In contrast, what was fascinating to Woolf in her encounter with the tadpole-shaped shadow is its significance as something provisional, something irreproducible, which film technology can neither restore nor represent.

It is Siegfried Kracauer, among critics who engaged in epistemologies that valorize the heightened power of contingency,<sup>27</sup> who shares a similar experience with

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<sup>27</sup> For extensive discussions of the idea of contingency as an important concept in Kracauer’s oeuvre, see Janet Harbord’s “Contingency’s Work: Kracauer’s *Theory of*



Woolf. In his book *Theory of Film* (1960), Kracauer reminisces about his own encounter with contingency at a movie theater in the silent era. In retrospect, he tells a story about a drunken grey-haired pianist he saw at a semi-derelict movie house which was once “an elegant revue theater” (Kracauer, *Theory* 137). The old pianist, Kracauer states, was always drunk while playing and “was so completely immersed in himself that he did not waste a single glance on the screen” (137). Kracauer goes on to describe the pianist by stating that

Sometimes, perhaps under the spell of a pleasant intoxication, he improvised freely, as if prompted by a desire to express the vague memories and ever-changing moods which the alcohol stirred in him; on other occasions he was in such a stupor that he played a few popular melodies over and over again, mechanically adorning them with glittering runs and quavers. So it was by no means uncommon that gay tunes would sound when, in a film I watched, the indignant Count turned his adulterous wife out of the house, and that a funeral march would accompany the blue-tinted scene of their ultimate reconciliation. (137)

Kracauer states that it is “[t]his lack of relation between the musical themes and the action they were supposed to sustain” that fascinated him greatly, because it not only made him “see the story in a new and unexpected light,” but also “challenged [him] to

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*Film and the Trope of the Accidental*” (2007) and Miriam Hansen’s *Cinema and Experience* (2012).

lose [himself] in an uncharted wilderness opened up by allusive shots” (137). He continues,

Precisely by disregarding the images on the screen, the old pianist caused them to yield many a secret. Yet his unawareness of their presence did not preclude improbable parallels: once in a while his music conformed to the dramatic events with an accuracy which struck me all the more as miraculous since it was entirely unintended. It was the same kind of sensation which I experienced when, walking the streets, I discovered that some painted clock dial outside a watchmaker’s shop marked the exact hour as I was passing by. And these random coincidences, along with the stimulating effects of the normal discrepancies, gave me the impression that there existed after all a relationship, however elusive, between the drunken pianist’s soliloquies and the dramas before my eyes—a relationship which I considered perfect because of its accidental nature and its indeterminacy. I never heard more fitting accompaniment.

(137-138)

In the above passages, Kracauer celebrates two different kinds of “random coincidences” (137) caused by the drunken pianist’s improvisation. The first type occurred when the relation between the pianist’s music and the action on the screen becomes disjointed. The music, in such a moment, renders its relation to the moving images arbitrary and thus creates a sort of defamiliarizing effect. The second type occurred when “once in a while his music conformed to the dramatic events with an accuracy” despite the fact that

“it was entirely unintended” (137). Kracauer states that this kind of rare accuracy gives him a sense of perfection “because of its accidental nature and its indeterminacy” (137). This type of accident heightens the pure present tense of contingency when Kracauer compares it to his experience of walking on the streets when he “discovered that some painted clock dial outside a watchmaker’s shop marked the exact hour as [he] was passing by” (137-38). Similarly, toward the end of her “Cinema” essay, Woolf posits that a possible site for discovering an aesthetics of contingency is the urban streets: “Watching crowds, watching the chaos of the streets in the lazy way in which faculties detached from use watch and wait, it seems sometimes as if movements and colours, shapes and sounds had come together and waited for someone to seize them and convert their energy into art; then they disperse and fly asunder again” (Woolf, *Essays* 352).

In short, Woolf’s encounter with the tadpole-shaped shadow highly encourages us to reconsider what Benjamin terms the decay of the aura in the early twentieth century. Her experience (as well as Kracauer’s) strongly suggests that “[t]he aura of the artwork is not entirely lost in the age of mechanical reproduction, but is displaced onto the mechanisms that always do more (and/or less) than simply reproduce” (Gaedtke 186). That is to say, it suggests that in the age of mechanical reproduction an auratic event can happen when something goes wrong and acts against artistic intentions and human controls. Woolf’s cinema experience came as an intense aesthetic experience of contingency when a machine was temporarily malfunctioning. What the tadpole-shaped shadow tells us is that when technology intervenes in the relationship between artists and audiences, accidents in technologically mediated artistic representations can transform a

mere chance event into an aesthetic encounter, and a passive spectator into an aesthetic subject. The next section will read Woolf's last novel *Between the Acts* based on my discussion of her rejection of attentiveness, her representation of distracted spectatorship, and her embracing of the aesthetics of contingency that is machine-mediated and (yet) auratic.

#### **IV.4. Art, Its Spectators and the Avant-Garde in *Between the Acts***

If new modernist studies more and more require us to understand modernism as “a complex exchange between artists and audiences” (Levenson, *Modernism* 3), Woolf's 1941 novel *Between the Acts* can be read as a foremost self-reflexive modernist work that mediates on such an exchange. In the novel, Woolf turns to the question of whether an artist's intention or her message to convey still matters when art can no longer hold the audience's attention. Revealing Woolf's ongoing interest in “the changing construction of audiences and reading practices during her time” (Cuddy-Keane, *Virginia* 8) more than any of her other novels, the novel's self-reflexivity is embodied in two ways: through the relationship between the playwright/director Miss La Trobe and the villagers who are both actors and spectators of her play, and through the novel's own relation to its readers in the way that its fragmentary form “encourage[s] readers to shift from conventional realist reading to modernist self-reflexive practices” (Cuddy-Keane, *Virginia* 121). Given that “the absorptive powers of the media and advertising industries created new pressures on experimental artists,” and given that “the heightened political circumstances of the 1930s placed heavy pressure on [their] vocation of formal

difficulty, intellectual demand, and challenges to the sense” (Levenson, *Modernism* 269), *Between the Act* is Woolf’s daring (last) attempt to deal with multiple pressures she might have felt as an artist.

In this novel, Woolf takes up the masses, which have stood as “counterweight and Other to modernist subjectivity” (Levenson, *Modernism* 102), as her main character and explores the masses’ distracted subjectivity as collective spectators of Miss La Trobe’s pageant-play. Consisting of a wide range of groups including the old, the youth, children, the village’s most respected families, new-comers, and a news reporter (Woolf, *Between* 74-75), Miss La Trobe’s audiences keep assembling and dispersing and are frequently distracted. In her diary entry on April 26, 1938, Woolf, talking about her inception of a new book, which would soon become *Between the Acts*, discloses her intentions to render subjectivity plural and communal as opposed to singular and individual by stating, “‘I’ rejected: ‘We’ substituted: to whom at the end there shall be an invocation? ‘We’ . . . composed of many different things . . . we all life, all art, all waifs & strays—a rambling capricious but somehow unified whole—the present state of my mind?” (*Diary* 135). Woolf’s idea about collectivity as “a rambling capricious but somehow unified whole” can be contextualized in the cultural milieu of the 1930s, when the masses were characterized by distraction, homogeneity, and susceptibility to totalization. As Lara Feigel points out, “the audience of Miss La Trobe’s pageant is a 1930s audience, whose experience of public viewing comes more from films” (185) than traditional theatre as old cronies in the town chat, “You can’t get people, at this time o’ year, to rehearse. There’s the hay, let alone the movies” (Woolf, *Between* 198). Given

that the novel is set in a “remote village in the very heart of England” (16), the novel acknowledges that cinema’s influence as mass entertainment has already penetrated into villagers’ everyday lives.<sup>28</sup> In their influential book *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer depict the masses as victims of mass entertainment, or the culture industry as they prefer to call it, which “leaves no room for imagination or reflection on the part of the audience” (127). They believe that the masses, or the consumers including workers, employees, farmers, and lower middle class, are helpless victims to capitalist production confining their body and soul and promoting constant sameness in that “the universal triumph of the rhythm of mechanical production and reproduction promises that nothing changes, and nothing unsuitable will appear” (134). The culture industry’s function is to fulfill the constant “need of the masses for distraction” by supplying something “patterned and pre-digested” so that no independent thinking must be expected and that every reaction is prescribed (137). The culture industry homogenizes and thus eliminates individuality because the notion of individuality is nothing but an illusion when an individual “can be tolerated only when

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<sup>28</sup> In her 1928 *Close Up* article, entitled “The Cinema in Arcady,” Dorothy Richardson also portrays this cultural phenomenon. In this article, Richardson responds to those who express concern about “the influence of the cinema in rural districts” (185): “We heard of youths and maidens once frugal, homely and dutiful, who now squander their earnings not twice weekly when the picture is changed, but nightly. [. . .] [W]hereas in the towns those who frequent the cinema may obtain together with its other gifts admission to a generalized social life, a thing unknown in slum and tenement, lodging-house and the smaller and poorer villadom, these people of village and hamlet already socially educated and having always before their eyes the spectacle of life in the raw throughout its entire lengths, the assemblage of every kind of human felicity and tribulation, find in the cinema tougher with all else it has to offer them, their only escape from ceaseless association, their only solitude, the solitude that is said to be possible only in cities. They become for a while citizens of a world whose every face is that of a stranger” (185).

his complete identification with the generality is unquestioned” (154). On the other hand, Benjamin, while partially agreeing with Adorno and Horkheimer by stating that “the masses seek distraction whereas art demands concentration from the spectator” (*Illuminations* 239), valorizes distraction as collective reception for he believes that distraction, in its tactile, shock-like manner, can change “the political dynamics of the masses’ relation to art” (Hansen, *Cinema* 99). He believes that “[t]he reactionary attitude toward a Picasso painting changes into the progressive reaction toward a Chaplin movie” (*Illuminations* 234). However, as he makes distinctions between the masses and high art, distraction and concentration, and Picasso and Chaplin, his prospect is firmly based upon the divide between high and low, bourgeois and proletarian, and traditional art and new art.

Woolf’s concern about representing the masses as “a rambling capricious but somehow unified whole,” then, indicates her deliberate deviation from the cultural understanding of the masses. While the way in which audience characters receive Miss La Trobe’s pageant is best described as distraction (as opposed to contemplation), it does not necessarily homogenize their reception nor totalize their vision. Rather, distraction allows spectator characters to freely oscillate between “*Unity [and] Dispersity*” (Woolf, *Between* 201). I argue that in *Between the Acts* Woolf reconsiders this complicated relationship between distraction and the masses and proposes a new ideal state of distractedness as a way of (re)instating or (re)establishing the masses’ position as modernist subjectivity by emancipating them from homogenization, and by disrupting the divide between high and low, traditional and new, and mechanical and natural,

thereby making a new (dis)unified whole. Deviating from distraction as a means for victimizing the masses, Woolf proposes a new regime of distraction which can be achieved through collective subjects' encounters with contingency, that is, with defamiliarizing moments, chance, improvisation, the in-between, and provisional.

In *Between the Acts*, the ways in which Miss La Trobe relates to her audience are indicative of art's precarious status in the 1930s. Miss La Trobe's own precarious status is largely predicated upon the misogyny of bourgeois patriarchy and the inferiority of woman as artist. She is depicted as a social outcast whose origin is dubious: "With that name she wasn't presumably pure English. From the Channel Islands perhaps? Only her eyes and something about her always made Mrs. Bingham suspect that she had Russian blood in her. [. . .] Rumour said that she had kept a tea shop at Winchester; that had failed. She had been an actress. That had failed. She had bought a four-roomed cottage and shared it with an actress. They had quarreled. Very little was actually known about her" (*Between* 57-58). Her "swarthy, sturdy, and thick set" (58) physique, her manner of striding "about the fields in a smock frock; sometimes with a cigarette in her mouth; often with a whip in her hand" (58), and her use of strong language make the villagers conclude that she is not "a lady" (58). As Georgia Johnston has put it, while Miss La Trobe's "inability to conform" somehow "marks her as a failure within society" (Johnston 62), she can "only fitfully 'fit' by masking her individual identity with her professional identity of village producer of the pageant" (65). However, the villagers often deem her as "bossy" although they admit that she has "a passion for getting things up" (Woolf, *Between* 58); they regard Miss La Trobe as their temporary leader so that



“they could put the blame on her” (63). While she constantly vacillates between budget concerns and her artistic desire to create a perfect illusion, obstacles constantly frustrate her goal: “The actors delayed. Every moment the audience slipped the noose; split up into scraps and fragments” (122). Miss La Trobe’s frustration as an artist always goes with her self-effacing tendency as she hides herself behind the bush throughout the play and maintains “her stooping position” to avoid attention (208). She considers herself “a slave to her audience” (94) and audiences the devil (180). The antagonistic relationship between artist and audience suggests that there is no mutual agreement between artist and audience about how a public art form such as a pageant is supposed to be received in this era.

In her 1938 book-length essay *Three Guineas*, which was written in an epistolary form addressing a male correspondent who asked her how war can be prevented, Woolf warns against the danger of witnessing the rise of fascism as passive spectators. Toward the end of her essay, Woolf, referring to a photograph of Hitler (“He is called in German and Italian Führer or Duce; in our own language Tyrant or Dictator” [Woolf, *A Room* 364]), writes that the photograph “suggests that the public and the private worlds are inseparably connected; that the tyrannies and servilities of the one are the tyrannies and servilities of the other [. . .] [; and that] we are not passive spectators doomed to unresisting obedience but by our thoughts and actions can ourselves change that figure” (364-65). Because of this remark, several critics have perceived *Between the Acts* as a critique of passive spectators and their acquiescent and potentially fascistic “we”-ness in the interwar period. However, these critics tend to lose sight of the counterpart of

passive spectators offered in the novel. In *Between the Acts*, the abhorrence of passivity inherent in the nature of spectatorship is expressed through the voice of Giles Oliver, Isa's husband and a stockbroker who commutes to London. Noticing the old generation's ignorance about the coming of war in Europe, he shows "his irritation, his rage with old fogies who sat and looked at views over coffee and cream when the whole of Europe—over there—was bristling [. . .] with guns, poised with planes. At any moment guns would rake that land into furrows; planes splinter Bolney Minster into smithereens and blast the Folly" (Woolf, *Between* 53). Although he loves the view like other characters, Giles is extremely wary of being subjugated to spectacle and believes that letting the view triumph means failure to pay attention to history written in the newspaper. For Giles, who is "hirsute, handsome, virile" (106), being a spectator involves a sense of impotence: "This afternoon he wasn't Giles Oliver come to see the villagers act their annual pageant; manacled to a rock he was, and forced passively to behold indescribable horror. His face showed it" (60).

Giles's association of spectatorship with passivity, his idea that "being a spectator is a bad thing," is predicated upon what Jacques Rancière terms two long-standing assumptions that have placed "the question of the spectator at the heart of the discussion of the relations between art and politics": that viewing is not only the opposite of knowing but also the opposite of acting (2). While the former highlights the spectator's being "held before an appearance in a state of ignorance about the process of production of this appearance and about the reality it conceals," the latter associates her immobility (as she has to sit in her seat) with passivity (2). For those who criticize

spectacle's domination over the spectator, "To be a spectator is to be separated from both the capacity to know and the power to act" (2). However, the novel reveals that Giles's pursuit of "action" as opposed to passivity is tainted with a private violence that is, as Woolf insinuated in *Three Guineas*, not far from fascist violence. During the intervals between the acts, his desire to be an actor rather than an audience is manifested through a violent act of stamping on a snake "choked with a toad in its mouth," a spectacle that gives him an impression of "a monstrous inversion" (*Between* 99): "The mass crushed and slithered. The white canvas on his tennis shoes was bloodstained and sticky. But it was action. Action relieved him" (99). Through Giles's preference of action, Woolf reveals the potential danger of denying one's spectatorial position in history.

Instead of warning about passive spectatorship or critiquing the collective subject's passivity, Woolf illuminates how spectators can bring about change while they fully acknowledge their role, as Bart Oliver affirms, acknowledge that "Our part [. . .] is to be the audience. And a very important part too" (58). In fact, the audience in the novel is not depicted as passive at all; they are constantly asked to respond to spectacles, to imagine, to fill the gaps, to engage with their own history, and to activate their own "unacted part" (153). Steven Putzel suggests that by the 1920s Woolf herself was "a highly experienced and sophisticated theater audience," cultivating her eclectic taste "ranging from the music-hall of her youth reprised in the Bloomsbury skits, to the social and political dramas of Ibsen, Shaw, and Chekhov, to her continued interest in Shakespeare, opera and ballet, to the stage experiments of her friend Tom Eliot," and she

gradually “realized that theatrical space is to a large extent defined by the reception and response of the audience” (110). In her essay “Notes on Elizabethan Plays” published in the *TLS*, 5 March 1925, Woolf wrote,

with all its faults—its patriotism, rhetoric and bombast, the Elizabethan audience leavened the mass with fire. The lines are flung and hurried into existence and reach the same impromptu felicities, have the same lip-moulded profusion and unexpectedness which speech sometimes achieves but seldom in our day the deliberate, solitary pen. Indeed half the work of the dramatists one feels was done in the Elizabethan age by the public.

(*Essays* 64, 69)

The theatre that interested Woolf is one dominated by the audience, which she later created in *Between the Acts* (Putzel 110). In *Between the Acts*, Woolf “chose not to model La Trobe’s theatrical conventions on those of Ibsen, Shaw, Chekhov, Elizabeth Robins (with whom Woolf was acquainted), or the many other serious women playwrights of the first third of the twentieth century,” which advocated “psychological realism, naturalism, or complex characterizations” (143). Instead, by featuring “her out-of-doors venue, amateur actors, and shoestring budget” at the expense of “lighting effects, curtains, fly space, or other amenities of the early twentieth-century public stage,” Miss La Trobe’s play follows the conventions of the village pageant heightening the role of the audience (143).

Although Putzer and other critics increasingly recognize how the novel “help[s] us understand the role theater audiences play in the creative process” (143), they tend to

neglect the border-crossing aspects of Miss La Trobe's pageant-play. While her play is in a hybrid art form that defies easy, monolithic definition, it resembles the early cinema's variety format as described as "Act; dance; sing; a little bit of everything" (Woolf, *Between* 58). Certainly, Mrs. Manresa's unanswered question—"Was is an old play? Was it a new play?" (109)—suggests the audiences' (and Miss La Trobe's) inability to pin it down. The pageant's distracted form is especially resonant with Miriam Hansen's point that Benjamin's "valorization of distraction (as opposed to the contemplative reception of traditional works of art) in the artwork essay presupposes a type of cinema experience still patterned on the variety format, that is, the programming of shorter films (interspersed with or framed by live performances) on the principle of maximum stylistic or thematic diversity" (Hansen, *Cinema* 86). Although the audience experiences extreme boredom and alienation before the pageant begins ("There was nothing for the audience to do. [. . .] They were silent. They stared at the view, as if something might happen in one of those fields to relieve them of the intolerable burden of sitting silent, doing nothing, in company. Their minds and bodies were too close, yet not close enough" [Woolf, *Between* 65]), as the play proceeds, it starts to transform the audience's relation to the spectacle in a more interactive way. While watching the play as "a mella<sup>29</sup>; a medley; an entrancing spectacle [. . .] of dappled light and shade on half clothed, fantastically coloured, leaping, jerking, swinging legs and arms" (93), the audience members stop being silent spectators and begin to talk and move.

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<sup>29</sup> According to OED, the word is borrowed from French, meaning "[a] cloth made of wools dyed in different shades or colours and mixed before being spun."

Particularly, it is when the voices of an actress and the chorus are intermingled (“She bawled. They bawled. All together they bawled, and so loud that it was difficult to make out what they were saying” [90]) that Isa receives the play as “a medley of things” and is confused about what she is supposed to make “with the beldame’s deafness, the bawling of the youths, and the confusion of the plot” (90). Acknowledging that “the plot was only there to beget emotion,” and that “there was no need to puzzle out the plot” (90), Isa gradually understands the play’s subversive function to cut the “knot” between plot and emotion and concludes, “Don’t bother about the plot: the plot’s nothing” (91). Isa’s awakening is highly reminiscent of what the variety format shares with later avant-garde filmmakers’ practice, which can be summed up as “exhibitionist confrontation rather than diegetic absorption” (Gunning, “The Cinema” 59). As Miss La Trobe’s play assaults the audiences “in a tactile, shocklike manner” through an entrancing spectacle and later through the actors’ holding up shattered mirrors to the audiences, its style resembles more “the *presentational* style of early films (as well as Soviet montage films) than the *representational* style of classical cinema” (Hansen, *Cinema* 86). That is to say, as Hansen makes a distinction, “Whereas the former tends to organize their space frontally and thus appear to directly address a collective audience in the theater space, the latter resorts to strategies derived from the proscenium stage and well-made play, offering the viewer (virtual) access to a closed diegetic world through continuity editing, narrative absorption, and focalization on psychologically motivated characters” (86).

Accordingly, the audiences receive Miss La Trobe’s pageant-play in varying ways. The play mesmerizes a spectator such as William Dodge, a proponent of hedonism

and aestheticism, who thinks that beauty itself is part and parcel of art (Woolf, *Between* 82); allows a spectator to envision her “unacted part” (153), as Lucy Swithin ecstatically exclaims, “What a small part I’ve had to play! But you’ve made me feel I could have played . . . Cleopatra!” (153); remains a failure for those who like to “leave a theatre knowing exactly what was meant,” such as Etty Springett (164). Likewise, the audience members portray Miss La Trobe the artist either as trickster who creates a “sham lure” (97) or as “twitcher of individual strings,” the “one who seethes wandering bodies and floating voices in a cauldron [. . .] and makes rise up from its amorphous mass a re-created world” (153).

Mrs. Manresa, who enjoys the pageant in the most distracted way, represents the masses whose taste was often conceived as plebeian and feminine. As Andrea Huysen famously pointed out in *After the Great Divide*, there was a notion from the nineteenth century on that “mass culture is somehow associated with woman” mainly due to the fact that “In the age of nascent socialism *and* the first major women’s movement in Europe, the masses [. . .] knocking at the gate of a male-dominated culture” were mostly women (Huysen 47). Throughout the novel, Mrs. Manresa’s femininity goes hand in hand with her cheap taste associated with vulgarity and garishness. Described as “[v]ulgar [. . .] in her gestures, in her whole person, over-sexed, [and] over-dressed for a picnic” (Woolf, *Between* 41), her image is always put on display: “Her hat, her rings, her finger nails red as roses, smooth as shells, were there for all to see” (39). A visitor from London and the wife of a wealthy Jew, she is deemed as a pollutant as though she comes to offer the villagers “a sample of her life; a few gobbets of gossip; mere trash” that the

villagers associate with urban life (42).<sup>30</sup> The strong association between femininity and cheap taste is especially evident in her specific mode of spectatorial engagement with the view and with Miss La Trobe's pageant-play. As a spectator herself, she calls the play "this entertainment" (56), is impatient of boredom (as she longs to "relax and curl in a corner with a cushion, a picture paper, and a bag of sweets" [66]), and admits her low taste without reserve by saying, "I'm on a level with [. . .] the servants. I'm nothing like so grown up" (45). Highly reminiscent of Dorothy Richardson's description of a spectatrix who is far from silent yet highly self-centered and self-expressive, who is free from man's perspective on history, Mrs. Manresa is "beating her foot and humming in time to" the tunes the gramophone plays (85) while watching the play. That she is the only audience who is not afraid of facing the mirrors held up by the actors near the play's ending ("facing herself in the glass, uses it as a glass; had out her mirror; powered her nose; and moved one curl, disturbed by the breeze, to its place" [186]) suggests the unlimited freedom she can enjoy as a (distracted) spectator. All in all, she is best fitted to "the spectator at the variety theatre [who] feels directly addressed by the spectacle and joins in, singing along, heckling the comedians" (Gunning, "The Cinema" 59).

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<sup>30</sup> But at the same time, her overflowing feminine energy, her "faith in flesh and blood" (39), revives male characters such as Bart Oliver and Giles Oliver: "She looked [. . .] goddess-like, buoyant, abundant, her cornucopia running over. Bartholomew[Bart], following blessed the power of the human body to make the earth fruitful. Giles would keep his orbit so long as she weighted him to the earth. She stirred the stagnant pool of his old heart even—where bones lay buried" (119). Her vitality, in a way, serves as a counterweight to the patriarchal impasse which, as Woolf believes in *Three Guineas*, led to the growth of Fascism.



Indeed, in the novel Woolf acknowledges that distraction, or inattention, is an established trend for cultural audiences of the 1930s. Particularly, Woolf does so by illuminating the newspaper's presence on the cultural landscape through multiple characters' close engagement with this media technology. Not just Isa, for whose generation "the newspaper [is] a book" (*Between* 20), and Bart Oliver, who uses *The Times* as a prop to make fun of his grandson, but other anonymous spectator characters, who gossip about what they read in the papers and ask each other, "D'you believe what's in the papers?" (121), reveal that newspapers play a big part in their daily lives. According to Karin Westman, "By the end of the 1930s, England was a nation of newspaper readers" (Westman 2), and particularly, *The Times*, the one the Olivers subscribe to in this novel, was the most popular one read by the country's higher classes: a 1935 survey shows that "54.1% of the families at the top of the income ladder took *The Times*, making it the preferred morning daily ahead of the *Daily Mail* (31.6%) or the *Daily Telegraph* and *Morning Post* combined (48.1%)" (5). With its adoption of Times New Roman font designed by Stanley Morison in 1931 and its anti-union, pro-Empire editorial policies, *The Times* was known to be conservative, aristocrat, and masculine (5-6). While the morning's *The Times* in the novel shows how newspapers affect the villagers' attention span by obliterating "the day before" (Woolf, *Between* 216), Isa's reading experience of it, which is highly inattentive, resists "the interpellative function of the newspaper in the 1930s" (Westman 8). Unlike her father-in-law Bart Oliver, who reads the paper to "reassure himself of his place in the world" (7) as a retired Indian civil servant, Isa is easily distracted while reading the same copy of *The Times*:

[. . .] as her father-in-law had dropped the *Times*, she took it and read: “A horse with a green tail . . .” which was fantastic. Next, “The guard at Whitehall . . .” which was romantic and then, building word upon word, she read: “The troopers told her the horse had a green tail; but she found it was just an ordinary horse. And they dragged her up to the barrack room where she was thrown upon a bed. Then one of the troopers removed part of her clothing, and she screamed and hit him about the face. . . .”

That was real; so real that on the mahogany door panels she saw the Arch in Whitehall; through the Arch the barrack room; in the barrack room the bed, and on the bed the girl was screaming and hitting him about the face, when the door (for in fact it was a door) opened and in came Mrs. Swithin carrying a hammer. (Woolf, *Between* 20)

As Westman points out, in contrast to “Bart’s attention to ‘finding his place in the column’ (Woolf, *Between* 13), Isa’s reading could well be categorized as ‘inattentive’” (Westman 8). Instead of attempting to fully understand the newspaper’s story by delving into it, Isa departs from its narrative, letting her mind wander from its text (Westman 8). Amplifying the event’s brutality, Isa’s visualization of the victimized girl in the story is strongly suggestive of a reader’s freedom of imagination which does not succumb to the newspaper’s interpellative power. With this scene, Isa, who loathes “the domestic, the possessive; the maternal” and who frequently “look[s] away” (Woolf, *Between* 19) throughout the novel, not only defies what Jonathan Crary terms the modern pursuit of

attentiveness, but also resists internalizing attentive norms associated with the violence of patriarchy in the 1930s. As Westman has put it, “By being inattentive to *The Times*, by daydreaming, Isa resists the interpellative hail of its pages, resists ‘slipp[ing] into’ that ‘universe of ready-made feelings’ which Bart embraces during his reading of *The Times*” (9). Through Isa’s inattentive reading, Woolf not only represents another obvious function of distraction, which deeply disrupts the subject’s internalized attentive norms, but also encourages her readers to emulate Isa’s inattentive strategy. Similar to the narrator’s meandering in “The Mark on the Wall,” Isa’s daydreaming, the act that Crary calls “a domain of resistance internal to any system of routinization or coercion” (77), becomes a way of shattering peace maintained by the masculine point of view.

When distraction takes the reigns, what organizes the novel’s reading experience are “thoughts without words” (Woolf, *Between* 55) and “words without meaning” (212). As discussed in the previous section, Woolf’s “The Cinema” essay reveals her understanding that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. Her strong interest in abstraction also manifests her belief that a new art’s goal should be disrupting and defamiliarizing the conventional relationship between the signifier and the signified. In *Between the Acts*, Woolf achieves this goal by experimenting with language, by reconfiguring the reading subject’s relation to language. The narrator often visualizes words by using tropes and by self-reflexively revealing language’s metaphoric aspects. For example, when the nurses are trundling the perambulator of Isa’s baby, their talk is described as “not shaping pellets of information [ . . . ] but rolling words, like sweets on their tongues” (10). When Lucy Swithin shows William Dodge around Pointz

Hall and says the word “the nursery” to introduce the room, the narrator describes the moment as if the word “the nursery” raises itself and becomes symbolical by connoting “the cradle of our race” (71). When the audience feels boredom about their being (seemingly) passive spectators, the danger of passivity is compared to the pageant’s linguistic function to the audience as potentially violent and fascistic: “Words this afternoon ceased to lie flat in the sentence. They rose, became menacing and shook their fists at you” (59). Miss La Trobe’s artistic vision hinges upon whether she is able to capture words constantly escaping her, whether she can hear the first words of her yet unwritten play. When words finally rise themselves and are available to her to hear, they are completely devoid of meaning: “Words without meaning—wonderful words” (212). By implication, Woolf encourages her readers to defamiliarize their own relation to language as though they watch an abstract, mysterious moving image on the screen. Words themselves are abstract, ephemeral, on the move, and devoid of meanings and thoughts.

#### **IV.4.1. “Intentional was it, or accidental?”**

When it comes to the question of Woolf’s relation to exhibitionary culture, critics tend to see *Between the Acts* as Woolf’s most positive deployment of spectacles. Certainly, the novel celebrates “the beauty of the visible world” (Woolf, *Between* 82). Karen Jacobs, for example, argues that the novel’s “distracted consideration of its annual village pageant—part airy entertainment, part history play—raises fundamental questions about whether aesthetic spectacle can further political aims by exposing

ideological biases and galvanizing the audience into significant political activity” (204), and that the novel lays stress on “the means by which aesthetic spectacle can potentially function as a palliative to violence” (204). Similarly, Mark Wollaeger observes that *Between the Acts*, especially Miss La Trobe’s pageant itself, testifies to Woolf’s “later belief that spectacles can catalyze change” and “her confidence in the power of individuals to deflect or transform ideological conditioning” (84). While I agree with these critics, my take on Woolf’s positive deploying of spectacles is that Woolf especially calls our attention to contingency, which is predicated upon a non-antagonistic relationship between the mechanical and the natural, and makes it integral to spectacles’ progressive ends. Although Miss La Trobe frequently feels her intention fails due to malfunctioning machines, fickle weather, and clumsy amateur actors, in reality, these very factors make the theatrical spectacles arrest the audience’s attention and thus serve to assemble them into a temporarily unified whole. Indeed, spectacles devoid of human control, or spectacles made by accident, and their effects fill the ostensible gaps in Miss La Trobe’s pageant-play and, somehow, lead the play to a success.

As Bonnie Kime Scott suggests, “with its trains, automobiles, airplanes, paperback books, newspapers, megaphone, and [. . .] its gramophone,” *Between the Acts*, despite its setting of rural England, is full of machines and commodities related to media technologies (104). In a way, both Woolf’s novel and Miss La Trobe’s play correspond to Brecht’s idea that there is no art that “remains wholly untouched by the new possibilities of communication (radio, film, book clubs, etc.)” (Brecht 48). In his essay

“The Film, the Novel and Epic Theatre” (1931), Brecht argues that there are no “sacrosanct works of art” immune “from every process and influence of our time” (48), and asks writers to abandon “the introspective psychology of the bourgeois novel” (50) and instead embrace the film’s emphasis on external action and external point of view for progressive ends. In *Between the Acts*, an artist’s strategic appropriation of communication technologies is especially embodied through Miss La Trobe’s use of the gramophone for her play. With its ambiguous positioning (“It must be hidden; yet must be close enough to the audience to be heard” [63]), the gramophone disrupts the possibility for spectacles to be received as a pure illusion. When its highly mechanical sound (“chuff, chuff, chuff” and “tick, tick, tick”) is omnipresent during the play to either make “the noise a machine makes when something has gone wrong” (76) or mark time, the gramophone reveals the boundaries between reality and illusion, thereby preventing the play from creating “a seamless whole in which the marks of the technology [would be] effaced” (Bolter 16). By exposing the audience to the sound of the real, the gramophone induces distracted listening, which was deemed in the 1930s as “a renunciation of listening choice, the opposite of responsibly paying attention, of managing one’s responsiveness to the world” (Goodman 17).

Critics who shed light on the gramophone’s multiple roles largely acknowledge the machine’s impact on the interplay between individual and community, private and public, and unity and dispersity. For example, Martin argues that “the gramophone’s warbling of ‘Unity—Dispersity’ points to the constantly shifting balance between the community and the individual” (“Unity—Dispersity” 107). With regards to the

machine's relation to Miss La Trobe, Scott notes its "central functions for the pageant" including "guiding the motions of the audience, providing a variety of mood music for the various period skits, and managing the intervals" (105), and points out its prosthetic function in relation to Miss La Trobe the auteur, calling it "an extension of herself" (105). Scott's point helps us understand how the gramophone, by guiding the motions of the audience, acknowledges spectators' position as "living bodies that are to be mobilized" (Rancière 3). Michele Pridmore-Brown, one of the first critics who shed new light on the gramophone, suggests a gradual change in the gramophone's impact on the audience. Pridmore-Brown argues that while "the gramophone at first acts as a tool for controlling the audience" akin to Fascism's efforts, it ultimately reveals Miss La Trobe's intention to "adulterate the messages of authority, thus interrupting what can be considered the imperialism of perfect communication" (Pridmore-Brown 411). Although I agree with Pridmore-Brown up to the point that the noise of the gramophone works against Fascist propaganda's intention to transform the masses into a homogeneous, receptive listener, I still insist that this subversion already takes effect from the very beginning of the play, the abruptness of which, creating uncertainty ("Was it, or was it not, the play?" [Woolf, *Between* 76]), is marked by the noise of the gramophone.

I want to focus on the moments when the noise of the gramophone, everyday sounds, and nature sounds coexist. When the mechanical sound holds the audience together, by making them fall into a trance, the audience is exposed to the non-diegetic sounds as well: "They sat exposed. The machine ticked. There was no music. The horns of cars on the high road were heard. And the swish of trees. They were neither one thing

nor the other; neither Victorians nor themselves. They were suspended, without being, in limbo. Tick, tick, tick went the machine” (178). In a way, the novel itself plays the role of the gramophone when it records the sound of the real. In his book *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (1986), Friedrich Kittler states that for the first time in human history, media were engulfed by “the noise of the real” due to the advent of gramophone in the twentieth century; by recording the time flow of acoustic data, the gramophone allowed us to reproduce any kind of sound—nonverbal, fragmentary, univocal (14). While the gramophone in *Between the Acts* “produces” the sound of the real rather than “recording” the time, it is the novel which “records” the real, or “what the dominant narratives have left out” (Cuddy-Keane, “Virginia” 90).

When we understand the machine-mediated nature of Miss La Trobe’s play, it is strange that Woolf, in her deploying of aesthetic spectacles, places nature’s contingency at the climax of Miss La Trobe’s play. As Jacobs points out, in the earlier parts of the novel nature is named “the view” and is put on display to reveal “its to-be-looked-at-ness, its instrumental value in relation to a human observer” (Jacobs 225). Although “the view” as “a pointless distraction” (Jacobs 225) merely induces boredom and passivity among its spectators, as the play proceeds, the audiences begin to reconfigure their relation to nature through their contingent encounters. Whenever Miss La Trobe’s vision fails, “nature takes her part” (Woolf, *Between* 192) to fill the gaps of the play.

The words died away. [. . .] And the stage was empty. Miss La Trobe leant against the tree, paralyzed. Her power had left her. Beads of



perspiration broke on her forehead. Illusion had failed. "This is death," she murmured, "death."

Then suddenly, as the illusion petered out, the cows took up the burden. One had lost her calf. In the very nick of time she lifted her great moon-eyed head and bellowed. [. . .] It was the primeval voice sounding loud in the ear of the present moment. [. . .] The cows annihilated the gap; bridged the distance; filled the emptiness and continued the emotion."  
(140-141)

Another climactic moment comes when Miss La Trobe feels "something was going wrong with the experiment" (179); it is right before the last act of the play, entitled "Present Time. Ourselves" (177), begins.

This is death, death, death, she noted in the margin of her mind; when illusion fails. Unable to lift her hand, she stood facing the audience.

And then the shower fell, sudden, profuse.

No one had seen the cloud coming. There it was, black, swollen, on top of them. Down it poured like all the people in the world weeping. Tears.

Tears. Tears. (180)

Revealing Woolf's own "fascination with sublime aesthetic moments" (Katz 107), both of the passages include the words such as "suddenly" and "sudden" to signal nature's abrupt intervention. With these scenes, Woolf, to borrow Benjamin's terminology, is planting "a blue flower in the land of technology," that is, "the highly auratic emblem of the romantic imagination" (Hansen, *Cinema* 74). In the face of the disintegration of the

aura, Woolf attempts to redeem the possibility of experience through the subject's encounters with contingency not derived from the modern, but from its opposite—the primitive. Indeed, Woolf's nature is imbued with contingency, which, in the age of Taylorism, "emerges as a form of resistance to rationalization" and "proffers to the subject the appearance of absolute freedom, immediacy, [and] directness" (Doane 11), and which renders anything "neither necessary nor impossible" (231). Experienced as the collective subject's intense encounters with the uncertainty, nature's contingency significantly contributes to transforming the masses into critical subjects, who can emancipate themselves from the obsession with narrative absorption, question their status in their own history ("do we change?" [Woolf, *Between* 121]), and, ultimately, realize that "Change has to come" (174). *Between the Acts* reflects Woolf's concern about the crisis of language in the age of machines. When written language was losing its power over machines and new media technologies, Woolf's experimentation with distraction transforms the established genre of novel into a new art form filled with the aesthetics of contingency. With this novel, Woolf not only discovered written language's new aesthetic possibilities, but also sought to emancipate spectators in the age of technological reproduction.

#### **IV.4.2. Why Isn't *Between the Acts* a Film?**

What is the ultimate significance of Woolf's forging the distracted spectatorship and creating a new ideal of distraction? In lieu of a conclusion, I would like to readdress the question Mark Tranter posed in his essay in *Virginia Woolf in the Age of Mechanical*

*Reproduction*: “Why isn’t *Between the Acts* a film?” To modify this question, why, despite her understanding that film is the best medium to represent contingency and cultivate distraction, and despite the fact that Woolf conceived distraction as an ideal state of reception, did she make Miss La Trobe into a playwright-director, not a filmmaker? As a possible answer, I propose that Miss La Trobe’s pageant-play as a form of distraction serves as a counterweight to Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will*, the Nazi propaganda film premiered in March 1935, in which “Riefenstahl aspired to bind her images into one coherent statement, one that excludes the possibility of competing appropriations and completely controls the attention of the viewer” (Koepnick, *Framing* 182). As Elizabeth Evans suggests, although there is “no reference to *Triumph of the Will* in Woolf’s diary or letters,” it is highly likely that Woolf has known about it (60).<sup>31</sup> Without doubt, Woolf’s choosing the pageant-play over other genres could be read as her response to “fascist theatricality of history,” a version of the aestheticization of politics that Benjamin warns against in his “Artwork” essay (Jacobs 207); as Susan Buck-Morss states, “Fascism [. . .] stag[ed] not only political spectacles but historical events [. . .] thereby making ‘reality’ itself theater” (36). An example par excellence of the aestheticization of politics, *Triumph of the Will*, a documentary film chronicling the Nuremberg Party Convention in 1934, is famous for its spectacular (re)presentations of Hitler and the masses and for its cinematic mastery.

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<sup>31</sup> Evans informs us that “In May 1935, Virginia and Leonard Woolf traveled to Germany where they witnessed at first hand state-sponsored anti-Semitism and virulent German nationalism” (57), and that Leonard Woolf “heard on the radio the broadcast of the Rally that Riefenstahl’s film memorializes” (60).

Miss La Trobe's pageant (and Woolf's novel as well) gives a significant counterweight to Riefenstahl's film in two ways: through its ultimate valorization of contingency and distraction and through its treatment of the masses as spectacle. First, as Koepnick has aptly put it in his book *Framing Attention*, while *Triumph of the Will* valorizes constantly shifting attention and endless movement that fool "the slowness of our visual perception" (180), "there is no space for coincidence or imprecision, no space for ambiguity or unwanted interpretation" in Riefenstahl's world (182). Following "the codes of narrative cinema" (180), the film is more interested in authoring "the real like an awe-inspiring artwork" (182) than in penetrating reality, more in consecrating "Hitler's power over the viewer's life and imagination" (182) than in discovering the optical unconscious. By making the pageant-play into a decentered form of "orts, scraps, and fragments," Woolf defies Riefenstahl's purpose to control the viewer's attention. Instead of controlling or homogenizing readers' vision, the novel itself suggests an alternative optics in which "All [the] eyes, expanding and narrowing, some adapted to light, others to darkness, [look] from different angles and edges" (Woolf, *Between* 100). By foregrounding contingency and presenting dispersing audiences, Woolf creates space for coincidence, ambiguities and varied interpretations, which are inherently prohibited in Riefenstahl's world.

Secondly, Miss La Trobe's pageant significantly ruptures the mass spectacles depicted in *Triumph of the Will*. In his book *From Caligari to Hitler*, Kracauer points out the fact that the film includes "picture[s] of the mass ornaments" appearing to Hitler and his staff, "who must have appreciated them as configurations symbolizing the readiness

of the masses to be shaped and used at will by their leader” (302). Kracauer argues that “these living ornaments can be traced to the intention of captivating the spectator with their aesthetic qualities and leading him to believe in the solidity of the swastika world” (302). Miss La Trobe’s play replaces such mass spectacles with a group of highly distracted spectators who are free to organize a unified whole and then to be dispersed. The shattered mirrors capturing and staging the masses in the last act of the play serve as a replacement of the myriad cameras used in Riefenstahl’s film. Watching their own images and taking the position of the camera at the same time, the masses become able to recognize the hidden connections among themselves, fascism, war, civilization, and history as the voice from a loud speaker states: “*Ourselves. Some bony. Some fat. (The glasses confirmed this.) Liars most of us. Thieves too. (The glasses made no comment on that.) The poor are as bad as the rich are. Perhaps worse. [. . .] Consider the gun slayers, bomb droppers here or there. They do openly what we do slyly. [. . .] A tyrant, remember, is half a slave. [. . .] Look at ourselves, ladies and gentlemen! Then at the wall; and ask how’s this wall, the great wall, which we call, perhaps miscall, civilization, to be built by (here the mirrors flicked and flashed) orts, scraps and fragments like ourselves?*” (Woolf, *Between* 187-88) Even Miss La Trobe’s use of the speaker, which embodies the collective subject’s distracted listening, can be read as a direct response to Hitler’s declaration that “without the loudspeaker, we would never have conquered Germany” (qtd. Attali 87).

As we repeatedly encounter the words “triumph” and “failure” (or the two words’ interplay) throughout the novel, *Between the Acts* can be read as “the defeat of

the will” from Miss La Trobe’s perspective, or can be read as “the triumph of the masses” from the audience members’ perspective.

CHAPTER V  
CONCLUSION

**V.1. The Emancipated Spectators**

In his essay “The Emancipated Spectator,” Jacques Rancière points out “the absence of any obvious relationship between the theory of intellectual emancipation and the question of the spectator today” (1). While reformers of theatre have disputed whether a spectator must be a “scientific investigator or experimenter [. . .] who observes phenomena and searches for their causes” (4) or she must be “removed from the position of observer calmly examining the spectacle offered to her” in order to become “the being in possession of all her vital energies” (4), they have agreed upon two things: that theatre must be “the place where the passive audience of spectators must be transformed [. . .] the active body of a community enacting its living principle” (5), and that the artist must “overcome the gulf separating activity from passivity” (12). Rancière remarks that “Emancipation begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting; when we understand that the self-evident facts that structure the relations between saying, seeing and doing themselves belong to the structure of domination and subjection[; and] when we understand that viewing is also an action that confirms or transforms this distribution of positions” (13).

Although Rancière’s emphasis is on theatre rather than the cinema and other arts, he points to the need to demystify any kind of art spectatorship accused of passivity. The emancipated spectator he proposes

acts, like the pupil or scholar. She observes, selects, compares, interprets. She links what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen on other stages, in other kinds of place. She composes her own poem with the elements of the poem before her. She participates in the performance by refashioning it in her own way—by drawing back [. . .] from the vital energy that it is supposed to transmit in order to make it a pure image and associate this image with a story which she has read or dreamt, experienced or invented. (13)

Focusing on three different types of spectators that are seemingly vulnerable, uncritical, and passive—a child, a woman, and the masses, respectively, this dissertation has explored how their spectatorship, while grappling with “equivalences between theatrical audience and community, gaze and passivity, exteriority and separation, mediation and simulacrum” and with “oppositions between the collective and the individual, the image and living reality, activity and passivity, self-ownership and alienation” (7), manages to “emancipate” them intellectually. Whether it is a child spectator who is trapped by the phantasmagoric world of irresponsible adults, whether it is a female spectator whose pursuits of art and autonomy are at odds with each other, or whether it is the collective subject required to fight against fascism while maintaining its spectatorial position and seeking a balance between individuality and communality, the spectator characters discussed in this dissertation begin to emancipate themselves by acknowledging their own multiple spectatorial positions. Likewise, the writers this dissertation sheds light on encourage their readers to encounter the spectacle and, by so doing, attempt to



emancipate their readers from linear reading, or the traditional mode of reading, interpellating them as “both distant spectators and active interpreters of the spectacle offered to them” (13).

## **V.2. Toward Spectatorial Modernism**

This dissertation acknowledges that the spectator as “a corporeal presence” is “a slippery concept” (Kennedy 3). As Dennis Kennedy suggests, it is true that investigating spectatorship is difficult because “audiences are not (and probably never have been) homogeneous social and psychological groups, their experiences are not uniform and impossible to standardize, their reactions are chiefly private and internal, and recording their encounters with events, regardless of the mechanism used to survey or register them, is usually belated and inevitably partial” (3). Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the study of spectatorship offers a useful tool to theorize the interface between spectatorship and readership “in the context of a changing relation between private and public life” by “mobilizing the distinction between private and public in a comparative study of” (Bruno, *Streetwalking* 338) modernist literature and film. As E. Deidre Pribram suggests, the study of spectatorship as “an attempt to understand why we choose to sit in the movie theater seat or on the living-room sofa captivated by a screen” and to understand what makes spectatorial experience “so pleasurable, desirable, [and] meaningful” is in close conjunction with “conceptualizations of subjectivity” (146). As concepts of the spectator aim to identify the subject “involved in an activity which has been described as everything from passive absorption to active production of the text” (146), they are

inseparable from aesthetic theories and reader-response criticism.

This dissertation has conceived the spectator's multiple positions as a common denominator between modernist literature and early cinema. It ultimately proposes a new critical term "spectatorial modernism" to open up the field of new modernist studies to the promise of an audience-oriented analysis. Spectatorial modernism refers to texts that highlight the spectator's multiple positions and her cultural activities ranging "from passive absorption to active production of the text" (Pribram 146) and that manifest writers' sensibility to readerly experience so that their preoccupation with the formation of modern subjectivity contributes to a new discourse for modernist readership. It also refers to texts that present marginalized or seemingly disempowered subjects who exert their own agency through spectatorial experiences; by doing so, spectatorial modernism endeavors to emancipate the spectator from the nineteenth century notion of spectatorship, thereby suggesting the spectator as an archetype of the modern subject.

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