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Recommended Citation

Lurie, Peter. "Inside and Outside Southern Whiteness: Film Viewing, the Frame, and the Racing of Space in Yoknapatawpha." Edited by Jay Watson. In *Faulkner and Whiteness*, 147-69. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2011.

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INSIDE AND OUTSIDE SOUTHERN WHITENESS

Film Viewing, the Frame, and the
Racing of Space in Yoknapatawpha

—PETER LURIE

Cash Bundren is a lover of music. At the end of *As I Lay Dying*, hearing sound coming from the new Mrs. Bundren's house in Jefferson, Cash comments that "[it] was playing in the house. It was one of them graphophones. It was natural as a music band" (235). Later he muses, "It's a comfortable thing, music is" (235); and, in *As I Lay Dying's* last chapter, "I reckon it's a good thing we aint got ere a one of them. I reckon I wouldn't never get no work done a-tall for listening to it. I dont know if a little music aint about the nicest thing a fellow can have" (259). As these remarks imply, Cash's "graphophone" is also a product, one that, like Anse's false teeth, Vardaman's electric train, and Dewey Dell's bananas, off-sets his trip to Jefferson and the Bundrens' burial of their wife and mother.

Cash's gramophone, though, is unlike these objects in that it furnishes a pleasure that is at once technological and aesthetic. Due to its portable nature, particularly, as well as to the fact that it is a machine, the gramophone allows Cash to enjoy music as a reproduction and in the comfort of his home. Listening to music on the gramophone would seem a simple enough activity (if it is not also "as natural as a music band"). Especially

because, as Cash describes it, such relaxation can newly be enjoyed in what was, before the advent of this particular entertainment technology, the isolated countryside. For one of the historical and cultural shifts that *As I Lay Dying* reveals is the role of modern commodities and their availability to formerly rural families like the Bundrens.¹

I say “formerly” with a deliberate eye on the Bundrens’ journeying. Coming to Jefferson, they do not quite become “town people”—despite Dewey Dell’s efforts to the contrary, evident when she puts on her Sunday dress as the family reaches Jefferson’s outskirts. Yet as the end of the novel and events within it suggest, their trip does afford them certain changes. In addition to acquiring the “new” Mrs. Bundren (an acquisition that seems troublingly like another product), they are initiated into a world of commerce and modernity that differs from their former, more purely rustic way of life. This introduction, though, comes with a cost: in addition to burying Addie, the family consigns brother Darl to the care of the state.

It is interesting in this light that in his close Faulkner does not return the Bundrens to their family spread. Rather he leaves them in the streets of Jefferson, having complied with the local police’s demand that they bury their putrefying mother. This lack of clear resolution concerning location implies at least a potential extension into aspects of modernity, including the Bundrens’ lingering within, if not urban space, then a domain of commerce, legality, and exchange that in the period of the novel’s events was also becoming increasingly racialized.²

That location is suggestive. Anse may complain early in the book about the incursion into his private farming life of taxes and the road (“Durn that road” [35]). And with the book’s close, it would appear that he was right to suspect that this new tie to town or even metropolitan life and public space would deny him one of his farmhands. Important to my considerations, though, is this curious induction into civic life as well as into modern consumer pleasures like Cash’s gramophone and the possibilities they offered families like the Bundrens. For if we consider other then-new cultural forms in relation to families like Anse’s, we would see that they bear an affinity with what Cash considers his own “indulgence” in music. And this is true in ways that have to do as much with social history as with developing aesthetic technologies and tastes.

One of those new forms was the cinema. Though neither film nor film viewing is ever named in *As I Lay Dying*, both the apparatus of cinema and what we might term its sociohistorical effects are evoked powerfully by and in the novel. These include the passing before the reader's "gaze" of the discrete, separate "frames" of the various characters' monologues, as well as, in particular sections, a fascination with watching machinery that resembled the interest of early film viewers in the cinematic apparatus (see Doane 108). It may seem unlikely that we would find a similar fascination with machinery per se in Faulkner's South. Yet at the river Darl evinces what we might call an urban-filmic sensibility. Watching Jewel and Vernon Tull in the water searching for Cash's lost tools, Darl muses, "From here they do not appear to violate the surface at all; it is as though [the river] had severed them both at a single blow, the two torsos moving with infinitesimal and ludicrous care upon the surface. It looks peaceful, like machinery does after you have watched it and listened to it for a long time" (163). We might consider too, as have others, the jolting, montage-like shifting across the novels' chapters.³

If Vardaman and his family are not explicitly depicted as film viewers, they nevertheless show signs of what has been theorized as a modern and cinematic optics or perception. The importance of the novel's references to consumer culture, though, or of its potential filmic overtones is not simply a historical and perceptual congruence. Rather, they allow us to see the Bundrens' transformation into, not only a different family, but arguably a new identity of both race and class.

Such a shift was occasioned outside the novel by an odd configuration: the empowering effects of two "modern" phenomena that shared a reliance on spectacle and an attendant framing as well as segregating of space: film viewing and lynching. Neither appears in *As I Lay Dying*. Both phenomena, however, play significant roles in "Dry September" and *Light in August* and, as the following discussion avers, in connection with one another. For this as well as other reasons, *As I Lay Dying's* links to cinema operate differently than do those in later Yoknapatawpha works. Its perhaps subtle evoking of modernity and film, however, set terms for a process across Faulkner's fiction that increasingly related film viewing to modern demands for a white, national identity, one that was also marked by class and which, over the

period of his life and writing, became increasingly violent. As such all three cases offer ways to consider the impact of early film viewing in its connections to racial identity and social power—the link between southern whiteness and what Richard Dyer calls cinema’s “culture of light.”⁴

Before we turn back to Faulkner’s fiction, it is useful to note that moviegoing changed considerably in the early twentieth century. Exhibited publicly for the first time in 1895, two years prior to Faulkner’s birth, film was originally considered a somewhat tawdry activity, enjoyed by working-class and immigrant laborers in industrial cities. By the late nineteenth teens and, certainly, the twenties, though, it had become a far more respectable activity. This change in status was due to specific efforts on the part of both particular directors such as D. W. Griffith and the burgeoning film industry to incorporate members of the middle class into the viewing public. As Lary May has shown, the efforts in the early 1900s of social reformers, film distributors and producers, and the National Board of Review combined to “create the beginnings of a truly mass entertainment” (30). Part of this change depended on the close monitoring of narrative content: all of these parties called for newly “moral” films, ones that included story lines as opposed to an earlier cinema’s reliance on burlesque or bawdy, nonnarrative “attractions.”⁵ Additionally, the National Board of Review worked hard after 1908, when half of the films shown in nickelodeons were foreign (with their own supposedly ribald imagery), to enforce a reduction in imports by 1913 to 10 percent (May 30). Lastly and importantly, these new films, understood as more suitable for a nonimmigrant, middle-class audience, were appearing in theaters that held more than a thousand viewers. (This was a dramatic change from the crowded, often unclean nickelodeons, which couldn’t seat more than three hundred.)⁶

In the South especially, this increase in film audience was also subtended by a particularly racial manner of organizing spaces like the cinema. For the class transformation in film’s audiences did not cut across lines of race. The importance of whiteness to this development is clear if we consider the kinds of films that viewers of the period would have seen. May surveys the prominence of pictures by D. W. Griffith, the so-called “grandfather of film,” including but not limited to his infamous epic *The Birth of a Nation*, in the first two decades of the twentieth century. During

the cinema's silent era, and in the period when Griffith's enormous popularity incorporated both middle- and working-class viewers, audiences were shown "warnings" about the risks of mixing with immigrant groups who, Griffith believed, did not share his embrace of conservative, Victorian mores (May 41–42). Michael Rogin similarly traces the impact that Griffith's magnum opus had on race relations, not in Faulkner's South, but in the North. He describes how, with the waves of immigration that spread into northern cities (and that fueled bitter debates in the 1920s about nativism), northerners became sympathetic to *Birth of a Nation's* story about a "beleaguered" white population in the South.⁷ Film viewing in this period, that is, and irrespective of class, became a purview of belonging to a new "nation" while it contributed to the entrenching of a newly national (and increasingly nationalist) white identity.

This new class and national collective and its racial cast would be especially important for a family like the Bundrens. For as moments from *As I Lay Dying* make clear, this family of poor whites has a hard time distinguishing itself from southern African Americans. On the outskirts of Jefferson, they pass through what Darl describes as a "negro" district. We will remember that, at the start of this chapter, Darl refers to the fact that the back of Jewel's shirt is "stain[ed] . . . black with grease" (227) that covers his burns, suffered while rescuing Addie's coffin the night before. Darl notes that Jewel's skin later darkens, taking on a "deeper tone of furious red" (229), just before he turns on the group of African Americans who have inadvertently insulted him by reacting negatively to the smell of Addie's body on the wagon. Like other southern laborers, Jewel and the Bundrens may appear "black" in other ways as well: unlettered, rural, defined by their status as indentured laborers. In his angry encounter with the group of black travelers as well as, moments later, a "goddamn town fellow" (230) on the road, Jewel seeks to establish a higher class and, particularly, racial identity for the family.

Yet as events from the novel and the period in which it is set suggest, such social "whitening" has already begun for the novel's characters. As we've seen, their movement to Jefferson allows them to enjoy some of the same consumer pleasures as other middle-class whites. Other details further suggest that a transformation in economic life is underfoot. Cash's name clearly evinces the move to a wage system, as opposed to the South's

use of tenant farming. Similarly, Cora Tull's cakes and her calculations about "saving out" eggs (6) suggests her preparedness to engage the market. Once the Bundrens arrive in Jefferson, and extrapolating from electric trains, bananas, and the gramophone, I'd speculate that, time permitting, the family may have taken in a picture show. If so, such an experience would have added to the Bundrens' increasing whiteness in town.

While the Bundrens' potential as consumers in the novel is clear, as Cash's gramophone and other commodities reveal, their visit to the movie house remains speculative. But as other Yoknapatawpha works like "Dry September" and *Light in August* show more directly, Faulkner's characters do frequent the movies, as Faulkner did himself.⁸ What these works share with the Bundrens' story is an emphasis on the spatial dynamic of modern southern racial identity, the at times lethal play of "inside and outside" a white public realm that the cinema both facilitated and enforced.

As the history of film viewing during Jim Crow reveals, the question of access to the space of the cinema, like other public spaces, pivoted on questions of exclusion, on who, in other words, enjoyed the privilege of being "interior" to the workings of the state. Darl may be consigned to a wandering position "outside" the law, as Patrick O'Donnell has suggested (91). But by implication, the Bundrens secure a position inside the law and civic space—one that resembles that of the (white) audiences for film. Robert C. Allen has written about what he calls the "racing of [southern] space" during Jim Crow, particularly around public areas such as cinemas. He points out that owing to the legal status of most exhibition spaces as private enterprises, movie theaters were particularly well-guarded areas of white privilege. "Unlike streetcars, railroad cars and station waiting rooms, movie theaters in the South were regarded and treated, not as public businesses but as private spaces. This crucial legal distinction gave racial exclusion the force of law" ("Relocating" 75). As one piece of crucial historical evidence, Allen notes the near-concurrence of the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, which was handed down on May 16, 1896, and the debut three weeks earlier of Thomas Edison's Vitascope at Koster and Bial's Music Hall in New York City (71). As a result, he claims, "For nearly 70 years ... the history of moviegoing and the history of racial segregation in the US, particularly in the South, are not only co-terminous but conjoined." Cedric J. Robinson writes about such spatial exclusion as well, noting the conjunction of legal segregation

and the advent of film. "Moving pictures appear at that juncture when a new racial regime was being stitched together . . . accommodating the disposal of immigrants, colonial subjects, and insurgencies among the native poor. With the first attempts at composing a national identity in disarray, a new whiteness became the basis for the reintegration of American society. And monopolizing the refabrication of a public sphere, with a reach and immediacy not obtained by previous apparatuses (museums, theaters, fairs, the press, etc.), motion pictures insinuated themselves into public life" (xiv–xv).⁹ As Allen elsewhere puts it succinctly, "Race is not just a part of the story of the history of moviegoing in the South; that story cannot be understood except in its relation to race. And once race is placed at the center of that story (where it belongs), it changes from an account of who saw movies where to an investigation of how the movies functioned as an instrument of social power" ("Decentering" 28).

The role of the cinema in the exercise of social power is evident in Faulkner's work. In both *Light in August* and in "Dry September," that exercise pivots on a southern definition of whiteness, but one that, as both works show, was also becoming national in the modern period. As these examples from Yoknapatawpha as well as particular film texts and theoretical works show, such a conflation depended on an association of whiteness with an abstract, "pure" conception of racial identity in which were subsumed actual markers of corporeal being. Yet importantly, both narratives also show Faulkner "re-embodiment" southern and U.S. whiteness in an effort to cast it into relief, so to speak—showing whiteness more starkly, and thus dismantling its presumption of power through invisibility.

"Dry September" offers perhaps the clearest example in Faulkner of the nexus of film, whiteness, and southern social space. Published in *Scribner's Magazine* in 1931, it illustrates the reach of racial policing in connection with film that we will also find detailed in *Light in August*. Like the novel, Faulkner's story also returns to whiteness its own conspicuousness and visibility, in large part because of the affinities between film viewing and racial violence that both narratives reveal.

"Dry September" includes a crucial scene that draws readers as well as characters into the interior space of the cinema. Faulkner's description of this visit to the movies is notable, though, for how closely it relates the effects

of both cinema and lynching on spaces that the story reveals are contiguous as well as similarly “raced.” As Minnie Cooper approaches the movie house in Jefferson with her friends, she crosses a town square which, as one of the women with her notes, is emptied of African Americans. “There’s not a Negro on the square,” she declares. “Not one” (181). The reason for this absence, we know, is the fact of Will Mayes’s lynching, the event that preceded Minnie’s reentry into what we might call the “sexual economy” of the town. Yet the episode of Minnie’s visit to the cinema is significant, both within the story and within Faulkner’s corpus and its attention to film and southern patterns of exclusion. Unlike the segregation or prohibition of blacks in southern movie houses outside the story, the withdrawing of African Americans from the town square here is performed voluntarily. The fact that there’s not a single “Negro” on the town square appears to be an anomaly to Minnie’s friends. But as Allen and others indicate, southern moviegoing was rigidly segregated from its beginnings until the civil rights movement. As a result, once Minnie and her friends enter the movie house and partake of its “silver dream” (181), the absence of African Americans would be in no way notable.

“Dry September” turns on this kind of social and racial exclusion, of inside and outside, as Minnie and her friends’ journey to the space of the town square and the adjoining cinema makes clear. Allen refers to the fact that “Jim Crow laws and practices were a reaction against the increased visibility of blacks in the urban public space as well as their increased economic and spatial mobility within that sphere” (“Relocating” 73). Here we will recall the absence or *invisibility* of African Americans on the town square as Minnie and her friends approach the movie house following Will Mayes’s lynching. Minnie’s supposed rape by Will mobilizes the “need” to protect white women like her and the evacuation of the town square, a securing of white space or a racing of public space that finds a clear fulfillment in the cinema.

In addition to newly enjoying this space, what Minnie comes to (re) possess in the story is both her own status as commodity and what legal scholarship has described as her “property” in her racial identity. In connection with his observations about southern moviegoing, Allen cites work by the legal scholar Cheryl Harris in which she describes whiteness as a “form of property” based on the right of exclusion of the sort that defined

cinematic viewing. As Harris puts it, “The possessors of whiteness were granted the legal right to exclude others from the privileges inhering in whiteness; whiteness became an exclusive club whose membership was closely and grudgingly guarded” (quoted in R. Allen, “Relocating” 78). Tellingly, it is Minnie’s earlier exclusion from that white club that leads in part to her fabrication of the rape story. We learn early in the story that, at a point in her youth, Minnie had been the subject of gossip and, after losing her quality of being “unclassconscious” (174), no longer attended parties or social events with the town’s elite. Like Joanna Burden in *Light in August*, in other words, who goes through an even more extreme transformation (from pariah to paragon of white southern womanhood), Minnie runs a circuit from being a neglected, almost nonwhite (or invisible) citizen of the town to being one of its prominent—and prominently visible—members. Such newly objectified status is evident when, crossing the square, “even the young men lounging in the doorways tipped their hats and followed with their eyes the motion of [Minnie’s] hips and legs when she passed” (181). As the ending of “Dry September” shows, part of that reinsertion derives from her entrance into the extended space of the cinema and how it allows a “reclaiming” of her racial as well as class property. As Robert Allen puts it of Southern moviegoing, “Whether it was purposive in this respect or even rose to the level of consciousness . . . the very act of moviegoing was for white Southerners an exercise of their property right to whiteness” (“Relocating” 79). It is Minnie’s moviegoing that, along with the rape story, allows her to reclaim her property.

In addition to relaying Minnie’s shift in social position, her access to an “inside” realm that is explicitly white, “Dry September” also shows the men of the community anxiously negotiating the social forces that assign positions inside and outside whiteness. As with other examples in Faulkner’s fiction and in southern social reality, one of the obvious ways in which the men define themselves as white is in their violent opposition to what they perceive as black threat. An important effect of this opposition is the link between the mob mentality that subtends vigilante violence, both in the story and outside it, and the securing of exclusively white enclaves like the cinema. We will turn to the lynching episode in *Light in August* shortly, noting its own associations with the phenomenon of moviegoing. White men in both *Light in August* and “Dry September,” as well as white

viewers—both as they appear in these works and are evoked by them—fashion whiteness as an exclusionary identity against African Americans and other, less “pure” (or purely racist) whites.

This intrawhite dynamic is in play from the very beginning of “Dry September.” In relaying it, Faulkner deliberately evokes film viewing and draws on readers’ encounters with the cinema. The story opens on a conversation in a barbershop in which appear fault lines in racial solidarity. A visitor to the town, a “drummer” who is getting a shave from the shop’s proprietor, sides with the other men present who believe Minnie Cooper’s rape accusation—or who believe that, irrespective of what Minnie claims Will to have done, he deserves violent punishing. When Hawkshaw offers one of the only voices of reason in the room, pointing to his own familiarity with Mayes and his conviction that Will would not have accosted Minnie, the drummer responds by challenging him in explicitly racial terms. “‘You’re a fine white man,’ the client said. ‘Aint you?’” (170). The narrator’s description of the drummer that follows is notable. “In his frothy beard he looked like a desert rat in the moving pictures. ‘You tell them, Jack,’ he said to [Butch]. ‘If there aint any white men in this town, you can count on me, even if I aint only a drummer and a stranger.’”

As the narrator’s reference makes clear, the drummer’s outsider status is overcome, first, by his willingness to close ranks with other men from Jefferson when he distinguishes his capacity for racial violence from that of the local barber, Hawkshaw. In this way, he more fully identifies himself as white. Secondly, and suggestively, the drummer’s strangeness is overcome by his donning what might appear by way of the narrator’s reference to cinema as a racial *mask*, a version of “whiteface” in his “frothy beard” that parallels in function if not in form the practice of blackface, which reinforced whiteness for actors and audiences of early cinema alike.¹⁰

It is significant that the drummer’s whiteness is compared here to an image from the movies. Crucially, Faulkner understands that his narrator’s reference to the cinema will operate meaningfully for his readers, revealing subtly how film viewing in the period could function to unify consumers of mass culture generally as well as movie audiences in particular. “Dry September” was originally published in *Scribner’s*, at a point in Faulkner’s career when he badly needed the income that such mass-circulation publications offered.¹¹ Readers of the story, then, are drawn into the space of

the cinema by way of this reference to an encounter with mass culture they would have been expected to have had. Yet, as Allen's remarks about southern moviegoing make clear, such an imagined as well as actual social space was deliberately constructed as white in the period of the story's events and its writing. As a result, at moments such as this readers come to occupy the same socially exclusive, "whitened" space claimed by Butch, McLendon, and the drummer.

Such complicity occurred outside the story as well. For a similar extension of the kind of racial violence that occurs in "Dry September"—and an implied inclusion in the realm of whiteness—was also enforced in other representations of southern vigilantism. Here I refer to the common practice in the Jim Crow South of photographing and retailing images of lynching on postcards. Such images became intensely popular in the 1910s, and their "success" at enforcing white rule owed much to their capacity to incorporate viewers through formal strategies like perspective. The cultural work performed by lynching photos has been commented on extensively by both Shawn Michelle Smith (118–22) and Grace Elizabeth Hale (228–30), who trace the troubling if tacit complicity of photographers, local police, markets, retail businesses, and institutions such as the United States Post Office in purveying these images as commercial products.

Such photos also included a key formal element that links them to Faulkner's story. And that is the way in which, like the passage from "Dry September" cited above, they include viewers in a textual space "inside" the represented event—irrespective of our wish to be so included. This is why looking upon the photographs of southern lynching in the photography collection *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* is so disturbing. In a photo of the lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, for example, viewers find themselves included, despite themselves, in a scenario and a (framed) space that has been defined violently as white (fig. 1). As the unnamed man in the foreground indicates *for the viewers* the direction of their gaze, we are drawn with him into a visual and social dynamic of looking upon a spectacle of violence that, by virtue of our positioning, affords us a power we have not asked for. The collection's title, *Without Sanctuary*, may reveal our own unwitting participation in the same prerogative as the whites who appear in the photos and our incapacity to separate ourselves from such events. Referring to these dual spectacles "under the

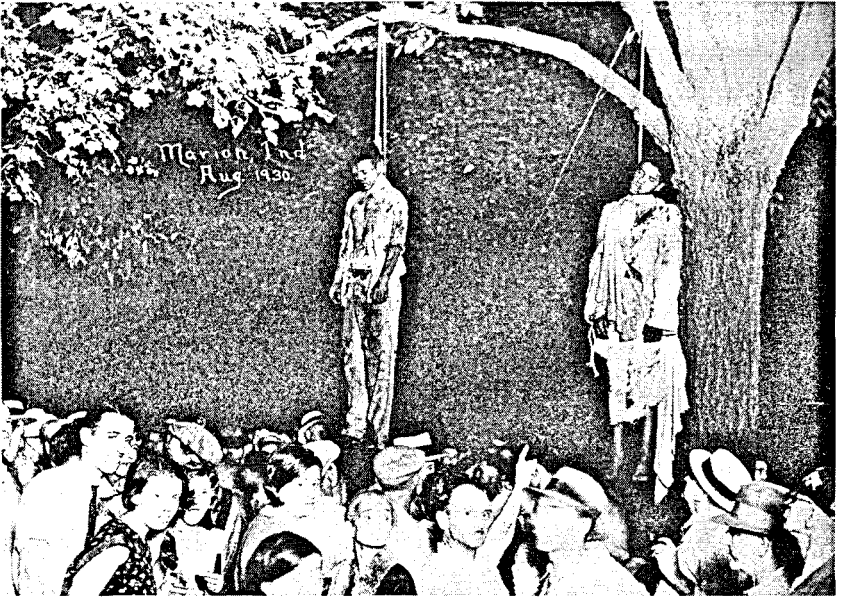


FIGURE 1 Photograph taken by Lawrence Beitler of the bodies of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, Marion, Indiana, August 7, 1930. Image reproduced courtesy of *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*, ed. James Allen, Twin Palms Press.

visual regime of Jim Crow,” Susan Donaldson writes, “[T]he rituals and the photographs also endeavored to situate the viewers as solidly and impreg- nably white, a visual rendering of the color line” (120).¹² As photographs such as these and Faulkner’s story alike attest, membership in a mob is not only limited to those who participate in lynching directly.

Readers of “Dry September” do not participate in lynching, nor look upon one; significantly, Will’s lynching is never in fact depicted. Yet as we have seen, the story’s narrator nonetheless reproduces a position of privilege based on assumptions of racial power that social and cultural exercises of whiteness (such as lynching and the cinema) supported. Bringing them together as the story does affords readers a position inside such whiteness and its narrative framing that we may not have desired or anticipated. This is not to say that “Dry September” elicits readers’ involvement in its events in the manner that actual lynchings or photos of them did. It is, though, the case that Faulkner fashions a readerly space and position

defined by whiteness and white privilege—in other words, by whiteness as “social power.”

Importantly, though, and despite these aspects, Faulkner’s story also furnishes readers a critical space apart from its troubling racial operations. And it does so precisely with the story’s ending(s). Minnie’s laughter in the cinema reveals a meaningful gap between her understanding of events, including the fact of her reinsertion into Jefferson’s sociosexual economy, and the townspeople’s awareness of southern social and racial rituals. Robert Allen’s point about moviegoing and its racial aspect not “[rising] to the level of consciousness” (“Relocating” 79) offers a useful way to understand Minnie’s hysterical laughing at the end of the story. Like Darl’s at the end of *As I Lay Dying*, Minnie’s laughter appears prompted by a recognition of the absurdity of her circumstances. Darl mocks the Bundrens’ insistence on “honoring” their dead mother by dragging her rotting corpse through the public byways; in “Dry September,” Minnie responds to the “silver dream” (we might say “white dream”) of cinema and the town’s collective attitudes, enhanced by the culture industry and Jim Crow, toward various economies of sexuality, race, and power. Though Minnie may not be consciously aware of such attitudes, her unsettling laughter suggests an incipient awareness of the fragility around whiteness and southern racial identity. As such it allows readers a stance vis-à-vis this nexus that is different from that of other moviegoers, like Minnie’s friends, or from our own position “with” McLendon and other white men in the story’s early and, as we will see, closing scenes. Moments such as these, in other words, allow us a simultaneous position inside and outside southern whiteness and its legal, visual, and narrative frames.

To clarify this observation, it will help to make an important turn to other Yoknapatawpha fiction. Like “Dry September,” *Light in August* is one of a handful of Faulkner’s works that in fact makes direct reference to the cinema. In the context of the novel, the social and racial “meanings” of film viewing are clear: they relate directly to the book’s culminating action and to Jefferson’s treatment of Joe Christmas. On the Saturday before Christmas is captured, the people of Jefferson go to the movies. They leave the town square, we’re told very simply, “as the picture show emptied” (456)—only to return in full on Monday in a “throng of people thick as on Fair Day” (458).

This reference to moviegoing seems innocuous enough. Yet, if we consider the changing demographics of film viewing in the period that novels like *Light in August* depict, we may draw some important conclusions about it. The audience for the picture show, importantly and newly in the 1920s, was multiclassed. As several critics have shown, the culture of Jim Crow and segregation served in forging what Jay Watson, in his introduction to this volume, calls a “post-Confederate cross-class regional (and eventually national) sensibility” (xi), a process that was facilitated by the experience of film viewing. Working-class or poor whites may well have been among the viewers of whatever movie was playing in Jefferson that night, along with more supposedly “respectable,” middle-class inhabitants of the town. As cultural historians have shown, this was a new development in the early twentieth century following the rising cultural status of movies.

What happens in the hours after Jefferson’s “picture show emptied” tells us something important about the effects of those changes. While we do not see this crowd directly, its presence is felt throughout the section of the novel that relays Joe’s capture and his later execution by Percy Grimm. It is important in this light to reemphasize that going to the pictures in Faulkner’s South was not a fully integrated activity. While white viewers of different classes may have enjoyed the different spaces of the film together (the imaginative space of the movie’s narrative as well as the actual social space of the movie house), African Americans did not. If they were allowed access to the films, it was only in the segregated sections of the balcony, what was referred to variously as “nigger heaven,” the “buzzard’s roost,” or the “crow’s nest.” It is this version of a (false) collective that Christmas is aware of throughout *Light in August* and which, along with Grimm, stalks and monitors his movements leading to his murder. This gathering, “collective” experience and identity defines small communities like Jefferson throughout the Yoknapatawpha works. What Faulkner also shows, however, here and throughout his fiction, is that whiteness in such towns was as much a function of exclusion as of inclusivity.¹³

While Grimm’s pretext for imposing a martial presence on the square and his own vigilante justice is to maintain civic order, it is the mob’s collective power, its “Fair Day” atmosphere, that in fact propels him. And this is a power and an energy that the movie house helps deliver. There is a homology, in other words, between the racing of space that occurs in the

movie house and Grimm's policing of race in his pursuit of Christmas. The line I am drawing, then, is not a tenuous one, and it runs straight from the exiting movie crowd (in its class heterogeneity) to Grimm's stalking and his race-baited fellow citizens.¹⁴ The narrator's mention of the picture show in the same chapter in which he introduces Grimm and the Mississippi National Guard thus seems more than incidental.

In his essay for this collection, Chuck Jackson examines the role of the National Guard in what he calls "emergency narratives" of the sort that inform works like *Light in August* and "Dry September." The mob mentality that is often on display in southern history and in Faulkner's fiction, which Jackson claims is extremely close to the makeup of a civilian military body like the National Guard, has also been seen as a step removed from the mass audiences for cinema.¹⁵ What work like Jackson's and others' attests to is the way in which various institutions of American cultural and political life sought to galvanize the country's "impure" elements into a white hegemony that transcended differences of class and region. He describes whiteness "as tied to the horror of state-based violence that is predicated on the imagination of a pure 'America,' a national signifier that stands apart from the body and its imperfect borders" (191). The body to which Jackson refers is both geopolitical and physical, and his essay pays interesting attention to the ways in which the National Guard encouraged a disavowal of bodily, class, or regional identity in states like Mississippi in favor of a process in which individual men imagined themselves as part of an abstract, idealized (and white) collective (192-94). "The National Guard grooms the animalistic, rural bodies of white men, refining their rituals and habits so that each will fit into a more respectable, civilized national culture" (196). That the picture show in *Light in August* empties just before Faulkner turns to his account of the Mississippi National Guard suggests a link between the abstract "whitening" promoted by institutions like the military and the practice of film viewing in the rural South.¹⁶

Strikingly, Jackson's approach to state power and policing notes the same refining into a disembodied, "white, abstract personhood" (226 n5) that others have pointed to in film studies. Robert Allen, for example, takes issue with psychoanalytic and feminist approaches to film viewing that find in both film texts and viewers a "disembodied," idealized aspect, resulting in an implicitly universalist, white identity ("Relocating" 49-54). Like

Allen, James Hay advocates for a historicist film studies that incorporates more than “an internal dynamic of cinema and [. . .] theories of subject positioning” and calls for “a way of discussing film as a social practice that begins by considering how social relations are spatially organized” (216). It is this relation to both screen and narrative space that attends works like “Dry September” and events in both it and *Light in August*. Percy Grimm, for example, occupies a central role in the novel and in Jefferson due to historical developments like the National Guard and the cinema, as well as their way of conjoining both national and southern modes of whiteness.¹⁷

The work of “abstracting” whiteness in and through film viewing has been taken up extensively by Richard Dyer. In his meditations on this practice in Western visual culture, including painting, film, and television, Dyer points to pictorial elements and technological strategies that “naturally” accommodate white skin toward an ideal of abstractness or even spirituality. He describes how whiteness has operated in visual media for centuries to fashion a peculiarly disembodied quality, one that allows whites to fall back upon a presumed, pervasive presence that is, at the same time, an absence of physicality or demarcation. This sense of being “everything and nothing” (*White* 39) lends to whiteness its putative lack of corporeality and its affinity with both a spiritual realm “beyond” race and a baseline, common definition of humanity.

Dyer’s thinking refers extensively to film and, in one essay (“Into the Light”), to an emergency narrative of the sort Jackson describes. Appearing well before Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha narratives, *Birth of a Nation* has much in common with them, including the affinities it develops between whiteness and purity, citizenship, and nationhood—as well as violence and death. The figuratively white militia of *Light in August* and the “cinematic” white men of “Dry September” and their connections to mob violence had their prototype, that is, in Griffith’s and in southern history’s Ku Klux Klan. In them all we find a literalized version of Dyer’s “culture of light,” the absorption of class and regional difference into a supposedly raceless, self-styled “pure” presence and identity. As several critics have described, the film revolves specifically around whiteness in both its ideological and aesthetic aspect.¹⁸ *Birth* offers a singular example of whiteness due to effects unique to cinema. As Dyer puts it, “All film takes place on a white background (the screen); to fill the screen with white costume is to increase

the radiation of light reflected off the screen. To have it swirl, as the Klan costumes [in *Birth*] do, especially when riding and rearing up on horseback, heightens the primary spectacle of film as light. This is the moment at which white men are whitest—but of course we cannot see their flesh” (“Into the Light” 173).¹⁹

The arguments surrounding the role of whiteness, the Klan, and Griffith’s vision of a pure “nation” founded on the expunging of blackness would be difficult to summarize here. What is most salient to my discussion is *Birth*’s logic of nationhood in connection with a specifically southern vision of race, one that informs the so-called “emergency narratives” of *Light in August* and “Dry September.” In this context, Percy Grimm in *Light in August* and Butch and McLendon in “Dry September” find their precursor in Ben Cameron, the southern hero at the center of Griffith’s film who mobilizes his white neighbors in response to his younger sister having been propositioned by a former slave, Gus.²⁰ In the movie’s famous ending, which follows the re-disenfranchisement of African Americans during Reconstruction—as well as Gus’s lynching—Ben appears with his northern beloved as harbingers of a new nation united in opposition to blackness. As a movie that more than any in history contributed to a national film culture, a “new nation” founded on film viewing, *Birth* offered viewers a remarkable and racialized conflation of screen space, narrative violence, and imagined community, both within the film’s vision of the new nation and in the actual experience of viewers in the cinema.²¹

Above all what Faulkner seems to have learned from the movies is the phantasmatic nature of whiteness, particularly in its southern conception. Film offers a useful model for this racial category precisely because of properties inherent in the medium itself. Film images, that is, like southern conceptions of whiteness, are chimeras, which rely for their existence not on any material presence or concrete fact such as “white” blood or even skin (or robes), nor on abstract ideals of national and racial purity, but on viewers’ willing belief in them. As Doane puts it of *Birth*, “It is as though it were crucial to dissociate racial difference from the epidermal scheme [...] and to transform it into a floating signifier of itself” (228). As promulgated by early cinema, notions of whiteness such as those on display in Yoknapatawpha, as well as in Faulkner’s lived world, likewise drew their force from southerners’ need to believe in their meaning and unimpugnable “truth” as

a floating, “transcendental signified.”²² Faulkner’s works thus reveal a link between southern notions of race and cinematic versions of whiteness that share an imaginative dimension that is *structural*. Drawing together the “silver dream” of cinema with the powerfully imaginary nature of Southern whiteness and its links to racial violence, as he does in both “Dry September” and *Light in August*, Faulkner reveals more than a casual link between the phenomena of film and lynching.

If we return to the story, we find this link manifested powerfully. It is crucial that in the barbershop scene Faulkner stresses that few of the men present know or actually believe that Will Mayes has assaulted Minnie. This gap between actuality and apprehension is figured in the story’s opening paragraph. In the third sentence, the object of the men’s “knowledge” (and of the sentence’s predicate) appears at a remove of several clauses from the statement’s beginning and in a particularly belabored syntax: “Attacked, insulted, frightened: none of them, gathered in the barbershop on that Saturday evening where the ceiling fan stirred, without freshening it, the vitiated air, sending back upon them, in recurrent surges of stale pomade and lotion, their own stale breath and odors, knew exactly what had happened” (169). As in the cinema, Faulkner’s narrative apparatus posits a clear gap between belief and factuality. Hawkshaw’s repeated statements of disbelief that anything happened between Will and Minnie are met with accusations of “niggerlover!” and sarcastic claims that Hawkshaw himself is “a hell of a white man” (170). White identity in such cases is predicated specifically on a suspension of disbelief, a capacity to embrace fantasy in a manner that gives the lie to truth but that commands its own veracity or verisimilitude (and is followed by a willingness to convert fantasy to violent action).²³

McLendon offers the final rhetorical fiat that both silences the other men’s resistance and establishes the imaginary, conjured—and therefore, unshakable—nature of Will’s “wrong” when in answer to a question about what happened, he shouts, “Happen? What the hell difference does it make? Are you going to let the black sons get away with it until one of them really does it?” (171–72). Factual wrongdoing, as Hale and others have noted, was rarely if ever the crucial animating motive in lynching activities. Rather, the impetus toward violence was the need to assert the communal identity of whiteness, one that, as in the segregated cinemas, “made race dependent on space” (Hale 228).²⁴ Like the various images of the cinema that Faulkner

invokes in “Dry September,” southern notions of whiteness are as flickering and as insubstantial as the shafts of light projected at the movie screen. Grasping at them powerfully, as McLendon, Percy Grimm, and the viewers of the picture show that empties into Jefferson’s town square in *Light in August* all do, produces a capacity for violence as lethal and unsettling as the screen images are “beautiful and passionate and sad,” accumulating, like Griffith’s vision of a white futurity, “inevitably on and on” (Faulkner, “Dry September” 181).

Fortunately for readers, what works like *Light in August* and “Dry September” do is slow the tempo of those fast-accumulating narrative passions offered by film and of the perceived emergencies that prompt them, allowing a response that is slower and that arrests the forward momentum for which *Birth* was famous. Crucially, Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha narratives also reverse the terms of visibility on which whiteness has historically relied. In addition to its supposed universality, and predicated upon it, whiteness in Faulkner and in the South was often defined by way of visibility. The segregation of film viewing, the depiction of whiteness on screen, the spectacles of lynching and the circulation of lynching postcards—all relied on the capacity to *see* in ways that accrued to whites but conferred on whiteness its own lack of visibility.²⁵ Shawn Michelle Smith has written powerfully about this pattern and its attendant problems. Among them, as this discussion of Faulkner’s emergency narratives has shown, is the fact of the viewer/reader’s positioning vis-à-vis the spectacle of white violence. Smith avers that such a dynamic can, in fact, work to reinscribe black suffering in its visual and spectacular aspect, “in which the representation and reproduction of the violated black body can function as a kind of fetish” (118). Conversely, Smith stresses the crucial dimension of *invisibility* attributed to whiteness, a feature that allows whiteness to function as a presumed basis for subjecthood—but also to shield whiteness (and whites) from critical and scrutinizing view. Drawing on Dyer’s account of whiteness as nontraceable, Smith points out that if “whiteness has historically secured its representational power through invisibility, by being that which is *not seen*, then *looking* at whiteness, making white bodies bear the burden of the gaze, can become an important critical task.”

In closing, it will help to see how Faulkner pursues that task precisely. As with other examples cited above, he does so by way of “screening”

whiteness and thus rendering it visible. What Faulkner shows at the end of “Dry September”—and in much of the Yoknapatawpha material—is a version of what W. E. B. Du Bois sought in his essay “The Souls of White Folk”: the critical task of seeing whiteness clearly and “from unusual points of vantage” that reveal white “souls undressed and from the back and side” (quoted in Smith 116–17). As Du Bois put it of his own racial vision, “I am singularly clairvoyant. . . . I see the working of their entrails. I know their thoughts and they know that I know.” We end Faulkner’s story with McLendon, witness both to his violent abuse of his wife—ironically after “defending” white womanhood by lynching Will Mayes—and to his particularly “embodied” aspect. Denying McLendon the invisibility of abstraction that (white) viewers of the cinema enjoyed and that lynch mobs and militias like the state National Guard enabled, Faulkner forces us to see the story’s racial antagonist in all his sweaty, singular, weighty mass.

He went on through the house, ripping off his shirt, and on the dark, screened porch at the rear he stood and mopped his head and shoulders with the shirt and flung it away. He took the pistol from his hip and laid it on the table beside the bed, and sat on the bed and removed his shoes, and rose and took his trousers off. He was sweating again already, and he stooped and hunted furiously for his shirt. At last he found it and wiped his body again, and with his body pressed against the dusty screen, he stood panting. There was no movement, no sound, not even an insect. The dark world seemed to lie stricken beneath the cold moon and lidless stars. (183)

In the dark scene at the story’s close, with the world lying “stricken” beneath the unending gaze of the “lidless stars,” McLendon’s embodied whiteness forcefully emerges under our readerly, critical, and, according to the prose’s figuration, unending view. As does a grotesquely literalized version of the Du Boisian view of white “souls undressed.” References to McLendon’s body and to a “screen” are each repeated, enabling both to be strongly embodied and starkly *seen*. While the screen against which he leans is not that of the cinema, it nevertheless (as did the spaces of film and film viewing in Faulkner’s South) sustains such notions of white identity as McLendon and others claimed. It also appears in this passage in a suggestive aspect

as a specifically rectangular “frame” against which, as on the film screen, the image of the white body stands out. From our perspective “outside the inside” of McLendon’s world and of the photographic as well as the literary frame, we see both the literal darkness of the cinema and the figurative darkness of Yoknapatawpha County, as well as a whiteness that, against such spaces and screens, emerges in its physical particularly.

Light in August includes its own evocation of film viewing that functions to expose the violent effects of a social and cultural practice defined by whiteness. We have seen the novel’s reference to Jefferson’s picture house and its audience, members of which also attend Percy Grimm’s vigil in the town square. Additionally, some of these moviegoers also “view” Joe Christmas’s mutilation and murder. That they do so is clear in the language that surrounds his scene of dying.

For a long moment he looked up at them with peaceful and unfathomable and unbearable eyes. Then his face, body, all, seemed to collapse, to fall in upon itself, and from out the slashed garments about his hips and loins the pent black blood seemed to rush like a released breath. It seemed to rush out of his pale body like the rush of sparks from a rising rocket; upon that black blast the man seemed to rise soaring into their memories forever and ever. They are not to lose it, in whatever peaceful valleys ... in the mirroring faces of whatever children they will contemplate old disasters and newer hopes. It will be there, musing, quiet, steadfast[.] (464–65)

Several critics have described the notable separation between Joe and his antagonists here, one enforced by their detached and decidedly visual manner of perceiving. (We might say detached *because* visual.) Concomitant with that “spectatorial” separation is a marked difference from Joe’s own visual capacity. With his open, “unfathomable and unbearable eyes,” Joe clearly sees more than his onlookers. In addition to seeing all of the South’s bias and race hatred, he regards his killers in their individual, “secret” and deeply threatened autonomy. (As Du Bois put it about seeing whites in their whiteness, “I know their thoughts and they know that I know.”) And Faulkner makes evident that, while they look upon Joe’s suffering and his final epiphany, Joe’s is a reckoning his attackers do not share. As audience to

Joe's dying, they nevertheless—like the film viewer—lack the comprehensive and profound racial vision he displays.

Faulkner's evocations of film here are also more pointed than in "Dry September." For while we may relate the scenario of dispassionately watching Joe die to the townspeople's quite recent experience of moviegoing, Faulkner's depiction of lynching also, and perhaps deliberately, recalls an infamous scene of lynching from film. Prior to its protest by the NAACP, *Birth of a Nation* included an extended scene of Gus's castration and murder. Due to vigorous protest over this particular sequence from the NAACP, Griffith cut the scene from the film following its initial screenings. He did so, however, as much for reasons of marketability as for any moral concern over the film's potential to alienate black viewers. (More precisely, he cut the scene to placate censors from the National Board of Review, whose imprimatur he needed in order to distribute the film [Rogin, "Sword" 277].) For with the lynching scene, as with the rest of the film, Griffith fully expected his audience's sympathy for its account of a "beleaguered" white South that took such violent measures against the "threat" of newly freed black sexuality. With the scene excised, *Birth* became even more palatable to white viewers, presenting them with a vision of (their) whiteness that was "softer" than Griffith's own virulent racism and thus more flattering to northern or "reconstructed" audiences.²⁶

Faulkner's version of lynching offers readers no such comfortable tempering. *Restoring* to his own scenario of lynching its basis in white violent efforts at social control, Faulkner more fully exposes readers to the kinds of machinations that Griffith's cinematic spectacle of lynching first relied on, but then muted. Like his treatment of McLendon at the end of "Dry September," Faulkner's attention to the onlookers at Joe's death presents them in their whitened aspect and links them to the phenomenon as well as the ideological effects of film viewing. Moreover, and unlike Griffith, Faulkner does not seek to mobilize sympathy for the white, vigilante violence that Grimm, like Griffith's Ben Cameron and his fellow Klansmen, visits on African Americans. Rather, he displaces that sympathy and subject position onto Joe. It is Joe whom readers know and through whose perspective we encounter the effects of racial violence. Pitting Joe's depth of vision, his encompassing, "unfathomable" gaze, against his persecutors' shallow, white, and filmic form of viewing along with their capacity for truly horrific

violence, Faulkner reveals much more directly and critically what remains absent from Griffith's film. Like McLendon pinioned against the screen of his back porch, exposed fully to our readerly view, Joe's murderers stand revealed in their filmic but also all too real mode of violent discipline. That the terms of that violence and the meting out of such discipline draw on a cinematic construction of whiteness demonstrates Faulkner's awareness of the medium and its painful, often distorting manner of framing. As a result, Faulkner's readers, while not endowed with such clairvoyance as Du Bois or the vision of Joe Christmas, are nonetheless compelled to see the "unwhite" and impure souls of men like McLendon, Percy Grimm, and Griffith's berobed Klan, and thus to peer—or even dwell—inside a frame of whiteness outside of which we might prefer to remain.