

Spectatrices: Moviegoing and Women's Writing, 1925-1945

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Abstract

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How did cinema influence the many writers who also constituted the first generation of moviegoers? In *Spectatrices*, I argue that early moviegoing was a rich imaginative reservoir for anglophone writers on both sides of the Atlantic. Coming to cinema from the vantage of the audience, I suggest that women of the 1920s found in moviegoing a practice of experimentation, aesthetic inquiry, and social critique. My project is focused on women writers not only as a means of reclaiming the feminized passivity of the audience, but because moviegoing offered novel opportunities for women to gather publicly. It was, for this reason, a profoundly political endeavor in the first decades of the 20th century. At the movies, writers such as Jessie Redmon Fauset, Zora Neale Hurston, H.D., Dorothy Richardson, and Virginia Woolf developed concepts of temporary community, alternative desire, and discontinuous form that they then incorporated into their literary practice.

Where most scholarship assessing cinema's influence on literature is governed by the medium-specificity of film, my project emphasizes the public dimension of the movies, the fleeting and semi-anonymous intimacy of the moviegoing audience. In turning to moviegoing, *Spectatrices* opens new methods of comparison and cross-canonical reorganization, focusing on the weak social ties typified by moviegoing audiences, the libidinal permissiveness of fantasy and diva-worship, the worshipful rhetoric by which some writers transformed the theater into a church, and most significantly, the creation of new public formations for women across different axes of class, gender, and race. In this respect, cinema's dubious universalism is both an

invitation and a problem. Writers from vastly different regional, racial, linguistic, and class contexts were moviegoers, together and apart; but to say they had the same experience is obviously inaccurate. In this project, I draw from historical accounts of moviegoing practices in their specificity to highlight that whereas the mass-distributed moving image held the promise, even the premise, of shared experience, moviegoing was structured by difference. The transatlantic organization of the project is meant to engage and resist this would-be universality, charting cinema's unprecedented global reach while describing differential scenes and modes of exhibition. Focusing on moviegoing not only permits but requires a new constellation of authors, one that includes English and American, Black and white, wealthy and working class writers alike. Across these axes of difference, women theorized the politics and possibilities of gathering, rethinking the audience as a vital and peculiar social formation.

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Introduction: From *Spectatrix* to Moviegoing

In 1916, the Italian journalist and novelist Matilde Serao published an essay entitled “Parla una spettatrice” (“a spectatrix is speaking to you”) in the journal *l’Arte Muta*. “Before the war,” she writes, “novelists, poets, and playwrights could not avoid noticing the impetuous and incessant agitation of the curious, even anxious crowds created by the cinema.” Soon after a knee-jerk indignation, says Serao, her literary peers more seriously considered how they could wrangle or accommodate this agitating new form: “‘let’s make these movies’– novelists, poets, and playwrights mused, and then decided – ‘let’s make them, but let’s also uplift the cinematographic art by lofty, poetic, and sublime stories.’”¹

Setting up her assertion that writing screenplays was *not* the proper literary response to cinema, Serao performatively sheds her role as writer, addressing the Italian literati from the vantage point of a *spettatrice* (spectatrix).

... for months and months, and with a feeling of sincere humility, I did only one thing: I went to the movies to take up my role of *spettatrice*. With my mortal eyes, I went to see, for a few cents, or even less, whatever might please, amuse, or move me in a film show [...] This spectatrix became convinced of a truth – let us say an eternal truth – that the audience of the cinematograph is made of thousands of simple souls, who were either like that in the first place or made simple by the movies themselves. For one of the most bizarre miracles occurring inside a movie theater is that everybody becomes part of one single spirit.

Oh, poets, novelists, playwrights, and brothers of mine, we should not strive so anxiously and painfully for rare and precious scenarios for our films! Let’s just go to the truth of things and to people’s naturalness. Let’s just tell plain good stories, enriching our craft from life itself and take on that elusive but passionate aura of

¹ Matilde Serao, “A Spectatrix is Speaking to You,” in *Early Film Theories in Italy, 1896-1922*, ed. Francesco Casetti et al. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 102-4. It is instructive to compare Serao’s ventriloquized poetic peers to the ways the Anglophone and Francophone poets of the late 1910s and early 1920s invoked cinema as a new provocation, maybe even a new form, for poetry. Apollinaire and Epstein in France, Lindsay in the United States, are exemplary. For more, see Susan MacCabe, *Cinematic Modernism: Modernist Poetry and Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2005), especially p. 4-6.

poetry, which springs from our overflowing heart [...] Dearest friends, it is a spectatrix speaking to you [...] This woman who is speaking to you is a creature of the crowd, it is she whom you should move, whom you should please....

There are several contradictions to highlight in this moviegoing manifesto, contradictions at the heart of this dissertation. One of cinema's most "bizarre miracles" is the formation of an audience of "one single spirit" – an unindividuated mass of affect and sensation. Yet Serao employs the gendered and singular "spettatrice" to cement her position; by essay's end, it is within her capacity as spectatrix (rather than, say, journalist or *littérateuse*) that she appeals to her literary "brothers." She transposes her femininity onto a larger body of women for whom she speaks (and whose taste she purportedly represents), women equally hungry for the evocative but simple narrative pleasures of the movies. Note the movement from "I" across the essay to "this woman" and "she" in the essay's final sentence: "This woman who is speaking to you is a creature of the crowd, it is she whom you should move, whom you should please." The authorial position Serao adopts is complexly situated between singular and plural, between this woman and these women, *una spettatrice* and a "single spirit." Rather than undermining her efforts, this dialectic legitimizes her appeal: she is both "a creature of the crowd" and an influential member of Italy's literary community; but it is by virtue of writing *from the position of the moviegoer* that her appeal gathers its rhetorical weight.²

Fast forward, more than 70 years later, to the feminist film journal *Camera Obscura's* 1989 special issue on "The Spectatrix." The issue was entirely devoted to the question of the

² For a comparable rhetorical performance in an anglophone context, see Elizabeth Bowen's 1937 articulation of the relationship between herself as writer and moviegoer: "I am not at all certain [...] that the practice of one art gives one a point of vantage in discussing another. Where the cinema is concerned, I am a fan, not a critic. I have been asked to write on "Why I go to the Cinema" because I do write, and should therefore do so with ease; I have not been asked to write, and am not writing, *as* a writer. It is not as a writer that I go to the cinema; like everyone else, I slough off my preoccupations there." Elizabeth Bowen, "Why I Go to the Cinema," in *Footnotes to the Film*, ed. Charles Davy (London: Lovat Dickson, 1937), 205-20.

female spectator. Edited by Janet Bergstrom and Mary Ann Doane, *Spectatrix* was engineered as an ecumenical event perhaps most provocative in its organization: four scholarly articles were chosen for their non-American focus, with essays on Italian, Canadian, Australian and British female spectatorship. The remainder of the issue was composed of short pieces by a massive number of scholars, a who's-who in 1980s (mostly psychoanalytic) film studies, with short contributions by critics like Kaja Silverman, Linda Williams, Miriam Hansen, Mary Ann Doane, Jacqueline Bobo, and Laura Mulvey. As with Serao, each of these testimonials is written from the double-perspective of both moviegoer and writer (in this case, theorist). Several of the essays dig into this complexity head-on, with Joan Copjec, for example, starting off her essay with a Freudian psychosymbolic truism that turns the journal's condition of possibility on its head: "The Woman does not exist."³

I begin with these two touchpoints, the manifesto and the special issue, because they articulate the problematic with which this dissertation is principally concerned: the contradictory figure of the *spectatrix*, and her relationship to writing. For Serao, pleasing the spectatrix is the key to unlocking the imaginative energies of war-torn Italy; for the many feminist scholars writing for *Camera Obscura*, she is simultaneously central and unthinkable, a tension between

³ "The Spectatrix." *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 7, no. 2-3 (1989). In their introductory essay to the special issue, Bergstrom and Doane stage the search for "the spectatrix" as vexed if not ultimately impossible, as it requires mediating between ethnographic, sociological, psychoanalytic, formalist, and cultural studies perspectives – most of which, of course, have massive epistemological contradictions when assembled together. "We chose the unfamiliar and relatively unused term "Spectatrix" as the title of this issue not to suggest sado-masochistic tendencies in the concept (although those connotations may not be entirely irrelevant), but instead to indicate the density and complexity of the matrix (or matrices) from which these issues emerge. The term "female spectator" is, perhaps, an overly familiar one, a convenience which unwittingly and misleadingly implies that one has complete control over the very questions which are posed about film and television. There is no attempt, in this issue of *Camera Obscura*, to reconcile the many divergent interests displayed here; rather, our aim is to present some of the tensions, the intellectual alliances and the conflicts which characterize contemporary feminist film and television theory insofar as it circulates around issues of reading, reception, spectatorship" (13). Later in the issue, Doane reiterates that "The female spectator is a concept, not a person" (142), a proposal I engage more fully in my final chapter.

the fact that so many of the academic writers were themselves female spectators, yet working within psychoanalytic frameworks in which “woman” was unarticulable within the father’s tongue of hegemonic cinematic address.⁴ The issue of *Camera Obscura* is an iterative and collaborative working through of this paradox: *we cannot write, here is our writing*. Thirty years separate us from this moment in intellectual history; the idea that women cannot be figured within a phallic libidinal economy does not carry the weight it once did. But I wish to retain the paradoxes of address, reception, and response that define both Serao’s 1916 essay and the 1989 special issue: the balances, ingenuities, and affordances emerging when one is a moviegoer, a woman, and a writer.

I move from the language of the *spectatrix* – a figure constituted as if *only* through gendered spectatorship – to the language of moviegoing because the writers I focus on – Dorothy Richardson, Jessie Redmon Fauset, Zora Neale Hurston, and H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) – themselves considered much more than mere spectatorship, focusing on that which surrounds the screen and its viewers. In my chapters, I argue that moviegoing can serve as a powerful tool for understanding literary production by women of the late 1920s and onward, noting how these writers conceptualized not only their spectatorship but the variegated practices of collection and dispersal, the contiguity of movieseeing with walking, thinking, worshipping, and writing.

Rather than focusing on film techniques, theories of film form, affinities between the author and

⁴ Here is Copjec on the matter: “It has always seemed to me (1) that some of the impasses we have encountered in our attempts to posit a female spectator have depended on our not taking seriously the proposition about the nonexistence of the woman; (2) that the question of the female spectator should be addressed on the level at which this proposition presents itself” (121). While Copjec’s is one of the special issues most adamant articulations of the “Woman problem,” as Freud had it, she is hardly alone. Mary Ann Doane begins her 1991 book *Femmes Fatales* in a similar headspace, opening her first chapter with Freud’s lecture on “femininity” in which he says “to those of you who are women this will not apply – you are yourselves the problem ...” Doane takes up this “problem” in theorizing the textual and psychoactive deficit attributed to the female spectator. In her words, “The woman, the enigma, the hieroglyphic, the picture, the image – the metonymic chain connects with another: the cinema, the theater of pictures, a writing in images of the woman but not *for* her. For she *is* the problem.” Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 18.

director, or the elaboration of a specifically cinematic consciousness – all of which are strategies literary scholars have used to assess and specify the contact between cinema and literature – I argue throughout that moviegoing is a necessary optic because it orients us to the peculiar sociality of cinema, which I take to be cinema’s most profound impact on its earliest viewers. The idea that millions could be experiencing the same text (could potentially be experiencing it in the same way) was a dizzying provocation to a generation of writers grappling with ideas of utopia, the interpellative force of the nation, the all-too-easy cohesiveness of ideology, and the possibilities of internationalism. Moviegoing provided a striking fantasy of collectivity – the mutual experience of darkness and light, collectivity and dispersal, shared by millions across the globe – but it also inevitably marked aberrations in that fantasy, aberrations themselves articulating architectures of violence and strategies of resistance. Moviegoing promised, on the one hand, a vast and ecumenical homogeneity of experience. It is this sense of *sameness* that prompted figures as disparate as H. G. Wells, Germaine Dulac, and Dziga Vertov to locate a utopian potential in film, one that might cut across linguistic and nationalist differences. Moviegoing delivered, on the other hand, both parables and lived structures of power. For this reason, there can be no single concept of the moviegoer; instead, there must be specific, differentiated theories of moviegoing which balance architectures of exhibition, urban space and policing, pleasure and displeasure, tranquility and terror, identification and repulsion. This dissertation balances and is organized around two irreconcilable socio-aesthetic qualities of moviegoing: an essential sameness (we are all watching the same film) and an essential difference (we are *not* watching the same film, nor with the same vulnerabilities or spectatorial techniques).

This dissertation concerns the period from 1925-1945, during which the feature film was no longer a fledgling form but standard fare, saliently consolidated as a mass medium through the grammars and distributive apparatus of Classical Hollywood. The well-documented economic hegemony of Hollywood; the introduction of the Hays Code in 1934, which censored putatively obscene or immoral content; and the increasing homogeneity of film experience after the advent of sound cinema (which required, for the first time, that film projectionists standardize a frame rate so as to synchronize with audio) – all of these consolidating forces make the period from 1925-1945 highly stable and, simultaneously, richly unstable. As for the cinema’s stability, the 1920s was the period of the feature film’s aesthetic primacy, with serials, shorts, and curiosities falling to the wayside. The earliest practices of projection for audiences (at fairgrounds, in churches, inconsistently and itinerantly) had been mostly replaced by storefront nickelodeons in the 1900s and early 1910s; these in turn were replaced by movie theaters following a proscenium design, built throughout the 1910s and 1920s. As historian Kathy Peiss narrates in *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York*, “In the early 1900s, the owners of amusement arcades began to close off a section in the back of the hall and project movies on a screen, charging five to ten cents for admission. By 1905, small storefront theaters, or ‘nickelodeons,’ spread throughout Manhattan’s tenement districts, encouraged by the peculiarities of the city’s licensing laws.”⁵ So-called ‘nickel mania’ gripped the city, such that these “early nickelodeons seemed extensions of street life, their megaphones and garish placards competing with the other sights and sounds of urban streets.”⁶ But the exuberant nickelodeon era was brief. As historian Shelley Stamp describes it in *Movie-Struck Girls: Women and Motion Picture Culture after the Nickelodeon*, “American cinema experienced

⁵ Kathy Lee Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 146.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 149.

a profound transformation, perhaps the most significant and far-reaching in its history, between the years 1908 and 1915. Cinema's visual grammar, its narrative paradigms, its industrial structure, its social standing, and its audience base all solidified during this transitional era [...] In a relatively brief span of time cinema developed from an inexpensive, fleeting amusement into the nation's first truly mass media."⁷

Against the stability of the feature film – not only one nation's mass medium, but the globe's – the instability of the period could be conceptualized in various ways: the competition between regional/national cinemas, the translocation of emigré filmmakers, the queer or excessive desires circumnavigating the Hays code, the ideological tectonics of incipient Fascism, the game-changing problems and possibilities of sound. I choose to locate the period's instabilities within the moviegoing audience. Take, for example, the cinema columns of Dorothy Richardson, which I discuss at length in my first chapter. Writing about London cinemagoing, Richardson depicts theaters and audiences rather than focusing on individual films, or cinema as a purely filmic art. In her fifth column for the journal *Close Up*, titled "There's No Place Like Home," Richardson sketches out a kind of architectural and social map:

Once through the velvet curtain we are at home and on any but first nights can glide into our sittings without the help of the torch. There is a multitude of good sittings for the hall is shaped like a garage and though there are nave and two aisles with seats three deep, there are no side views. Something is to be said for seats at the heart of the congregation, but there is another something in favour of a side row. It can be reached, and left, without squeezing and apologetic crouching. The third seat serves as a hold-all. In front of us will be either the stalwart and the leaning lady, forgiven for her obstructive attitude because she, also an off-nighter, respects, if arriving first, our chosen sittings, or there will be a solitary, motionless middle-aged man. There is, in proportion to the size of the congregation, a notable number of solitary middle-aged male statues set sideways, arm over seat, half-persuaded, or wishing to be considered half-persuaded. Behind there is no one, no commentary, no causerie, no crackling bonbonnières.⁸

⁷ Shelley Stamp, *Movie-Struck Girls: Women and Motion Picture Culture after the Nickelodeon* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2000), 3.

⁸ Dorothy Richardson, "There's No Place Like Home," *Close Up* 1.5 (November 1927): 44-7.

In this sumptuous passage, we can glimpse, first, the way that moviegoing had by 1928 achieved a form familiar enough to us today. The multitude of “good sittings,” the “nave” and “two aisles,” the avoidance of “side views” all indicate an architecture standardized in the 1920s, one that prioritized an essentially unified, but easily navigable, field of vision. But in addition to the spatial coordinates of the theater, Richardson places careful attention on social coordination as well, with the faux-scepticism of the “middle-aged male statues” seated awkwardly, “solitary” and “sideways,” as if coordinated perpendicular to the sincerely “leaning” woman, whose “obstructive attitude” – the adamancy of her tilting body – seems to lengthen, or strengthen, her ardent gaze. Richardson savors these different kinds of looking, different orientations (spatial as well as libidinal) to the screen. Finally, there is a creepy chill in the very back rows, where “there is no one, no commentary, no causerie, no crackling bonbonnières.” One catches in these damp negations their own inversion: the commentary, causerie, and crackling of the front rows.

Indeed, the phenomenon of the front row gets its own column, Richardson’s seventh. In “The Front Rows,” she depicts the young children sitting nearest the screen on a Saturday, some of them asleep. Richardson is performatively affronted: “Here indeed was ‘the pictures’ as black villainy. I remembered all I had heard and tried to forget on the subject of the evils of the cinema, as it is, for small children and especially for the children in the front rows.” But this overstated horror vanishes as Richardson turns to the front row as a sociological laboratory.

Meanwhile the front rowers of all ages, the All-out responsive pit and gallery of the cinema are getting their education and preparing, are indeed already a little more than prepared for the films that are to come. Anyone visiting from time to time a local cinema whose audience is almost as unvarying as its films, cannot fail to have remarked the development of the front rowers, their growth in critical grace. Their audible running commentary is one of the many incidental interests of a poor film. It is not only that today the lingering close-up of the sweet girl with tragically staring tear-filled eyes is apt to be greeted with jeers, and the endless love-making of the endless lovers with groans. It is not only that today’s

front rowers recognise all the stock characters at a glance and can predict developments. It is that the quality of the attention and collaboration that almost any stock drama can still command is changed. For although attention never wavers and collaboration is still hearty and still the sleek and sleekly-tailored malefactor is greeted at his first and innocent seeming entry as a wrong'un and the hero, racing life in hand through a hundred hairbreadth escapes to the rescue is still loudly applauded and applause breaks forth anew when the villain is flung over the cliff, the front rows are no longer thrilled quite as they were in their earlier silent days by all the hocus-pocus.⁹

“No longer thrilled quite as they were,” indulging in distracted “commentary,” their “attention and collaboration” noticeably and irrevocably weakened, these children are Richardson’s guide to and through cliché; their noisiness is a kind of knowledge, emblem of their preparedness for “the films that are to come.” Notice that the social working of the audience is not ancillary or secondary to the meaning of the films they are viewing; for Richardson, it is the other way around.

Nowhere is this attunement to the audience as a site of meaning and knowledge stronger than in Richardson’s eighth column, in which she describes a type woman – sometimes just called “the lady” – who gleefully disrupts the would-be reverence of the theater with gossip, fussing, eating, rustling. “It is not only upon the screen that this young woman has been released in full power. She is to be found also facing it, and by no means silent, in her tens of thousands. A human phenomenon, herself in excelsis.”¹⁰ Richardson is ambivalent about the presence of this “by no means silent” woman. On the one hand, “I evade the lady whenever it is possible and, in the cinema, as far as its gloom allows, choose a seat to the accompaniment of an apprehensive consideration of its surroundings, lest any of her legion should be near at hand. Nevertheless I have learned to cherish her.” Richardson bestows on “the lady” a glorious narcissism: “herself in excelsis.” She sees “the lady” as the culmination of centuries of discursive and artistic creation, a

⁹ Dorothy Richardson, “The Front Rows,” *Close Up* 2.1 (January 1928): 59-64.

¹⁰ Dorothy Richardson, “Continuous Performance VIII,” *Close Up* 2.3 (March 1928): 51-5.

figure flagrantly mocking those (men) who, “while they respectfully regard woman as life's supreme achievement, capping even the starfish and the stars, are still found impotently raging when in the presence of the wonders of art she remains self-centered and serenely self-expressive.” Though personally nettled (Richardson, in the same column, drafts a provisional rulebook for audience members), Richardson is also awed by “the lady’s” disregard for norms of reverence and absorption (norms further registered by Richardson’s recurrent use of the word “congregation” or “nave”). Regardless of how one might feel about this woman “in excelsis,” determined to thwart the silent reveries of her neighbors, she is a salient – indeed a *constitutive*, definitional – member of the moviegoing audience. “Meanwhile here we are, and there she is. In she comes and the screen obediently ceases to exist [...] Instinctively she maintains a balance, the thing perceived and herself perceiving.”

This balance between “thing perceived and herself perceiving” is the central organizing tension of this dissertation. In her accounts of 1920s moviegoing, Richardson is not merely giving texture and color to the atmosphere surrounding the ‘real’ event unspooling on the screen; instead she is centering the dramas of the audience in and as the very meanings of the cinema. These constitutive and counterposing forces – between collection and dispersal, absorption and distraction, communion and interruption – are, for Richardson, the stuff of cinema. As film critic Iris Barry put it, “A cinema audience is not a corporate body, like a theatre audience, but a flowing and inconstant mass. I fancy that we associate the picture-house with darkness, though the theatre is dark too, because the stage is a lighted dolls' house: our minds project themselves into the light, leaving the body behind in its seat [...] The stage of the cinema is in the minds of the spectators. There is no such separation as the theatre-goers experience. To go to the pictures is to purchase a dream.”¹¹ Yet that dream is never wholly purchased, in the sense of secured,

¹¹ Iris Barry, *Let's Go to the Pictures* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1926), 32.

within the tittering and whispering, the “stalwart” lady leaning forward eagerly, perhaps admonishing the woman “in excelsis.”

Every effort to chart the imaginative contact between cinema and literature has necessary criteria of inclusion and exclusion. The issue is made more difficult by the problem of object choice: is it films, filmmakers, film theorists, or something else that we might put in conversation with literature? And between these objects, are we charting influence, correspondence, adjacency, or something else? David Trotter, in *Cinema and Literature*, resolves the issue by organizing his project around writers and directors, consolidating the distance between author and auteur. He situates Woolf, Joyce, and Eliot alongside Griffith and Chaplin; this has the effect of corroborating accounts of a singular authoring genius within the earliest film criticism, such as Vachel Lindsay’s writings on Griffith, or Elie Faure’s writings on Chaplin. Susan McCabe in her aptly named *Cinematic Modernism* has focused on the way individual poets took up the formalism and psychological experience of film – she focuses on montage, phenomenology, and hysteria in the works of Stein, H.D., Williams, and Moore. Laura Marcus, whose work has most directly influenced my own, has constellated the reams of writing on early cinema, particularly the attempts to consolidate aesthetic philosophies capacious enough for this new art form, in *The Tenth Muse: Writing about Cinema in the Modernist Period*. In *Dreams of Modernity*, she has focused on the railroads, psychoanalysis, cinema, and literature as mutually interpenetrating discourses and technologies.

Together, these scholars have relied on an understanding of cinema centered on film – and for good reason. Marcus, whose method is altogether more discursive than Trotter’s or McCabe’s, depends on (and assiduously collates) early attempts at film aesthetics. McCabe’s method lifts what McCabe calls film’s “fragmented phenomenology” in order to delineate a

poetics derived therefrom. It is inevitably inviting to ground oneself in film, and in film theory, because that is cinema's remnant, medium, and matter. It is altogether more difficult to make the turn from the screen to its beholders.

My project is organized transnationally, with the optic of moviegoing serving as its unifying principle. I focus on the literary production of four women: Dorothy Richardson, Jessie Redmon Fauset, Zora Neale Hurston, and H.D. (Hilda Doolittle). As I elaborate in my second section on moviegoing and race, the transatlantic framing of this project is necessary for a number of reasons which I will briefly sketch out here. First, a great deal of the cinema produced and distributed in the 1920s was American.¹² British moviegoing cultures of the 1920s are irrevocably wrapped up in American cinema's ever more coherent visual grammars. Second, British Modernism (the field within which I was intellectually forged) draws extensively on a fetishized notion of American Blackness, particularly amongst writers engaging cinema. This is apparent in the work of Richardson and H.D., two of my central figures, who rely on putatively 'authentic' conceptions of virile American Blackness for their own aesthetic and erotic agendas.

However, my focus on Black American women who themselves theorized the social dimensions of cinema – in the case of Hurston, by making cinema – is not meant merely as a

¹² Hollywood was not always the international hegemon of cinema that it is now. Richard Abel recounts the history American efforts to supplant imported (especially French) films during the nickelodeon era in *The Red Rooster Scare: Making Cinema American, 1900-1910* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). By the 1920s, however, Hollywood held a secure monopoly on the films distributed in Britain, seizing on the deficit of British film production in the wake of World War One. Stuart Hanson recounts this economic history in *From silent screen to multi-screen: A history of cinema exhibition in Britain since 1896* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007): "the lack of support for the British film industry by both the government and City finance capital, as well as the conscription of many of the industry's key personnel, meant that Hollywood seized the initiative. During the war exhibitors came increasingly to rely on US films as domestic film production declined to less than 10 per cent. By 1918 some 80 per cent of films shown in British cinemas were from the USA" (41). It was not until late in the 1920s, with the coming of sound cinema, that efforts to curb Hollywood's dominance went into fuller effect. "In 1927 the government opted for a protectionist approach [...] and introduced into law the Cinematograph Films Act 1927 (the '1927 Act'), which established quotas for the number of British films that had to be shown in cinemas" (45).

rejoinder or correction to a misbegotten fetishism on the part of H.D. and Richardson. Instead, I argue that the specific qualities and textures of Black American moviegoing are necessary for accessing the theoretical power of moviegoing of the period more fully. Fauset and Hurston demonstrate the pleasures as well as the perils of cinema for Black folks; without delving into this complexity, we fundamentally misapprehend what moviegoing meant. The excitingly global address of cinema was always hegemonic rather than egalitarian, negotiated rather than neutrally received, always inflected by regional difference. But for many writers of the period – Dorothy Richardson and H.D. distinct among them – cinema provided what Richardson called “universal sanctuary,” the possibility of a shared language and refuge. To understand the animating but already-broken promise of this “universal sanctuary,” one must understand the corrosiveness at the heart of it. Radically alternative visions of moviegoing and congregation are necessary, those that not only acknowledge but are constitutively defined by the risks, pressures, and pleasures of cinema seen and spoken from the perspective of Black thinkers. It is worth dwelling, finally, on the role I am playing as critical facilitator of a conversation that did not explicitly occur. Unlike Paul Robeson, Hurston and Fauset did not explicitly collaborate with or contradict their contemporaries across the pond. There is a staging and a doing here, one that is idiosyncratic and, from a disciplinary perspective, willful. I want to be aware of this; so should my readers, rather than assuming the orchestration to be neutral or unremarkable.

Much more than womanhood joins these four writers, yet their shared femininity (as a problematic, a provocation) allows us to think about them as four contemporary *spectatrices*. But I must make some final distinctions between my work and that of the *Camera Obscura* board in 1989. As I have stated above, I turn from mere, discrete spectatorship to the more densely textured concept of moviegoing. I have opted to spare my readers the misfortune of reading

“moviegoer” or something similarly awful, focusing instead on the ways that moviegoing was an always already gendered phenomenon. Whatever theoretical complications obtained to the figure of the female spectator in the contexts of 1980s psychoanalytical methodology are instructive, historiographically, but one should not get lost in them. Women went to the movies and wrote from this vantage. This brings me to my last point of departure from the theoretical underpinnings of the special issue, which is that I am specifically interested in the literary life of moviegoing. Similar to the way that Serao used the ambiguity of her position (one but metonymically many, a distinctly feminine voice within a “single spirit”) as both origin and destination of literary invention (I am speaking to you; you must write for me), I focus on writers whose practices of moviegoing were inextricable from their literary preoccupations with sociality, strangers, public encounter, and the dynamic possibilities of congregation.

This introduction is organized in four sections, in which I situate moviegoing in relation to gender, race, medium, and modernism, respectively. Across these sections, I elaborate the reasons why this project requires a transatlantic frame, looking both to the transnational circulation and distribution of films and, more significantly, the way that cinema’s global reach insinuated a premise of universal address. This problem of an always already false universality is best analyzed and deconstructed through a comparative frame that centers Black spectatorship, moviegoing, and literary response.

I also organize my chapters so as to perform two transatlantic crossings instead of one. Rather than a dissertation that would neatly break into two halves, one British (and white) and the other American (and Black) – implicitly recreating the canonical, regional, and racial silos I seek to bridge – I have organized my chapters chronologically. I begin with the two authors most explicitly engaged with the concept of moviegoing: Dorothy Richardson, whose 1925 novel *The*

Trap I read alongside the columns she wrote on London's moviegoers; and Jessie Redmon Fauset, in whose 1928 novel *Plum Bun* moviegoing plays a crucial narrative and symbolic role. In my first chapter, I find in Richardson's *Close Up* columns a theory of temporary spiritual assembly that corresponds to the aesthetics of temporariness coursing through her critically misrecognized opus and life's work, the thirteen-volume long *Pilgrimage*. In my second chapter, I argue that Fauset deploys moviegoing to consolidate the risks, pleasure, fantasies and realities animating the passing plot, deepening the passing plot's critical capacities. Rather than a conservative portraitist of the Black bourgeoisie, Fauset is better understood as a social thinker whose political daring is found in *Plum Bun*'s minor forms of relation: the ethical obligations to people we do not know very well or like very much. We miss this political and ethical complexity unless we are oriented to public and semipublic assemblies of strangers and near-strangers.

In my third and fourth chapters, I modulate the concept of moviegoing, taking it in new directions. In my third, I analyze the dynamics of spectatorship specific to churches in Zora Neale Hurston's fiction and filmmaking; it was, after all, in churches that many rural Black American spectators first encountered the moving image. Approaching the church as a space of spectatorship, I study the complex and undertheorized visuality of Hurston's first novel *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934) and develop the notion of "thick witness" to describe the way her anthropological methods mirrored the modes of mutual beholding endogamous to the church in her documentary *Commandment Keeper Church: Beaufort South Carolina, May 1940* (1940). In my final chapter, I elaborate the concept of movieleaving to account for the cinematic remnants in the poetry of H.D. long after she had 'left' her zeal for silent film behind her. I note the way that HD's diva worship of Greta Garbo corresponds to a complex erotic spiritualism that

venerates the distance between the modern reader and the classical mythological figure, as well as between fan and the star, in her celestial poetic masterwork, *Trilogy* (1945).

Shopgirl and Protoplasm: Moviegoing and Gender

Out in Hollywood, the managers of picture houses leave the lights off several moments at the close of a sad or harrowing film that the audience — film stars and beauties of all kinds, and sorts — may repair the ravages of emotion (if any) without being observed of the vulgar public. I have been puzzled all my life as to why I never wanted to be an actress, and now I know. When I cry, low lights or high, it's one and the same. Cry I will and let who will be handsome.

Djuna Barnes, "The Wonton Playgoer," *Theatre Guild Magazine* (May 1931)

Across this dissertation, I situate moviegoing in relationship to femininity for two reasons. The first is a historical discourse of the early 20th century that itself associated moviegoing with passivity, suggestibility, and emasculation. Texts across various genres and written by very different kinds of thinkers — the high modernist gatekeeper, the Chicago school sociologist, the Frankfurt social critic — betray anxieties about the presence of women within the moviegoing audience; that, or they betray anxieties concerning the stupefaction of the audience — a stupefaction itself explicitly and implicitly gendered.

The second and more powerful reason for which I think of moviegoing and femininity as symbolically and materially entangled is that many women found in moviegoing a social practice of unprecedented accessibility, what Miriam Hansen in *Babel and Babylon* designates as an "alternative public sphere" where, "more than any other entertainment form, the cinema opened up a space — a social space as well as a perceptual, experiential horizon — in women's lives, whatever their marital status, age, or background."¹³ Film scholar Antonia Lant asks, "Where

¹³ Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 117. Hansen's argument concerns the possibility of forming affiliations,

before had droves of women been allowed, indeed invited, to amass, to stare, to assemble in darkness, to risk the chance encounter, the jostling and throng of the crowd?"¹⁴ Both Hansen and Lant are undoubtedly correct – but not universally so. This is another iteration of the imposition of a universality whose inevitable variations, deviations, and failures reveal its premise to be falsely built – this time in the very term "woman." Instead of taking a monolithic construction of "woman" for granted in order to deconstruct in my second section, I want to indicate throughout how that monolithic concept is constructed. For women of the 1920s – those who had mobility and means and would not be turned away because of the darkness of their skin – the movie theater was a laboratory. Here, female spectators could examine the relationship between self and social formation, vision and sensation, body and appearance, within a public venue of easy and relatively cheap access. Following two generations of feminist scholarship, we should understand women's encounters with cinema to be negotiated rather than received; yet the female (or emasculated) spectator figures in early 20th century texts as the symbol of cinema's soporific dangers. Instead of spilling ink in resisting an ostensibly 'female' passivity of the moviegoing audience, I suggest that scholars embrace specifically feminine encounters with cinema as a means through rather than around the problem of early cinema's aesthetic denigration.

To highlight one of the more symptomatic and explicit examples of the discourse I am describing, I turn to Siegfried Kracauer. In mid-March of 1927, Kracauer published eight pithy

alternative communities, simultaneously within and against Hollywood's homogenizing, universalizing textual address. This was particularly possible, Hansen argues, within immigrant communities and amongst women. This dialectic of possibility is inscribed in her choice of title: "The juxtaposition of Babel and Babylon is programmatic to my approach to the question of spectatorship in the sense that it highlights a tension, at least during the silent era, between the cinema's role as a universalizing, ideological idiom and its redemptive possibilities as an inclusive, heterogeneous, and at times unpredictable horizon of experience" (19).

¹⁴ Antonia Lant and Ingrid Periz, eds., *Red Velvet Seat: Women's Writings on the First Fifty Years of Cinema* (London ; New York: Verso, 2006), 37.

pieces in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* under the collective title “Die kleinen Ladenmädchen gehen ins Kino,” or, *The Little Shopgirls go to the Movies*. Later anthologized in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays* (1963), the essay-sketches critique touchstones of popular genres which, in Kracauer’s account, produce a singular and uniform effect on the engrossed shopgirls. The shopgirls occupy almost no textual space in the series – just the final sentence of each section and, of course, the title of the whole. Kracauer uses the shopgirls as a rhetorical foil; their naivete complements and permits his analysis. Where Kracauer observes a cynical homeostasis in the story of a reformed prisoner — “Society disguises the sites of misery in romantic garb so as to perpetuate them,” thereby maintaining “the underling as underling and society as society”¹⁵ — his imagined audience is less discerning, more easily duped. “The little shopgirls gain unexpected insights into the misery of mankind and the goodness from above.” Appraising the grammars of romance, Kracauer coolly clucks, “No film without a dance club; no tuxedo without money. Otherwise women would not put on and take off their pants. The business is called eroticism, and the preoccupation with it is called life [...] In the dark movie theaters, the poor little shopgirls grope for their date’s hand and think of the coming Sunday.” When watching a war film, “it is hard for the little shopgirls to resist the appeal of the marches and the uniforms.” When watching a cosmopolitan tryst, “the little shopgirls want so badly to get engaged on the Riviera.”¹⁶

“The Little Shopgirls go to the Movies” elaborates several presumptions about cinema and gender with which this dissertation is intimately concerned. Kracauer focuses on women rather than men, working girls rather than bourgeois housewives; they are unmarried and unremarkable. Their naiveté – that which makes them so susceptible to the twist of ideology – is

¹⁵ Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995) 295.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 295-9.

linked to their singleness and class; they are written so as to lack but forever anticipate the plenitude offered to them at the movies in little snatches of heterosexual fantasy. Note, too, that the Ladenmädchen are plural. Against the singular critic, they form a crowd of fools. For this reason, they are necessary to Kracauer's argument; their credulousness confirms the insidiousness of narrative film. The shopgirls get both titularity and the last word; they are of no, and of total, importance. Thinking through *laden*'s meanings — the German noun for a shop or store, but also a German verb meaning to load, to board, to galvanize — we might ask what weight or charge the shopgirls carry, and where they might be taking us. This final point is key, since the shopgirls do not belong singly to the cinema. They go to see a film ... and then they leave. They revel in imagined encounters on the street and lazy Sunday afternoons. And, of course, they work. They are defined not only by their desirous movie-viewing but by their rather public, even fetishized, visibility. They belong not to a hermetic zone of pure spectatorship, but to the more vibrant realm of the coming-going.

Kracauer's essays are not exceptional; rather, they typify a broad social anxiety concerning the cinema's particular danger for suggestible young women. Kracauer is writing just as the moving image turns 30 – the anxieties his essays reflect had already a history of their own. In the very earliest years of picturegoing, argues Antonia Lant, female spectators were anxious not to be recognized by acquaintances, as in the 1908 case of an anonymous “lady correspondent” at the *Boston Journal* who describes her first blush of shame upon meeting a friend at the theater: “a woman friend of mine who seemed to shrink within herself when she saw me. She felt as I felt no doubt – like a child caught at the jampot.”¹⁷ Lant suggests that this correspondent's anxiety “was partly attributable to the newness of the setting, for women who

¹⁷ Lady Correspondent of the *Boston Journal*, “Picture Shows Popular in the ‘Hub,’” (New York: *Moving Picture World*, 16 May 1908), quoted in *Red Velvet Seat*, 61.

attended such public events would have been suspect as prostitutes, almost by definition [...] conventions of female behavior at the movies did not yet exist.”¹⁸ This can be said to be true for only the briefest moment in cinema history, since conventions around female spectatorship swiftly emerged and were just as swiftly documented. The very first work of sociology to take cinemagoing as its object, Emilie Altenloh’s *On the Sociology of Cinema* (Altenloh’s 1914 dissertation, completed under Weber), is structurally organized around gender difference, with sections on *Geschmack der Knaben* (boys’ taste) and *Geschmack der Mädchen* (girls’ taste), as well as one section on *Gehilfinnen im Kaufmannsstand* (which, almost in anticipation of Kracauer, roughly translates to shopgirls). Categorizing the viewing habits and social protocols of moviegoing *Mädchen*, Altenloh finds that young women of the early 1910s saw films less regularly than their male counterparts, her explanation being that “the daughter is always more closely bound to the framework of the family, and parents have a lot to say about how she spends her free time. She will hardly ever undertake anything completely on her own.”¹⁹

By the late 1920s, women were no longer timid and idiosyncratic moviegoers. Instead, moviegoing was one of the most accessible and popular pastimes for women, who were active and highly visible members of moviegoing audiences. Indeed, as many film historians have pointed out, movies were increasingly marketed for women, who became guarantors of,

¹⁸ Lant, *Red Velvet Seat*, 51.

¹⁹ Emilie Altenloh, “On the Sociology of Cinema: Film Entertainment and the Social Classes of its Patrons” (Eugen Diederichs, 1914), excerpted. Translated from German by Patti Duquette, with the assistance of Christine Haas and Sarah Hall, quoted in *Red Velvet Seat*, 119. While Altenloh’s is the first work of sociology to address moviegoing, two extremely significant later works of sociology by Harold Blumer in the United States and J. P. Mayer in England are worth considering as well. Both Blumer and Mayer turned to qualitative approaches, collecting written accounts of moviegoers’ habits and tastes, particularly among young women. Blumer’s work in particular problematizes the presence of female moviegoers. Researched and written as part of the Payne Fund Studies, Blumer’s *Movies and Conduct* was one of thirteen studies that assessed the problem of cinema, public morality, and children’s behavior – a flurry of work that coincided with the adoption of the Hays Code in 1930 and (some argue) contributed to its stricter enforcement in 1934. See Herbert Blumer, *Movies and Conduct* (New York: Macmillan & Company, 1933) and J. P. Mayer, *Sociology of Film: Studies And Documents* (London: Faber and Faber, 1946).

variously, the cinema's respectability, its mass appeal, and its commercial viability. In a 1926 *Manchester Guardian* column, British film critic C. A. Lejeune goes so far as to say that "the kinema must please the women or die. The vast majority of picture-goers are women and always will be. The time of day is in their favour, to steal an odd hour from the afternoon."²⁰ Film historian Hilary Hallett describes a similar phenomenon in the United States, where the gendered and gendering address of different discourses – print advertising, film journalism – both produced and relied on the production of intimacy with female readership, mobilizing consumption and shaping taste. Whereas "the nation's budding advertising industries often addressed th[e] consumer as a paranoid, passive, irrational conformist who needed the guidance of advertising elites to navigate this new landscape of desire", the movies, on the other hand, "often addressed women as experts who understood their importance as figures who acted as the arbiters of what counted as successful popular culture in modern times."²¹

By the time Kracauer begins writing *Shopgirls* in 1927, Dorothy Richardson was writing her first columns for *Close Up*, a journal characterized by female leadership. In Richardson's first column, she finds a "scattered audience [...] 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."²² In her sixth column, she self-consciously addresses changing attitudes about cinema's respectability: "We go. No longer in secret and in taxis and alone, but openly in parties in the car. We emerge, glitter for a moment in the brilliant light of the new flamboyant foyer, and disappear for the evening into the queer faintly indecent gloom."²³ While Richardson does not explicitly gender this newly emboldened

²⁰ C. A. Lejeune, "The Week on the Screen", *Manchester Guardian* (15 January 1926).

²¹ Hilary A. Hallett, *Go West, Young Women! The Rise of Early Hollywood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 69.

²² Dorothy Richardson, "Continuous Performance", *Close Up* 1.1 (July 1927): 34-7.

²³ Dorothy Richardson, "The Increasing Congregation," *Close Up* 1.6 (December 1927): 61-5.

“we” – as she reverentially gendered her “new audience” of mothers – the moviegoers’ flamboyance and indecency, their movement from “glitter” into “gloom,” suggest an audience detached from the norms of public masculinity.

In contrast to the cinematic pleasures both experienced and described by Richardson and Lejeune, male modernist British writers like Eliot, Pound, Lawrence, and Lewis (to name but a few!) publicly despised the cinema. In Eliot’s take-down of the “cheap and rapid-breeding cinema” in his 1922 essay “Marie Lloyd,” he suggests that moviegoing will annihilate whatever virility the “lower classes” had once retained:

With the dwindling of the music-hall, by the encouragement of the cheap and rapid-breeding cinema, the lower classes will tend to drop into the same state of amorphous protoplasm as the bourgeoisie. The working-man who went to the music-hall and saw Marie Lloyd and joined in the chorus was himself performing part of the work of acting; he was engaged in that collaboration of the audience with the artist which is necessary in all art and most obviously in dramatic art. He will now go to the cinema, where his mind is lulled by continuous senseless music and continuous action too rapid for the brain to act upon, and he will receive, without giving, in that same listless apathy with which the middle and upper classes regard any entertainment of the nature of art.²⁴

For Eliot, the working-man is unmanned at the movies. Without Marie Lloyd and the lusty collaborative energy of the music hall, he (always he) will “receive, without giving” – one could put the matter rather crudely. The jolt of sexual anxiety I detect in Eliot’s stupefied “protoplasm” surfaces once again in a 1927 essay on the “Contemporary Novel,” this time in a critique of Lawrence’s erotics. “When his characters make love – or perform Mr. Lawrence’s equivalent for love-making – and they do nothing else – they not only lose all the amenities, refinements and graces which many centuries have built up in order to make love-making tolerable; they seem to reascend the metamorphoses of evolution, passing backward beyond ape and fish to some

²⁴ T.S. Eliot, extract from ‘Marie Lloyd’, in *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), 173-4 [originally published as ‘London Letter’ in *The Dial*, December 1922, 659-663].

hideous coition of protoplasm.”²⁵ Eliot’s fear of protoplasm – of undifferentiated, overcoupled, weirdly erotic *ooze* – is a gendered anxiety about standing out and standing up: of activity, autonomy, and individuation.

Eliot was right. There is a specific erotic configuration in the movie theater. Here I do not mean the psychoanalytic truisms of 1970s apparatus theory (light is phallic, darkness is uterine) What Eliot saw as amorphous protoplasm we should understand as rituals of collective desire. It is not about scopophilia (Laura Mulvey’s way of understanding the heterosexism of cinematic desire); the thing that is threatening to Eliot is that it is passivity that is linked to cinema’s erotic enchantment. Both Eliot and Kracauer understand this passivity to be a threat to civilization, whether through stupefaction or emasculation. Here I turn to one of the images that initially animated this project, an image from which Antonia Lant derives the title of her compendium: *The Red Velvet Seat*. Where once the feathered hat was the synecdoche for female viewership, ostentatiously blocking the vision of the people sitting behind her, by the 1920s in the era of the picture palace, “a different but parallel figuration, suggesting a lower area of the woman’s body, persisted in women’s ubiquitous references to plush banquettes.”²⁶ Lant is riffing here on Lejeune, who once again serves as a canny appraiser of cinema’s feminine pleasures: “the small cushioned seats are women’s seats; they have no masculine build.” The sumptuous chair – into which one might sink, whose upholstery one may anxiously pick at or tenderly caress – is a perfect symbol for the *textures of position*. Lejeune’s quip is less about the gendering of objects than the way objects coordinate gender as an active social technology. Crucially, though, Lejeune *relishes* the softness and pliancy of the chair. Unlike Husserl’s writing desk, which we know

²⁵ T. S. Eliot, “The Contemporary Novel” in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: Literature, Politics, Belief, 1927–1929*, ed. Frances Dickey, Jennifer Formichelli, and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 83 [unpublished original essay].

²⁶ Lant, *Red Velvet Seat*, 42.

from the start is an *origin* of ideas, the red velvet seat serves as a *repository* for a femininity overdetermined by mass cultural mediation. Yet it is from the vantage of this seat that many women chose to write.

The Problem of the Universal: Moviegoing, Race, and the Transatlantic

As an infant phenomenon, moviegoing created a sense of common experience in two meaningfully distinct ways. First, the medium promised a uniformity of address, a putatively identical encounter with the film object. It is this fantasy of iterative identity that allows an essay like Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* to be conceivable. Unlike written text, the silent film image could ostensibly stand on its own across languages. Second, through the practice of moviegoing, cinema was understood to be a collective endeavor with a presupposed sociality: a common experience formed through assembly, orientation, and duration. As a friend pointed out to me, even when he had the rare privilege of being totally alone in a theater, he *felt* himself to be part of a collective practice in a way distinct from the solitary act of reading.

Each of these fantasies of collective experience crumbles under too much pressure. As scholars have pointed out, silent film never obtained a pre-Babellian moment of global address. Films were heavily and idiosyncratically edited by projectionists; intertitles were (mis)translated, introjected, or cut entirely; norms around musical accompaniment or presentation varied wildly. As the scholars behind the Spectatrix issue of *Camera Obscura* have pointed out, the gendered and gendering practice of moviegoing meant that even the same film watched at the same time had very different meanings for two viewers. It is impossible to adequately conceptualize

moviegoing – to have any pretense of naming the phenomenon – without considering gender. It is even more necessary to attend to the way the American color line differentiated spaces and protocols of exhibition for Black American viewers of the early 20th century. As American major studio films consolidated and mass-distributed a marketable notion of Blackness – a notion both H.D. and Richardson latched onto and fetishized in their own ways – Black filmmakers and moviegoers received, created, and transmuted cinema on their own terms. N—— Heaven²⁷, the name for the segregated balcony of a movie theater (the name Carl Von Vechten attributed to Harlem in his novel of the same name) makes the structural difference baked into spectatorship irrevocably salient. Any pretense of a unitary image or a unifying address quickly disappears from the vantage of a racially segregated balcony.

Nevertheless, the fantasy of a collective experience associated with moviegoing is strong and specific. While the dream of universal experience can only ever be a fantasy, there is something in both film as a medium and moviegoing as a practice that insinuates generality, that presupposes a social world. By the 1920s, almost everyone in England and the United States went to the movies; this makes moviegoing a complexly but powerfully ecumenical concept.²⁸ Writers from immensely different regional, racial, and linguistic contexts were moviegoers, together and apart; this shared “horizon of experience,” as film scholar Hansen has put it, makes cinema one of the more homogeneous practices of modernity. With its unprecedented reproducibility and global reach, film inspired dreams of a new world peace, with figures as

²⁷ I have opted to omit the N-word in my own prose, typing it only when directly quoting authors.

²⁸ Here I draw on Andrew Shail’s distinction between two forms of “influence” in literary history. The first is discrete, elective, and self-conscious, whereas the second “concerns changes in the everyday mental landscape of whole populations, changes in such basic conceptions as the substance of thought” (Andrew Shail, *The Cinema and the Origins of Literary Modernism* [New York: Routledge, 2012], 1). Shail goes on to characterize cinema as “an aspect of everyday life, an item on a citizen’s menu of pastimes, a social interaction and a form of knowledge” (9). Like Shail I am interested in the metacultural shifts that cinema inaugurated; unlike Shail, my object is not a generalized definition of *cinema*, but specifically of *moviegoing* as a modality that we have insufficiently theorized and estranged.

disparate as H. G. Wells and Dziga Vertov finding utopian, transnational potential in silent cinema. In a different register, Hansen considers cinema's internationalism a kind of "Vernacular Modernism," with cinema offering "the single most inclusive cultural horizon in which the traumatic effects of modernity were reflected, rejected or disavowed, transmuted or negotiated."²⁹

My effort in this dissertation is to examine the fissures in this "horizon of experience." Rather than merely debunking the utopianism of Wells or Vertov, I suggest we understand moviegoing as a specific set of paradoxical relations between the particular and the universal. Cinema *was* a staggeringly new "horizon of experience," inviting a whole generation into a sense of collective aesthetic experience beyond what had previously been possible. However, the cinema was – and still is – shot through with difference. What is so thrilling about moviegoing, conceptually, is that it is both the vehicle of collective affect and the very mechanism of difference. We are left with a striking contradiction: whereas the mass-distributed moving image held an ecumenical charge, the promise – even the promise – of shared experience, moviegoing both "made good" on that promise – with every screening a new audience, a new social body – and was structured by difference.

Turning to Black American spectatorship of the period is necessary to understand what moviegoing meant. It is only through this orientation that we can fully apprehend the neutral, 'ideal' concept of moviegoing that permitted a Wells or a Vertov to glimpse utopia on the screen. This is because the violence, risk, and resistance that defined the viewing conditions of Black spectators reveal any presumption of neutrality or idealization to be untenable. Whereas the

²⁹ Miriam Batu Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism." *Modernism/modernity* 6, no. 2 (1999): 59-77. Hansen argues that cinema provided a shared "horizon of experience" under which massive populations across the globe negotiated, tested, and understood modernity. Her sense of cinema's unprecedented capacity for mass-address modifies and deromanticizes the utopian strain in early-20th century thinking on silent cinema.

many scholarly efforts to understand female spectatorship have often relied on theoretical rather than empirical bases of evidence – to the point that Judith Mayne considers the spectator to be a “textual position” rather than an actual viewer – the fact of the segregated theater exposes the “inclusiv[ity]” of Hansen’s “horizon” to be concretely, manifestly compromised. One aim of this dissertation is to bridge two as-yet distinct but fundamentally interrelated bodies of scholarship: first, works in literary studies that attend with renewed scrutiny to the relationship between cinema and literature; second, those in film studies that newly emphasize the contributions of Black communities in cinema history. In chapters two and three, I contextualize Black American spectatorship of the 1890s onward through the scholarship of Jacqueline Stewart, Cara Caddoo, and Cherene Sherrard-Johnson. For now, I bring to the fore Stewart’s vital concept of “reconstructive spectatorship”, her theorization of “the range of ways in which Black viewers attempted to reconstitute and assert themselves in relation to the cinema’s racist social and textual operations.”³⁰ Moving beyond the enthralled, subsumed, or in/credulous viewer, Stewart’s model of “reconstructive spectatorship” is partial and intermittent, situated and highly reflexive: a spectatorship that sees itself seeing.

Vitally concerned with moviegoing as a constitutively public experience, Stewart calls for a movement “beyond an emphasis on the individual, the textual, and the psychic to include a consideration of the collective, the contextual, and the physical” elements at play when Black viewers gathered.³¹ To return to Hansen’s “inclusive cultural horizon,” then, we should understand it to be a contested and complex zone of engagement, dis/identification, and dialogue; its inclusivity is forever negotiated, never arriving and always at stake. Moviegoing, in naming the mode rather than the medium of cinema, is conceptually powerful because it can

³⁰ Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 101.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 101.

(indeed, it *must*) hold these tensions between inclusion and exclusion, collection and dispersal, homogeneity and difference. To think through moviegoing is to acknowledge the possibilities inhering within a group of intimately assembled strangers while attending to the structures of power that organize and constrain their assembly.

Why, though, is it intellectually productive or necessary to consider the experience of Black American spectators alongside white British ones? The choice to organize this dissertation transnationally – with only one native-born Englishwoman, one white American expat, and two Black American writers of the Harlem Renaissance – has been the most consistently thorny aspect of this project, in both its early conception and gradual development. But it is also this project's most significant intervention in a field that consistently prioritizes – implicitly and explicitly – the impact of cinema on white writers. Analyzing early cinema's impact on literature without taking seriously the contexts and legacies of the race film, for example, is tantamount to leaving early cinema unanalyzed. A genre specific to the 1910s-1930s, often but not always directed by Black filmmakers, always targeted specifically at Black audiences, the race film is central to film scholarship of the last two decades, but has surfaced more intermittently and idiosyncratically in literary scholarship. Race films exhibited something about cinema's not-yet-foreclosed potentials. If we overlook alternative and impoverished (economic) modalities that flourished in this moment, we ignore the ways that cinema could have flourished otherwise.

But focusing on Black moviegoing, in addition to Black filmmaking, is crucial to understanding the interpenetrating relays of cinema and literary practice. Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* proves to be a powerful tool for this thinking. When Angela Murray, the novel's protagonist, finds a “cherished freedom and sense of unrestraint” at the cinema, it is not only because she's at the movies or because she's passing as white in a new city – but because she's passing as white,

in a new city, at the movies. In the dark of the theater, Angela modulates the hypervisibility of urban life and the risks of exposure that attend it. On the screen, the “shadowy adventures” of the (unnamed and implicitly banal) films she watches consolidate the aspirations to agency and autonomy that subtend the material realities of the passing plot. Her assembly amidst an anonymous collective of (presumed-white) viewers gives her a foretaste of a possible life in which she would share the would-be neutrality and spectatorial authority of a white audience: not the object of the gaze, but an innocuous observer. Obviously such binarizing is confounding, impossible – but these are the options immediately available to Angela within an antiblack visual regime in which the look is never neutral.

Moviegoing occasions this unrestraint, but it also carries a threat. Angela asks herself whether the white moviegoers in the seats next to her would “resent” her freedom, whether she might in fact be restrained or expelled if her Blackness were disclosed. Her emotional expansiveness is an outgrowth of her mobility: her capacity to move between Black and white milieux. Less abstractly, Angela knows the sting of having a friend expelled from a segregated theater in Philly and can measure it against the balm of attending a theater in the West Village incognito and alone. It is her intimate knowledge of two distinct moviegoing conditions that makes her unrestraint so “cherished” and, like all cherished things, highly vulnerable. Similarly, it is Fauset’s juxtaposition of the two that establish her as much more than a flowery renderer of the Black bourgeoisie, and rather as a social novelist concerned with the complexities of anonymous assembly and the stakes of public Black being.

Hence, it is not only because cinema itself was so transatlantic in distribution and reception that my dissertation crosses Europe and the United States. The double gambit of this project is that understanding the psychic and physical experience of moviegoing can best teach

us to retrieve the cinematic in the literary. Moreover, there can be no single theory of the moviegoer; instead, there must be specific, differentiated theories of moviegoing which balance architectures of exhibition, urban space and policing, pleasure and displeasure, tranquility and terror, identification and repulsion. The effort of *Spectatrices* is not one of inclusion but, more fundamentally, an attempt to get at the structures subtending a putatively neutral ideal of spectatorship.

Fauset demonstrates the advantages of using moviegoing as an expansive comparative rubric, even when that choice demands an unconventional transatlantic frame. Let us take Richardson and Fauset as primary examples. It is highly unusual to have both Richardson and Fauset in the same project – not only because they were divided by an ocean and the violent structures of race, but because the latter is understood to be patently modernist in her aesthetic protocols and intellectual milieu, while the latter is routinely dismissed as middlebrow. But both women wrote about moviegoing at approximately the same time, and in very similar ways. Both found that moviegoing bridged their concerns with sociality and aesthetics in inimitable fashion. Both considered the social space of the theater, incorporating its social and aesthetic features into their literary practice. Both wrote Bildungsroman. And both derived from cinema ideas of temporary sociality and collective contingency that belie the protagonist-centered protocols of the genre. Fauset, despite her internationalism – her trips to Algeria and France, Angela Murray’s burning desire to go to Europe to study as a painter – has been provincialized within the fields of “Modernism” and Black American literary history. By bringing together Fauset and Richardson, I am not trying to make an argument for the latter’s high Modernist sensibility – rather, I am arguing that writers in extremely different intellectual and social milieus were simultaneously influenced by a phenomenon unparalleled in its tension between homogeneity and difference.

Moviegoing *both* carries the potential to flatten out hierarchies – one reason why Hansen’s theoretical metaphors hinge on ‘horizontal’ – and is irreducibly defined by hierarchy. Moviegoing is a provocatively irresolvable dialectic between universal and particular experiences of modernity. For this reason, it opens up comparative models that have gone underthought in the highly regionalized and segregated field of English literature.

In the way that Hurston and Fauset theorize social congregation and alternative public belonging – indeed, in the ways they theorize Blackness in and as collective – they offer a rejoinder to the white Anglophone writers who found in cinema yet another technology to articulate and consolidate ideas of racial difference. Michael North has already written extensively on the way that Pound and Eliot spoke to each other through a ventriloquized African-American vernacular.³² But even in a more would-be-benevolent instance, as when H.D., Kenneth Macpherson, and Bryher collaborated with Paul and Eslanda Robeson on *Borderline*, the film was frank in its fetishistic luxuriation on Paul Robeson’s body. Eslanda wrote in her diary, “Kenneth and H.D. used to make us so shriek with laughter with their naïve ideas of Negroes that Paul and I often completely ruined our makeup with tears of laughter, had to make up all over again.”³³ Here Eslanda indicates the way that European anglophone intellectuals used film as a technology to understand and codify Blackness; in her “shrieks” and “tears,” I hear a violence under the humor. In *Close Up*, the magazine that H.D., Bryher and Macpherson edited, Dorothy Richardson is even more overt in her fetishism. In her first essay to grapple with the coming of sound, Richardson writes: “here were the cotton-fields: sambos and mummies at work, piccaninnies at play – film, restored to its senses by music [...] music utterly lovely, that

³² Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language and Twentieth-Century Literature* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998).

³³ Eslanda Robeson. Diary (20–29 March 1930). Yale University, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New Haven, CT.

emerged from the screen as naturally as a flower from its stalk: the voices of the cotton-gatherers in song.”³⁴ What is crucial here is not that Blackness features in film but that it salvages the sound film which had so crassly threatened the specific artistry and solemnity that Richardson and HD located in silent film. Blackness, reduced to and fetishized as song, has the power to save an entire medium:

A mighty bass voice leapt from the screen, the mellowest, deepest, tenderest bass in the world, Negro-bass richly booming against adenoidal barrier and reverberating: perfectly unintelligible. [...] And so it was all through: rich Negro-laughter, Negro-dancing, of bodies whose disforming western garb could not conceal the tiger-like flow of muscles. Pure film alternating with the emergence of one after another of the persons of the drama into annihilating speech.

These moments indicate the rather intimate relationship between British Modernist production and aesthetic theory, on the one hand, and the fetishized, imag(in)ed, expropriated American Blackness that enables it.

Instead of simply reifying white British Modernists siphoning Blackness, making Blackness mean something for them, I want also to talk about other writers – Black writers – thinking about moviegoing and congregation. With this move, what is lost is a coherence of literary history. What I hope to gain is an unprecedented literary comparison, employing moviegoing as an optic. Moviegoing, and specifically the experience of moviegoing by women, both requires and permits this comparison – the comparison of figures who, though women and though writing contemporaneously, are rarely considered together. I am trying to build a bridge between a body of work that is very British in its thinking with the reality that most films seen by Brits were American films, carrying with them the same ideologies of race with which Hurston and Fauset were contending and to which they were responding. There are other figures thinking

³⁴ Dorothy Richardson, “Dialogue in Dixie,” *Close Up* 5.3 (September 1929): 211-8.

about cinema and the transatlantic – Langston Hughes and Dorothy West traveling to Soviet Union, Paul Robeson performing in England – but in choosing four women, I’m trying to get at what is both shared and unshareable across these subject positions.

Film’s Abstraction: Moviegoing with and without Medium

In deploying moviegoing as a keyword throughout this dissertation, I am foregrounding cinema’s peculiar sociality while moderating scholars’ over-reliance on medium-specificity, turning from the hypostases of film form to the variegated practices of attendance. However, I wish to highlight from the outset some complications inherent to this reorientation. First, as I argue below, it is impractical, if not outright impossible, to make claims about cinema that do not in some way invoke the medium around which the practice is structured. Second, definitions of media have become ever more sophisticated and expansive, with media historian Lisa Gitelman, for example, defining media as “socially realized structures of communication, where structures include both technological forms and their associated protocols, and where communication is a cultural practice, a ritualized collocation of different people on the same mental map, sharing or engaged with popular ontologies of representation.”³⁵ Such a definition actually dovetails quite well with the notion of moviegoing, where the medium of “cinema” is not just its material substrate but the grooves and channels, “ritualized collocation[s]” and “popular ontologies” of shared cinema-making. Third, within the history of film theory, there is already a long tradition of abstracting “a film” (roughly synonymous with a movie) from “film” (roughly synonymous with celluloid). D. N. Rodowick argues that film has always been just as much a virtual as an

³⁵ Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 7.

analogical phenomenon, rather than one that has only recently become virtual through digital production.³⁶ Rodowick's analysis hinges on a further level of abstraction separating "a film" from "cinema." This abstraction is significant enough to trace out a brief history, since it indicates the ways that film (now media) studies is obsessively ambivalent about the f-word around which it so long cohered. For my purposes, I wish to do with the concept of "moviegoing" something like what has already happened with "film" – to establish a dynamic and dialectical relationship between the concrete facticity of the practice and the abstracted idea of moviegoing, an abstraction that can allow moviegoing to travel into literary textuality.

Scholars assessing the imaginative contact between literature and early cinema have largely missed the moviegoer – she wanders off or gets lost in the dark. Image, close-up, montage, projection; these and other 'technical' elements more quickly cohere, appear more self-evidently formal. As David Trotter put it in *Cinema and Modernism*, our understanding of literature's relationship to cinema is too often "committed to argument by analogy."³⁷ Within Modernist studies, a film-centered formalism has defined many if not most approaches to charting cinema's influence. Because film and text have such intriguing affinities – they represent through inscription and are experienced syntagmatically – the temptation is to (merely)

³⁶ David Norman Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007). Rodowick grounds his analysis in aesthetic history, arguing that "in its historical efforts to define film as art, and thus to legitimate a new field of aesthetic analysis, never has one field so thoroughly debated, in such contradictory and interesting ways, the nature of its ontological grounding" (12). Cinema troubled aestheticians and scholars so completely because it befuddled Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's distinction between "the arts of succession or time and [those of] simultaneity or space... the emergence of cinema, now more than 100 years old, unsettled this philosophical schema even if it did not successfully displace it" (13). Cinephiles and film theorists, says Rodowick, clung to and debated film's material substrate so energetically *because* of its aesthetic indeterminacy.

³⁷ David Trotter, *Cinema and Modernism*, Critical Quarterly Book Series (Malden, MA, USA: Blackwell Pub, 2007), 1. Trotter further resists any recourse to analogy by insisting that "literature is a representational medium, film a recording medium. The freedom modernist literature sought was freedom from the ways in which the world had hitherto been represented in literature. The freedom film sought (initially, at any rate, if not for very long) was freedom from representation: the freedom merely to record." *Ibid.*, 3.

conceive both as forms of writing, each with respective ‘techniques’ that the other might imitate, annotate, or disavow. Colin MacCabe’s claim that “it is impossible to imagine the form of either *Ulysses* or *The Waste Land* without the developments of film editing” is exemplary of this tendency.³⁸

But newer, more nuanced incarnations proliferate.³⁹ A more recent example, one that illustrates how difficult it is to pull away from film as an analytical model, is Lisa Stead’s *Off to the Pictures: Cinema-going, Women’s Writing and Movie Culture in Interwar Britain*. Throughout, Stead adopts a capacious intermedial framework, arguing that “film [...] cannot be considered separately from its interrelationship with other cultural forms.”⁴⁰ She considers moviegoing along magazine consumption, movie writing, and other discourses and practices of interwar British femininity, persuasively arguing that to extricate one element from the others is to misapprehend the period’s layered experience of gendered being. But this intermedial focus nevertheless culminates in film-centered readings where, for example, Jean Rhys “uses cinematic techniques to represent and reflect back on the increasingly mediated and gendered notions of looking perpetuated by cinema.”⁴¹ Brilliantly, Stead appropriates “cinematic techniques” (she specifies “framing, cutting and gazing”) to comment on their own analytical insufficiency, their already-entangled status in a larger scopic regime. The subtlety of Stead’s many-modal argument hinges, nevertheless, on film form.

³⁸ Colin MacCabe, “On Impurity: the Dialectics of Cinema and Literature,” in *Literature and Visual Technologies: Writing after Cinema*, ed. Julian Murphet and Lydia Rainford (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 15-28, 20. For a literary methodology explicitly drawing on montage and film form to explain modernist poetics, see Susan McCabe, *Cinematic Modernism: Modernist Poetry and Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2005).

³⁹ See especially Alix Beeston, *In and out of Sight: Modernist Writing and the Photographic Unseen* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Lisa Nanney, *John Dos Passos and Cinema* (Clemson, South Carolina: Clemson University Press, 2019).

⁴⁰ Lisa Stead, *Off to the Pictures: Cinema-Going, Women’s Writing and Movie Culture in Interwar Britain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 2.

⁴¹ Stead, *Off to the Pictures*, 107.

Rather than merely finding a hole in Stead's method, I dwell on her reading of Rhys to demonstrate how hard it is to talk about cinema without talking about medium, even in a book whose title – *Off to the Pictures* – signals her laudatory efforts to move beyond medium-specificity. Against film's easily-fetishized materiality and imitable techniques, *moviegoing* is just harder to hold onto. It is modal rather than textual, performed rather than inscribed. As streaming services proliferate, we can more clearly see *moviegoing* as a specific feature of cinema's history rather than its only or purest form. 21st-century viewing habits – at home, in our beds, on our laptops – expose *moviegoing's* givenness to be anything but given. Instead of the axiomatic, invisible, essentially unremarkable means through which cinema is/was accessed, *moviegoing* is better understood as a historically specific, expressive, and altogether strange modality through which cinema is/was performed. *Moviegoing* requires and produces a constitutive tension between individual and collective experience, promising both solitude and congregation, absorption within assembly. A *moviegoing* audience literalizes Michael Warner's claim that a public “unites strangers through participation alone, at least in theory.”⁴² Viewers are gathered in temporary, anonymous, yet profound intimacy – at least in theory!

As I state earlier, I have largely eschewed film reading in order to estrange my own spectatorship. But I adopt this methodology not only to take seriously and make formal the whiteness and maleness that situate my gaze, but also to seek out that which surrounds the screen, since so much of what the writers in this dissertation prioritize in their experience of the “cinematic” is extra- (even anti-) filmic. Simply put, I avoid film as much as I can; but to think about cinema requires an attunement to the medium around which the apparatus is built and the theories associated with that medium. Stead's treatment of Rhys exemplifies this problem. As I argue above, the assumed identity of the medium and its address redoubles the sense of

⁴² Michael Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics,” *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (January 1, 2002): 56.

collective experience both instantiated and undone by moviegoing. For this reason in my chapters on Richardson and Fauset I mention not a single film, giving full attention to the ways these writers conceptualized the audience, the balms and stings of going to the movies. In my third and fourth chapters, I turn to writers who were themselves filmmakers and briefly analyze H.D.'s *Borderline* and a more involved reading of Hurston's documentary footage – particularly *Commandment Keeper Church*. Yet even in these film readings my object is sociality. With Hurston my focus is the Black American congregation as a space of alternative and reciprocal models of spectatorship, specularly, and display, where the relationships of seeing subject and object seen are constantly shifting. With H.D., I move away from her revered status as literary Modernism's montagist and think of her instead as a fan, positioning herself as and against the moviestar with unembarrassed erotic desire.

Film theory has long benefitted from a semantic cleft in the word “film” itself. The noun forks in two directions — one material, the other virtual. First, there is filmstock: the easily flammable, slowly deteriorating matter upon which the cinematographic image is – well, was – inscribed. Second, there is the feature film: roughly synonymous with “movie,” the film is problematically, implicitly, and only ever provisionally grounded in its materiality. In the case of lost films, the *idea* of the film remains long after its material form goes up in smoke. As fragile or damaged reels are digitized – as cinema becomes more comprehensively digital *in toto* – a feature film's material corroboration *as* film is more obviously semantic than literal; but this was always the case. Carl Theodor Dreyer's *Joan of Arc* surely existed, was understood to exist, long before its most comprehensive copy was discovered in a Norwegian asylum in 1981; Oscar Micheaux's many “lost” films still subsist in newspaper reviews, drafts of scripts, and other

repositories of cultural memory, though they may never be seen again. Indeed, the question of memory is vital: during the decades prior to television and home viewing, feature films obtained and retained their shape as it were *in memoriam*. As moviegoers left, spilling out onto the street, it was through recollection that they could repossess, and in repossessing name, that fragile, fleeting, cherished thing – the film I saw.

The most influential attempt to define cinema in terms of its materiality is André Bazin's "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," the first essay in his three-volume compilation *What is Cinema?* Bazin's masterpiece has achieved monumental status in film studies; film historian Dudley Andrew dubbed Bazin "cinema's poet laureate, or better, its griot" in his introduction to the 2004 edition.⁴³ Bazin rooted cinema theory in medium specificity, contrasting the photograph's deathmask to the cinematograph's ghostly reanimation. Bazin insists that "photography does not create eternity, as art does, it embalms time, rescuing it simply from its proper corruption."⁴⁴ Like an undertaker or high priest, photography prepares the past for the tomb. In contrast, "film is no longer content to preserve the object, enshrouded as it were in an instant [...] Now, for the first time, the image of things is likewise the image of their duration, change mummified as it were."⁴⁵ The paradox of "change mummified" has galvanized film and media studies for decades, influencing scholars like Dudley Andrew, Philip Rosen, and Laura Mulvey to think in celluloid. Yet even in this essay so paradigmatically stressing cinema's indexicality, Bazin swerves in his final sentence from the material to the virtual: "On the other hand, of course, cinema is also a language."⁴⁶

⁴³ Dudley Andrew, *What Cinema Is! Bazin's Quest and Its Charge* (Chichester, West Sussex, U.K. ; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), ix.

⁴⁴ André Bazin and Hugh Gray, *What Is Cinema?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 14.

⁴⁵ Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, 14-5.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

Semioticians have dutifully substantiated Bazin's cheeky "of course," describing cinema as a system of codes and lexical units, a language "spoken" between individual films, filmmakers, and spectators. For Christian Metz, cinema was never "meant" for narrative or vice versa: in their infancy, the camera and projector were technologies of record and display, not yet yoked to diachronic storytelling. For Metz, it was the pressure of narrativity that yielded film's language: "*It was precisely to the extent that the cinema confronted the problems of narration that, in the course of successive gropings, it came to produce a body of specific signifying procedures.*"⁴⁷ Because no single film could marshal a complete vocabulary or exhaust every conceivable syntax, the category of "cinema" took on a new burden, the burden of abstraction. Cinema as total language; cinephilia as ardent fluency.

The terms "film" and "cinema" therefore have a complex relationship to each other, one traced out by Metz and Deleuze. For Metz, the cinema arrived between 1910 and 1915, with the consolidation of the five-reel feature film; hence, it is only through the intensity of the part's codification that we can conceptualize the whole. This whole, once derived, yields philosophical results individual films never could; this is how Dudley Andrew explains Deleuze's departure from his cherished Bergson: "In 1983, Gilles Deleuze would apologize for Henri Bergson's 1908 dismissal of the apparatus by insisting that the philosopher had considered only the *cinématographe* and had not yet felt the difference of cinema, which soon emerged as a complete mutation."⁴⁸ Deleuze and Metz, in rather different ways, detach this "mutation" from its material body. Their ambition is to liberate cinema as a system for, respectively, thinking and signifying. Yet each inevitably relies on analyses of single movies, rehearsing the fall from cinema to film.

⁴⁷ Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, University of Chicago Press ed (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 95.

⁴⁸ Andrew, *What Cinema Is!*, xiv.

D. N. Rodowick astutely captures the paradox in Metz: “the semiological distinction between cinema and film requires a vertiginous dialectical circularity between two terms and two sets [...] film and cinema are contrasted as actual and ideal objects that in fact cannot be separated. This is the difference between an *énoncé*, or discrete utterance, and language or *langue*, as a virtual system of differences; or, more simply, the difference between an individual and concrete message and the abstract code that gives it sense.”⁴⁹

Where Rodowick, Deleuze, and Metz worked to dematerialize film, making cinema a concept in excess of its material instantiations, feminist scholars of the 1980s specified and pluralized conceptions of spectatorship. But what these feminist approaches have done is not merely make things more concrete – instead, as I have elaborated at the outset of this introduction, they have also added to the abstraction of cinema by thinking through address, affect, orientation, and disidentification. The turn to spectatorship coincided with and was influenced by the turn to reader response in literature departments and was particularly configured around feminist psychoanalytic frameworks, as exemplified by Laura Mulvey’s 1975 more-than-seminal essay, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. Specific conceptualizations of spectatorship multiplied, such that Judith Mayne’s 1993 book *Cinema and Spectatorship* could compile and analyze almost two decades of thinking on the subject. Choosing to focus on “paradoxes” of spectatorship rather than features or facts of spectatorship, Mayne isolates three: address and reception, fantasy, and negotiation. Each term emerged “to conceptualize the competing claims of the homogeneous cinematic institution and heterogeneous responses to it.”⁵⁰ Mayne frames each that each term paradoxical supports the point I am attempting to make here,

⁴⁹ Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*, 18.

⁵⁰ Judith Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship*, Sightlines (London ; New York: Routledge, 1993), 79.

which is that moviegoing has the capacity to further abstract rather than make concrete the thing we call cinema.

Making moviegoing abstract – an abstraction beyond pure or mere spectatorship – allows us to see how it became portable to literary writing. I am not trying to get *out* of abstraction by fetishizing the concrete – the taste of the popcorn or the texture of the seat (though those things are, also, important). Rather, in taking moviegoing as an idea, I point to how cinema provoked new thinking about collection, dispersal, temporary refuge, the erotics of assembly, the possibility of a shared orientation, the rhythms of the day, the relationship between stillness and hubbub – in short, the many different ideas of sociality which are the things I note in the literary works that I analyze. The medium of film is never absent from these socialities; it is the pretense and object around which assemblies gathered, whispered, wept, and ate popcorn. But instead of focusing on the particularities of *film* – conceived as an aesthetically discrete and materially bound *medium* – I theorize moviegoing as an aesthetically indiscreet practice and atmospheric *milieu*. That which is projected on the screen is doubtless formal; so too are the social currents which roil before, during, and after projection.

To the Darkhouse: Moviegoing, Modernism, Social Aesthetics

In ending with a reading of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, I have two aims. The first is to provide a test case for the principles elaborated throughout this introduction, demonstrating how an orientation to moviegoing reshapes or illuminates anew the aesthetic contours of a specific work of literature. But that choice yields questions of its own – why Woolf? In answering this question I express my second aim, which is to ask what moviegoing and Modernism have to say to each other and, ultimately, to suggest that clinging too hard to

Modernism gets in the way of all that moviegoing as a conceptual locus can offer. Situating this project both with and without Modernism, I demonstrate the resources moviegoing offers to those scholars still chasing that big-M monster (and more power to you!) while establishing that, as I see it, moviegoing opens us to aesthetic and thematic continuities in thrilling excess of Modernism as a category. Specifically, I consider *social aesthetics* – meaning both collective aesthetic experience and the aestheticization of sociality – as something that *To the Lighthouse* draws from moviegoing, and that moviegoing inspired writers of the era to conceptualize anew.

To date, Modernism has been the major – in many ways, the only – avenue for thinking about cinema and early 20th-century anglophone literature together. It is vital to specify that I mean Modernism in a now rather dated sense: a canon established in the 1950s, defined by a certain reflexivity and commitment to textual experiment – rather than the pluralized, rangey, ever-expanding and lower-case *modernisms* taken up by the New Modernist Studies. This choice to focus on an outmoded Modernism is not out of any allegiance to the old guard but rather to indicate the intellectual history of a fledgling field that, til now, has relied on old, well-guarded literary canons to legitimize and ballast any turn to cinema at all. Even when scholars’ efforts to bring cinema into contact with literature do not reify this taken-for-granted canon (and they generally do), they always reify Modernism as a taken-for-granted category. Take for instance Garret Stewart’s description of his project in the beginning of *Between Film and Screen: Modernism’s Photo Synthesis* (1999): focusing on film and text, he conceives of his book as a “study of the textual basis of the two forms – the two formative systems – in the articulation of a modernist inscription.”⁵¹ What modernist inscription *is*, exactly, is not specified, but Stewart’s choice of authors includes James, Conrad, Forster, and Joyce – so rather than being defined, it

⁵¹ Garrett Stewart, *Between Film and Screen: Modernism’s Photo Synthesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 2.

can simply be presumed. Here is Stewart's definition of modernism, some 250 pages later: "under pressure of modernity, modernism becomes a name for what the electric cluster of the screen image has in common with the unsung glister of the subvocal signifier."⁵² Maddeningly, modernism is just the name Stewart gives for that which film and text have in common.

But Stewart is hardly alone.⁵³ One need only look at Lisa Nanney's recent book on Dos Passos, which hinges heavily on Dos Passos' brilliant reappropriation and reinvention of montage, not to mention the earliest works on cinematic approaches to literature, to see scholars thinking through film form and the camera in relationship to Modernist experiments with juxtaposition, obscurity, and medial reflexivity. This makes sense both historically – those we call Modernists were the first generation of moviegoers – and, often, aesthetically, since principles developed by Sergei Eisenstein map quite persuasively onto experiments in poetry of the 1920s. The problem, of course, is that in focusing on Modernism we cut off a huge portion of writers & writing modalities that are also engaged with cinema. This is the major reason why Jessie Fauset hasn't made her way into an Americanist monograph like Beeston's *In and Out of Sight* (2018). Instead of trying to get Fauset into the Modernist club, I suggest it is more significant to think about moviegoing alongside but also without modernism. Moviegoing is most useful, conceptually, when it pushes us beyond the aesthetic and generic silos that organize literary studies, focusing instead on that which was both unifying and divisive in the Modernist period.

⁵² Stewart, *Between Film and Screen*, 265.

⁵³ David Trotter's *Cinema and Modernism* (2007) focuses on Joyce, Eliot, Woolf, Griffith, and Chaplin; Susan MacCabe's *Cinematic Modernism* (2006) on H.D., Eliot and Pound, Stein, and Moore; Alix Beeston's *In and Out of Sight: Modernist Writing and the Photographic Unseen* (2018) on Stein, Toomer, Dos Passos, and Fitzgerald. I think it is not merely notable but crucial that in Trotter's second book concerning cinema and literature, he moves beyond Modernism as a unifying principle. Trotter's *Literature in the First Media Age* (2013) draws on middlebrow fiction at the borders of Modernism, with Trotter explicitly opting to establish a wider canon for literary contact with cinema, as well as establishing a wider array of media (telephone, telegram, plastic, airplane) with which to contextualize literature.

To this end, I focus in my reading of *To the Lighthouse* on a quality she shares with every other figure in this dissertation. This quality is what I call moviegoing's *social aesthetics*. The term cuts both ways, referring to the way moviegoing forced thinkers to consider how so much of aesthetic consumption was now experienced collectively; it refers, too, to the way the social body – an aggregating or dispersing audience – could itself be understood of subtle form and surprising beauty. Laura Marcus has persuasively argued that *To the Lighthouse*, published in 1927, should be read in relationship to Woolf's 1926 essay "The Cinema."⁵⁴ in which Woolf decries "the ordinary eye, the English unaesthetic eye" ("a simple mechanism") and suggests hieratically that cinema has not yet arrived because viewers are not sufficient to behold it. "... for all the clothes on [viewers'] backs and the carpets at their feet, no great distance separates them from those bright-eyed, naked men who knocked two bars of iron together and heard in that clangour a foretaste of the music of Mozart." Marcus reads *To the Lighthouse* as an attempt to chase the cinema still eluding us, an invitation I find salutary and permissive. But unlike Marcus, I am animated more by the "naked men" and what they strain to hear – the congregation rather than the "music."

Reading *To the Lighthouse* alongside and through nonliterary media is a time-honoured critical tradition, especially because Lily Briscoe is a painter (and an angsty, iconoclastic one at that.) Louise Hornby situates Woolf alongside early photography, arguing that Woolf "constructs a theory of photography in her novels and writing, stitching into her prose an epistemology of photographic objectivity, precision, and fact," where "Objectivity [...] does not indicate a naive realism or the notion of a singular truth, but rather the ideal form of an unoccupied

⁵⁴ Laura Marcus, *The Tenth Muse: Writing about Cinema in the Modernist Period* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

perspective.”⁵⁵ Thinking through the earliest forms of photography – cyanotypes and “cameraless exposures” of plants and other organic matter – Hornby suggests that Woolf “understands photography as a medium out of which the world develops objectively: discoverable but independent of the subject.”⁵⁶ Hornby’s sense of a world emerging without a subject resonates with Laura Marcus’s reading of *Time Passes* – the novel’s middle section – as a cinematic experiment. Marcus looks to the camera’s capacity for recording and making newly present that which defies, exhausts, or merely lies beyond or before human perception. “The reality in a photograph is present to me while I am not present to it,” as Stanley Cavell puts it.⁵⁷ Reading through Woolf’s 1926 essay “The Cinema,” Marcus discovers in “Time Passes” an aesthetic experiment not only – or even primarily – in novelistic form; instead, “we see Woolf exploring the possibilities of a future or potential cinema.”⁵⁸ And many scholars have thought about the role of painting and other material arts in the text, notably Urmila Seshagiri and Cara Lewis. Seshagiri relates Lily Briscoe’s notorious “little Chinese eyes” to questions of orientation and Orientalism, arguing that “through Lily’s ‘little Chinese eyes,’ the long-standing imperialism binaries (colonizer/colonized, white/nonwhite, civilized/primitive) symbolized by tea, china, and the other material evidence of British rule will lose their meaning in the postwar world [...] Reading Lily Briscoe’s artistic development in dialogue with the racially derived doctrines of

⁵⁵ Louise Hornby, *Still Modernism: Photography, Literature, Film* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 146.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁵⁷ Quoted in Marcus, *The Tenth Muse*, 114.

⁵⁸ Marcus, *The Tenth Muse*, 146. Woolf in her essay describes the uncanny thrill of watching documentary footage a full decade after its release, the swift and startling realization that men depicted in adolescence had since died in war; young girls had since become mothers. Paradoxically, time’s passing is eerily apparent in these films because they leave time’s passing disarticulated; Woolf is unsettled by the signifiers’ presence, their *non*-historicity, in the wake of their referents’ absence, their death. Marcus suggests that when she digs into the crevices of a housescape drained of human content, Woolf is authoring a sequence of epic cinematic indifference. Decay and despoliation, the gnawing-down and warping of wood, the creep of moss and the roaring storm are registered with a roving but untroubled gaze: the narration seeks to rid itself of human vagary, adopting the cold, consistent intelligence of a recording machine.

early-twentieth-century English formalism illuminates how *To the Lighthouse* transforms an essentialized understanding of nonwhite racial identity into a template for modern English selfhood.”⁵⁹ Finally, Lewis focuses on the painting genre of the still life, not in relation to Lily’s paintings but to the centerpiece on the Ramsay’s dinner table: “It is this kind of quiet artwork [...] which reveals the extent to which the visual and verbal arts are imbricated in *To the Lighthouse*.”⁶⁰

These various, sensitive, often gorgeous readings of the novel’s profound intermediality take up individuals beholding – through Lily’s eyes, for example – or they imagine the world as if unbeheld – as in Hornby and Marcus’s readings of the camera and photograph. Marcus further consolidates the relationship between film and individual perception when she argues that the characters in *To the Lighthouse* think like cinematographers, sifting through material from the past and present: the “cinematographic nature of *To the Lighthouse* is [...] bound up with questions of presence and absence, the recording of the past and negotiations with loss and legacy.” None of these readings, however, explains the social aesthetics of the novel: the way congregation and dispersal, social dissonance and consonance, proximity and distance, are all in themselves vital and aesthetic; nor how one of the novel’s most miraculous aesthetic achievements – the dinner party at the end of *The Window* – is inseparably tied to its being shared. What moviegoing opens in the novel is this quality, where the meaning and form of an

⁵⁹ Urmila Seshagiri, “Orienting Virginia Woolf: Race, Aesthetics, and Politics in *To the Lighthouse*,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 50, no. 1 (2004): 71. It is worth clarifying that I disagree with many of Seshagiri’s readings of Woolf’s racial politics, particularly that Woolf’s use of blackface in attending the 1911 Post-Impressionist Ball (not to be confused with the exhibit from the year prior) demonstrated “an early interest in reordering the boundaries of Englishness through tropes of racial difference” (65) rather than a racist consolidation of those very boundaries.

⁶⁰ Cara Lewis, “Still Life in Motion: Mortal Form in Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*,” *Twentieth-Century Literature* 60.1 (2014): 426.

object perceived are irrevocably shaped by the social body perceiving it together – and where that social body can itself be glimpsed as an aesthetic object.

Where Marcus draws on the pseudo-photographic capture of human bodies, ghostly traces, inhuman biological processes – all of which obtain their meaning from her emphasis on the film camera – my reading of *To the Lighthouse* focuses on its aesthetic sociality, the proximity of bodies sitting together in the dark, waiting for something to happen. In Chapter 17 of “The Window,” a sequence Marcus largely overlooks, I am interested in this somatic, proxemic experience of cinema: the rustle and closeness of bodies, the thrill of darkness, the murmuring of the crowd. Where Marcus dwells on the one-to-one relationship between viewer and screen, camera and object-image, I focus on the one-to-many network that moviegoing requires and produces.

The scene begins with a splintered sociality. Mrs. Ramsay opens the chapter in a state of mourning and regret, drifting in and out of memories of her one-time friends the Mannings with the probing scrutiny of an editor combing through extra reels: “But now she went among them like a ghost; and it fascinated her, as if, while she had changed, that particular day, now become very still and beautiful, had remained there, all these years” (87). Lily appraises Tansley with a similarly anti-illusionist optic: “could she not see, as in an X-ray photograph, the ribs and thigh bones of the young man’s desire to impress himself, lying dark in the mist of his flesh” (91). Acrimony builds in the webby, fissured space of the dinner party. Jealousies and petty outrage spring out of intractable class differences, withered friendships, gendered imperatives. “But how would it be,” Lily ponders acidly as she watches Tansley flail, “if neither of us did either of these things?” — if the ungallant man refused to rescue the damsel, if the ungenerous woman ignored the awkward guest. “So she sat there smiling” (91). The evacuating force – the abrupt vacuuming

out of social affinity – is especially vigorous in this not-quite hermetic room. Both Mrs. Ramsay’s love for her husband and Bankes’ fondness for Mrs. Ramsay are swiftly and utterly voided: as she stares down the table, “She could not understand how she had ever felt any emotion or affection for him” (83). Sitting next to his hostess, Bankes sourly rebels: “now, at this moment her presence meant absolutely nothing to him: her beauty meant nothing to him; her sitting with her little boy at the window — nothing, nothing” (89). Mrs. Ramsay diagnoses a general atrophy where others can only fumble after a something-missing.

Lily felt that something was lacking; Mr. Bankes felt that something was lacking. Pulling her shawl round her Mrs. Ramsay felt that something was lacking. All of them bending themselves to listen thought, “Pray heaven that the inside of my mind may not be exposed,” for each thought, “The others are feeling this [...] Whereas, I feel nothing at all” (94).

The “nothing, nothing” that takes up residence in characters’ minds has a peculiar solidity, a plastic and accretive quality. Bankes holds onto his “treachery” with a mirthless pleasure, much as Lily clings to her cold but sustaining misandry. Think of Mrs. Ramsay’s “wedge-shaped core of darkness” (63) — her constitutive void, her cultivated kernel of invisible, indivisible self-being: a kind of sufficient and thing-cohering ‘dark matter.’ Negativity, solitude, and alienation register at the table as a vibrant, weighty, strangely tangible “nothing.”

This agitation corresponds to the uncertain hush as the lights dim and the screen yawns, vacant. More significantly, the scene suggests that cinema will never be a fantastical salve for some social wound. Cinema does not soothe or fix; it reconstitutes. The movie theater is a site where the collective finds its apprehension temporarily restructured, where many are united in the act of “seeing together” as Carmichael and Mrs. Ramsay do, where the abundance of social anxieties can be suspended, stretched into the aisles or onto the screen. Cinema does not provide

something lacking; instead it reorders the darkness, resituates the “nothing, nothing” through its unique interplay of harnessed light and deepening shadows.

Sensing a crowd glutted on nothings, Mrs. Ramsay begins the feature presentation.

Now eight candles were stood down the table, and after the first stoop the flames stood upright and drew with them into visibility the long table entire, and in the middle a yellow and purple dish of fruit. What had she done with it, Mrs. Ramsay wondered, for Rose’s arrangement of the grapes and pears, of the horny pink-lined shell, of the bananas, made her think of a trophy fetched from the bottom of the sea, of Neptune’s banquet, of the bunch that hangs with vine leaves over the shoulder of Bacchus (in some pictures), among the leopard skins and the torches lolloping red and gold . . . Thus brought up suddenly into the light it seemed possessed of great size and depth, was like a world in which one could take one’s staff and climb hills, she thought, and go down into valleys, and to her pleasure (for it brought them into sympathy momentarily) she saw that Augustus too feasted his eyes on the same plate of fruit, plunged in, broke off a bloom there, a tassel here, and returned, after feasting, to his hive. That was his way of looking, different from hers. But looking together united them (96-7).

The optics of the scene shift, saliently. The room has moved together into the present. In a hesitant ‘first draft,’ the candles register the atmospheric, the windy hollows and stormy vexations, before they “dr[a]w with them into visibility the long table entire.” Much like a movie screen, the table glows with new vitality, becomes a luminous ground for the apparition and ricochet of meanings. They pulse but, crucially, *pull*. They at once throw off their light and invoke, activate, *invite* the luminosity of the table itself. “Projection” is term insufficient to the complex visuality of this scene, where light is both a hose and siphon, pouring out and pulling in. Just so with the movie screen, which receives and reflects a beam of light while also “drawing in” its audience. The guests are not mere witnesses to the lightshow, but participants in its meaning.

Mrs. Ramsay and Augustus Carmichael share, in their oblique but collaborative modes of spectatorship, the experience of moviegoin. They apprehend the denoted object, the centerpiece, with markedly distinct “way[s] of looking.” However enamored, Mrs Ramsay

maintains a careful distance from the arrangement, eventually displacing it through metaphor and allusion; she beholds the spectacle of the centerpiece but is all the more attentive to its associations and its supple effects on her fellow-viewers. The bowl's dazzling there-ness pushes her elsewhere, to the bottom of the sea, far backwards into mythological time. Mrs. Ramsay delights in the bowl's activation, its sudden charge and stunning change, its technicolor pulse. The bowl, flaring up vivaciously under Mrs. Ramsay's burning look, becomes a "trophy", then a Bachan "bunch", and finally a veritable "world" illusionistically endowed "with great size and depth". Mrs. Ramsay refuses a simple proximity to the beautiful thing beheld, insisting on vertiginous changes in scale. In her rapt but associative appraisal of the bowl, Mrs. Ramsay performs one version of spectatorship, the one Woolf describes in "The Cinema" as a marriage of eye and mind, where meaning follows a procedure of cognition and decoding, reaction and remapping.

Contrast this to Carmichael's alimentary, digestive "way of seeing" — he "feast[s]" and "plunge[s]" with unabashed gourmandism. The two are brought into "sympathy" not through identical viewing practices but by viewing, dissimilarly, together. Mrs. Ramsay's abstraction mingles with Carmichael's absorption; her flighty, associative montage resting comfortably alongside his chewy, ruminative long take (a take in two senses). The animosity or misapprehension between them does not evaporate in this sympathetic instant, just as the fissures in social life do not find suture at the cinema. But they do partake in a sumptuous "looking together" that suspends and reorganizes their relation to each other, returns to them something produced in the throb of shared vision. Referring back to Tansley's derisive comments about the frivolity of dinner parties allows us to further elucidate what I am calling commensal cinema. "They did nothing but talk, talk, talk, eat, eat, eat. It was the women's fault. Women made

civilisation impossible with all their ‘charm,’ all their silliness” (*TTL* 85). Here, the principal organ of affiliation and communion is the mouth rather than the eye, and Tansley discerns nothing but waste in oral procedures. To eat and talk are effeminate, hardly the work of industry or intellect. And yet, Tansley captures something essential in his pejorative gloss: unlike the Husserlian writing desk, the table is a realm of singularly womanly production. Mrs. Ramsay’s social work is table talk, the art of atmospheres. Tansley sees only the production of waste; Woolf looks to the table for the production of social meaning, fraught and delicate, endangered but vital. The table is suggestive, too, because its productions are meant for the mouth: intended to be savored, swallowed, gossiped, guffawed. A kitchen-table cinematics requires Carmichael’s delectation just as much as it requires Mrs. Ramsay’s associative swerve: a marriage of eye and *mouth* as well as eye and mind.

Woolf’s many dialectical preoccupations — the play between proximity and distance, intimacy and estrangement, solidarity and solitude — are intensified here, thrown into focus. Why seek out a faint or flickering cinematic semiotics at the dinner table, when so much more is available for analysis? The answer lies in the distinct relationship between affect and luminosity, the role that bright gleaming surfaces and wriggling, inky darkness play in a suffused, ambient, rich and deeply real atmosphere of feeling.

...the faces on both sides of the table were brought nearer by the candle-light, and composed, as they had not been in the twilight, into a party round a table, for the night was now shut off by panes of glass, which, far from giving any accurate view of the outside world, rippled it so strangely that here, inside the room, seemed to be order and dry land; there, outside, a reflection in which things wavered and vanished, waterily.

Mrs. Ramsay, who had been uneasy, waiting for Paul and Minta to come in, and unable, she felt to settle to things, now felt her uneasiness changed to expectation.

The very idea of distance is briefly banished from the room. The window becomes a “rippled [...] reflection in which things wavered and vanished, waterily.” The window no longer frames a view or composes a scene, is instead the site of *decomposition*: corroborating the dining room’s vivid reality, insinuating the outside world’s murky, fraudulent decay. The exterior becomes an abstraction, an incomprehensibility; the world becomes the room’s damp and smudgy negative, a realm of ghostly, drowned mimesis. Here we might return to Woolf’s “glimpse” of true life amidst the busy prestidigitation of the movies in her essay on “The Cinema” : “At the cinema for a moment through the mists of irrelevant emotions, through the thick *counterpane* of immense dexterity and enormous efficiency one has glimpses of something vital within” (emphasis mine).

The darkened window of Chapter 17 works analogously, obscuring “something vital within.” It is not that the window obscures the world from the Ramsay’s gathering, but that it obscures their gathering, that fragile “something vital,” from the world. The window serves, counterintuitively, and only in this chapter, as the movie screen’s antithesis: a plane upon which projections fail to find purchase, slip waterily away into unknowing. Instead of operating as the privileged metaphor of the screen, apt for framing and viewing, it becomes a partition. Instead of looking where we are usually instructed to, we are asked to turn our gaze elsewhere. This is a re-orientation from the privileged markers of the apparatus to the “something vital” within, briefly sheltered from the world, awash in the light and watching together. Cinema’s flicker, its flitting between absence and presence, apparition and loss, the many constitutive “nothing, nothing”s that give the movies their semblance of being ‘something’ shapely and substantial – this vacillation is arrested. Loss moves briefly to and through the window, plenitude stays where it sat. Nothing, but nothing, is more ‘there’ than the Ramsay’s table. In a gorgeous inversion of the movie theater’s luminosity, a dark screen shimmers in a room flooded with light.

The table becomes an allegory for moviegoing intensified through inverted articulation and rigorous partition: this is Woolf apprehending the cinema in a way it cannot yet see itself. The mood changes; anxiety blossoms into “expectation”, worry into calm. The film is underway.

Chapter One: The Temporary in Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage*

Why pounce upon the cathedral? There it stood, amidst its town, awaiting them, three little people about to join the millions over whom in its long life it had cast its shelter and its spell. In strolling about, they would come upon it, see it from various points of view, gradually wear down the barrier between it and themselves, and presently, either together or alone, venture within its doors.

Opening sentences of Dorothy Richardson's *Dimple Hill* (1938)

... this strange hospice risen overnight, rough and provisional but guerdon none the less of a world in the making. Never before was such all-embracing hospitality save in an ever-open church where kneels madame hastened in to make her duties between a visit to her dressmaker and an assignation, where the dustman's wife bustles in with infants and market-basket.

Dorothy Richardson, "The Increasing Congregation," *Close Up* (1927)

These are not just any old books. They are monuments. Sacred texts that the modern West has subjected to a lengthy scrutiny, searching in them for its own secret. Literary history, though, is puzzled about what to do with them.

Franco Moretti, introduction to *Modern Epic* (1994)

What if we thought of the Long Modernist Novel as a movie theater rather than a cathedral?

I ask this (admittedly specific and idiosyncratic) question as an extension of the idiosyncratic and specific question with which Dorothy Richardson begins *Dimple Hill*, the twelfth chapter-volume¹ in her 13-book *Pilgrimage*: “why pounce upon the cathedral?” In the moment, Miriam Henderson – the protagonist of Richardson’s neverending (anti)novel – and her companions the Broom sisters are contemplating a visit to the cathedral, the main attraction of an sleepy unnamed town. But the first sentence of *Dimple Hill* problematizes their endeavor, turning a touristic choice into a metafictional commentary on the unfolding shape of Richardson’s sprawling lifework.

Miriam decides to go alone. For her companions, Florence and Grace Broom, “there would be no venturing. Boldly, all eyes, they would march in, and immediately begin to poke about amongst its vitals.” Scandalized in advance by their incurious poking, Miriam opts for “sloping secretly in and seeing and feeling it, as far as her intermittent skepticism allowed, in the way of the ascetic young man, the sight of whom, sitting in the railway carriage aloof and meditative over his missal, had reminded her that they were bound for a cathedral town” (*DH* 403). As is often the case in *Pilgrimage*, one space slides through memory into another: the cathedral juxtaposed with the train car, linked in thought by the “ascetic young man.” Each space (train car and cathedral) is a site of potential spiritual recognition and fellowship. Indeed, when Miriam does attend an Anglican church service a chapter later, she is desperate to be elsewhere. “It was the absence, here in church, of intervals of stillness that was preventing the sense of unity and home-coming [...] her spirit sought in vain here for a home for the joy of yesterday ; gasping,

¹ Following Gloria Fromm, editor of Richardson’s letters, as well as Richardson herself, I use the clunky language of “chapter-volume” to highlight the tension between serial installment and standalone event that defines each book-length section of *Pilgrimage*.

almost, for breath in the heavy atmosphere wherein these subdued people were going through their performances, under the leadership of the parson, an automaton with an assumed voice and accent, and a mind tethered elsewhere” (*DH* 422-423). Notice here the language of completion and belonging, “unity and home-coming,” which Miriam seeks *in* “intervals of stillness.” This complex blending of the tiny and contingent (merely an interval, spent with strangers) and the profound (unity; home-coming) is one of the major temporal dynamics of *Pilgrimage*. A sense of unity is to be found (or found wanting) in the temporary.

Why pounce upon the cathedral? Poised at the beginning of *Dimple Hill*, which Richardson mightily struggled to publish on her own terms, the question elevates a tourist’s whim (do we really need to go, can we do something else?) and transforms it into a metacommentary on setting and structure in *Pilgrimage* more generally. The cathedral is the wrong site – culturally overinscribed, too historical, too Anglican – to serve as a metaphor for her novel’s architectural and spiritual heterodoxy.² This is one way to read *Dimple Hill*’s narrative itself; the text moves from the cathedral to the eponymous farm, a Quaker enclave. There is an obvious rhetoric to this narrative movement: from cathedral to farm, Anglican pomp to Quaker severity, mass to meeting.

But the opening question of the cathedral is insistent and sincere. Richardson was always striving to find, through the art of the novel, a space that could provide what she termed “universal hospitality” for her wandering pilgrim-protagonist. Miriam’s journeying across the novel’s more than 4000 pages is a search for both spiritual and physical dwelling; it is not

² Writers of long novels were already conceptualizing their own work as cathedral-like, particularly Proust, who said he conceived of the structure of *A la Recherche* as a cathedral’s. See André Benhaïm, “Unveiling the synagogue beyond Proust’s cathedral,” *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 9, no. 1 (2015): 73-86; Edward Engelberg, “The displaced cathedral in Flaubert, James, Lawrence and Kafka,” *Arcadia* 21, (3): 245-62, and especially Luc Fraise, *L’Œuvre cathédrale: Proust et l’architecture médiévale* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2014 [réimpression de l’édition de Paris, 1990]).

incidental to the novel's meaning that she is often in need of housing. The cathedral is therefore yet another false arrival; a space around which some of the devout may organize their pilgrimages, surely, but merely a stop in Miriam's longer journey. In the context of *Dimple Hill* itself, the cathedral is a spatial foil to the Quaker farm where Miriam spends the majority of the narrative. But, as Richardson writes to her friend and benefactor Bryher, even Quakerism is merely another stop on the way somewhere elsewhere; one reason Richardson so insisted on a thirteenth volume of *Pilgrimage* is that she wanted to save Miriam from this false arrival.³ The novel relentlessly pursues what, in all its interminability, it cannot find: a spiritual and physical homecoming. This is *Pilgrimage*'s most defining experiment – to seek, and find, and always lose the feeling of home.

I am drawing Richardson's language of "universal hospitality" from her film writing, rather than her towering fiction. The 1927 column in question is entitled "The Increasing Congregation." In writing about the movie theater, Richardson falls back on Christian metaphors (Richardson sees the theater as one step away from an "ever-open church") and medievally-inflected language ("guerdon"); in short, she is invoking the movie theater *as* a makeshift cathedral. The conflation tells us something about why Richardson was so captivated by moviegoing as a social and aesthetic practice; she found in the movie theater a kind of "hospitality" that her protagonist herself pursued. But it is worth distinguishing these two architectural spaces, with both of which Richardson was strongly concerned. Churchgoing and moviegoing share an iterative and collective quality – what distinguishes them for Richardson is the randomness and temporariness of the group that gathers in the latter. Churches (especially cathedrals) carry the weight of the ages. The movie theater – "rough and provisional" – is crass,

³ Dorothy M. Richardson and Gloria G. Fromm, *Windows on Modernism: Selected Letters of Dorothy Richardson* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 347.

less restrictive, more mundane. And, as a collection of strangers, fundamentally more fleeting: every unity is specific, inimitable, and temporary.

With *Dimple Hill*, Richardson's long novel was being published *in toto* for the first time, the 1938 Knopf edition. Starting in medias res, as her chapter-volumes always do, *Dimple Hill* must be understood in relation to its turbulent publication history and the pressures put on *Pilgrimage* as a total work. By the time it was published, almost nobody was reading Richardson. Only ripples remained of the splash she had made in the 1910s, when her stylistic innovations in representing interiority prompted May Sinclair to coin the term "stream of consciousness."⁴ Now considered one of literary Modernism's most significant (if overdetermined) techniques, "stream of consciousness" was the language Sinclair settled on to describe what felt utterly original in Richardson's project: "In this series there is no drama, no

⁴ While it is extremely peripheral to my argument, it is worth saying that I consider "recurrence" much more useful language for *Pilgrimage's* representation of consciousness than "stream of consciousness." I am pulling the term from Richardson herself, who hated Sinclair's designation and resisted it throughout her career. In *Pointed Roofs* (1915), Miriam experiences fleeting pangs of homesickness that take the form of flashbacks; though she wishes to remain present in her new German environment, "the home scenes recurred relentlessly. Again and again, she went through the last moments . . . the good-byes, the unexpected convulsive force of her mother's arms [...]" The "relentless" irritant of this parting — a parting that seems never to reach its conclusion, the "convulsive force" of the squeeze holding it tight in the mind — is contrasted to a quieter, gentler hug that one of Miriam's students gives her. "The sense of that sudden little embrace recurred often to Miriam during the course of the first day." The effect is musical, a reverberation. After listening to another student practice piano, the recurrence becomes a fabric: "Miriam went to bed content, wrapped in music. The theme of Clara's solo recurred again and again; and every time it brought something of the wonderful light — the sense of going forward and forward through space." *Pointed Roofs* has as little plot as any other of the volumes; instead of a compelling story, Richardson gives us a "going forward and forward through space." She accomplishes this movement "forward" by incorporating these moments of gurgling reverence: less a flowing stream (which flows, inevitably, somewhere) than a fountain rhythmically and quietly replenishing itself. Richardson is primed to glimpse and articulate an essential recurrence within moviegoing — to understand moviegoing as periodicity — and to elevate this quality to the level of a formal property, indeed an aesthetic, rather than a mere habit or routine. But holding onto experience in an age of routinization requires a gentle creasing, cresting of the day's rhythms. Experiences demand a continuous return.

situation, no set scene. Nothing happens. It is just life going on and on. It is Miriam Henderson's stream of consciousness going on and on [...] In identifying herself with this life, which is Miriam's stream of consciousness, Miss Richardson produces her effect of being the first, of getting closer to reality than any of our novelists who are trying so desperately to get close."⁵ The sheer audacity of her literary experiment – every extension of *Pilgrimage* tightly focalized through Miriam Henderson, with no perceptible kowtowing to “drama,” “situation,” or “set scene” – prevented her work from gaining any but the most apostolic following. Two decades after Sinclair's review, Richardson was straining to get work written, let alone published. She relied on writer and patron Bryher for both financial support and literary guidance, regularly lamenting her under-realized ambitions. Writing to Bryher in 1933, she drolly consigned herself to the margins of literary history: “One of these days, some investigatory literary historian who finds the book sympathetic, may go out of his way to discover why it was never finished, may chance to discover, & may put a footnote, no: 16, on the 3000th page of his book on Literature under Capitalism, & let himself go therein on the Martyrdom of a Worst Seller.”⁶ To her friend S. S. Koteliensky, she wrote that same year that *Pilgrimage* – plagued by miscorrected copies, hard to access, impossible to find as an ordered sequence in a bookstore or library – “has, so to speak, never been published.”⁷

It was Koteliensky who first suggested to Richardson the possibility of publishing *Pilgrimage* as a collection – an idea she latched onto with enthusiasm. Through a string of

⁵ May Sinclair, ‘The Novels of Dorothy Richardson’ in *The Egoist*, Vol. 5, No. 4, (April 1908), 57.

⁶ Richardson and Fromm, *Windows on Modernism: Selected Letters of Dorothy Richardson*, 250.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 254. Richardson continues lamenting to Kot: “Ten chapter-volumes have found their way into print, into an execrable lay-out & disfigured by hosts of undiscovered printer's errors & a punctuation that is the result of corrections, intermittent, by an orthodox ‘reader’ & corrections of these corrections, also intermittent, by the author [...] The order in which these ‘chapters’ appeared is apparently undiscoverable either by booksellers or librarians. They offer, as the first, or the latest, any odd volume they happen to have.”

negotiations between publishing houses, the project of publishing a total Pilgrimage fell on Richard Church at Dent Press. Church believed the key to cementing Richardson's fame was advertising. With every publication of chapter-volumes in the 1930s, Church wanted *Pilgrimage* to be finished. This was true of *Clear Horizon* in 1936 and *Dimple Hill* in 1938. In 1936, Church created blurb for *Clear Horizon*, the 11th chapter-volume, in which he declared the "completion of Pilgrimage" – much to Richardson's horror. Writing to her that same year, he stressed "how very strongly I feel about the method which is necessary: and how important for us all will be the fact that the great book has been drawn to a conclusion [...] I am determined that we must have everything fully ripe before we make what obviously is the final bid for establishing your work [underlined emphases are Church's throughout]."⁸ But by the time *Dimple Hill* was published in 1938, Richardson had already been working on its successor for months, telling Bryher in a December 1937 letter: "I have spent this last week [...] in Vaud, in a vignette occurring in March Moonlight, the successor of Dimple Hill" (340, underlined emphases are Richardson's). And again to Bryher in June 1938, regarding Richard Church's ongoing publicity campaign: "The circular, not quite what was originally planned, has boiled down to a longish article by Richard Church, incorporating tributes. It will, I hope, more or less serve its purpose. But I cannot say I enjoy having the twelve chapters to date, wick [*sic*] have landed Miriam in Quakerism from whose insufficiencies I am now engaged in rescuing her, represented as the whole of Pilgrimage."

This thing – the "whole of Pilgrimage" – is the problem, not only for book publicists but for scholars as well. How does one categorize an object so massive and magisterial without falling back on conceptions of totalities and wholes? Especially given Richardson's regular desire to see her work published as a single piece? The contradiction is sharp: Richardson wished

⁸ Richardson and Fromm, *Windows on Modernism*, 306.

her work to be conceived of and experienced as an ongoing and unified work, yet she resisted the act of completion which would terminate the whole. Scholars have come at this problem from several perspectives. For Lynette Felber, in *Gender and Genre in Novels Without End*, the problematic textuality resists any understanding but that of *écriture féminine*, an idea that Ellen Friedman had explored with regards to Richardson in “Utterly Other Discourse: The Anticanon of Experimental Women Writers from Dorothy Richardson to Christine Brooke-Rose.” Building on Friedman’s designation, Felber suggests that Richardson “presents an alternative to phallogentric discourse by defining and representing an *écriture féminine*. [...] In the creation of her lengthy *roman-fleuve*, she is not only the first modernist stream of consciousness writer, but she is also the precursor of those contemporary feminist theorists who would create a woman’s language.”⁹ For Felber, the endlessness is a plenitude that escapes the regulations and strictures of heteropatriarchy’s language system, overflowing any form that would contain it. Thinking more materially about Richardson’s time as a dentist’s assistant, Kristen Bluemel suggests that the “problem of endings in *Pilgrimage* can be reframed, if not resolved, once we examine it in relation to the represented endings of health and life in Richardson’s alternate literary forms [...] the body, and specifically the body struggling with the symptoms and meanings of the human ending of death, proves Richardson’s most effective means of illustrating her implied theory about the impossibility of narrative endings.”¹⁰ Another, more systematic approach to the problem of totality is Elisabeth Bronfen’s *Dorothy Richardson’s Art of Memory: Space, Identity, and Text*. Bronfen categorizes the (dizzying) variety of spaces across *Pilgrimage* in three groups: material, metaphorical, and textual. Her approach is exhaustive rather than interpretive, using a

⁹ Lynette Felber, *Gender and Genre in Novels without End: The British Roman-Fleuve* (Gainesville, Fla.: University Press of Florida, 1996), 116–17.

¹⁰ Kristen Bluemel, *Experimenting on the Borders of Modernism: Dorothy Richardson’s Pilgrimage* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997), 125.

kind of taxonomy of space to parcel out the whole of *Pilgrimage* without attempting to tell us what that whole might mean – except that *Pilgrimage*'s meaning is bound to its spatiality.

Instead of totalizing critiques, *Pilgrimage* requires an approach sensitive to its brokenness, incongruity, and partiality. As Rebecca Davies puts it, the failures of the novel are inextricable from its ambitions: “Richardson's steely determination not to stray from the confines of Miriam's mind posed a unique artistic challenge, one that specifically prohibited the kind of cutting and shaping that her critics recommended.”¹¹ To honor this determination without diminishing it, Scott McCracken, the editor of the recently-released Oxford Edition of the works of Dorothy Richardson, suggests the most fruitful lense for getting into *Pilgrimage*'s unwieldy, strange bigness. McCracken and his collaborator Adam Guy call the novel's structure an “open design,” the structure “marked by gaps and silences that grant the reader a collaborative role in the creation of the narrative.”¹² Rather than a purposeful, cathedral-like whole, Guy and McCracken suggest that Richardson “created a design that allowed for accident.” As editors of her work, this commitment to accident presents challenges, since “the gaps and absences that open the text to the contingencies of the reader's interpretation also create extra uncertainties in Richardson's manuscripts, which can easily translate into errors when the manuscript is translated into print.”¹³ McCracken and Guy point out that “Richardson seems to have recognised this problem, but often blamed herself or her conditions of work rather than seeing it

¹¹ Rebecca Rauve Davis, “Stream and Destination: Husserl, Subjectivity, and Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage*,” *Twentieth-Century Literature* 59, no. 2 (Summer 2013): 319.

¹² Adam Guy and Scott McCracken, “Editing Experiment: The New Modernist Editing and Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage*,” *Modernist Cultures* 15, no. 1 (2020): 113. Concerning Richardson's editing of her various manuscripts throughout her lifetime, Guy and McCracken draw a distinction between Richardson's iterative process and that of her contemporaries. “In contrast to ‘proto works’ like *Stephen Hero* and ‘He Do the Police in Different Voices,’ and in contrast to Hannah Sullivan's sense that writers ‘make it new’ through revision [...] none of the editions of *Pilgrimage* can be characterised as revisions in Sullivan's sense. Each, including the 1938 edition, is an experiment in itself” (126).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 116.

as intrinsic to her method.” Rather than a “problem” or artistic deficit, the editors categorize Richardson’s “willingness to incorporate the risk of failure into her aesthetic” as “a way of insuring her ongoing commitment to narrative experiment.”¹⁴ They reach the conclusion that “*Pilgrimage* might be characterised as an anti-novel; and, as we have seen, its narration from the subjective point of view of her heroine, Miriam Henderson, reveals not the autonomy, but the heteronomy of the subject.”¹⁵

McCracken and Guy’s “open design” is not only explanatory but hugely permissive for scholars and teachers of Richardson who would otherwise be daunted by the sheer bigness of the text. Open design insinuates not only a practice of experiment but a structure with multiple entry points and forking pathways. The openness permits a reorientation from monumentality and totality, into the momentary and partial. Kate McLoughlin, for example, focuses on “moments of insight” in the works of Richardson and James, arguing that both writers “wrote long novels in response to what they, and others, perceived as a crisis in transferable experience. More specifically, James and Richardson enable the reader to perceive the functioning of this experience by constructing moments of insight to which the works’ lengthiness is indispensable. The lengthiness, furthermore, not only makes it possible for the reader to view this experience working in action, but also actually fosters comparable experience in him or her.”¹⁶ These hard-won moments of exalted thought, mimetically transferred to readers, are just one of many ways that temporariness accrue meaning in *Pilgrimage*. I would argue that impermanence defines every single space occupied in the novel. As Bronfen explains of the middle chapter-volumes, “Miriam seeks, on the one hand, to explore foreign and unknown sites in order

¹⁴ Adam Guy and Scott McCracken, “Editing Experiment,” 116.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 127.

¹⁶ Kate McLoughlin, “Moments of Insight in Long Novels by Henry James and Dorothy Richardson,” *Modernist Cultures* 10, no. 3 (2015): 300.

to gain access to them, while, on the other hand, she never remains in any one of these places, either because she feels excluded or because she declines being part of the world they represent.”¹⁷ Bronfen depicts Miriam’s journey to London as a recourse after “three failed attempts to find a sense of belonging in houses with closed social structure” in the suburbs; she begins “to explore foreign spaces in the gesture of oscillation, going out only to return always to her own room, where she is protected from all external contact.”¹⁸ While Miriam’s move to London is a specific narrative shift, this quality of itinerancy, oscillation, coming-going is not unique to these specific chapter-volumes; it is rather the primary condition of Miriam’s pilgrimage.

How does moviegoing factor into these questions of novelistic scope, open design, temporary moments, and itinerancy? My argument in this chapter is that moviegoing provided Richardson with a method for sharpening her aesthetic and thematic principles of the temporary. In the recurring column she wrote for the journal *Close Up*, the movie theater was to Richardson an intermittently sacred space, one in which her aesthetic and social concerns were conjoined. Its specificity was its unique, iterative creation of temporary communities. When, in 1927, Bryher asked Richardson whether she would write for *Close Up*, Richardson demurred, saying that with her preference for adventure films, she might be out of her depth.¹⁹ This weakness becomes the strength of her column, *Continuous Performance*, which almost never speaks about individual films and instead comments on the textures and possibilities of moviegoing as a phenomenon. She writes about the kids who sit in the front row and the strengths of the best piano

¹⁷ Elisabeth Bronfen, *Dorothy Richardson’s Art of Memory: Space, Identity, Text*, First digital edition produced by Lightning Source 2011 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 19.

¹⁸ Bronfen, *Dorothy Richardson’s Art of Memory*, 22.

¹⁹ Richardson and Fromm, *Windows on Modernism*, 134. Writing to Bryher: “We are thrilled by the prospect of the Film paper. High time there was something of the sort. I can’t however see myself contributing, with my penchant for Wild West Drama & simple sentiment.”

accompanists; she writes with equal derision and admiration about the woman who will not stop talking to her friends during the film. She is generally interested in the flows and currents that take people into the theater, and those which take people out of it.

I emphasize sociality as key to Richardson's thinking about moviegoing and, more big-picture, sociality as key to Richardson's aesthetic theory and practice. Her love of moviegoing stemmed from its ability to weave together the social and the aesthetic. This is true, first, in the sense that an individualized (ineffable, incommunicable) aesthetic experience is subordinated to a social one, where the viewers of a film co-create its formal contours. But it is true, second, in that sociality becomes an aesthetic experience in itself, becomes an object of appraisal and enjoyment. Movies helped Richardson develop her sense that aesthetic experience was social, and that social experience was aesthetic. Finally, it is the temporariness of both aesthetic experience and specific forms of social assembly that made them precious and profound to Richardson. The thrill of discovering a sense of unity and co-dwelling with strangers at the movies was the same socio-aesthetic quality Miriam is chasing across *Pilgrimage*. She finds it, repeatedly, and then loses it. Every epiphany is transformative, but none is final; every assembly disassembles. There are many arrivals in *Pilgrimage*, many moments Miriam feels as if she has found herself at home. Each of these is meaningful; none is terminal.

My argument is not that moviegoing serves as some hermeneutic turnkey for *Pilgrimage*; it does not. What I argue instead is that Richardson used her temporary but intense engagement with the cinema as a means to sharpen her ongoing aesthetic principles. As I have been interpreting the novel's titular pilgrimage, it describes Miriam's search for a sense of spiritual and physical dwelling. What Miriam in fact gets is a series of homes that are only temporary. This might seem like a failure and cause for regret and melancholy. In fact, by turning to Richardson's

writings on moviegoing, we can see that the temporary is itself a category on which she placed immense social and spiritual significance.

Where to this point I have been focusing on *Pilgrimage* as a whole, in the remainder of this chapter I set up a relay between Richardson's columns and her 1925 chapter-volume *The Trap*. I turn to this chapter-volume both because of its narrative content and its timing in Richardson's life. Written in the years leading immediately up to her *Close Up* columns, *The Trap* exhibits many of the same preoccupations with a temporariness that is both social and aesthetic. I focus first on the relationship between the temporary and the continuous, a term vital to Richardson both because of the iterative, accretive nature of *Pilgrimage* and, more obviously, because her film column was entitled "Continuous Performance." The temporary is defined, I argue, by its mediating the continuous and the discontinuous, the sense of securing a moment from the flow of duration while savoring that moment's imminent reintegration into time's flow. Next, I turn to Richardson's consideration of refuge and hospitality in both her columns and in *The Trap*, arguing that the spaces that most signify home, home-coming, and hosting are in fact public, temporarily created, and fragile spaces. As Richardson names the movie theater as a space of "universal hospitality," she also develops Miriam's sense of herself as a hostess – a facilitator of vital gatherings in which something transformative can occur. Yet Miriam's hospitality is native to contingent and temporary zones of encounter that do not mimic the patterns of the family home as much as they disavow them. I turn, finally, to the way Richardson's sociality relies on strangers, contingency, openness, and exposure. It is within this section that I develop the idea of social bodies obtaining, in Richardson's thinking, their own aesthetic dimension. Finally, contextualizing Richardson within the wider gambit of my project, I consider Richardson's racial politics – the way that her beloved experience of temporary

fellowship is created through exclusion, rather than all-inclusiveness. For Richardson, those whom are necessarily excluded from audience-congregates are Black; indeed, in an all too traditional gesture of white audiences witnessing minstrelsy and blackface, Richardson fetishizes Black performance as spectacle in order to secure the fragile solidarity of her cherished assembly of spectators.

Temporary / Continuous

The title of Richardson's film column is "Continuous Performance," an inviting and beguiling phrase that at turn could signify the projector's steady burble, the musicians underscoring the film, the actors' performance on the screen, the actions of audience members themselves, the single spectator's departures and revisitations, even the cinema as a complex nexus of interrelated and collaborating agents. What I highlight in this section, which engages Richardson's columns as well as some general features of *Pilgrimage* as a complex organism, is the relationship in her thinking between the *continuous*, with its extremely obvious correlations to her writerly praxis, and the *temporary*, rendered in vivid intervals of startling unity – unity to be savored, her readers are made to understand, because they are already presupposed to be fleeting, built not to last but to evaporate.

As for continuousness, *Pilgrimage's* is unique. Despite a (predominantly) chronological organization (with many, many flashbacks) and rigid focalization in one character, one of the qualities that makes *Pilgrimage* hardest to read without guiding texts is its temporal vagueness. Miriam Henderson's emplotment, her precise coordination in an overarching life-structure, is consistently un- or under-described. Studiously attentive to the details of space, Miriam and the

narrator (they occasionally merge) are often indifferent to the precise recording of time. Despite the linear chronology of the thirteen volumes, there are gaps, omissions, and reveries that render *Pilgrimage* regularly, albeit quietly, baffling. This bafflement might be understood as part of *Pilgrimage*'s work: if we think of the volumes, and their internal chapters, as a series of initiations, then the disorientation is better understood as an aesthetic feature rather than a writer's failure. George H. Thomson assures nervous readers that "when presentation on so grand a scale is combined with an intimate subjective narration from which explicit overview and review are excluded, the result can be intimidating."²⁰ Intimidating, maybe even mystifying – an effect might register, too, as *boredom*. Suspended between the massive scale of the whole and the rigorously "isolated" miniaturism of the episode, we've little ground to get our bearings — and indifference is preferable to vertigo.

In his companion to the work, where he reconstructs *Pilgrimage*'s consistent but underarticulated chronology, Thomson opts for a cinematic metaphor to describe its "compressed and fragmented narrative." Describing the way that readers are ushered in and out of scenes, he suggests that "the result is somewhere between the product of the still camera and of the camcorder, a series of windows on experience, each vivid and detailed, but isolated. Thoughts, feelings, and memories flood the scene, by turn distancing the focus or plunging it into close-up, until expansion exhausts the moment or the episode. Curtain. A new episode."²¹ This episodic quality with its attendant "curtaining" – far less schematic than *Ulysses*, far less signposted than in Proust – means that Richardson's readers are always forever beginning – often without knowing where or when they are. Kristen Bluemel calls this *Pilgrimage*'s "death of the ending," and centers her analysis on the (un)scene of Miriam's mother's suicide. Occurring – or not? –

²⁰ George H. Thomson, *A Reader's Guide to Dorothy Richardson's Pilgrimage* (Greensboro: University of North Carolina Press, 1996) 1.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

during the very last paragraph of *Honeycomb* (1917), the death itself goes rigorously un-depicted; indeed, readers can miss it entirely (I did!). As Bluemel observes, while “this is the most dramatic of any of *Pilgrimage*’s many endings, its power as ending exists without representing a resolution to plotted events.”²² In the final sentence, Miriam finds herself “in eternity ... where their worm dieth not and their fire is not quenched.”²³ *Honeycomb* is curtailed without climax; its magnetism derives precisely from its hermeneutic futurity, the way it transposes trauma both elsewhere and onward, into an emergent interpretive activity, a kind of beginning.

Richardson’s project, then, is marked by both extreme continuity and extreme discontinuity. On the one hand, the text is unique in its constancy when set against its modernist siblings: even in Proust, we find neither the unfailing focalization nor the fidelity to chronology that define Richardson’s project. On the other hand, as indicated above, Richardson folds in vast, gnostic silences; she probes the grey-zones of consciousness such as waking and sleeping; and she withholds information that might enable her readers to more easily “place” the novel’s many secondary characters. Narrative is severely subordinated to setting; readers are sometimes required to wait several pages before they can know what Miriam is doing, when the narrated events are taking place, how many days (weeks, months...) have elapsed between this scene of narration and the last. *Pilgrimage* is both a towering work of seemingly unceasing narration *and* an exercise in subtly alarming discontinuities. Richardson marries methods of disruption (sleighting, forgetting, omission) with the thickening matter (slight, forgotten, omitted) which binds a life together; the combination is simultaneously inviting and resisting intimacy.

Across Richardson’s film columns, it becomes clear that cinema gives her the conditions

²² Kristin Bluemel, *Experimenting on the Borders of Modernism: Dorothy Richardson’s Pilgrimage* (Atlanta: University of Georgia Press, 1997) 123.

²³ Dorothy Richardson, *Pilgrimage: Vol I* (London: Virago, 1970) 490.

to contemplate the hinge at the heart of continuity. In moviegoing, certain elements sustain the fantasy of an immersive and eternal continuity; others disturb or destroy it. One of the chiefest elements for Richardson was the music accompanying silent films. In praising her local pianoman, she singles out his flair for “continuous improvisation” and his “talent for spontaneous adaptations. As long as he remained with us the music and picture were one.”²⁴ Richardson as much savours a graceful balance as she solicits its disequilibrium, placing “as long as” on a fulcrum. Indeed, the theater management's later misguided efforts to modernize the orchestration resulted in “the destruction of the relationship between onlookers and film.” To maintain the “undisturbed continuity of surrounding conditions, the musical accompaniment should be both continuous and flexible” (II). Continuous and *flexible*. Lacking the whirring cool of the fantastically well-tightened machine, Richardson’s cinema easily falls apart. Compare this to Eliot’s sense that “the working-man [...] is lulled by continuous senseless music and continuous action too rapid for the brain to act upon, and he will receive, without giving.”²⁵ Less passive and more precarious, Richardson’s cinema depends on calibrated and temporary unities: between the spectators and the film, the musician(s) and the film, the spectators and the musician(s) – and of course, the spectators and each other. Given the required “flexibility” of the pianist, unities are brief, interrelated elasticities: tissues that expand, contract, and tear – in the blink of an eye.

Even when all goes perfectly well, moviegoing is an aesthetically vexed practice because hinges dis/continuity. On the one hand, Richardson opens up the cinema as a space of constancy: reliably *there*, it mediates and mitigates the urban uncertainties of vagrancy and cohabitation, fatigue and overwork. On the other, she draws attention to the experience’s fragility, how its

²⁴ Dorothy Richardson, “Continuous Performance II: Musical Accompaniment”, *Close Up* vol. I no. 2, August 1927.

²⁵ T. S. Eliot, “Marie Lloyd” in *Selected Prose* (London: Faber & Faber, 1975) 173.

constancy is threatened or undermined – how its aesthetic integrity, its sense of wholeness, is always in precarious relation to the dailiness to which it inevitably belongs. Any semblance of cinematic wholeness was premised on its dis/continuity with the daily rhythms surrounding it: the fact that it is bordered off from yet integrated within the temporality of the day. In her very first column, after first asserting that “the [picture] palaces were repulsive,” Richardson details her arrival at a humbler theater, “one of those whose plaster frontages and garish placards broke a row of shops in a strident, north London street” (I). The half-haughty “one of those” connotes sly fondness for — at least familiarity with — the upstart picturehouse, which both “broke” and belongs to the “row of shops.” Inside, Richardson finds a new and surprising phenomenon, but it is not, crucially, the thing on the screen:

It was a Monday and therefore a new picture. But it was also washing day, 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.²⁶

As the film itself begins, Richardson’s account of this “escape [...] into eternity” comes to rely on a watery metaphors of suspension: the movie’s “first scene was a tide, frothing in over the small beach of a sandy cove, and for some time we were allowed to watch the coming and going of those foamy waves, to the sound of a slow waltz, without the disturbance of incident.” It is not so much that the assembled women have voided or avoided washing day, since they are submerged in its sloshing metonymy. Rather, their “sanctuary” is an interval — “some time” — during which they may watch instead of wash: the cinema here is the day’s dilation, rather than a

²⁶ Dorothy Richardson, “Continuous Performance”, *Close Up* 1.1 (July 1927): 34-7.

departure from dailiness altogether. Moviegoing does not supersede or annihilate the day, with all its attendant drudgeries, but stretches and, in stretching, reorganizes it. The day seeps in and out of this temporary interval. As Jenelle Troxell puts it, “The cinema provided the fostering conditions for the mystical experience (a quiet space for contemplation) as well as a means of re-animating the quotidian and could be integrated into the daily routine.”²⁷

Under Richardson’s gaze, the mundane objects of washing day are not forgotten but transformed, set to alternative rhythms and glimpsed from unexpected angles. The cinema both severs the day and belongs to it. It promises “sanctuary” from the city but invariably recycles urban semantics; it holds washing day at bay through its own watery suspensions. If it is “an escape from the everlasting *qui vive*,” then it is an escape into and through rather than out. In the way that it breaks down but belongs to the day, moviegoing provides Richardson a metaphor for the breaks at the heart of her own narrative practice. Both a rest and a tear, her breaks form temporary holes into which the surround incurs, recurs. Think again of Miriam’s mother: *Honeycomb* refuses to resolve her death, to grant it the status of a narrated event. Instead, Richardson transforms this unspeakable suicide into a reservoir that pools and leaks. Not cauterized or closed through narration, it is left unhinged.

When we think of the cinema in similar terms, we can glimpse its extraordinary appeal for Richardson. Instead of reviews of single films, she wrote of her fellow viewers and the experience they shared and, in sharing, created. She found something tender and fragile in this joint endeavor, something that troubled the relentless flow of urban life by belonging to it, in the same way that the “garish” picturehouse “broke” the row of shops of which it was also, of course, a part. And moviegoing — as a periodic, intermittent, ever-unfinished practice —

²⁷ Jenelle Troxell, “Shock and ‘Perfect Contemplation’ : Dorothy Richardson’s Mystical Cinematic Consciousness,” *Modernism/modernity*, 21, no. 1 (January 2014): 53.

affirms the aesthetic principle of recurrence all the more strongly. Moviegoing requires that cinema be not the realization of a formal harmony but a horizon of incompleteness — continually discontinued, fragmented by the very nature of its recurrence, a seemingly eternal performance, always unfinished.

Temporary Homecoming

Zooming in on *The Trap*, it is useful to reiterate that, amidst her other searches, Miriam is straining for a new sense of belonging, one suitable to her family's diminished financial status, her mother's death, her professional and financial instability, and her everchanging living-quarters. The thirteen volumes recount a hunt for permanent housing just as much as they bear witness to Miriam's more "literary" journeys: her spiritual, political, artistic, and intellectual pilgrimages. Nor does the one merely stand in for the other; Richardson's keenly observed spaces are too beloved to be merely symbolic, repositories for the more important (mental; transcendental) search. Setting is never subordinate to narrative; it is always the other way around. Throughout her protracted hunt for housing, then, Miriam requires a modernized concept of temporary home-coming. Her family having lost its fortune, she requires a method of assembly that does not rely on the estate, the gate, or the name of the father. By endlessly iterating this search — while, in *The Trap* and elsewhere, providing profound but fleeting and ultimately untenable refuge — Richardson makes homecoming one of Miriam's most significant pilgrimages.

Published in 1925, *The Trap* tells a story familiar to single women living in London: an awkward, ultimately failed attempt to live with a flatmate. Still resolving her ambiguous

relationship to the London-based Lycurgans (the Fabians through a glass darkly) and accepting her decision not to marry the Russian-Jewish Michael Shatov (the aforementioned Kot through the same glass), Miriam arrives at the flat on “a short by-street paved from side to side [...] an old little street. A scrap of old London standing apart, between the Bloomsbury squares and the maze of streets towards the City.”²⁸ Between Bloomsbury and the “maze of streets” (a uniquely para-literary middleground), Miriam stages her doomed fellowship with Selina Holland. Initially, Miriam finds herself “deep, quite deep, in delight at the prospect of settling down here in intimacy” (406).

The delight fades. To Miriam’s thinking, Miss Holland is the type of the washed-up “chatelaine,” too prim and proud to live with for long. Unfamiliar with Yeats (who happens to be their neighbor across the street: another overdetermined adjacency), Holland is not to be trusted with Henry James: “Miss Holland would get nothing from James. She would read patiently for a while and pronounce him ‘a little tedious.’ ” (411). When Miss Holland apologizes for the rattling of the flat’s windows, Miriam detects “a fresh source of division. [Miriam] loved rattling windows; loved, loved them” (430). Indeed, their tensions often stem from incommensurate attitudes towards the spaces they live in or navigate together; when Miriam takes Miss Holland to a beloved Italian cafe, Donizetti’s, she discovers that Selina “would never expand to the atmosphere. Would always sit as she was doing now, upright and insulated, making formal conversation; decorously busy with the small meal” (427). Eventually, a slight misunderstanding severs their already tenuous relationship: Miss Holland wishes Miriam’s friend Shatov to write a letter in Russian on behalf of some acquaintances, and Miriam fails to act quickly enough. But the narrative pretense (a favor too slowly done) obscures the real conflict of the novel, which is

²⁸ Dorothy Richardson, *Pilgrimage: Vol III* (London: Virago, 1970), 399.

not between two characters so much as it is between two dispositions to the “atmosphere,” to which Miss Holland will “never expand.”

This plot, it must be said, is rather uninteresting. Who cares about this small relationship between Misses Henderson and Holland, which results in very little? And isn't Miriam's stay in this flat relatively insignificant? The importance lies less in the events that are possible and more in the social and psychic states Richardson is able to explore by moving Miriam through various settings. One of the early disappointments in *The Trap* is the apartment's unsuitability for hosting a party – a disappointment that leads Miriam one step closer to a semi-public, always temporarily achieved concept of refuge. Her sitting room is too dark: “The worst is that nothing shone. Nothing reflected light. It suddenly struck her as an odd truth that nothing of Miss Holland's reflected light” (440). Deeming it a “cruelty to ask any one to endure the room for an hour” she concludes that “there would be no tea-parties” (441). Instead, her first foray into the world of hosting takes place in a club, where she experiences a thrill so deep and transporting that it estranges her from herself: “In the perfect moment a light had gone up that showed Miriam a new self and a new world. It was she, not they, who was abroad in a strange land” (454). Her achievement is overshadowed by the implicit protocols (of property and privacy) that regulate good hospitality. The “light [...] gone up” sours into a “disquieting brilliance. For her initiation as a hostess was so slight. To sit thus, irresponsibly dispensing club fare, was the merest hint and shadow of hostess-ship. Yet it had been enough to make the world anew [...] to join for a moment the great army of hostesses as an equal, was proud experience. But it was also a sort of death” (454).

“Enough to make the world anew.” This “sort of death,” like Mrs Ramsay's impulse for hospitable self-annihilation, opens up a unique and startling proximity to new, strange bodies and

ways of being. Not despite but because of its occurrence outside the home, because it so badly imitates the easy gentility of which it is the “merest hint and shadow,” because it is bracketed by shame as surely as it is with “proud experience,” the “slight” initiation moves Miriam closer to a sociality of the stranger. Neither friend nor fellow-lodger, strangers are here figured as “guests without distinction.”

[...] the game is enchanting. And brings, within an immense loneliness, a sort of freedom. That was there distinctly. A sort of enforced freedom. To have nothing oneself. To seek only the being of others regardless of their quality as persons; as guests without distinction brought back the wonder of life renewed. Pitiful and splendid. If these strange large beings taking tea were thieves and murderers, the joy of tending them would be the same. Perhaps greater. It was more thrilling to wait upon Florrie and Mrs Philips, whose lives she shared only imaginatively, then upon Grace, with whom she had a sort of identity (455).

This tepid “sort of identity” – identity confirmed through friendship but “imaginatively” short-circuited by fellowship with near-strangers – is contrasted with Miriam’s earlier sense of hosting as a “sort of death.” The erotics of hospitality bubble in the “thrilling” possibility that one’s guests might be “thieves and murderers,” might indeed be “sort of” responsible for one’s “sort of death.” Miriam finds herself not only in the “light” of a new experience but in the thralls of a fantasy whereby parties produce estrangement rather than intimacy. It is through a deathly giving-over of identity – here understood in relation to peerage, friendship, and “distinction” – that Miriam discovers the “enforced freedom” which comes through ministrations to the essentially anonymous other. Richardson contrasts a “sort of” social life, rooted in knowing and being known by others, with a “sort of” social death, thick with erotics and abnegation, “pitiful and splendid.”

In her film columns, Richardson extends and specifies the problematic of semi-public intimacy that she depicts in Miriam’s first, and failed, act of hosting. Two consecutive columns

titled “There’s No Place like Home” and the “The Increasing Congregation,” from which I quote at the very outset of this chapter, are especially illuminating. As she continued writing with *Close Up* into the winter of 1927, Richardson landed on an essential porosity of the cinemaspace; much like her virtuoso accompanist, “both continuous and flexible,” the picturehouse flickered between meanings depending on what was required of it. In “There’s No Place Like Home” and “The Increasing Congregation,” Richardson alternatively figures the cinema as a house and a church. First, the theater has the almost tactile familiarity of domestic space — an internal architecture so beloved and well-trod that we can navigate it in semi-darkness: “Once through the velvet curtain we are at home and on any but first nights can glide into our sittings without the help of the torch.”²⁹ The moviehouse “feels” like home — it has a plushy somatic quality, and the avid moviegoer can navigate it as adroitly as she would her own bedroom. In “The Increasing Congregation,” Richardson shifts the language to focus on the cinema’s collectivity, extolling its parochial potential with a blend of fervor and irony:

... together in this strange hospice risen overnight, rough and provisional but guerdon none the less of a world in the making. Never before was such all-embracing hospitality save in an ever-open church where kneels madame hastened in to make her duties between a visit to her dressmaker and an assnigation, where the dustman’s wife bustles in with infants and market-basket.

Universal hospitality. See that starveling, lean with loathing, feeding his unknown desperate longings upon selected books, giving his approval to tortoiseshell cats. He creeps in here. Braving the herd he creeps in. His scorn for the film is not more inspiring than the fact of his presence.³⁰

Mundane dailiness seeps into the sacred space of this “ever-open church” – as in her first column, ritual is impregnated by bustle. The ritual relies on, even as it distends, the rhythms of the everyday – much as the medievalism of “guerdon” is absorbed (is “of”) the modern,

²⁹ Dorothy Richardson, “Continuous Performance V: There’s No Place Like Home”, *Close Up* 1.5 (November 1927): 44-7.

³⁰ Dorothy Richardson, “The Increasing Congregation”, *Close Up* 1.6 (December 1927): 61-5.

swift-moving “world in the making.” Evidently, Richardson’s cinema is *most* hospitable to significations: hearth, house, back-alley, pew and prize, this movie-parish leaps from sacred to profane and back again. “Refuge, trysting-place, village pump, stimulant, shelter from rain and cold at less than the price of an evening’s light and fire, drunkenness at less than the price of a drink. Instruction. Peeps behind scenes. Sermons. [...] The only anything and everything. And here we all are, as never before. What will it do with us?”

What indeed? Despite its momentum and brio, the essay is unresolved. The crowd veers from “peeps” to “sermons” in the blink of an eye, flitting between the antipodes of reverent absorption and irreverent distraction. The congregation has not decided whether they are gathered to worship or defile, or indeed whether there is much to distinguish the one from the other. Tranquility threaded with sensation, “refuge” and “tryst” sit seat-to-seat. Richardson’s “universal hospitality” is sincere, but wryly so: is it an ideal attained or an ideal tainted? Her “hospice” remains “strange,” lodged somewhere between a safe haven and a rowdy hall.

This “strange hospice risen overnight” is recursive. Really, it did not rise, once, overnight; it rises, once again, every night of moviegoing. Rather than a hospice built once that endures through its stubborn materiality, the phenomenon which Richardson describes should be understood as an essentially contingent, always emergent refuge. This hospitality, if “universal,” comes swiftly and fleetingly into being. It is hospitality without the home, and therefore without transgression in the classical sense.

“Universal hospitality” is not the cinema’s gift to its audience but its invocation *of* that audience, the difference between *harbor* as noun and verb. For Richardson, the cinema does not usher in moviegoers as honored guests; it interpolates moviegoers as hosts to each other. Welcome rests intermittent but salient in assembly; its intensity is amplified, its duration

described, by the certainty of its revocation. This provisional hospitality is defined as much by the briefly suspended misanthropy of the “starveling, lean with loathing” as it is the voluptuous come-hither of the velvet curtain. It is not a welcome freely and forever given; rather, it is relation asterisked. It is in these terms that I suggest we understand Richardson’s the perilous and uneven event, of the assembly’s coming-into-being.

The Temporary Aesthetics of the Social: Exposure without Film

In her columns, Richardson writes of an audience no less luminous than the pictures themselves. In the same essay where she discerns a “universal hospitality” imminent in the dark, she and her fellow moviegoers move together through a shifting lightscape. “We go. No longer in secret and in taxis and alone, but openly in parties in the car. We emerge, glitter for a moment in the brilliant light of the new flamboyant foyer, and disappear for the evening into the queer faintly indecent gloom” (VI). For Richardson, it is “we” who “glitter” briefly and “we” who queerly and indecently disappear; the vacillation between light and dark, film’s overthought hauntology, is displaced from the screen onto its viewers (literally; think of faces brightly lit through ricochet — faces flooded in an excess of light, light that inevitably targets more than the retina, spilling over to expose the face entire).

Yet it is the “queer faintly indecent gloom” that presides thickest over the moviegoers. Richardson reminds us wryly, “One cannot show off one’s diamonds in the dark [...] to the cinema one may go not only in the old luster but decorated by the scars of any and every sort of conflict. To the local cinema one may go direct, just as one is” (V). What intrigues me here is the insistence that this audience arrives “direct,” untransfigured, heterogeneous. Whether marked by

the “old luster” of the Victorian theatergoer or the more cryptic scarring — factory hands, or veterans? — this audience remains individuated, unassembled until it passes through “the flamboyant foyer.” Together, the gathering obtains a dynamic luminosity to match that of the changing screen. Brightly illuminated before cloaked in darkness, exhibiting stubborn scars next to flashing jewelry — they are there to see and, in seeing, to disappear: but first, and crucially, they are caught. Richardson insinuates that something happens in this collective crossing of this threshold, something cultic and indescribable. The convening, liturgical pulse of “We go;” the lingering question (“And here we all are, as never before. What will it do with us?”) — these obliquely connote a transformative if unknowable occurrence.

I am calling this something-happening “exposure.” I mean to invoke first the simplest sense of the word: the audience is exposed, partially and incompletely, to each other. By attending to the foyer, Richardson sees what Kracauer will not: the “shine” of old luster, the dull gloss of the scar. In attending the spectacle, the witness is witnessed. This doubled viewership is what Djuna Barnes claims, willfully: “Cry I will.” She wishes to be seen as she is, tears shining in her eyes and on her cheeks. By attending to the moments when the lights go *up*, Barnes glimpses and caresses the contours of exposure.

But it is the second, photographic meaning of the word — the interval during which a chemically-saturated surface is exposed to light — with which I wish to linger. More specifically, I am drawing inspiration from Kaja Silverman’s recent revision of the history of photography. As she provocatively argues, “photography isn’t a medium that was invented by three or four men in the 1920s and 1830s [...] it is, rather, the world’s primary way of revealing itself to us — of demonstrating that it exists, and that it will forever exceed us. Photography is also an ontological

calling card: it helps us to see that each of us is a node in a vast constellation of analogies.”³¹ Refusing standard understandings of the photograph as an index, representation, or copy, Silverman lands on the category of *analogy* (a gorgeous turn on the analogue) by which she means “the authorless and untranscendable similarities that structure Being, or what I will be calling “the world,” and that give everything the same ontological weight.”³²

Silverman returns to the “originary” fathers of print photography – Niépce and Daguerre – in order to theorize what she terms the “unstoppable development” of the image. She attends specifically to the ways the photographic image – venerated for its “immobility and permanence” – was in fact “neither immobile nor permanent in the first decades of its history. It emerged slowly, through the gradual accretion of the traces inscribed on a ‘recipient-plate’ by the light emitted by the external world.”³³ The necessarily long exposure time (sometimes the length of an entire day) rendered images that were vibrantly hazy, ambiently lit by a multitude of suns. To Silverman’s thinking, they did not index a moment-in-time cleaved from the day or represent a subject’s view, but offered a more diffuse and supple testimony, “the ‘coming forward’ or ‘presencing’ of the world.”³⁴ This leads her, through Bergson’s notion of the evolutionary body, to the conclusion that “there is [...] no such thing as form; there is only *formation*.”³⁵ The development of photography across the nineteenth century comprised the mastery and compression of this interval of exposure, the whittling away of formation until it yielded form. Indeed, the first *moving* images painstakingly coordinated two briefer-than-brief moments (the moment of photographic capture and the stroboscopic flash of the projector) in technical

³¹ Silverman, Kaja. *The Miracle of Analogy: or the History of Photography, Part 1* (Stanford University Press, 2015), 10-11.

³² Silverman, 11.

³³ *Ibid.*, 39.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 47, emphasis in the original.

harmony; out of two carefully conjoined discontinuities was produced the semblance of continuous motion.

For Richardson, moviegoing returned viewers to an experience of suspended exposure. While they marveled at the genius of an apparatus that could both capture and re-project slivered moments-in-time, the audience themselves recapitulated the more ambient and elastic process of “gradual accretion.” If we return to Richardson’s first column with this insight, we find her “new audience” submerged in an aqueous solution, developing in a darkroom. It is not my intention to propose a facile homology between women and filmstock; indeed the conflation breaks down immediately when we press on it (is the audience exposed to the light or developed in the dark? Of course, in the cinema, it’s both). Rather, I detect in Richardson an urge to detach the formal elements of film *from* film, to return them to the audience. Its vacillating shimmer and shadow are transposed onto the assembled star, which does indeed shine. The result is a suffusion of the assembly with the atmosphere, the one exposed to the other; this exposure marks the moviegoer’s formation.

Exposure is another word for what Miriam in *The Trap* calls “expanding to the atmosphere,” the openmind- and bodiedness she fears Miss Holland can never achieve. In *Revolving Lights*, a novel prior, during a spirited argument with Hypo (Richardson’s fictionalization of H. G. Wells), Miriam asserts that women do not need emancipating. After Hypo’s chiding (“Prove it, Miriam”) she insists that they have achieved emancipation “through their pre-eminence in an art. The art of making atmospheres. It’s as big an art as any other. [...] Not one man in a million is aware of it. It’s like air within the air.”³⁶ While this art’s going blithely unrecognized by men in the millions may certainly undermine Miriam’s argument for liberation, her attention to atmosphere as an aesthetic achievement — to be both treasured and

³⁶ Dorothy Richardson, *Pilgrimage: Vol III* (London: Virago, 1970), 257.

cultivated — is one of *Pilgrimage*'s chief recurring lessons. Thinking atmospherically requires gentle observation of the self in its environment: it demands an exacting knowledge of the borders of one's being, since it is at these edges that we are exposed.

In ending my reading of *The Trap*, I return to Miriam's failed tenure with Miss Holland as a problem of atmosphere: a failure that transpires on the level of setting rather than the more privileged level of plot. All the promise of the apartment, and its attendant intimacy, is nestled in cadences of light. Miriam's first proleptic imaginings of herself at home are movement in and out of brightness: "Up there, on the upper floors of the house that remained so quiet before her claim, were rooms as quiet, her own. Soon she would daily be slipping out into this small brightness, daily coming back to it, turning from strident thoroughfares to enter its sudden peace" (400). Miriam finds "the thing she loved" in this new building: the simple interplay of light on matter that has loyally sustained her throughout her urban wanderings. "Very gently she went down her stairs. In this clear upper light, angles and surfaces declared themselves intimately. The thing she loved was there. Light falling upon the shapes of things, reflected back, moving through the day, a steadfast friend, silent and understanding. She had loved it wherever she was, even in the midst of miseries; and always it had belonged to others. This time it was her own" (403). For Miriam, light is the world's most precious resource, to be contemplated, weighed, and orchestrated; here we might situate her next to Kaja Silverman, for whom photography is the world's means of revealing itself to us, its abundant gift of denotation. Note that the "angles and surfaces declared themselves intimately" to Miriam, coming to meet her where she is. They mediate and register — like photographs of no one's taking. Intimacy and revelation accrue in the exposure.

But the light belongs, of course, not just to Miriam. And where she would arrange her life and her possessions photographically — that they might register, respond, and luminously declare — she finds Miss Holland in stubbornly matted darkness. “The worst was that nothing shone. Nothing reflected light. It suddenly struck her as an odd truth that nothing of Miss Holland’s reflected light. Even the domed wooden cover of the sewing-machine, which was polished and should have shone, was filmed and dull” (440). Miriam and Selena fail to see eye to eye on matters of taste, propriety, and politics — but the greatest threat to their flatmateship is Miss Holland’s resistance to exposure. Unwilling to expand and determined not to risk, Miss Holland’s rigidity thickens, and Miriam increasingly refers to her as a *chatelaine*. This puts Selena in the position of the custodian, managing space and mismanaging light without bending to either. It also separates domestic space all the more starkly from the cafés and clubs where Miriam increasingly spends her time — there, the risks of meeting, perhaps hosting, the other are mirrored by flickering, changeable light. Increasingly, the apartment dwindles, unshining, and Miriam finds herself evicted from the setting long before the novel ends. “The stillness was impermeable. Wrapped within it, the rooms disowned her” (447). Selena and Miriam do not come together in exposure, neither to each other nor to the shifting light which one would contain and the other would savor. Coming two years before Richardson’s writings on film, *The Trap* depicts an audience failing to arrive.

Refuge for Whom?

All throughout I have been focussing on the temporary communities that Richardson finds in the movie theater, and the analogous search for belonging and spiritual communion that

Miriam does in *Pilgrimage*. These moments of temporary refuge are never teleological because they never remain. Instead, the novel is a series of arrivals that fade or turn sour. Nevertheless, one feature that consistently defines these moments (and which Richardson herself seems unable to think through) is the presumed whiteness of the assembly. What is most significant is that Richardson does not ignore Black performers or omit race from her thinking altogether; but instead that when Black people emerge in her writing they are always the spectacular object around which and through which white assemblies congregate and are constituted. I return to a quote I used in my introduction, from Richardson's column "Dialogue in Dixie," in which she, like so many of her peers writing in *Close Up*, largely bemoans the coming of sound. Where she differs however is in the moment of salvation: the potential of sound cinema is discovered in the singing of a Black chorus in the 1929 film *Hearts in Dixie*. "here were the cotton-fields: sambos and mammies at work, piccaninnies at play – film, restored to its senses by music [...] music utterly lovely, that emerged from the screen as naturally as a flower from its stalk: the voices of the cotton-gatherers in song."³⁷ In her language Richardson conflates the chorus with the field. Their music "emerge[s] from the screen as naturally as a flower from its stalk," further consolidating screen with field, singer with cotton bloom. Phantasmatically, Richardson renders film an organic phenomenon which recorded sound has rendered stilted, phony. By insisting on the naturalness of the Black chorus Richardson, finds film "restored" precisely because she deems the Black performers non-human, vegetal, vital enough to cut through the artificiality of recorded sound. Indeed, she finds the song to be "perfectly unintelligible." It is because the song is not, in Richardson's assessment, intelligible speech that "pure film" can return to itself: "rich Negro-laughter, Negro-dancing, of bodies whose disforming western garb could not conceal the

³⁷ Dorothy Richardson, "Dialogue in Dixie," *Close Up* 5.3 (September 1929): 214.

tiger-like flow of muscles. Pure film alternating with the emergence of one after another of the persons of the drama into annihilating speech.” Speech annihilates what Richardson finds lovely.

This moment in her columns is not exceptional. In *Pilgrimage*, Miriam also finds Black performance to be ruining by intelligibility. In *Backwater* (1916) Miriam goes to Brighton to escape her stultifying job as a schoolteacher. There, she and her companions see a minstrel show. As is so often the case, the event is subsumed by the setting. I have highlighted it in the excerpt below to pull it away from the clause that subordinates the performance from its surrounding.

As one opened the door of the large, sparsely furnished breakfast-room it shone for a moment in the light pouring over the table full of seated forms; it haunted the glittering scattered sand round about the *little blank platform where the black and white minstrels stood singing in front of their harmonium*, and poured out across the blaze of blue and gold sea ripples, when the town band played Anitra’s Dance or the moon song from the Mikado [...]³⁸

Marginal as a narrated event, the minstrel performance appears in the next chapter as a leitmotif: literal snatches of “nigger minstrels’ songs” that she and her companions sing to pass the time.

She and Eve and Harriett and Gerald did sometimes hum the refrains of the nigger minstrels’ songs, or one of them would hum a scrap of a solo and all three sing the chorus. Then people were quiet, listening and smiling their evil smiles and Miss Meldrum was delighted. It seemed improper and half-hearted as no one else joined in; but after the first few days the four of them always sang between the courses at dinner. Gerald did not seem to mind the chaffy talk and the vulgar jokes, and would generally join in; and he said strange disturbing things about the boarders, as if he knew all about them. And he and Harriett talked to the niggers too and found out about them. It spoilt them when one knew that they belonged to small London musical halls, and had wives and families and illnesses and trouble (243).

For Miriam, the songs themselves are unobjectionable, allowing the group to cohere and get along. What she finds unacceptable is when Gerald and Harriot speak to the Black performers and ask them questions. “It spoilt them,” says Miriam, to know that these Black musicians are

³⁸ Dorothy Richardson, *Pilgrimage: Vol I* (London: Virago, 1970), 241.

people with lives of their own. Miriam wants the songs to signify something non-human, and they are spoiled by over-intelligibility.

These moments tell us something important about Richardson's vision of temporary refuge and community – whether it's a moviegoing audience or small groups of friends in Brighton. Black performance is routinely an object to be enjoyed and consumed with an almost salvific capacity to rescue a medium – but only so far as Blackness is understood to be natural, organic, non-human, unthreatening. This pulls us, finally, to Richardson's language of universal hospitality, and to the problematic of the universal across this dissertation. As much as she craves a welcoming congregation, she cannot imagine Black people to be anything other than that which gives the congregation its cohesion. Returning, finally, to her language of a “strange hospice risen overnight, rough and provisional but guerdon none the less of a world in the making,” we might well remember that this world is built with the simultaneous fetishization and exclusion of Black folks as its condition of possibility.

Chapter Two: Moviegoing and the Public in Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun*

When she leaves Philadelphia for New York, Angela Murray changes her name to Angèle Mory. By the time she finally arrives in Paris, however, Angela has left the affectedly French name behind. “Angèle,” chosen to conceal Angela’s Black Philadelphian roots, is expunged from the text: it appears for the last time in *Plum Bun*’s second-to-last chapter, just before the name might best suit its setting.

Plum Bun: a Novel without a Moral (1928), Jessie Fauset’s under-read and widely misunderstood *kunstlerroman*, hinges on this name change.¹ “Angèle” grants access to the bohemian, vaguely progressive world of 1920s Greenwich Village; “Angela” hearkens back to the circumstances the young woman is trying to flee: stiff social respectability and institutional racism. “Angèle” is the name of white-passing mobility, art classes at Cooper Union, and trysts with wealthy suitors; “Angela” is the name her sister calls her.² The novel’s significance (the “moral” its full title insists it lacks) risks being blunted by the force of such overt textual gimmickry. *Plum Bun* can be – and has been – read as a bourgeois cautionary tale about a wayward Black woman’s willfulness and eventual rehabilitation. Instead, the novel should be more richly read as an elaborate negotiation between what one owes herself and what she owes her publics – the way some subjects inhabit multiple publics, and the ethical consideration with which they come to pass between them.³ “Angèle/Angela” indexes a pivot point, a multiplicity rather than a duplicity. And *Plum Bun* narrates less a moral education than an ethical evolution;

¹ The edition referenced in this chapter is Jessie Redmon Fauset, *Plum Bun: A Novel without a Moral*, Black Women Writers (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990).

² In a pivotal scene from the novel, Angela is actually terrified that her dark-skinned sister Virginia will call her by name in front of her suitor, who knows her as Angèle. The scene is read at greater length in the fourth section of this chapter.

³ I thank Brent Edwards for helping me to clarify this formulation.

Angela does learn that she has erred in going “over to the other side,” as she puts it (*PB* 92). Rather, she comes to understand that her movement over and back and over again comes with complex, emerging, and changing obligations.

Strangely – well, strangely only at first, as I will demonstrate – Fauset articulates the tension between individual expression and collective entanglement at the cinema. Newly arrived in New York, Angèle finds an unprecedented feeling of ease while regularly attending the movies. “Would these people, she wondered, glancing about her in the soft gloom of the beautiful theatre, begrudge her, if they knew, her cherished freedom and sense of unrestraint?” (*PB* 92). In Manhattan, where she knows no one and no one knows her, she can reinvent herself without fear of recognition. In the flickering dark of the moviehouse – with all, or most, eyes on the screen – she further mitigates the everyday hypervisibility of urban life. The experience titillates her not because the films are good but because they confirm that she is on “the thresh-hold of a career totally different from anything that a [film] scenario writer could envisage.” Watching movies, Angela is in a state of fantasy and activation, delighted by the audacity of her own mobility, the novelty of her “unrestraint.” Crucially, Angela is *amidst*. The ecstasy of her freedom is inseparable from her participation in a collective practice of reverie. A new desire is awakened, the desire to belong to the audience within which she revels. By passage’s end, “she wished she knew some of these pleasant people.”

Fauset’s engagement here is remarkable given her literary context. While Black moviegoing spiked across the first decades of the 20th century, the manner in which Harlem Renaissance writers attended and attended to the cinema was elliptical, ironic, often delayed; an interest in cinema surfaced idiosyncratically, inconsistently, or late. Langston Hughes and Dorothy West famously traveled to Moscow to make a movie, but not until 1932 — thirteen

years after Oscar Micheaux released *The Homesteader* (1919), seventeen years after Griffith's powderkeg *Birth of a Nation* (1915). The Russian movie they set out to make was never made.⁴ Hughes published *Montage of a Dream Deferred* in 1951, taking up the formal and political invitations of montage almost twenty years after meeting Sergei Eisenstein. Nella Larsen reportedly loved Greta Garbo, but dampens any references to cinema or moviegoing in her fiction.⁵ Zora Neale Hurston made her own ethnographic documentaries, but in isolation from her colleagues and with such indifference towards contemporary editing conventions she seems to have seen either every movie or none at all. Jessie Redmon Fauset, on the other hand, renders moviegoing a phenomenon not only of passing interest, as it were. Instead, moviegoing is narratologically and symbolically pivotal to *Plum Bun*.

Of the writers mentioned thus far, Fauset is least read by academic and non-academic readers alike. Yet, while peripheral to the established modernist canon, Fauset was one of the most important figures within the Harlem Renaissance. As literary editor of the *Crisis* from 1919-1926, she published poems by Claude McKay and Langston Hughes, earning the dubious moniker of “midwife” to the Harlem Renaissance.⁶ Despite her central role in forming a literary community in and through the *Crisis*, Fauset still suffers from neglect. McKay, whose poems Fauset enthusiastically published, thought her “prim and dainty as a primrose” and found her novels “quite as fastidious and precious. Primroses are pretty.”⁷ Cheryl Wall's characterization of Fauset in *Women of the Harlem Renaissance* tempers this “prim” public image by narrating

⁴ See especially Louise Thompson, “The Soviet Film,” *The Crisis*, 40.2 (February 1933): 37, 46 and Langston Hughes “Going South in Russia,” *The Crisis* 41.6 (June 1934): 162-63.

⁵ George Hutchinson, *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2006), 445.

⁶ Langston Hughes retrospectively suggests that Fauset, along with Charles Johnson and Alain Locke, “midwifed the so-called New Negro literature into being.” *The Big Sea: An Autobiography*, Liberation Classics (London: Pluto, 1986), 218.

⁷ Hiroko Sato, “Under the Harlem Shadow: A Study of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen” in Cary D. Wintz, ed., *The Harlem Renaissance, 1920-1940* (New York: Garland Pub, 1996), 266.

moments of incredible audacity, editorial and otherwise. Pointing out that Fauset was one of very few Black American women to visit Algiers and to venture into the casbah, Wall writes, “Frequently drawn to new territory, in art as in life, [Fauset] was occasionally brave enough to enter it. But she was unlikely to remain once she realized where she was. The potential risk was too great, as much to the image she reflected as a proper Negro woman as to herself.”⁸ Following Wall, I read Fauset’s treatment of moviegoing as one such venture into unexpected territory, a sojourn into the public world of anonymous intimacy.

To this point, *Plum Bun* is one of only a few literary works that imagines the promises, thrills, and dangers of cinema for Black moviegoers of the 1920s in relation to the promises, thrills, and dangers of urban mobility, particularly for Black women. While Claude McKay includes scenes of moviegoing in *Home to Harlem* (1928) and a ruthless commentary on Marseillaise pornography in *Banjo* (1929), with McKay the depiction is more heavily ironized. Fauset’s engagement, if more sincere than McKay’s, is also marked by the same interest in moviegoing rather than movies. Fauset’s attention never falls on the films one might see at the cinema. Rather, she hones in on the curious practices of attendance. Provocatively, Fauset forges a tight but complex relationship between moviegoing and passing. The one is done while doing the other, yes; but in certain moments of cinematic reverie, the act of moviegoing briefly slips into a more metonymically weighted status, standing in for the slew of risks and ambitions that percolate the passing plot.

The intensity of Fauset’s engagement with cinema is unique; to label her an exception to the rule, however, further obscures the subtle interplay between visual and literary cultures in the

⁸ Cheryl A. Wall, *Women of the Harlem Renaissance*, Women of Letters (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 34. Wall continues: “how many other American women of her generation had even the desire to traverse the Kasbah? How many fewer still could have found the means to make the journey?” (35). Wall’s reassessment of Fauset focuses principally on her editing at the *Crisis*, admitting that “in [her] viewer Fauset achieved more distinction as a journalist and essayist” than as a novelist (48).

discourses and practices of 1920s Black Americans. This interplay can be difficult to locate, particularly given the ideological friction separating, say, Oscar Micheaux from W. E. B. DuBois and Alain Locke.⁹ Jane Gaines has argued that any attempts to “attach race movies to the Harlem Renaissance” would be “an historical error since the Harlem elite virtually ignored these popular films and wrote them off as having nothing to do with art.”¹⁰ Gaines insists on the “high / low distinction” governing the era, arguing that the distinction is necessary “to explain the broad ballyhoo and brouhaha, the hype and the hucksterism that defined American movie culture in the teens and twenties.”¹¹ Cherene Sherrard-Johnson adopts a more expansive approach, one attentive to the high-low proximities made possible through remediation: “to exclude the midwestern-born Micheaux from the Harlem Renaissance is to reaffirm the fixity of the geographic, chronological, ideological boundaries of Black artistic expression.”¹² Sherrard-Johnson observes that Micheaux, in addition to adapting his own novels for the screen, draws on Charles Chesnutt and Pauline Hopkins, engaging and remediating a Black literary inheritance.¹³

When Hurston, Hughes, McKay, and Fauset in turn mined and reanimated the movies, they proceeded with understandable caution. Their reluctance to endorse Micheaux indicates, I would venture, less artistic snobbishness than political skepticism – a presentiment of cinema’s power to arrest, transfix, and harm. The channels grooved between Black filmmaking, Black moviegoing, and Black literary production of the 1920s are understandably faint, indices of

⁹ See Charles Musser, “To Redream the Dreams of White Playwrights: Reappropriation and Resistance in Oscar Micheaux’s *Body and Soul*” in *Oscar Micheaux and his Circle*, ed. Pearl Bowser, Jane Gaines, and Charles Musser (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2001), 128.

¹⁰ Jane Gaines, *Fire and Desire: Mixed-Race Movies in the Silent Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Cherene Sherrard-Johnson, *Portraits of the New Negro Woman: Visual and Literary Culture in the Harlem Renaissance* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 83.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 85

hesitant and infrequent visitation. Even when Fauset, juxtaposing Angela Murray's moviegoing with her painting, implicitly probes the aesthetic dimensions and capacities of cinema, she does so by examining the aesthetics of assembly – crowds and currents – rather than montage, composition, or pictorial depth. Fauset's approach to the shared spaces and conditions of cinema illuminates similar strategies in contemporaneous Black writing.

Fauset's interest in cinema begins at the *Crisis*; her interest, in turn, exposes the cinematic discourse operating in the *Crisis* we might otherwise overlook. Fauset was actually the first to introduce the word "cinema" to the *Crisis*, in a 1922 review of René Maran's novel *Batouala*, praising the novel's "cinema-like sharpness."¹⁴ But her interest in cinema predates the review: in 1920 Fauset published her 'novelette' *The Sleeper Wakes* across two issues of the *Crisis*. It is in *The Sleeper Wakes* that Fauset first symbolically conjoins moviegoing and white-passing. Amy Boldin, the protagonist of *The Sleeper Wakes*, runs away from home into a doomed passing plot after seeing a particularly thrilling melodrama. When Amy recounts the film in question to her adopted caretaker, Fauset's technique is an out-of-breath prolepsis, since Amy's recap is in miniature the very plot she will soon undergo: "oh, Mrs. Boldin, it was the most wonderful picture a girl such a pretty one and she was poor, awfully. And somehow she met the most wonderful people and they were so kind to her. And she married a man who was just tremendously rich and he gave her everything."¹⁵ Here, domestic ideology triumphs in an explicit cautionary tale, but this is not where Fauset's thinking ends.

¹⁴ Jessie Fauset, "No End of Books," *The Crisis* 23.5 (March 1922), 208. Fauset's review of *Batouala* points to something more nuanced than literary midwifery: the forging of internationalist and comparative literary cultures. For an argument for Fauset's internationalism, see Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003). I will return to the question of Fauset's internationalism – and *Plum Bun*'s culmination in France – in the conclusion of this chapter.

¹⁵ Jessie Fauset, "The Sleeper Wakes: a Novelette," in *"Girl, Colored" and Other Stories: a Complete Short Fiction Anthology of African American Women Writers in The Crisis Magazine, 1910-2010*, ed. Juith Musser (McFarland & Company, 2011), 91-107, 93.

Fauset's most extended and sophisticated engagement with cinema is *Plum Bun*. Published after Fauset's tenure as literary critic had ended, the novel follows Angela Murray as she leaves her constrictive middle class life in Philadelphia to pursue a painting career in New York City. Like most of Fauset's protagonists, Angela is a light-skinned Black woman seeking opportunity and personal expression beyond the social constraints imposed upon her. Like Amy, Angela is stirred at the cinema; shortly after arriving in New York, before making any new friends or taking any art classes, she spends an extended period of time simply going to the movies. For days on end, she sinks into a "sense of unrestraint" only recently made possible to her. As a white-passing Black woman in the late 1920s, Angela is a unique spectator. She can attend the "all-Negro" theaters along 135th street if she wishes, but she opts instead for the ones downtown. Fauset leaves ambiguous whether these specific theaters have balconies, where Black moviegoers would congregate in the *de facto* segregated cinemas of the Jim Crow northeast. Regardless, Angela sits with white viewers, inches from those who might oust her if they could. "Would these people, she wondered, glancing about her in the soft gloom of the beautiful theatre, begrudge her, if they knew, her cherished freedom and sense of unrestraint?" The dangers of exposure, the ethics of assembly, and the possibilities of a new life swirl together in the dark.

While Fauset singles out moviegoing as a significant feature of Angela's first weeks in New York City, she never names a single film, director, or star. Angela sees movie after movie, but Fauset does not gloss any specific plots, as she had in *The Sleeper Wakes*. This seeming indifference to film(s) *per se* sets Fauset apart from many modernist writers, including her more famous colleagues. Years before Langston Hughes published *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, Fauset was contemplating cinema, its imaginative resources, aesthetic qualities, and potential dangers. Unlike Zora Neale Hurston, whose dazzlingly unconventional documentaries defy

categorization, Fauset never turned to filmmaking. For her, cinema's significance lay in practices of attendance rather than film form, milieu rather than medium. She gravitated towards the social dimensions of moviegoing rather than the formal dimensions of film, seemingly sidestepping that modernist shibboleth called *medium*. But *Plum Bun* is one of very few literary works that imagine the promises and dangers of cinema for Black moviegoers of the 1920s in relation to the promises and dangers of urban mobility and public life, particularly for Black women.¹⁶ Fauset notes the drift into anonymous public being, the queer and short-lived fellowship between strangers, the crackle of possibility that gathers in a gathering. Fauset is an underappreciated theorist of Black American contact with cinema, but only by taking moviegoing seriously (as she did) can we see her as such.

Moviegoing allows Fauset to situate a character's psyche along the jagged line where individual and collective experiences converge. Since Angela is white-passing, she can move between different spaces and modes of spectatorship, testing herself within and against different audiences. She could watch from the balcony or the ground floor, could attend the theaters along 135th but chooses the ones downtown; her spectatorship constitutes, then, a choice of public. Fauset sends Angela to the movies to dramatize this choice, depicting how her private desires are intimately connected to the publics she navigates.

There was a theatre [...] just at the edge of the Village, which she came to frequent, not so much for the sake of the plays,¹⁷ which were the same as elsewhere, as for the sake of the audience, a *curiously intimate* sort of audience made of numerous still more intimate groups. Their members seemed both purposeful and leisurely (93, emphasis mine).

Here, Angela is chasing audiences rather than films, trading the specificities of film-text (the photoplays are "the same as elsewhere") for the textures of collective practice. In viewing, her

¹⁶ Here, I find it instructive to compare Fauset with Nella Larsen, who idolized Greta Garbo but never describes moviegoing in her fiction.

¹⁷ The reference here is to 'photo-plays.' For the passage quoted in its entirety, look to p. 112-3.

interiority touches on, weighs itself against the bodies and imagined minds of her fellow viewers. She yearns incorporation into this intimate assembly, but a distance remains; neither entirely alone nor entirely integrated at the West Village cinema, Angela vibrates at a threshold between inner knowledge and outer appearance. She briefly contemplates a rash disclosure:

If she were to say to this next woman for instance, ‘I’m coloured,’ would she show the occasional dog-in-the-manger attitude of certain white Americans and refuse to sit by her or make a complaint to the usher?

Fauset leaves the question unanswered, as Angela chooses anonymity and solitude. Within this congregation, intimately gathered, she is alone.

When she came here her loneliness palled on her, however. All unaware her face took on the wistfulness of the men gazing in the music store. She wished she knew some of these pleasant people.

Several desires intersect in Angela’s wistful, roving gaze: the desire to go unnoticed, the countervailing desire to be found out, the desire to be one of these “pleasant people” or at least to know them; be known by them; to know them without being known by them.

“Curiously intimate,” the phrase Angela uses to describe the West Village audience, names more than the friendliness of small cliques within the crowd. It names Angela’s desire to find herself not just *with* an audience but *of* an audience. Further, it names a sociality peculiar to cinema, since weeping, laughing, and gasping with a group of strangers and near-strangers is undoubtedly intimate but curiously so: at once immersive and fleeting, finite and open-ended, intense and anonymous. Fauset uses these features of moviegoing to distill the complexity of Angela’s desire. Wanting both secrecy and intimacy, self-determination and social acceptance, Angela’s viewership is similarly ambivalent, sliding off the screen and landing on her neighbors. As Roland Barthes would have it, Fauset replaces a “relation” between viewing subject and image with a “situation,” an entangled encounter that incorporates the self, screen, and surround.

Writing forty years later on the other side of the Atlantic, Barthes describes quite accurately the phenomenology of Angela's moviegoing:

[...] as if I had two bodies at the same time: a narcissistic body which gazes, lost, into the engulfing mirror, and a perverse body, ready to fetishize not the image but precisely what exceeds it: the texture of the sound, the hall, the darkness, the obscure mass of the other bodies, the rays of light, entering the theater, leaving the hall; in short, in order to distance, in order to "take off," I complicate a "relation" by a "situation." What I use to distance myself from the image – that, ultimately, is what fascinates me: I am hypnotized by a distance; and this distance is not critical (intellectual); it is, one might say, an amorous distance.¹⁸

It is Angela's proximity to strangers who might ignore, befriend, or betray her that renders her "situation" so fertile, fraught, and thrilling. Her double-bodiedness is sharper than Barthes' is. She boldly but cautiously seeks social "situation" – to be incorporated rather than merely adjacent – but the stakes are rather high. What Barthes calls an "amorous distance" is, for Angela, quite tenuous. She must manage not only the distance between herself and the image, but that between herself and her neighbors. Remaining absorbed in the "engulfing mirror" of the screen would mean never knowing "these pleasant people" around her; but in getting too close to them, she risks discovering them dangerously unpleasant.

Through Angela's reveries, Fauset provocatively and counterintuitively amplifies the resonances between moviegoing and white-passing, making moviegoing stand in for the slew of risks, ambitions, and desires that percolate the passing plot. Moviegoing becomes a narrative metonym: yes, it is a thing done in passing, while passing, but because Angela's moviegoing organizes and intensifies a set of desires related to femininity, visibility, whiteness, and belonging, it also stands in *for* passing. Self-presentation and public being, anonymous assembly, fleeting or impossible intimacies: these are the 'cinematic' phenomena Fauset singles out for

¹⁸ Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1989), 349.

consideration. These same phenomena are central to *Plum Bun's* passing plot, as Angela leverages anonymity and self-presentation to foster relationships (maybe fleeting, maybe impossible) with new friends and lovers. What is curious and specific about moviegoing, too, is that it is something done in the dark – a moment when Angela can consider and evaluate her relationship to different social bodies while slipping away from others' scrutiny that would corroborate or deny her. As I said above, Angela can move *between* different spaces and modes of spectatorship, testing herself within and against different audiences: moviegoing is therefore not entirely overdetermined by passing, but rather a fertile zone of multiplicity where the possible paths Angela can take – into different affiliative relations and ways of being – are not so much foreclosed as they are considered.

For these reasons, Angela's desire to belong to an audience is not trivial or incidental. Instead, it teaches us a new way to read *Plum Bun* beyond the individualistic, bourgeois frameworks that have accrued to Fauset. As Hazel Carby has argued in *Reconstructing Womanhood*, Fauset has an overriding narrative conservatism, a "middle-class code of morality and behavior that structured the existence of her characters and worked as a code of appropriate social behavior for her readers."¹⁹ Problematically, Angela's passing is written as an extended mistake; it is not linked to survival or material exigency, coded instead as willful and selfish. Despite the novel's titular moral-lessness, Angela undergoes an unmistakable moral development, reclaiming both her Blackness and the sister she had abandoned. But I argue that this reclamation is rather more nuanced than the mere 'correction' of a wayward woman. When, in the novel's final pages, Angela declares that "so far as sides are concerned, I am on the coloured side," she is making a choice of public belonging more than one of individual identity

¹⁹ Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 167.

(373). Angela chooses not only between a white lover and a Black one, between artistic expression and filial devotion, her self and her sister, but between different forms of assembly and modes of public being. Angela's desire to belong to an audience deepens the critical capacities of the passing plot, elaborating the segregated worlds she navigates and sharpening the ethical intelligence with which she comes to navigate those worlds. As Carby puts it, "the mulatto [...] is most usefully regarded as a convention of Afro-American literature which enables the exploration in fiction of relations which were socially prescribed."²⁰ In *Plum Bun*, Angela passes between different publics whose contiguity is highly policed; her achievement by novel's end is learning to do so without guile.

Despite its narrative drives towards marriage and familial reconciliation, *Plum Bun* is obsessed with public, "curiously intimate" forms of assembly: audiences, coteries and crowds, colleagues and acquaintances, new and fragile friendships, the microsociology of passersby. There is a politics to these encounters distinct from respectability or individualism, a recurring curiosity about public formations and one's place within them. Because *Plum Bun*'s primary plot navigates shifting relationships between sisters, suitors, and lovers, we might mistakenly assume Fauset's depictions of public life are mere thickness, scenography or reality-effect. But I think this is a misreading of Fauset, whose reputation as a portraitist of the Black bourgeoisie occludes her interest in minor forms of relation: our ethical obligations to people we do not know very well or like very much. We miss this political and ethical complexity if we look only at the level of narrative. Beyond the family and marriage plots, an entirely different drama unfolds, that of public entanglement and public belonging. Minor relations flourish between strangers, near-strangers, colleagues, and acquaintances. Angela's moviegoing, though seemingly inconsequential, signals the importance of public belonging and minor relation throughout *Plum*

²⁰ Carby, 49.

Bun. The movie theater is an exemplary site of Angela's ambivalence. On the one hand, her West Village moviegoing represents her rejection of a Black public defined by and within contested space; on the other, it dramatizes her keen desire for specifically public, "curiously intimate" forms of belonging. I argue that *Plum Bun*'s political spark catches in the resolution of this ambivalence, at the moment when Angela reclaims a Black public.

"They enjoyed the exhibition" : Fauset in the context of 1920s Black moviegoing

In the first decades of the twentieth century, Black audiences developed elaborate cinematic practices and literacies, flocking to theaters in Harlem, Chicago, Philadelphia, and across the country. When there weren't theaters, they went to churches, where traveling projectionists screened films from the town over or the season prior. Black moviegoers faced ushers who moved them from their seats, ticket vendors who would not admit them; sometimes, violent mobs of white men rioted in or near the theaters. Moviegoing was a gamble. Incrementally, in northern cities, black viewers could attend "all-Negro" theaters; in other regions, they were pushed to the balconies. Sometimes they could insist, resist, or sue; usually they could not. As black independent filmmakers such as Micheaux, William Foster, and Noble Johnson began making movies in the late 1910s, Black viewers began seeing themselves represented on the screen as ingenues, detectives, homesteaders, sophisticates, gamblers, and war veterans.

It is not only with respect to other literary figures that we ought to contextualize Fauset's movie-mindedness. To understand her extended scenes of moviegoing, we must see her mediating different cultural dimensions specific to her time: the cinematic discourse peculiar to

The Crisis, where Fauset was literary editor for seven years; the ritualized phenomenon of Black moviegoing in New York City and Philadelphia, central cities in *Plum Bun* and in Fauset's geographic imaginary more generally; and finally, the corrosive promise of universality that cinema simultaneously offers and withholds — images universally distributed, universally received — a promise which quickly evaporates in the segregated theater. This section, therefore, situates Fauset in relationship to historical scholarship regarding early Black moviegoing; the moviegoing discourse in the *Crisis*; and Claude McKay's depictions of moviegoing, contemporary to Fauset's, which demonstrate both to be writers committed to an aesthetics of assembly. In both *Home to Harlem* and the "Blue Cinema" chapter of *Banjo*, McKay examines the particularities of attendance and spectatorship. This shared interest complicates received wisdom about McKay and Fauset, namely that McKay's novels explore public, alternative, and international community whereas Fauset's stay mired in bourgeois domesticity.

Everyone went to the movies, something that makes moviegoing a complexly ecumenical concept. Writers from immensely different regional, racial, and linguistic contexts were moviegoers, together and apart; this shared horizon of experience can open new methods of cross-canonical comparison. At the same time, however, moviegoing's real conceptual energy stems from a striking contradiction: whereas the mass-distributed moving image held an ecumenical charge, the promise — even the premise — of shared experience, moviegoing was structured by difference. With its unprecedented reproducibility and global reach, film inspired dreams of a new universality, with figures as disparate as H. G. Wells, Germaine Dulac, and Dziga Vertov finding utopian, transnational potential in silent cinema. In a different register, film scholar Miriam Hansen considers cinema's internationalism a kind of "Vernacular Modernism,"

with cinema offering “the single most inclusive cultural horizon in which the traumatic effects of modernity were reflected, rejected or disavowed, transmuted or negotiated.”²¹

However, any pretense of a unitary image or a unifying address quickly crumbles from the vantage of a racially segregated balcony. Despite cinema’s unprecedented reach and formal homogeneity, Black folks’ experiences of moviegoing were radically unlike those of white viewers. To confront this problem, film historian Jacqueline Stewart coins the term “reconstructive spectatorship” to theorize “the range of ways in which Black viewers attempted to reconstitute and assert themselves in relation to the cinema’s racist social and textual operations.” Stewart “read[s] Black spectatorship as the creation of literal and symbolic spaces in which African Americans reconstructed [...] identities in response to the cinema’s moves toward classical narrative integration, and in the wake of migration’s fragmenting effects.”²² Moving beyond the enthralled, subsumed, or in/credulous viewer, Stewart’s model of “reconstructive spectatorship” is partial and intermittent, situated and highly reflexive: a spectatorship that sees itself seeing. This situated-ness is crucial to what Stewart calls the “public dimension” of moviegoing, one that “persisted for Black viewers, complicating the presumed pleasures (and limitations) of classical absorption and distraction for the ‘ideal’ spectator.”²³ Vitaly concerned with moviegoing as a constitutively public experience, Stewart calls for a movement “beyond an

²¹ Miriam Batu Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism." *Modernism/modernity* 6, no. 2 (1999): 59-77. In this watershed essay, Hansen argues that cinema provided a shared “horizon of experience” under which massive populations across the globe negotiated, tested, and understood modernity. Her sense of cinema’s unprecedented capacity for mass-address modifies and deromanticizes the utopian strain in early-20th century thinking on silent cinema.

²² Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 94.

²³ Stewart, 94.

emphasis on the individual, the textual, and the psychic to include a consideration of the collective, the contextual, and the physical” elements at play when Black viewers gathered.²⁴

Not only did Black communities develop distinctive and oppositional practices of spectatorship and cinephilia; they did so *early*. The first documented exhibition of moving images for a Black audience occurred in 1897, less than two years after the so-called birth of cinema.²⁵ Focusing on churches and other alternative “theaters” throughout the south and midwest, Cara Caddoo makes the provocative claim that Black audiences had robust motion-picture literacy prior to the arrival of “all-Negro” theaters in the 1920s: “By the time colored theater districts had sprung up across the industrial North, African Americans had already spent more than a decade at the cinema [...] They had watched the moving pictures on Sunday afternoons at their churches, during fundraisers at the local Masonic lodge, and from the cramped balcony seats of the segregated venue. The more recently opened colored theater presented even more filmgoing options.”²⁶ Caddoo further argues that, “through their interactions with the motion pictures, Black Americans forged a collective culture of freedom.”²⁷ To return to Hansen's “inclusive cultural horizon,” then, we should understand it to be a contested and complex zone of engagement, dis/identification, and dialogue; its inclusivity is forever negotiated, never arriving and always at stake. Moviegoing, in naming the mode rather than the medium of cinema, is conceptually powerful because it can (indeed, it *must*) hold these tensions between inclusion and exclusion, collection and dispersal, homogeneity and difference. To think through moviegoing is to acknowledge the possibilities inhering within a group of intimately

²⁴ Ibid., 101.

²⁵ Caddoo, *Envisioning Freedom: Cinema and the Building of Modern Black Life* (Cambridge, Massachusetts ; London, England: Harvard University Press, 2014), 15.

²⁶ Caddoo, *Envisioning Freedom*, 98.

²⁷ Ibid., 44.

assembled strangers while attending to the structures of power that organize and constrain their assembly.

In the midst of this expansion of Black moviegoing, writers like the *New York Age*'s Lester Walton (whom Anna Everett calls "African America's first major mass-culture griot") or the *Chicago Defender*'s Sylvester Russell took up questions of representational politics and sociological impact.²⁸ Movie reviews and commentary gained a foothold in newspapers like the *Defender*, the *Baltimore Afro-American Ledger*, and the *Iowa State Bystander* (which started protesting dramatic adaptations of Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman* in 1906, some years before D. W. Griffith's more infamous film adaptation in 1915).²⁹ In contrast to the recurring film columns and film reviews that emerged in Black newspapers, periodicals like the *Crisis* engaged cinema less frequently, and arguably less directly. There are no film reviews in *The Crisis* until the early 1930s. In the 1920s, during the moment of his greatest success, Oscar Micheaux seems not to exist; Noble Johnson shows up only in the ad section, where his production studio – Lincoln Film Corporation – is advertised for sale. The word "film" does not appear in the first five years' worth of issues – that is, until 1915, when *Birth of a Nation* drew black audiences into the first mass protest of a movie, a protest with which the *Crisis* was centrally involved.

But this should not suggest an indifference to cinema within the pages of the *Crisis*; rather, we must ask more properly in what way the *Crisis* was engaging cinema. Indeed, the periodical in its very earliest years provided a model for understanding moviegoing without movies. While Fauset's use of the word "cinema" is exceptional, thinking about cinema in the *Crisis* is not, but attention falls on conditions of exhibition, less on feature films or film aesthetics than the cinema's embeddedness in Black public life. From its very first issue, the

²⁸ Anna Everett, *Returning the Gaze: A Genealogy of Black Film Criticism, 1909-1949* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001), 18.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 60.

Crisis referenced cinema in the long-running feature “Along the Color Line” under various, often contradictory subcategories. The very first issue of the magazine places movies under the subheading Art: “Denver is planning a theatre for colored people. One is in operation in Washington, D. C. There are scores of moving-picture shows opened recently for colored patronage in the border states.”³⁰ In the sixth issue, under the subheading Crime: “About 1,000 men and boys, mostly boys, mobbed the Negroes who were abroad in the business districts of Fort Worth the other night. [...] The riot was precipitated by efforts of white men to operate a moving-picture show exclusively for Negroes [...] the Negro ticket taker remained at his post until half a brick was sent flying through the window. Other missiles followed the first, and in a minute the interior of the movie-picture show house was in darkness.”³¹ January 1912, this time under Courts: “Dr. W . Ross, of Denver, Col., brought suit against a theatre for refusing to sell him orchestra seats [...] his wife was ordered to the rear in a moving-picture theatre.”³² Months later, April 1912, under The Ghetto: “In Montgomery, Ala., a white man was about to open a moving-picture show for colored people, but was forbidden to by the city authorities on the ground that it was on one of the main streets.”³³ October 1913, now under Uplift: “The Afro-American Film Company has been incorporated under the laws of New York State and financed by the Negro Business Men's League of Philadelphia. The purpose of this company will be to give educational films especially applicable to Negroes.”³⁴

Art, crime, courts, uplift, the ghetto. Despite the categorical diversity, what we see here is a thinking-through: placing and testing cinema within, variously, the realms of art, law, policing, and urban space. But less fancifully, cinema’s emergence in different editorial ‘locations’ tells us

³⁰ “Along the Color Line,” *The Crisis* 1.1 (November 1910), 6.

³¹ “Along the Color Line,” *The Crisis* 1.6 (April 1911), 11.

³² “Along the Color Line,” *The Crisis* 3.3 (January 1912), 100.

³³ “Along the Color Line,” *The Crisis* 3.6 (April 1912), 228.

³⁴ “Along the Color Line,” *The Crisis* 6.6 (October 1913), 268.

something both simpler and more important: no matter where it was placed, cinema was embedded in public life. Cinema's categorical itinerancy in *The Crisis* reflects its social reach; stories of exhibition appear alongside advertisements, political victories and defeats, legal perils, and strategies of the everyday. This editorial adjacency reflects cinema's embeddedness in social practice, conceived principally in its relationship to spaces of collective black flourishing. The contexts of moviegoing — theaters, seating, owners, financiers — solicited more interest in the pages of *The Crisis* than did the films one could see. This subordination of text to context, of movies to moviegoing, defines cinema through its public and collective ethos: scenes of violence, methods of oppression, and strategies of resistance take on an ontological heaviness. The orientation to the sites and exigencies of exhibition suggests something unfamiliar to 21st-century viewers: the idea that the conditions of moviegoing were cinema's conditions of being.

When we consider the space of the theater, the notion of reconstructive spectatorship, and the performative/public dimension of cinema for Black viewers, a writer like Claude McKay — whose approach to cinema would otherwise seem entirely embattled and dismissive — acquires new nuances, new depths of engagement. I turn to McKay both because of the literary relationship he and Fauset shared — she was the first to publish his poems in the *Crisis* — and because there is a critical tendency to contrast McKay's vagabondism with Fauset's narrow middle-classness. As I alluded to above, McKay himself described Fauset as “prim and dainty as a primrose.” McKay has come to figure non-normative forms of black social life — as in Brent Edwards' formulation of the “band” in *Banjo*³⁵ — while Fauset has become a representative for the “primrose” politics of the black bourgeoisie. Yet in bringing both writers alongside each

³⁵Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003), 219.

other, one notices they think about cinema in strikingly similar ways, fixating on exhibition contexts, audience experience, and the possibilities of assembly. In both *Home to Harlem* (1928) and *Banjo* (1929), McKay references the movies, and the satirical bite of these episodes does not detract from their investigative energy. In *Home to Harlem*, moviegoing is a cadence in the movement of a love affair, emerging as if in extension of coitus.

They wove an atmosphere of dreams around them and were lost in it for a week [...] They went to the Negro Picture Theater and held each other's hand, gazing in raptures at the crude pictures. It was odd that all these cinematic pictures about the Blacks were a broad burlesque of their home and love life. These colored screen actors were all dressed up in expensive evening clothes, with automobiles, and menials, to imitate white society people. They laughed at themselves in such rôles and the laughter was good on the screen. They pranced and grinned like good-nigger servants, who know that "mas'r" and "missus," intent on being amused, are watching their antics from an upper window. It was quite a little funny and the audience enjoyed it. Maybe that was the stuff the Black Belt wanted.

The film itself is bad. From "crude" and "burlesque" down to the very last "maybe," it is excoriated. The only "good" thing described on the screen is laughter, but McKay likens the comedy to the "antics" produced by the plantation's grotesque scopic regime, where performance style is wrought through subjection and surveillance. The simile, pushed to its most disturbing conclusion, brings the Black audience into the position of mastery, looking down at the screen as "from an upper window."

McKay continues puzzling out this problem of vantage in the following chapter, which opens with another trip to the movies: "After dinner they subwaged down to Broadway. They bought tickets for the nigger heaven of a theater, where they watched high-class people make luxurious love on the screen. They enjoyed the exhibition. There is no better angle from which one can look down on a motion picture than that of the nigger heaven." From one chapter's end to the subsequent chapter's beginning, McKay achieves a salient shift in place and subject. The

narrator turns his attention, as if between chapters, from the problematics of representation to the problematics of exhibition. The contrast is marked by smaller shifts: from plural (“all these cinematic pictures”) to singular (“the exhibition”); from a “Negro Picture Theater” in Harlem to an explicitly segregated theater downtown. Whereas in Harlem the couple watches the film(s) from the vantage-point of an entirely Black audience, when going downtown they must sit in “nigger heaven” – by 1928 a famously fraught term designating (across various registers of affection, affectation, derision and malice) a church balcony, the “colored” section of a segregated movie theater, Harlem itself, or all of these at once. One final shift obscures as much as it reveals: from “colored screen actors [...] all dressed up” in the Harlem theater to “high-class people mak[ing] luxurious love” in the theater downtown. That these “high-class people” are white is implied but not exactly given; rather, if it is given, we “get” it through the exhibition context rather than the elaborately un-described film-text.

The narrator turns, then, from the content of race films to the context of the segregated theater, scoping out both from the simultaneously ironized and idealized vantage of “nigger heaven,” from which “there is no better angle [...] one can look down on a motion picture.” McKay is certainly “looking down” on film and on race films in particular. His distaste for “imitation” and “broad burlesque” are barbs directed at Micheaux’s melodramas. This derision comes through even more strongly in the leadup to the “blue” cinema:

“Oh, I’d like to see the thing, all right,” replied the young man, “but—are there colored or white persons in the picture?”

“White, I suppose. The colored people are not as advanced and inventive as we in such matters. Excepting what we teach them,” the leader added, facetiously; “they often beat us at our game when they learn.”³⁶

³⁶ Claude McKay, *Banjo* (New York: Harper, 1929), 213.

Here, McKay is commenting, through several layers of indirection, on the same imitations – the same “antics” – that he’d found so reminiscent of the plantation in *Home to Harlem*. Several transpositions soften (or sharpen) the sting: melodrama is translated into pornography, transported to Marseilles. The deeply political matters of casting, ownership, address, and exhibition are similarly transposed, and trivialized, in this conversation between tone-deaf would-be cosmopolitan American tourists.

The “facetiously” rendered accusation of bad imitation anticipates what Jane Gaines calls a “semiotics of substitution,” a quality she celebrates in the all-Black remakes of the late 1920s. For Gaines, these remakes – like the 1926 temperance melodrama *Ten Nights in a Barroom*, an adaptation by the Colored Players of Philadelphia of a film made five years prior – were phenomena more fascinating than ‘mere’ imitations; they not only ornamented but *modulated* the original. “... Black casting transformed Hollywood formula films, producing more than an exchange of this or that element [...] It might even be useful to think of race movies as written in another key, perhaps a minor key inasmuch as the effect of the minor is always produced by its oblique relation to the major key, a key the minor knows and tells us it knows, and diverges from only to return.”

McKay, it is safe to say, does not find such bittersweet and tuneful effects in the race films he lampoons. Rather, and crucially, the dissonances he gathers into his half-ironic half-joyful scenes of spectatorship are products *of* spectatorship; “the laughter was good on the screen” in Harlem; “they loved the exhibition” downtown. *They loved the exhibition* – they noticed, in noticing understood, and in understanding loved the dispositif, the theater, the balcony: the furtive procedures of assembling within and against a violent architecture. The

images on the screen cannot be redeemed by virtue of their “minor” key; for McKay, the music is lateral and intramural. His moviegoers risk forgetting the film altogether.

Moviegoing and *Plum Bun*'s Plot

To turn from film to moviegoing has implications for the analysis of plot, *Plum Bun*'s in particular. Choreographies of assembly modulate or interrupt narrative desire; practices of attendance – the coming and going, the sitting down, getting up, moving and looking around, buying tickets and finding good seats, involved in “going to the movies” – might supersede the unspooling story on the screen. It's not that we entirely *ignore* the “feature presentation,” more that we are distracted or transfixed by that which surrounds it. Our minds wander, noticing more and less than we are meant to.

In this section, I do two things in setting moviegoing and plot together. First, I demonstrate the unexpected narratological function of cinema in Fauset's fiction, comparing *Plum Bun* with its predecessor *The Sleeper Wakes* (1920). In each, a trip to the movies precipitates the protagonist's decision to leave home and pass for white; further, moviegoing serves as a narrative metonym, the passing plot in miniature. Second, and almost in contradiction, I suggest that Angela's moviegoing in *Plum Bun* models a sidelong approach to the novel's plot: her gaze drifts from the screen to savor the curious intimacies flourishing in the shadows. Angela's spectatorship reorients us to minor forms of relation and social assembly adjacent (perhaps irrelevant) to the familial and romantic configurations that inevitably govern *Plum Bun*'s narrative resolution.

But one cannot deny that cinema has a specific and unique narratological function in *Plum Bun* and *The Sleeper Wakes*. I draw on both because, in story and shape, the two are companions, Amy Boldin a sketch for Angela Murray's portrait eight years later.³⁷ Both are structured in five parts; both narrate disastrous courtships with rich and racist white men; both move inexorably towards the protagonist's disclosure of her Blackness. Crucially, for each protagonist, a singularly impactful trip to the cinema precipitates her decision to leave home and move to a new city. In *The Sleeper Wakes*, Amy is captivated by a "pretty girl picture," as her adopted father calls them. That evening, she turns on all the gas-jets in her room and gazes into the mirror, "apostrophiz[ing] the beautiful, glowing vision of herself." Gas-lit and framed in the soft focus of her own regard, Amy creates a homemade facsimile of the close-up. All day, she has been learning 'how to look,' at the cinema and elsewhere. While trying on a dress at Marshall's after the picture, Amy overhears two men: "Jove, how I'd like to paint her!" and "My God! Can't a girl be beautiful!" More than these words, it is the look in their eyes that gives Amy the most information: the same look "in the eyes of the men in the moving-pictures which she had seen that afternoon." Amy does not so much realize as receive her (presumed white) beauty: "she was really good-looking then," she thinks. "She could stir people – men!" In her room that night, she declares, "I'm like the girl in the picture," intensifying the identification and confirming her foster parents' worst fears. Amy muses, "She had nothing but her beautiful face – and she did so want to be happy." A paragraph later she runs away to New York, with nothing but her own beautiful face and the instinct that her happiness must be found elsewhere.³⁸

³⁷ Fauset has a preoccupation with young heroines whose names begin with A: Amy in *The Sleeper Wakes* (1920), Angélique in *Double Trouble* (1923), and of course Angela herself in *Plum Bun*. Through each fictive iteration, Fauset deepens the problems that confound her light-skinned female protagonists; I think of each text (and each protagonist) less as a revision of its predecessor than an elaboration.

³⁸ Amy leaves Trenton for New York City, meeting a coterie of cosmopolitans through her benefactor, a woman auspiciously named Zora. Amy marries the wealthy, bigotted Stuart Wynne; when Wynne tries to have a Black man lynched for a perceived offense, Amy confesses that she too is Black, threatening to out

For Angela, a racist ticket-taker in Philadelphia proves the final straw in a series of indignities that sends her to Manhattan. The humiliations begin at the Academy of Fine Arts, where Angela has regularly attended class by passing as white. Soon after her parents' deaths, however, she is outed by a vindictive childhood acquaintance who, serving as the studio's model, refuses to pose for a Black painter. The following day, Angela's painting instructor confronts her: "But, Miss Murray, you never told me you were coloured," he "blurt[s] out miserably." Angela responds with one of the novel's major ethical questions: "Coloured! Of course I never told you that I was coloured. Why should I?" (72–73).

That night, Angela decides to leave Philadelphia, but only after a second humiliation: a failed trip to the movies. Angela's companion, Matthew Henson, tells her she will "like the surroundings almost as much as the picture" at the "little gem of a theatre" they are to attend. She understands the coded language, an "indirect method of telling her that they would meet with no difficulty in the matter of admission" (74). Notwithstanding these assurances, Matthew is denied entry: at the theater (which "was only one storey" – that is, lacking a segregated balcony) the ticket-taker tells him that "she can go in, but you can't" (75). That night, "reviewing to herself the events of the day," Angela says aloud, "This is the end" (76). The following morning, she begins planning her move to New York. This means that a failed trip to the movies is the very last thing Angela does before resolving to adopt a new city and a new name. Since extensive moviegoing is one of the first things she does upon arriving in New York, moviegoing structures a chiasmus across Parts I and II of the novel:

- A Angela's art classes end
- B Angela attempts to go to the movies with Matthew, unsuccessfully
- C Angela leaves Philadelphia for NYC, changes her name to Angèle

her husband's interracial marriage if he goes through with his plan. Unlike *Passing's* Clare Kendry, whose abrupt but seemingly inevitable death cements Larsen's titular conflation of passing with dying, Amy survives her marriage and opts for financial dispossession, mourning her past while facing her future.

- B Angèle goes to the movies alone, successfully and often
 A Angèle's art classes begin

Positioned as if it were painting's kid sister, cinema plays a pivotal role in *Plum Bun*'s early development despite its apparent innocuousness. Complexly embedded within the *künstlerroman* plot, moviegoing modulates the novel's early rhythms, hastening Angela's departure but delaying Angèle's artistic arrival. And while Angela finds herself "on the thresh-hold of a career totally different from anything that a scenario writer could envisage," moviegoing serves as this very thresh-hold, a passage-point between Part I ("Home") and Part II ("The Market").

Together, Amy and Angela bring one of Fauset's narrative tactics into sharp focus: moviegoing serves to deepen and quicken the passing plot. In neither case does moviegoing catalyze passing. *per se*; after all, Angela often passed with her mother as a child. Rather, her frustrated moviegoing experience with Matthew propels her out of Philadelphia, a physical movement away from home and a narrative movement into an open field of encounter. This movement (home → public) is, of course, a feature of most trips to the cinema. Fauset isolates and dilates a quotidian rhythm, turning it into a metastructure. Indeed, moviegoing's ideal 'final' shape (home → public → *home*) resonates with the nursery rhyme from which *Plum Bun* pulls its title and its structure: "To market, to market / To buy a Plum Bun; / Home again, Home again, / Market is done." In the novel's five corresponding sections – *Home*, *Market*, *Plum Bun*, *Home Again*, and *Market is Done* – Angela's formatively sour trip to the movies occurs near the end of *Home*; the same is true in *The Sleeper Wakes*, where Amy's gaslit self-admiration concludes part one of five. Cinema leads away from the familiar, into the misadventure of passing. In the self-reflexive nursery rhyme logic of both novel and novelette, cinema is the first dream from which the sleeper must wake, an advert for the plum bun; it precedes and prefigures the sweet but hollow thing Fauset's protagonists must learn, through nausea, to resist.

But this is only half the story: while moviegoing's narratological function in both texts betrays a latent domestic ideology – the fear that a young woman's entry into public life might lead her astray – this is where Fauset's thinking begins rather than where it ends. Cinema alternately quickens and dilates the narrative: whereas a formative trip to the movies hastens Angela's departure to New York, her moviegoing post-arrival is leisurely and aimless. Moviegoing holds no narrative content of its own: Angela does nothing and meets no one, in fact neglects the artistic career that brought her to New York. Indeed, the sequence conspicuously omits whatever plots the movies themselves possess, such that Angela seems to briefly escape emplotment altogether. Here, I include the entire passage along with the sentences immediately preceding and succeeding it.

And she made notes in her sketch book to enable her some day to make a great picture of these "types" too.

Of course she was being unconscionably idle; but as her days were filled to overflowing with the impact of new impressions, this signified nothing. She could not guess what life would bring her. For the moment it seemed to her both wise and amusing to sit with idle hands and see what would happen. By a not inexplicable turn of mind she took to going very frequently to the cinema where most things did happen. She found herself studying the screen with a strained and ardent intensity, losing the slight patronizing scepticism which had once been hers with regard to the adventures of these shadowy heroes and heroines; so utterly unforeseen a turn had her own experiences taken. This time last year she had never dreamed of, had hardly dared to long for a life as free and as full as hers was now and was promising to be. Yet here she was on the thresh-hold of a career totally different from anything that a scenario writer could envisage. Oh yes, she knew that hundreds, indeed thousands of white coloured people "went over to the other side," but that was just the point, she knew the fact without knowing hitherto any of the possibilities of the adventure. Already Philadelphia and her trials were receding into the distance. Would these people, she wondered, glancing about her in the soft gloom of the beautiful theatre, begrudge her, if they knew, her cherished freedom and sense of unrestraint? If she were to say to this next woman for instance, "I'm coloured," would she show the occasional dog-in-the-manger attitude of certain white Americans and refuse to sit by her or make a complaint to the usher? But she had no intention of making such an announcement. So she spent many happy, irresponsible, amused hours in the marvellous houses on Broadway or in the dark commonplaceness of her beloved

Fourteenth Street. There was a theatre, too, on Seventh Avenue just at the edge of the Village, which she came to frequent, not so much for the sake of the plays, which were the same as elsewhere, as for the sake of the audience, a curiously intimate sort of audience made of numerous still more intimate groups. Their members seemed both purposeful and leisurely. When she came here her loneliness palled on her, however. All unaware her face took on the wistfulness of the men gazing in the music store. She wished she knew some of these pleasant people.

It came to her that she was neglecting her Art (91-93).

Angela is not wholly indifferent to plot; after all, she has replaced her “patronizing scepticism” with a “strained and ardent intensity.” But the “adventures of these shadowy heroes and heroines” go unspecified, less interesting to Angela than her own adventure, the astonishing fact of her presence in these theaters, in this city. Ultimately, the photoplays (“the same as elsewhere”) are important to Angela not because of the stories they themselves are telling, but because of the introspection and congregation – the strange mix of solitude and assembly – that they occasion. Here, the public quality of moviegoing takes precedence over the narrative quality of the movies themselves.

With this scene, I extrapolate an implicit method for reading *Plum Bun*'s plot. A dual approach is needed: a willingness to mitigate any “patronizing scepticism” and engage with the desires motoring an admittedly melodramatic story, combined with a roving gaze that can savor minor relations and public encounters, social configurations counterbalancing the novel's overarching tendency towards marital and familial normalcy. This recuperative plotting is a major reason Fauset is not more widely respected. Barbara Christian in *Black Women Novelists* writes that Fauset's “plots seldom rise above melodrama.”³⁹ As aforementioned, Hazel Carby has compellingly characterized the “conservatism” of Fauset's narratology, a conservatism

³⁹ Barbara Christian, *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985), 43.

congealing in acrobatically happy endings that reinscribe single Black women into respectable Black heterosexuality.⁴⁰ Contrasting Fauset's endings with Nella Larsen's, where the contradictions of Black womanhood remain snarled and irresolvable to the end, Carby criticizes Fauset's over-reliance on "imaginary resolutions to [...] social contradictions" – a phrase repurposed from Fredric Jameson. For Carby, these "imaginary resolutions" lack the uncompromising honesty of Larsen's disconsoling endings. Even the most sympathetic portraits of Fauset, such as Carolyn Sylvander's *Jessie Fauset, Black American Writer*, struggle to reckon with Fauset's seemingly apolitical narratology. Sylvander deems Fauset's work "a literature of search more than a literature of protest," advocating "descriptive analysis" as a preferable critical stance to "prescriptive judgment."⁴¹

It is true that a synopsis of *Plum Bun*'s plot does little to defend Fauset from accusations of conservatism and (mere) melodrama. The primary plot follows the shifting relationships between Angela and her sister, Virginia; her lover, Roger Fielding; and her eventual husband, Anthony Cross. From childhood, the sisters double each other, with Virginia acting as "Angela's moral mirror," to use Cherene Sherrard-Johnson's phrase.⁴² Where Angela is lighter-skinned like the girls' mother, Mattie, Virginia is darker-skinned like their father, Junius. Mattie teaches Angela to pass: together, they go shopping and to the cinema, pretending to be a white mother and daughter. When one day they run into Junius and Virginia, Mattie panics. Against her better judgment, she pretends not to recognize them. The moment mortifies Mattie, who tearfully apologizes to Junius later that evening for "cut[ting] him." But the incident reverberates profoundly and ambiguously for Angela; she will later recapitulate the scene with Virginia at

⁴⁰ Carby, 167.

⁴¹ Carolyn W. Sylvander, *Jessie Redmon Fauset, Black American Writer* (Troy, NY: Whitston, 1981), 19.

⁴² Cherene Sherrard-Johnson, *Portraits of the New Negro Woman: Visual and Literary Culture in the Harlem Renaissance* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 49.

Penn Station. Though she was there to pick up her sister, Angela freezes, “stupid with fear” when Roger, her enthusiastically racist boyfriend, bumps into her by chance (*PB* 157). Caught between welcoming her sister and pleasing her lover, Angela snubs Virginia.

Across *Plum Bun*, the sisters reflect and foil each other. As Angela continues her doomed romance with Roger, Virginia gets engaged to Anthony Cross, a white-passing but secretly Black artist whom Angela had earlier rejected. Ironically, it is Angela’s snub at Penn Station that leads Virginia to Anthony; the evening of Virginia’s arrival, she wanders into a stranger’s room, too distraught to realize her mistake. That stranger is Anthony. When Roger leaves Angela, she *too* falls for Anthony. All the while, Virginia has held a torch for Matthew Henson, an overeager suitor of Angela’s from Philadelphia. Cutting pithily through the convolution, Jacquelyn McLendon glosses: “Jinny really wants Matthew Henson, who she believes still wants Angela; Angela wants Roger, who just wants sex; and Anthony wants Angela.”⁴³ When Angela is ready to return Anthony’s love, the melodramatic deadlock – two sisters in love with the same man – is resolved with a flourish: in the novel’s last pages, Virginia writes that she had decided to marry Matthew after all, freeing Anthony and Angela to be married. The tangled criss-crossing of sisters and beaux is tidily, problematically resolved: Angela is matched with the man who can pass for white, Virginia with the man too dark to turn Angela’s head.

Where other scholars have engaged this plot head-on, arguing for a canny sophistication underlying its contrivances, I find a partial engagement more fruitful.⁴⁴ In the margins of the primary plot, Fauset explores the dynamics of public belonging, anonymous affinity, and mere

⁴³ Jacquelyn Y. McLendon, *The Politics of Color in the Fiction of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 49.

⁴⁴ For example, McLendon, building on Barbara Christian’s assertion that Fauset writes “bad fairy tales,” suggests we should be “examining the fairy-tale motif as self-conscious design rather than dismissing it as artistic flaw. In *Plum Bun* there is evidence that a ‘bad’ fairy tale – in other words, a fairy tale’s ironic inversion – is precisely what Fauset wants to depict” (29).

acquaintanceship. If we emulate Angela's distracted spectatorship, turning our head ever so slightly from the screen, we can glimpse another *Plum Bun* entirely.

Angela's public relations

This other *Plum Bun* is a public novel. Symbolic dramas articulate and resolve themselves in public space. Hesitant and guarded intimacies take root – relationships that may grow or wither, perhaps never reaching the intensity of friendship or sexual companionship. Through these minor relations, Fauset expresses political possibilities exceeding her timid narrative conclusions. Moving through various forms of assembly — artistic coteries, bustling street crowds, speech attendees, audiences of moviegoers — Angela comes to understand her own publicness as ethically freighted. Her decisions and dilemmas throughout the novel are not strictly individual: she chooses not only between a white lover and a Black one, between personal expression and filial devotion, her self and her sister, but between different forms of assembly and modes of public being.

Plum Bun's publics are sharpest when thrown against Fauset's much earlier story, *My House and a Glimpse of my Life Therein*. Published in *The Crisis* in 1914, the story narrates the imaginative flights made possible by the narrator's "irregular, rambling" house. Sprawling and secluded, with attic, library, and forested grounds, the house is revealed in the story's last paragraph to be "constructed of dream-fabric," an immaterial fantasy of dwelling and material ownership. In *My House*, this dream-home is a site of autodidactic education: the narrator recounts the stories she's read in comfort – Mother Goose, *Alice in Wonderland* – the texts she is currently reading – Walter Pater, the Rubaiyat – and those she's yet to read: "Schopenhauer and

Gorky, Petrarch and Sappho, Goethe and Kant and Schelling; much of Ibsen, Plato and Ennius and Firdausi, and Lafcadio Hearn, – a few of these in the original. With such reading in store for me, is not my future rich?”

The richness of this narrator’s future relies on the mental exploration of a vast and distinctly un-American *elsewhere*, a cartography running from Ibsen’s Norway to Firdausi’s Persia. The space of reading is itself built of dream-fabric, the home reconstructed as a concept. The narrator – apparently childless, perhaps parentless – seems to have neither kitchen nor ironing board. In short, *My House and a Glimpse of my Life Therein* is an exercise in immateriality, an investigation into the *idea* of owning and dwelling or, as Fauset herself describes it, a “sense” :

With this sense of ownership, a sense which is deeper than I can express, a sense which is almost a longing for some unknown, unexplainable, entire possession – passionate, spiritual absorption of my swelling – comes a feeling that is almost terror. Is it right to feel thus, to have this vivid, permeating and yet wholly intellectual enjoyment of the material loveliness and attractiveness of my house? May this not be perhaps a sensuality of the mind, whose influence may be more insidious, more pernicious, more powerful to unfit me for the real duties of life than are other lower and yet more open forms of enjoyment?

Fauset counterposes the abiding pleasures of dwelling to the fear that such enjoyment leaves homeowners “unfit.” Subtending this fear, given only vague dimension in the story itself, are other fears unspoken. Fauset does not explicitly contrast domestic safety and reverie to anti-Black violence, nor does she contrast homeownership to sharecropping. Whether or not these off-stage perils are precisely those which “unfit” the homeowner, external social currents are palpable in the narrator’s anxiety, an anxiety “that is almost terror.” The “sensuality of the mind” she fears is not only decadence, but retreat. The house, and the narrator’s life therein, require a turn away from the public sphere.

Returning to *Plum Bun*, we find “lower and yet more open forms of enjoyment” in, of course, the act of moviegoing. It is not merely lower, but public – a constitutively but complexly public phenomenon promising both solitude and assembly, exemplifying the mutual entanglement of private desire and public space throughout the novel. Moviegoing is one of the more explicit, but hardly the last or most poignant, moments in which Angela asks herself to which public(s) she belongs. In fact, this question is sharpest late in the novel when Angela discloses her Blackness to a group of journalists, a moment of solidarity with a colleague, Miss Powell, whose scholarship was revoked after the committee found out Miss Powell was Black. The question Angela had asked her painting instructor in Philly – “Of course I never told you that I was coloured. Why should I?” – is transformed, suddenly a question of public solidarity rather than private disclosures. With this surprisingly carefree confession, spoken to journalists rather than intimates, Angela relocates herself in relation to a Black public.

Fauset’s decision to stage Angela’s confession in such a manner is best understood as the final twist in *Plum Bun*’s ongoing but ambivalent relationship to Black public life. Take for example Angela’s first glimpse of Harlem:

She had never seen coloured life so thick, so varied, so complete. Moreover, just as this city reproduced in microcosm all the important features of any metropolis, so undoubtedly life up here was just the same, she thought dimly, as anywhere else [...] A man’s sharp, high-bred face etched itself on her memory, —the face of a professional man perhaps, —it might be an artist. She doubted that; he might of course be a musician, but it was unlikely that he would be her kind of an artist, for how could he exist? (96)

Or Angela’s observations at a speech given by “Van Meier,” Fauset’s fictionalized DuBois:

Here and there a sprinkling of white faces showed up plainly, startlingly distinct patterns against a back-ground of patient, softly stolid Black faces; faces beaten and fashioned by life into a mold of steady, rock-like endurance, of unshakable, unconquered faith. Angela had seen such faces before in the churches in Philadelphia; they brought back old pictures to her mind (217).

Angela cannot decide how to place herself within or against the Black assemblies she describes, whether she belongs inside or outside of them. On the face of it, she approaches Black New York with the anthropological gaze of the white artist – at Van Meier’s speech she finds herself once more “revelling in types” (216), abstracting strangers’ faces into categories and trafficking in clichés of “rock-like endurance” and “unconquered faith.” But she hesitates just at the threshold of discovering herself amidst the crowd. Wondering whether a striking passerby is an artist, Angela decides that he cannot be “her kind” of artist, “for how could he exist?” As I argue in my final section, Angela’s unimaginative question – how could *my kind of artist* exist in Harlem? – obscures her more profound, implicit provocation: *could I, an artist, exist among them?*

Undoubtedly, Fauset is concerned with Angela’s psychological development, romantic fulfillment, and maturing sense of self; but she is concerned just as conspicuously with Angela’s growing awareness of her ethical obligations to people she does not know very well or like very much. Minor characters pull Angela into various milieux. There are her friends Martha Burden and Ladislas Starr, a free-thinking married couple who prominently display the *Crisis* in their living room and host salons. There are Virginia’s friends, “a happy, intelligent, rather independent group of young coloured men and women” who introduce Virginia to the illustrious Van Meier (209). There is Rachel Salting, the upstairs neighbor with whom Angela shares the stairwell intimacies of co-tenancy. Angela sympathizes with Rachel because she is Jewish and her lover’s family is antisemitic, but her commiseration does not stop Rachel from declaring she “wouldn’t marry a nigger in any circumstances. Would you?” (313). Most important of all, there is Miss Rachel Powell, Angela’s colleague at Cooper Union, whom Angela initially describes as having an “ugly beauty.” Miss Powell – whom Angela never calls Rachel – has dark skin and

does not have the luxury of passing; instead of befriending her classmates, she works industriously and alone.

Through Miss Powell, Fauset most clearly expresses the ethical prerogatives and political stakes of Angela's public navigation. When both she and Angela win a scholarship to study in France, Miss Powell's is revoked after the selection committee discovers she is Black. Outraged, Angela blurts out: "if Miss Powell isn't wanted, I'm not wanted either. You imply that she's not wanted because she's coloured. Well, I'm coloured too" (347). What Angela has not yet been able to share *privately* with any of her classmates – what she could not even bring herself to tell Anthony the evening he told her of his father's lynching – she admits freely to the press.

The armchair press conference calls attention to itself as patently bizarre: why is *this* the moral climax of this novel without a moral? But the confession makes sense if we understand it as the logical conclusion of the novel's public impulse; here Fauset can scramble norms of private and public communication, effecting a reflexive mode of self-disclosure that comments on its own 'publicity.' Eschewing the sanctity or eroticism of the confessional mode, Fauset chooses scandal. The scene takes place in a home, but not Angela's; indeed, it is her very first time calling upon Miss Powell. Angela behaves out of a sense of moral duty; but she does so on behalf of a colleague, not a lover or friend. A drawing room tea becomes a press conference, mere acquaintance transformed into political solidarity. And one of the newspapermen reveals, unintentionally, the precise ethical distinction of the scene in a patronizing speech given before Angela admits that she, too, is a woman of color. The reporter rudely reminds Miss Powell that Angela made no efforts to bunk with her on the transatlantic trip, or to befriend her in any way.

Why shouldn't [Angela] have asked you to be her side-partner on this trip which I understand you're taking together? There would have been an unanswerable refutation for the committee's arguments. But no, she does nothing even though it means the thwarting of a life-time's ambition. Mind, I'm not blaming you, Miss

Mory. You are acting in accordance with a natural law. I'm just trying to show Miss Powell here how inevitable the workings of such a law are (346).

The “law” the journalist here invokes is not merely racist but intimately racist, a prohibition not on public shows of solidarity but on interracial friendship. Implicitly, he makes the case that longterm intimacies are the principle form of meaningful relation. The “natural law” presumably dictating Angela’s behavior is one that proscribes the sphere of female friendship. The journalist’s tone is condescending, his ideas insipid and violent, but he articulates an assumption readers of *Plum Bun* risk emulating: the idea that what matters most is the private world of friendship, sorority, and fellow-feeling. In contrast, note Fauset’s description of Angela’s epiphany: “Some icy crust which had formed over Angela’s heart shifted, wavered, broke and melted. Suddenly it seemed as though nothing in the world were so important as to allay the poignancy of Miss Powell’s situation; for this, she determined quixotically, no price would be too dear.” Even at this moment of greatest intensity, Miss Powell is still *Miss Powell*; even as Angela opens herself “quixotically” to racial solidarity, in the moment when “the icy crust [...] shifted, wavered, broke, and melted,” to call Miss Powell *Rachel* is literally unthinkable.

Miss Murray and Miss Powell will remain “curiously intimate” from this moment on: they will always retain the slight coolness of acquaintanceship. And this confession, Angela’s atonement for a novel’s worth of passivity, is crucially a displacement. Through this scene, Fauset rhymes and resolves the scenes of “cutting” – of willful misrecognition – that have pained Virginia so deeply. As my friend and colleague Kristen Maye put it, Angela’s confession is “both a move to embrace Blackness publicly while shirking intimate responsibility.”⁴⁵ The heroic nature of the confession is undercut by its too-little-too-lateness: it is not Miss Powell but

⁴⁵ Private conversation, May 28 2020.

Virginia to whom such a sacrifice is owed. Fauset lays the groundwork for this reversal early on, in childhood, when Angela and Virginia establish an imaginary game:

... some nonsense of their early childhood days when it had been their delight to dress up as ladies. Virginia would approach Angela: "Pardon me, is this Mrs. Henrietta Jones?" And Angela, drawing herself up haughtily would reply: "Er, – really you have the advantage of me." Then Virginia: "Oh pardon! I thought you were Mrs. Jones and I had heard my friend Mrs. Smith speak of you so often and since you were *in the neighbourhood and passing*, I was going to ask you in to have some ice-cream." The game of course being that Angela should immediately drop her haughtiness and proceed for the sake of the goodies to ingratiate herself into her neighbour's esteem (35, emphasis mine).

The routine is intimate but premised on near-anonymity: a secret language rooted in the banality of smalltalk, sisterly closeness taking the guise of mere acquaintance. The game's privacy (a playworld belonging to Angela and Virginia alone) is derived from its mimicry of public life (the world of rumor and gossip, Smiths and Joneses). That Mrs. Jones happens to be "in the neighbourhood and passing" signals the poignancy the game will later gather.

For it is this game that saves Angela from exposure at Penn Station. When Virginia greets Angela, she chooses their favorite salutation: "I beg your pardon, but isn't this Mrs. Henrietta Jones?" Relieved, Angela takes the bait, exploiting the game's pretense of unfamiliarity.

Oh, God was good! Here was one chance if only Jinny would understand! In his astonishment Roger had turned from her to face the speaker. Angela, her eyes beseeching her sister's from under her close hat brim, could only stammer the old formula: "Really you have the advantage of me. No, I'm not Mrs. Jones."

Roger said rudely, "Of course she isn't Mrs. Jones. Come, Angèle" (159).

It is not an accident that this scene, by far the deepest of the novel's "cuts," takes place in a train station – nor that Virginia, "after a second's bewildered but incredulous stare," walks quickly away and "vanishe[s] into a telephone booth" (159). In this symbolically fraught encounter, Angela recapitulates Mattie's castrative misrecognition of Junius, but the sheer publicness of the scene prevents it from being merely psychoanalytic. The arrival and departure

of huge numbers of anonymous others, the specific semiprivacy of the telephone booth, the loophole provided by the sisters' pretense of mere acquaintanceship; even in this most intimate of betrayals, the public throngs about. Train stations, movie theaters, and the living rooms of one's colleagues attenuate the oedipal force of the family. Returning to Miss Powell with this public in mind, we can appreciate all the more Angela's confession on her behalf. Whereas others have read her as a symbolic stand-in for Virginia, I find it more illustrative to understand her as Miss Powell: a colleague, not quite a friend, certainly not a sister. Angela's disclosure does not heal the wounds she has inflicted on Virginia; rather, it represents her developing public ethos, the reclamation of public Black belonging. Her final lines to the reporters – "please leave. We'll keep you out" – mirrors the moment, early in the novel, when a racist ticket-taker barred admission to her moviegoing companion. Angela's confession is not to or for her family; it is for the public she has finally decided to join.

The crowd scene: moviegoing and painting

One final, conspicuous question remains: how does Angela's moviegoing relate to her Art? In both *Plum Bun* (1928) and *The Sleeper Wakes* (1920), moviegoing is set quite explicitly in relationship to painting; however, the comparison is centered on the social context of both practices rather than the aesthetic object produced. Through this juxtaposition, the movie theater and the painter's studio are co-defined as spaces of simultaneous observation and display. The artistic object, whether film or painting, is less important than the encounter between bodies, the everyday but highly political experience of seeing and being seen. Fauset sets moviegoing against painting to highlight the vital importance of learning how to look: how to notice and

discern, how to reconcile what you see with what others see, how to solicit the gaze without attracting too much scrutiny. Since Angela is a portraitist whose career is predicated on passing, the cultivation of both ways of looking – noticing, appearing – has high stakes both personally and professionally.

Fauset brackets the full-page description of moviegoing with evocations of painting on either side (see p. 20). Immediately prior to Angela's extended moviegoing in New York, she is making "notes in her sketch book to enable her some day to make a great picture" of passing types. By the end of her cinematic excursions, she realizes she has been "neglecting her Art." On one end, Angela sketches; on the other, she admonishes her own inactivity. Incompletion 'frames' moviegoing, positioning cinema as that which separates the sketch from its realization. Like Lily Briscoe's more famous problem with an unfinished painting, Angela Murray has something blocking her view.

At first glance, then, moviegoing is a waste of time for the artist. More than a mere distraction, the movies are the "neglect" of Art. Insofar as Angela *does* engage with any of the familiar formal categories of narrative art – namely, plot – she does so but briefly, as I've discussed above. Yet even as Fauset contrasts moviegoing's langor with painting's rigor – the former's "unrestraint" interrupting, and at great length, the would-be discipline of the latter – Fauset undermines the division just as cannily. Moviegoing extends the "impact of new impressions," adding to Angela's reservoir of sensations and social "types." Her idleness is ambivalently rendered, "unconscionably idle" in one sentence, "wise and amusing" in the next. Equivocation kinks the syntax: "by a not inexplicable turn of mind she took to going very frequently to the cinema where most things did happen." The effect of this belaboring is that moviegoing takes a peculiarly *central* role in the unfolding of an aesthetic process.

Whether or not readers find Angela's cinematic turn "unconscionably idle" or "wise and amusing," one thing is certain: the account is never about the medium of film. Given the twofold references to Angela's artistic practice, this choice is notable and self-reflexive. As an artist, Angela is provocatively indifferent to medium, opting instead for milieu: while she "stud[ies] the screen with a strained and ardent intensity," she thinks not of composition, dimension, lighting, or focus – observations we might expect of an ambitious painter – and only fleetingly of plot. Searching and uncertain, the "ardent intensity" of Angela's gaze falls from the screen, landing on her fellow-viewers. Far from an ideal, absorbed spectatorship, Angela's is closer to the "distracted spectatorship" Shane Vogel describes as endemic to the American cabaret. For Vogel, it is the "interplay of closeness and distance, acceptance and refusal, connection and disconnection, concentration and distraction" that shapes and creates the cabaret, where "the performer competes with the audience itself for its attention."⁴⁶ With Angela, there is no such competition, the movies having already lost; by passage's end, the audience is the object of her curiosity and desire.

But why does Fauset encircle this otherwise self-contained scene with Angela's sketching and neglected art? The juxtaposition cannot produce a formalist comparison between paint and projected celluloid, distinct visual media with respective affordances and limitations. Instead, the juxtaposition is social, taking moviegoing and painting as multilateral contact-zones wherein being able to see requires one's being seen. Remember, it is the model who outs Angela at the Philadelphia Fine Arts Academy, upending our sense of the scopic power generally organizing the scene of painting. And recall, in *The Sleeper Wakes*, the stranger's almost incongruous utterance upon seeing Amy: "Jove, how I'd like to paint her!" Finally, there is Angela's ongoing

⁴⁶ Shane Vogel, *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, Performance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 70.

fascination with social ‘types,’ a distinctly public method predicated on inventing knowledge and insinuating depth from surface features one might glimpse, as if in passing. Across these different registers of everyday visibility, Fauset’s protagonists are concerned with *how to look* in two senses, self-presentation and scrutiny of others. They learn to notice and intuit, to see more than they show. Passing requires getting the edge on visibility, getting ahead of the gaze that would see too much.

Plum Bun charts a slow revision in Angela’s sense of how to look, a transformation that has everything to do with Angela’s reclamation of her Blackness and a Black public. Initially paranoid and protective, by novel’s end Angela reconciles seeing and being seen, learning to look more expansively and to be seen more vulnerably. This is not only an ethical and political development (though it is emphatically both) but an aesthetic one, too, since reconciling these two ways of looking is the condition for authentic self-portraiture. In her fantastic book *Portraits of the New Negro Woman*, Cherene Sherrard-Johnson argues that Angela undergoes a “transformation from a myopic materialist to a sincere artist,” a transformation indicated by her shifting perspectives on Black beauty, her ability to see Black women “with new eyes.”⁴⁷ Sherrard-Johnson reads two passages in which Angela mentally appraises Miss Powell. In the first, Angela finds Miss Powell possessed of “a kind of ugly beauty” typified by her “unnaturally straight and unnaturally burnished hair.” In the second, there is nothing ugly in Miss Powell’s beauty: “To anyone whose ideals of beauty were not already set and sharply limited she must have made a breathtaking appeal.” As Sherrard-Johnson sharply observes, Angela is commenting on an earlier version of herself— her first assessment warped by her “preconceived and destructive notions of beauty” rather than “her friend’s dark skin.”⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Sherrard-Johnson, 67.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 67.

As she modifies her habits of perception, Angela's seemingly inconsequential desire to belong to an audience gathers new profundity. Her artistic interest in strangers and types, paired with her wistful yearning for public belonging, suggests the face she is seeking in the crowd is her *own*. If, as Sherrard-Johnson argues, Fauset's "genius resides in her referential engagement of the aesthetics and subjects of the Fourteenth Street School (the urban vein of American scene painting) and her development of her protagonist's psyche within that locale", I would add that Angela's moviegoing sharpens another desire, one that her fascination with 'types' belies but also betrays: the desire to be the subject of her own regard, to both see the 'scene' and be situated within it. This is why, when in Harlem she passes a man with the "sharp, high-bred face" that "etche[s] itself on her memory," Angela simultaneously thinks he must be an artist and cannot be "her kind of artist, for how could he exist?" (96).

The face etches itself on Angela's memory not because it indexes a particularly undecidable "type" but because it signals her own conflicting impulses between artistic expression and public belonging. In this moment, it is *herself* that Angela stands on the verge of finding in the street scene. What if she were to find "her kind of an artist" not in the "sharp, high-bred face" of a stranger, but in her own? The question – "for how could he exist?" insinuates another, more profound: "could *I* exist *among* them?" In reclaiming a Black public by novel's end, Angela creates the conditions for a complex self-portrait: a crowd scene that includes her.

Chapter Three: Thick Witness in Zora Neale Hurston's Churches

After a long hiatus from filmmaking, years after her patron Charlotte Mason ended their correspondence and financial relationship, not so long after the publication of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston went to church. In *Commandment Keeper Church, Beaufort South Carolina, May 1940*, Hurston joined a filmmaking team in documenting the worship practices of a Gullah congregation. Most of the footage is centered in the space of the eponymous church, though some of it takes place in a car on the highway leading up to Beaufort, and a portion depicts a choral performance outdoors.

While the footage is marked by striking similarities to Hurston's fieldwork from the late 1920s, attributing single authorship of *Commandment Keeper* to Hurston is complicated. She was the film's director, but several elements of production were out of her control. The trip was planned by anthropologist Jane Belo, an acolyte of Margaret Mead's, and was tied in to Belo's larger interest in alternate states of consciousness and experiences of trance (Belo, like Mead, studied trance in Bali). Belo hired a team of cameramen – Norman Chalfin, Lou Brandt, and Bob Lawrence – who were responsible for the camerawork and sound recording. The sound meant to accompany the footage was recorded by, and eventually recovered from Chalfin; it is not synchronized with the visual material. Synchronization was impossible because the church itself was not wired for electricity. Finally, while four reels and more than 40 minutes of footage are housed at the Library of Congress, the most accessible format in which *Commandment Keeper* is available to viewers is through the “Pioneers of African-American Cinema” project, and is edited down to a little less than 15 minutes.¹

¹ This is the version I have had access to. *Commandment Keeper Church Beaufort South Carolina 1940*, Mastered in 2K from 16mm film elements preserved by The Library of Congress (Margaret Mead/South

Nevertheless, whatever vagaries separate us from the film-text she may have had in mind, Hurston directed the footage, both behind and in front of the camera.

Hurston's filmmaking is part of a wider transmedial project, one that could never be said to culminate in any one genre or form. This is quite literally the case in that Hurston sought to preserve some of the best sound recordings from the 1940 Beaufort expedition for her own purposes. Writing to her colleague Paul Green at the University of North Carolina, Hurston asked to borrow her own recording equipment so that she and Green could use the best songs for a play she proposed writing with him: "I don't want them to get ahold of certain tunes which I have earmarked."² This attitude – pulling material from one project to animate another – is typical of Hurston as a creator; desire to take sound footage from Beaufort for her play, rather than for Belo's documentary project, is more rule than exception. As Cheryl Wall has demonstrated, the material Hurston collected in the late 1920s and early 1930s – material whose publishing rights Charlotte Mason, through a strict contract, legally owned between 1927 and 1932 – found its way into various publications, including Hurston's 1930s novels and her folklore-opus *Mules and Men*.³ Some work was sanctioned by Mason; some of it (most famously *Mule Bone*, Hurston's ill-fated collaboration with Langston Hughes) was done in secret. But all of it had a quality of deep interconnectivity.

Theoretically, Hurston's filmmaking can be understood under the framework of the panaesthetic. Each of Hurston's published or unpublished works participates in a complex ecology, one of many interrelated and intermedial projects of documentation, recreation, and

Pacific Ethnographic Archives Collection), directed by Zora Neale Hurston, *Pioneers of African-American Cinema* (New York: Kino Lorber, 2016).

² Daniel Eagan, *America's Film Legacy: The Authoritative Guide to the Landmark Movies in the National Film Registry* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 315.

³ Cheryl A. Wall, *Women of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 155–57.

presentation of rural Black American life and language. This is not to diminish Hurston's skill or style as a filmmaker, but rather to better situate her as an exemplar of what Daniel Albright calls the panaesthetic. Rewriting Gotthold Lessing's distinction between the spatial and the temporal arts, Albright suggests a more productive binary is "a tension between arts that try to retain the propriety, the apartness, of their private media, and arts that try to lose themselves in some panaesthetic whole."⁴ Hurston's work – her relentless collecting, dislocating, and reconfiguring of materials she so cherished across the many genres of essay, novel, film, theater, sound recording, etc. etc. – is that of an artist committed to exuberant transmediality. For Hurston, "The aesthetic is simply a mode of all sensible reality, conceived under the rubric of the made."⁵

For this reason, I do not attempt to theorize the cinematic Hurston per se. Where Autumn Womack and Fatimah Tobing Rony have admirably delineated the politics, style, and peculiarity of Hurston as a filmmaker, that is not my approach. To describe a writer-ethnographer singularly invested in the formal provocations and documentary affordances of the camera would be to overstate Hurston's reliance on filmmaking and willfully ignore her use of text as an acoustic recording technology (not to mention her extensive use of literal recording technologies). Likewise, to single out the moviegoing audience, as I have done with Fauset, would mean misrecognizing or subordinating the dozens of alternative forms of social assembly Hurston describes: the porch, the store, the workcamp, the jook, and – most important for this chapter, the church. Hurston's project, her dauntless decades-long efforts to story southern Black rural life, is irreducible to a single genre or medium. Within this framework, I read *Commandment Keeper* in relation to Hurston's first novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934). Rather than making claims specific

⁴ Daniel Albright, *Untwisting the Serpent: Modernism in Music, Literature, and Other Arts* (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 33.

⁵ Daniel Albright, *Panaesthetics: On the Unity and Diversity of the Arts*, 1st [edition], The Anthony Hecht Lectures in the Humanities (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 9.

to the novel or the film – or specific to Hurston as a novelist or a filmmaker – I argue that each text manifests a larger creative locus of Hurston’s, the exploration of Black American churches as spaces of spectatorship and social negotiation. The church, rather than the novel or the film, is the locus – one might even call it a medium – with which this chapter is preoccupied.

In positioning the church as a site of Black American spectatorship, I am referencing on a historical phenomenon traced out by Cara Caddoo in *Envisioning Freedom: Cinema and the Building of Modern Black Life*. Caddoo stresses that churches were the first spaces in which Black spectators encountered the moving image. Here, she describes an exhibition in 1897:

The room was dimmed, but even in the darkness, the growing excitement must have been palpable as the audience waited for the show to begin. Finally, the machine sprang into motion – a whirring sound emanated from its gears, then a rhythmic click, like the sound of a baseball card clipped to the spoke of a bicycle wheel. Light splashed across the canvas, and immense images moved as if they were alive.⁶

The passage is a critical fiction, a recreated moment in a Baptist church at the turn of the twentieth century. Cara Caddoo can only evoke what the archive leaves unsaid: the crackling energy of the sanctuary, the sonic interplay of machines and assembled viewers, the wondrous changes in luminosity. Her diction (“sprang,” “splashed,” “alive”) revivifies something film history has deadened. Her work is an act of recreation rather than invention: the specific certainly took place, in 1897, at the Second Baptist Church in Kansas City, Missouri. It is, Caddoo suggests, the first exhibition of moving images for an Black American audience.

Caddoo’s choice to speculate, giving texture and breath to a few lines of print in the *Omaha Enterprise*, is not fanciful or gratuitous. Rather, her critical recreation should be understood in relation to the density of mythology surrounding early screenings in the normative, white-washed history of spectatorship. Take *L’arrivée d’un train en gare de La Ciotat*, for

⁶ Cara Caddoo, *Envisioning Freedom: Cinema and the Building of Modern Black Life* (Cambridge, Massachusetts ; London, England: Harvard University Press, 2014), 14.

example. A Lumière frères short depicting a train approaching the audience along a diagonal axis, likely filmed in 1895 but screened in 1896, the film's reception is one of the most thickly over-imagined events in cinema history. In his seminal essay historicizing the aesthetics of early spectatorship, Tom Gunning quips, "In traditional accounts of the cinema's first audiences, one image stands out: the terrified reaction of spectators to Lumiere's [*L'arrivée*]. According to a variety of historians, spectators reared back in their seats, or screamed, or got up and ran from the auditorium (or all three in succession)."⁷ Gunning goes on to describe the way "this primal scene of cinema underpins certain contemporary theorisations of spectatorship," glossing in particular Christian Metz's sense that "our belief in this legendary audience [...] allows us to disavow our own belief in the face of cinema."⁸ Analyzing the film's reception in relation to fairground attractions and trompe l'oeil effects in the magical theater, Gunning argues that reclaiming our disavowed credulity would be missing the point. Instead, he argues for a specificity to the experience of early audiences, an aesthetics of astonishment that played out the vacillation between belief and disbelief. It was the mechanism of illusion – rather than the illusion itself – that served as the site of this dialectic: "What is displayed before the audience is less the impending speed of the train than the force of the cinematic apparatus."⁹ Gunning's historicist aesthetic theory is itself forceful because of the mythological density of *L'arrivée* – it is its status as a cinematic "primal scene" that permits Gunning's historical specificity.

Within this film historical context, I understand Caddoo's archaeology of the Second Baptist Church to be an intervention on the mythological foundations of cinema. It is just as much a symbolic reorientation as it is a material one. The Second Baptist Church, like many

⁷ Tom Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator," in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, 7th ed (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 114.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 118.

Black churches of the 19th and early 20th-century South, began as an idea. Before it was a brick-and-mortar institution, the church “had been little more than a ‘stragglers camp,’ a place where freedmen and refugees from the Civil War, dressed in rags, and clutching their only possessions, gather to pray together.”¹⁰ Similar to Baby Suggs’ congregation in Morrison’s *Beloved*, the church begins as an assembly without installation in a physical building: “As the war raged on around the members of this humble congregation, they looked to one another and to their faith for guidance and consolation.”¹¹ More than ‘fleshing out’ a historical narrative, Caddoo theorizes distinct, and distinctly Black, turn-of-the-century spectatorial conditions. This 1897 Kansas City audience, unlike that of *L’arrivée* in 1896 – and unlike the various 1920s audiences of *Plum Bun* – was a congregation, oriented not only towards a shared image (projected on a wall or a curtain? near pulpit or altar?) but towards a collective creed and a shared vision of survival.

Caddoo reformulates our understanding of Black spectatorship and Black churchgoing as mutually inclusive phenomena – sometimes, identical phenomena. In alternative spaces across the American South, Black viewers established a cinematic literacy very much their own, distinct from and *prior to* the construction of segregated and/or Negro-only theaters in the 1910s. “Between 1897 and 1910, hundreds of black film showmen and -women exhibited motion pictures in black lodges, schools, and, most frequently, churches. [...] The practices of black film exhibition that developed across the urban South and West were not simply borrowed from a world of white producers and showmen. The leaders of the Second Baptist and others like them were at the vanguard of the new motion picture phenomenon.”¹² To take this scholarly intervention seriously means returning to the church as a resonant topos – not only as a mainstay

¹⁰ Caddoo, *Envisioning Freedom*, 14-5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹² *Ibid.*, 16.

in the social and imaginative lives of many Black American Christians but, as a space in which unique forms of cinematic spectatorship developed. Situating Black audiences “at the vanguard of the new motion picture phenomenon” requires not only a reexamination of who saw what when – but also, *how*.

Building on this understanding of Black churches as cinematic contact zones, I zoom in on Hurston’s churches in fiction and film, taking them as arenas of complexly choreographed seeing. In churches, the politics of witnessing get reflexively articulated and performed. I have developed the concept of “thick witness” to account for the lateral, crowded, and contested visuality in Hurston’s churches. In landing on the language of “thick witness,” I am playing on Geertz’s path-opening notion of “thick description” – the idea that the anthropologist should make central their semiotic participation and interpretive power in the descriptions they narrate. Hurston’s approach in *Commandment Keeper* is Geertzian *avant la lettre*: she immersed herself in the activity of worship, to the degree that Fatimah Rony calls her an “observing participant” rather than a participant observer. Hurston sings, praises, plays the drum and, as Rony points out – I hadn’t noticed until my third viewing, after reading Rony – nudges one of her fellow singers closer to the microphone. With “thick witness,” I aim to convey the way Hurston’s documentary methodology was not only suited to by *derived from* her subject material. “Thick witness” names two distinct ways of seeing, both of which Hurston intermingles in her practice. First, “thick witness” names forms of spectatorship endemic to Hurston’s churches, churches in which worshipful witness meant active participation, negotiation, and conscious self-display. Second, it serves as a term for the practice of ethnography specific to *Commandment Keeper*, in which the ethnographer is not only present in the scene but participating in it. This thickens, as it were, the tensions between observer and observed,

anthropologist and anthropological object, until the dense space between these poles is itself a reservoir of meaning.

In the readings that follow, I relate Hurston's first novel *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934) with *Commandment Keeper Church*, using both to get at the church as an underexplored but necessary topos in Hurston's map of rural Black social life. In emphasizing the visuality of the church, I argue against its figuration as a solely or even primarily religious site in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* – arguing instead that it is the interplay of wandering, even impious gazes – and the negotiation of social dynamics therefrom – that renders the church such a fertile site for Hurston's first novel. In making this argument I read *Jonah's Gourd Vine* against the grain, the received notion that this first venture into fiction should be interpreted autobiographically. Instead, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* is the portrait of a community, one filtered through the prism of a morality tale. And while *Commandment Keeper* is more earnestly concerned with religious experience and practice, it is the complex visuality of the film footage that sets it and Hurston apart from the anthropological norms of the era. In short, Hurston mines and savors the specific visuality of the church, a visuality that is complexly distributed – contested and multidirectional.

The Visual Church in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*

A moralizing tendency runs through the scholarship on *Jonah's Gourd Vine* – understandably so, given the novel's church-centeredness and biblical allegory. In these critical accounts, the social and political functions of rural Black churches are subordinated to their religious function and moral institutionality. The two (sociality and spirituality) are clearly inextricable, but in the case of Hurston scholarship, the latter subsumes the former. An instinct to

track the religious impulses animating Hurston's work is itself understandable, since Hurston was both the daughter of a preacher and a successful apprentice to voodoo practitioners.¹³ But the remarkable dissonance between Hurston's upbringing and her time spent with voodoo doctors can overdetermine readings of her work, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* in particular. Because *Jonah's Gourd Vine* depicts a preacher struggling to reconcile his spiritual calling with his carnal desires, and because John's second wife drives him from his first by visiting a conjure woman, these religious readings are not only apt but necessary. They are also insufficient, as they oversimplify the social fractiousness and dynamism of the novel in favor of an individualized moral journey.

Jonah's Gourd Vine tracks the rise and fall of John Pearson, a womanizing preacher modeled to some extent on Hurston's father. John is born on Alf Pearson's plantation in Notasulga, Alabama – it is hinted but never confirmed that Pearson is John's father – but is raised by his mother and step-father across the river from town. When his step-father hires him out for the season, John comes to Notasulga and meets Lucy Potts, whom he courts and soon marries. Despite his love for Lucy, John is a womanizer and often leaves his family in states of financial duress. When Lucy's brother, Bud, comes to collect on a debt, John beats him brutally and must flee Notasulga when Bud goes to the police. It is in moving his family to Eatonville that Pearson comes into his role as a preacher and central community figure. But his eye still wanders, and much of the novel's tension and culminating tragedy is derived from this singular character flaw. Hurston's parents were named John and Lucy and her father was a preacher, so the novel reads rather tidily as a storying of Hurston's childhood. But *Jonah's Gourd Vine* is more meaningfully understood – like all of Hurston's work – as a social organism, a novel of opportunities and crises navigated by entire communities. Pearson's infidelities are not private problems at all. An open secret, deacons at his church take sides; some invite guest preachers to

¹³ Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men*, (New York: Perennial Library, 1990).

supplant him while others take measures to support him. The church is not merely the setting and symbol of a good man's calling and moral failure but of a community's norm-setting and negotiation. As such, while my readings below do focus on John Pearson more than any other character in the novel, they are concerned primarily with John's manipulation of the visual space of the church.

As with readings of *Plum Bun* that reify Fauset's bourgeois sensibilities without acknowledging the potentialities at play in the public and semipublic spaces through which Angela travels, criticism of *Jonah's Gourd Vine* suffers from a narrow focus on a protagonist's individual journey, which in turn frames the novel as a story of moral crisis and decline rather than complex collective being. Readings isolate the life of John Pearson, his behaviors and misbehaviors, as the central optic for understanding the novel's progression – from promise to ruination, from blossoming gourd to life-rotting worm. Much of this stems from the tantalizing biblical story invoked by the title, when God provides a shade-giving vine for Jonah only for the vine to be destroyed by a burrowing worm. In her 1990 forward to the novel, Rita Dove calls John himself “a rapidly growing vine [...] everything he touches blossoms under his hand.”¹⁴ Critic John Lowe understands the worm as John's “sexuality” and the vine as his “comfort.”¹⁵ In a feminist rereading in which she takes Hurston to be critiquing the institution of marriage, M. Genevieve West argues that John's wife Lucy is the vine: “When Lucy dies, John is left without shelter in a desert of a community. Without Lucy's discriminating vision, John perishes in the heat and wind of gossip.”¹⁶ These allegorical hermeneutics are possible, I think, because of an

¹⁴ Rita Dove, “Forward” to Zora Neale Hurston, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), xi. This is the edition to which I will be referring throughout this chapter.

¹⁵ John Lowe, *Jump at the Sun: Zora Neale Hurston's Cosmic Comedy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 94.

¹⁶ Margaret Genevieve West, “Feminist Subversion in Zora Neale Hurston's *Jonah's Gourd Vine*”, *Women's Studies*, 31:4, 510-11.

individuating tendency perhaps best evidenced by Deborah Plant when she argues that, “Though community, as a site of resistance, and collective action, as a strategy of resistance, are highly valued among African Americans, Zora Neale Hurston’s site of resistance, though grounded in the community, was located within herself [...] A staunch individualist, Hurston believed in personal industry, individual merit, and self-empowerment.”¹⁷

Dove, Lowe, and West offer one-to-one readings of the allegory that dramatically oversimplify the novel’s social world. Like Plant, they rely on the assumption that, in the world of the novel, the privileged hermeneutic and political “site” is best located within a character’s self. But this is not an accurate depiction of the novel’s social turbulence and dynamism. Rachel Farebrother puts the point neatly when she opines, “The loose plot, which relates the rise and fall of the preacher John Pearson, is often interrupted by collage-like fragments that are the very stuff of the novel.”¹⁸ This “very stuff” intrudes on the “loose plot” in the form of folk sayings, extended and seemingly aberrant episodes between minor characters, petty squabbles between church deacons, and interpretations of the many sermons that circulate in the text. As Farebrother elaborates, “The novel is scattered with vignettes that document the African American congregation’s responses to various sermons. This serves to authenticate a particular version of the sermon, positioning the novel squarely inside a specifically African American cultural tradition.”¹⁹ For Farebrother, the Jonah allegory is one of many biblical citations purloined and repurposed, often without explicit citation, that themselves collide with folk sayings, blues, gossip, and storytelling in the novel’s deeply interwoven “collage.” And Elizabeth J. West, in *African Spirituality in Black Women’s Fiction: Threaded Visions of Memory, Community, Nature,*

¹⁷ Deborah G. Plant, *Every Tub Must Sit on Its Own Bottom: The Philosophy and Politics of Zora Neale Hurston* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 33.

¹⁸ Rachel Farebrother, *The Collage Aesthetic in the Harlem Renaissance* (Farnham, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 151.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 159-60.

and Being, points out that many of what Farebrother calls “collage” materials are non-Christian or syncretically Christian, deeply African in nature: “As Christian preacher and folk hero, John personifies the delicate coexistence of Christianity and African-rooted spirituality among blacks.”²⁰ Rather than a Christian ecology of sin and redemption, West finds in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* “a resounding affirmation of African-rooted spirituality and life.”²¹

I will point out, too, that *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* – as both allegory and novel – does not belong comfortably to John, something Hurston telegraphs before readers even open the book. The titular vine is *Jonah’s*, not John’s: between main character and titular allegory, a significant anagrammatic slide opens up an array of possible interpretations. Invoking a specific biblical backdrop, Hurston also teases us with a lexical puzzle: the surplus, or subtraction, is the letter and article “a.” Through the indefinite article that separates Jonah from John, I understand Hurston to be creating a springy dialectical relationship between an individual believer and her or his worship community. This reading, which until now lingers on the level of the signifier, is further substantiated by my reading of the congregation as an exemplary model of interconnected spectatorship, where the church functions not only as a site of religious experience but also, and primarily, a site of social knowledge, disclosure, resistance, and subversion. To put my reorientation as simply as possible, I argue that Hurston’s churches are social spaces first and sacred spaces second: the two functions coincide in “thick witness,” a form of spectatorship specific to church space across Hurston’s work. In order to maintain his protagonism – his central role in the community, diegetically, and in the novel, extra-diegetically – John must negotiate the terms of the church’s visibility. It is not only the substance of his sermons but his orchestration of the church’s complex visual terrain that guarantee his success.

²⁰ Elizabeth J West, *African Spirituality in Black Women’s Fiction: Threaded Visions of Memory, Community, Nature, and Being*, 2013, 151.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 153.

The visual is a vital but underthought aspect of the novel, subordinated in many readings to its oral elements: dialect and sermon. This focus on acoustics and orality has been wrapped up with the question of the “authentic” in Hurston’s work, a phenomenon evident as soon as the weekend after *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*’s 1934 publication. As M. Genevieve West points out in her analysis of New York City papers’ early reviews of the novel: “Every reviewer – even those who offer substantial criticisms of the novel’s development of the characters, or the handling of time – praises Hurston’s use of dialect.”²² Those contemporaneous (and predominantly white) reviewers often attempted to locate “objectivity” in the novel, engaging in what Rosemary Hathaway calls touristic reading: “the fallacious practice whereby a reader assumes, when presented with a text where the writer and the group represented in the text are ethnically different from herself, that the text is necessarily an accurate, authentic, and authorized representation of that ‘Other’ cultural group.”²³ One reviewer took exception, for example, with John Pearson’s most extended and virtuosic sermon near the novel’s climax. He argued that it was “too good, too brilliantly splashed with poetic imagery, to be the product of any one Negro preacher.”²⁴ As M. Genevieve West points out, this infuriated Hurston – who pulled the sermon from one delivered by C. C. Lovelace in 1929. Hurston transcribed Lovelace’s sermon, and incorporated it nearly word for word as John Pearson’s.²⁵

The sermon is one of the novel’s most significant textual operations, and one from which critics have derived much of the novel’s meaning. But the focus is on the verbal rhetoric,

²² Margaret Genevieve West, *Zora Neale Hurston & American Literary Culture* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005), 70.

²³ Rosemary Hathaway, “The Unbearable Weight of Authenticity: Zora Neale Hurston’s ‘Their Eyes Were Watching God’ and a Theory of ‘Touristic Reading,’” *Journal of American Folklore* 117, no. 464 (Spring 2004), 169.

²⁴ John Chamberlain. “Books of the Times.” Rev. of *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, by Zora Neale Hurston. *New York Times* 3 May 1934: 17.

²⁵ West, *Zora Neale Hurston & American Literary Culture*, 74. The entire sermon can be found in Zora Neale Hurston, *The Sanctified Church* (Berkeley: Turtle Island, 1983), 92–99.

rhythms, and linguistic potentiality of the sermon. Plant argues that, “In her reclamation and celebration of African American folklore, Hurston often expressed her ideas in sermonic form and through the voice of the folk preacher – the very embodiment of African American oral tradition.”²⁶ Gary Ciuba argues that “The novel does not just celebrate an African-American world of words but ponders the very implications of orality and literacy for achieving selfhood.”²⁷ One author even opines that the novel, though relying on sermons throughout, is insufficiently sermonic in its structure: “while *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* arguably qualifies as Hurston’s most overtly “religious” novel, with a preacher for its protagonist, it founders as a preacherly text for its failure to transform the raw material it foists on readers into a more coherent rhetorical strategy.”²⁸ John’s sermons rely, as I will demonstrate, on visual rhetoric just as much as spoken language. As Hurston herself writes in *The Sanctified Church*, preaching is a complexly synaesthetic audiovisual phenomenon, relying on both listening and seeing, vision and speech: “The call to preach is altogether external. The vision seeks the man. Punishment follows if he does not heed the call, or until he answers. In conversion, then, we have the cultural pattern of the person seeking the vision and inducing it by isolation and fasting. In the call to preach we have the involuntary vision – the call seeking the man.”²⁹

In Hurston’s early stories and first novel, the church is a space of gossip, subversion, and social defiance. Specifically, characters take advantage of the church’s concentrated and ritualized visibility to express grievance and desire, articulating beyond the bounds of propriety while soliciting the gaze of the community. Take, for example, two quickly juxtaposed cases of

²⁶ Plant, *Every Tub Must Sit on Its Own Bottom*, 93.

²⁷ Gary Ciuba, “The Worm against the Word: The Hermeneutical Challenge in Hurston’s *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*,” *African American Review*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (Spring, 2000), 120.

²⁸ M. Cooper Harriss, “Preacherly Texts: Zora Neale Hurston and the Homiletics of Literature,” *Journal of Africana Religions*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (2016), 285-6.

²⁹ Zora Neale Hurston, *The Sanctified Church* (Berkeley: Turtle Island, 1983), 84.

domestic violence in *The Eatonville Anthology*, both of which orbit around an Eatonville church. In the *Anthology*, both Mrs. Clarke and Mrs. McDuffy are beaten at home, but it is by means of the church that Hurston juxtaposes them: a public space enables her to conjoin two women's private lives.

IX

[Mrs. Clarke] is a soft-looking, middle-aged woman, whose bust and stomach are always holding a get-together.

She waits on the store sometimes and cries every time [Mr. Clarke] yells at her which he does every time she makes a mistake, which is quite often. She calls her husband 'Jody.' They say he used to beat her in the store when he was a young man, but he is not so impatient now. He can wait until he gets home.

She shouts in Church every Sunday and shakes the hand of fellowship with everybody in the Church with her eyes closed, but somehow always misses her husband.

X

Mrs. McDuffy goes to Church every Sunday and always shouts and tells her 'determination.' Her husband always sits in the back row and beats her as soon as they get home. He says there's no sense in her shouting, as big a devil as she is. She just does it to slur him. Elijah Moseley asked her why she didn't stop shouting, seeing she always got a beating about it. She says she can't 'squinch the sperrit.' Then Elijah asked Mr. McDuffy to stop beating her, seeing that she was going to shout anyway. He answered that she just did it for spite and that his fist was just as hard as her head. He could last just as long as she. So the village let the matter rest.

Both entries are written with a matter-of-factness rendered possible by understatement, like the sinister litote of Mr. Clarke's being "not so impatient" now that he's learned to "wait until he gets home" to strike his wife. Hurston's wryness distances us from the violence; the settings of church and store remove us from the domestic scenes which, crucially, she refuses to depict. I think Hurston adopts these strategies of setting and style not to mock her characters but to avoid what Hortense Spillers calls pornotroping. In her account of enslaved people's bodies rendered "flesh" under the semiotics of slavery, Spillers writes that, "the captive body *translates*

into a potential for pornotroping and embodies sheer physical powerlessness that slides into a more general ‘powerlessness’³⁰ (emphasis mine). In the long wake of this originary ‘translation,’ the spectacle of violated Black bodies shores up white fantasies of power, even and especially amongst would-be sympathetic white liberals. As Hurston herself put it, this time in her essay “The ‘Pet Negro’ System”, it was “so generally accepted that all Negroes in the South are living under horrible conditions that many friends of the Negro up North actually take offense if you don’t tell them a tale of horror and suffering.”³¹ In place of the expected horror and suffering, sincerely or ‘unflinchingly’ depicted, Hurston opts for irony.

But this irony does not evacuate the vignettes of ethical weight. Hurston is not merely satirizing Mrs. Clarke and Mrs. McDuffy. Though the humor of the episode – much of it turning on the trope of the overzealous churchlady – is arguably at their expense, the juxtaposition of both women draws attention to the church as the vehicle of their visibility and self-expression. Hurston is writing into a specific dynamic of spectatorship and display, one mediated through the regular rhythms of church space, with “Church every Sunday” rhyming section IX’s last sentence and section X’s first. “Church every Sunday” – a promise or chant, a repurposed banality. The phrase returns and insists, as do Mrs. Clarke and Mrs. McDuffy, opening a lateral space of mutual beholding. The women congregate, both implicitly in the fictive space of the church and explicitly in the material space of the text. At church every Sunday, both women lodge their complaints through the exaggerated performance of self-presence. Both demand to be seen; in Mrs. Clarke’s case, touched; in Mrs. McDuffy’s, heard. Each woman “shouts” her faith, but in so doing shouts her complaint. Further, Hurston’s description of each woman subtly comments on the conditions of her visibility. The “soft-looking” Mrs. Clarke’s eyes are closed (are they

³⁰ Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 206.

³¹ Zora Neale Hurston, “The ‘Pet Negro’ System.” Quoted in Wall 1995, 914–21.

bruised shut?) but she knows nevertheless how to avoid her husband's hands; Mrs. McDuffy's uncertain place in the sanctuary (is she in the back row with her husband or has she moved nearer the front?) reorients the gaze of the congregation from pulpit to pew. Her "determination" is both ecstasy and insistence: *see me*.

With Mrs. Clarke and Mrs. McDuffy, Hurston avoids a story of salvation or intervention. Neither abusive husband is condemned or pathologized, and the village decides to "let the matter rest." Hurston is less interested in overdetermined delineations between perpetrators and victims, or, more subtly, between objects and subjects of the gaze. Instead, she is after the lateral, intramural dynamics of witness, disclosure, and resistance specific to congregation. She gives language here to a considered kind of witness, deliberate and a degree removed. *Harm travels*, she seems to be saying; *how are we best situated to see it?* Crucially, she does not take the pornotropic approach of foregrounding violence, instead adopting the terms of visibility Mrs. Clarke and Mrs. McDuffy seem to have chosen for themselves. The very coolness of Hurston's language is mimetic, standing in for a spectatorship that considers but does not necessarily pry.

Jonah's Gourd Vine further elaborates the church as a social crucible, where the complex dynamics of a community are articulated and negotiated. The novel's very first scene in a church makes this clear. It is a richly choreographed and layered sequence, including choral performance, the novel's first sermon, and John and Lucy's illicit courtship. Determined to hasten their romance, John arrives at church before anyone else "with a three-cornered note in his hymn-book" (*JGV* 52).³² He falls to his knees and prays, then remarks (Hurston's verb is actually "exult[s]") "Dat sho sound good [...] If mah voice sound *dat* good de first time Ah ever prayed in de church house, it sho won't be de las'." When Lucy arrives, she and John swap messages in the hymn-books they surreptitiously exchange. John's to Lucy: "Dere Lucy: Whin

³² Zora Neale Hurston, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008).

you pass a mule tied to a tree, / Ring his tail and think of me” (52). And Lucy’s to John: “Long as the vine grow ’round the stump / You are my dolling sugar lump. / Mama whipped me last night, because Bud told her we was talking to each other” (53). John is so taken with the missive that he is “blind and deaf to his surroundings” until Lucy’s brother, the traitorous Bud, sharply instructs him to get his pitch as the choir begins to sing:

It was a hard race and hotly contended at the top of the lungs all the way. The trebles won because while altos, basses and even other trebles forgot their notes in confusion and fell by the wayside, Lucy never missed a note. Bud growled away in the bass but Lucy treed him and held him growling in discomfiture out upon a limb until the end of the piece cut him down.

Finally, the pastor gives an entirely idiosyncratic sermon. He declares, “‘Ah takes mah tex’ ‘tween de lids uh de Bible,’” then slams the bible shut. “Another challenging glare about the room. Same results. ‘Don’t you take and meddle wid *what* Ah takes mah tex’. Long ex Ah gives yuh de word uh Gawd, ‘tain’t none uh yo’ business what Ah gits it from’ ” (54). John, fixated on Lucy, “heard little of it [the sermon]. He studied the back of Lucy’s head and shoulders and the way the white rice buttons ran down her back and found plenty to entertain him the whole while.”

This first glimpse of the Notasulga church presents an arena of social contest and possibility. It is here that John can be near Lucy without fear of censure, here too that his resonating voice carries back to him the possibility of leadership within a community that, until now, had marginalized him as an interloper from “across the creek.” Hurston secularizes three of the church’s key components: its architecture, hymn-books, and bible. It is the building’s acousticity – its status as an amplifying technology – that convinces John this trip won’t be his last. In lieu of piety, the hymn-books facilitate flirtation, mediating the desires they would putatively circumscribe. And the bible is less an authoritative overtext than it is a fulcrum

between the pastor's authority and the hermeneutic powers and social pressures of his congregation. In slamming the bible shut, the pastor consolidates a sense of "de tex" as verbal, interlocutory, and socially contested.³³ The church throngs with messages that are horizontal – between congregants – rather than vertical – between the worshiper and the proper object of worship.

But it is within the choral fight for "sound supremacy" that Hurston most explicitly marks the church as an organ of social mapping, subversion, and renegotiation. Though Bud may police her sexuality outside of the sanctuary, here she "tree[s] him and h[olds] him growling in discomfiture out upon a limb until the end of the piece cut[s] him down." Hurston's metaphor of the hunted "coon" is disturbing because of its overdetermined use as a racial slur; moreover, the image anticipates a reversal some forty pages later. While Lucy is pregnant with her first daughter, Bud comes to collect money John had borrowed. But John is not at home – he is at the jook with a new flame – and Lucy cannot pay. Implacable, Bud cruelly exacts payment by taking the couple's wedding bed, leaving Lucy to give birth later that night on a pallet on the floor. Furious with his brother-in-law and with himself, John beats Bud, who in turn goes straight to the police. John is then forced to flee a vigilante mob, "twenty or thirty men in the cloud-muddied moonlight" (100). Unable to find John, the klansmen ask Alf Pearson if he knows where John went, and he responds, "I've treed many a coon in my time, but I don't believe I've got a drop of bloodhound in me" (101).

³³ This scene is mirrored at a minor character's wedding. Mehaley Grant, one of the women whom John is amorously connected to, marries Pomp Lamar – but her father insists on officiating the wedding. He wears down the pastor summoned to do the ceremony until he leaves. Then Woody Grant "who had committed the marriage ceremony to memory anyway, grabbed an almanac off the wall and held it open pompously before him as he recited the questions to give the lie to the several contentions that he could not read" (83).

Within this symbolic system of racial terror, Lucy's use of "sound supremacy" to "tree" her brother is a complex and unsettling event. Her performance is highly specialized, a responsive and improvisational kind of singing Hurston further theorizes in her collection of essays, *The Sanctified Church*.

Negro spirituals are not solo or quartette material. The jagged harmony is what makes it, and it ceases to be what it was when this is absent. Neither can any group be trained to reproduce it. Its truth dies under training like flowers under hot water. The harmony of the true spiritual is not regular. The dissonances are important and not to be ironed out by the trained musician [...] each singing of the piece is a new creation. The congregation is bound by no rules [...] we must consider the rendition of a song not as a final thing, but as a mood. It won't be the same thing next Sunday.³⁴

Hurston understands the congregation to be "bound by no rules" within this ever-modulating art whose "jagged harmony" is a ritualized irregularity, a process of difference and dissent. In *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, this unruly polyphony is both social and musical. Through the metaphor of the bloodhound, Hurston sets Lucy's powerful voice in relationship to an entire apparatus of racialized violence. Hurston's rumbling synesthesia – where one person's voice can "tree" another's – allows Lucy to subvert a sexist power structure by reconfiguring a racist one. The effect is troubling and astonishing: the choir becomes a "jagged" metonymy for a social world whose structures can be inverted by augmenting or diminishing a chord.

That John's first experience in church is governed by sexual flirtation and sound supremacy, rather than religious devotion, should not suggest the novel is entirely devoid of questions of faith and the divine. But efforts to understand John and his position solely through the lens of spiritual aspiration and failure seem to willfully misapprehend the banal and petty grind of church politics. Once John and Lucy are established in Eatonville, Lucy's canny sense of the sanctuary as a space of display is no less refined. As John's fame grows in and around

³⁴ Hurston, *The Sanctified Church*, 77.

Eatonville, so too does his tendency to stray. Shortly before the couple's second daughter, Isis, is born, the couple is in crisis, with whispers and rumors of John's philandering. But after Isis is born, the couple take the infant to the church in Sanford when John has been guest preacher. "Git yo' things on, Lucy, and come on tuh Sanford [...] De church ain't seen mah wife in six months. Put on dat li'l' red dress and come switchin' up de aisle and set on de front seat so you kin be seen" (115). Savvy about the optics of this affair, Lucy opts for a different dress.

With her bangs above her shining eyes and the door-knob not of hair at the back, Lucy sat on that front seat in church and felt a look strike her in the back and slide off helplessly. Her husband's glance fell on her like dew. Her look and nobody else's was in his gray eyes, and the coldness melted from the pit of her stomach, and at the end of the sermon John came down from the pulpit and took the baby from her arms and standing just before the pulpit proudly and devotedly called, 'Come heah eve'ybody, one at de time and pass by and look on yo' pastor's baby girl chile. Ah could shout tuhday.' And they came.

There are many things to note in this extremely condensed moment of plural spectatorship. First: the church is, even more transparently than anywhere else in the novel, a space of social contest and dynamic visual expression, where Lucy is able to fend off the "look" that "helplessly" glances off her back through the careful coordination of her family's visibility. John knows that it is high time his wife makes another appearance in the Sanford congregation; Lucy knows that her new dress and taut "door-knob" hair are as instrumental to the vision of marital plenitude as is the young child on display. But there is something else at play in the field of interwoven gazes – the envious "look" that strikes Lucy in the back, John's loving "glance" that falls on her "like dew," the satisfaction that "her look and nobody else's" is in her husband's eyes. The look that glances "helplessly" off Lucy's back is that of Hattie, the woman with whom John has "taken up" in Sanford, who in but a short time will hire a conjure woman to win John for herself. These women, structured as narrative antagonists, are briefly congregants; they share and *dispute* the terrain of the church's visibility. Remembering Mrs. Clarke and Mrs. McDuffy, I take this

co-presence to mean something rather specific. The two women will never speak to each other or meet each other elsewhere in the text – except in church. As with the balm of “Church every Sunday” in the *Eatonville Anthology*, the church in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* is a shared terrain unlike any other, the only moment where these women play out their narrative antagonism in space.

I do not wish to deflate the scene’s significance by suggesting that the ritual of proudly displaying Isis is (merely) spectacular. Indeed, since Isis is convincingly read as a biographical stand-in for Hurston herself, the scene is all the more richly understood as a moment of authorial arrival – Hurston’s entry into the church’s visual field. Considering that Hurston’s signature move as director of *Commandment Keeper Church* will be participating in the ritual she depicts, this scene is all the more richly read as a skilled visual orchestration. And later, at a moment when John is most at risk of losing his congregation, he will rely on a similar tactic of both verbal and visual rhetoric, suggesting that his words will no longer do enough:

‘Mah chillun, Papa Pearson don’t feel lak preachin’ y’all tuhday [...] y’all been looking at me fuh eight years now, but look lak some uh y’all been lookin’ on me wid unseein’ eye. When Ah speak tuh yuh from dis pulpit, dat ain’t me talkin’, dat’s de voice uh God speakin’ thru me. When de voice is thew, Ah jus’ unhoother one uh God’s crumblin’ clods.’

Presenting himself as a “natchel man,” John deems himself insufficient to preside: “ ‘Ahm comin’ down from de pulpit and Ah ain’t never goin’ back lessen Ah go wid yo’ hearts keepin’ comp’ny wid wine and yo’ fire piled on mah fire, heapin’ up.’ He closed the great Bible slowly, passed his handkerchief across his face and turned from the pulpit, but when he made to step down, strong hands were there to thrust him back” (122). Here, John relies on both the verbal and visual impact of his anti-sermon, but he also teaches his viewers how to look. He accuses his congregation not of seeing too *much*, but of seeing too *little*. The defense hinges not only on the trope of the divine instrument – that John is merely a vessel while preaching – but also on a

specific and *lacking* form of witness. The church space becomes a training ground for two forms of witness – one that allows you to apprehend the presence of God, another which allows you to be more fully in the world and in community. The shutting of the bible – so reminiscent of the defiant preacher from the very first church scene who will find ‘da tex’ where he likes, thank you – literalizes this moment of transition from one form of witness into another, as John becomes not only “unhother one uh God’s crumblin’ clods” but a vulnerable community member in need of support.

John’s most virtuoso sermon, the one that Hurston copied near-verbatim from Lovelace, is similarly premised on how to witness. There are very few changes to the original, but those that exist bring the relationship between secular witness and religious experience into greater clarity. Both sermons draw on the image of Jesus, wounded. “Now a man usually gets wounded in the midst of his enemies; but this man was wounded, says the text, in the house of His friends. It is not your enemies that harm you all the time.” But then they diverge:

Lovelace:

Watch that close friend, and every sin we commit is a wound to Jesus.

Hurston:

Watch that close friend. Every believer in Christ is considered His friend, and every sin we commit is a wound to Jesus.

Hurston’s minute but meaningful revision of this specifically under-articulated phrase enables her to artfully integrate both the spiritual and secular senses of witness. The paranoia of the original – in which “watch that close friend” moves as if without further need of explanation into “and every sin we commit is a wound to Jesus” – is given a linking phrase. In this link – the

idea that friendship may index or indicate our divine relations, as well – Hurston injects a dose of reparation (look out for your neighbor) into an otherwise paranoid form of witness (*look out for your neighbor!*)

This gentler sense of witness – what earlier I have described as a gaze that considers but does not pry, as in the case of *The Eatonville Anthology* – is one that corroborates rather than surveils the neighbor – a thicket of beholding.

Thick Witness: *Commandment Keeper Church, Beaufort South Carolina, May 1940*

In the late 1920s, Hurston used the 16mm camera Charlotte Mason had given her to create her earliest documentary footage. The materials she filmed include children’s games, a picnic, a Florida lumber camp, and five minutes’ footage of Oluale Kossola (better known as Cudjo/Cudjoe Lewis), one of the very last survivors of the Middle Passage. By 1940, after her falling out with Charlotte Osgood Mason, Hurston had new financial limitations, but she also had a new capacity for ethnographic reinvention. A decade removed from Franz Boas’ heavy objectivist influence on her late-1920s documentaries, Hurston made a strikingly different film, one in which she was an active member of the religious practices she recorded.

Before diving into my reading of *Commandment Keeper*, it is instructive to contextualize Hurston’s filmmaking within its film-historical episteme and its contemporary critical reception. Of special note, historically, are the “ethnographic reconstruction” film as a genre – typified by Robert Flaherty’s 1922 *Nanook of the North* and 1926 *Moana* – and Franz Boas’ model of objectivist anthropological research. As Fatimah Tobing Rony describes it, the “ethnographic reconstruction genre” is nostalgic, romantic, and unapologetically staged; it nevertheless makes a

bold claim on cultural truth. The genre “makes the indigenous subject into a document, the image of the body seen as ‘real,’ sufficient in itself to establish the truth of the implicit evolutionary narrative [...] with ethnographic reconstruction, the underlying fictional context is elided, a result justified by the notion that the Ethnographic, although living [...] is a survival of something long since dead.”³⁵ In contrast to Flaherty’s explicitly reconstructive project, Boas was interested in the camera for its would-be objectivity and its ability to register microdata. In 1930, he took a camera to British Columbia to photograph the Kwakiutl, an indigenous people he had studied throughout his career; similar to Hurston’s approach, he primarily filmed activities and performances – songs, games, dance, manufacture.³⁶ Margaret Mead, Boas’ acolyte and Belo’s mentor, sums up the Boasian sense of the camera some 40 years later in a debate with James Baldwin over the definition of history: “Now my definition of what did happen is that if there’d have been a camera there running on its own steam with no human being to press the button on or off what would have been on the film is what really happened.”³⁷ Mead’s sense of history subsists on the fantasy of a mere camera, neutrally registering the events that pass before it. More precisely, the fantasy is of mere representability: of phenomena whose depiction would in no way influence their nature.

Situating Hurston’s early film footage in relation to Flaherty, Boas, and Mead does not neatly explain her work. The footage is idiosyncratic, full of disorienting cadences and tangents, surprising juxtapositions and overexposures. Rather, these antithetical approaches – between Flaherty’s romantic reconstruction and Boas’ positivist aspiration to neutrality – give shape to the epistemic boundaries of 1920s ethnographic cinema, the assumptions and representational

³⁵ Fatimah Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 130.

³⁶ See J Ruby, “Franz Boas and Early Camera Study of Behavior,” *Kinesics Report* 3 (1), 6-11.

³⁷ Quoted in Rony, 193.

ideologies within which Hurston worked. Not all scholars are sympathetic to her efforts. In *Cultures in Babylon: Black Britain and African America*, Carby considers the anthropological dimension of Hurston's writing. Wary of Hurston's depiction of rural 'authenticity', Carby considers Hurston's anthropological attitude a mechanism of "discursive displacement" rather than one of mimetic transparency. Drawing on Gayatri Spivak's binary of the intellectual and the subaltern, Carby asserts that, although "Hurston identified herself both as an intellectual and as a representative figure from the folk culture she reproduced and made authentic in her work," the assertion that "she *was* both did not resolve the contradictions embedded in the social meanings of each category."³⁸ Rather than a discursive emplacement, Carby argues that Hurston's search for cultural authenticity constitutes a "discursive displacement," in that her "creation of a discourse of 'the folk' as a *rural* people in Hurston's work in the 1920s and 1930s displaces the migration of black people to cities." In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Mules and Men*, "the rural black folk become an aesthetic principle" [...] "a folk who are outside of history."³⁹

This critique is particularly worth considering in the context of film, one of whose medium-specificities is the absent scene it re-presents; displacement is inescapably a feature of projection. But scholars have noted the ways that Hurston dives into the representational politics of film with canny reflexivity and brio. Writing about Hurston's earlier films, Autumn Womack, argues that they "shift the existing logic of intelligibility governing the possibilities for what it means to see and be seen," effectively moving away from "a politics of representation that takes for granted the representability of black social life, and toward a concern with what visual technology can and cannot convey."⁴⁰ Womack understands these early films to be an "interface

³⁸ Hazel V. Carby, *Cultures in Babylon: Black Britain and African America*, The Haymarket Series (London: Verso, 1999), 171.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁴⁰ Autumn Womack, "'The Brown Bag of Miscellany': Zora Neale Hurston and the Practice of Overexposure," *Black Camera* Vol. 7, No. 1 (Fall 2015), 117.

between blackness and filmic technology” rather than an “exercise in documentary style.” Rethinking amateurism as an epistemic experiment in visuality, Womack conceives of the many moments of overexposure as threshold-moments of over- and under-representation: too much light, too little inscription. In these moments, Womack finds Blackness: “Coming and going, appearing and disappearing, the feeling of blackness moves in excess of extant categories of identification, racial idioms, or visual grammars.”⁴¹

Readings of *Commandment Keeper* have similarly focused on its deconstruction of representational, and especially anthropological, norms. Where Womack’s readings explode the very notion of ethnography as a representational project by reading film “errors” as formal experiments, Fatimah Tobing Rony identifies a different kind of overexposure: that between ethnographer and ethnographic subject. Rony suggests that Hurston’s innovation was in “violat[ing] the boundaries between Observer/Observed.” Rony first demonstrates the strong influence that Boas had on his pupil, suggesting that “Much of [Hurston’s]] footage seems to have been conceived as scientific samplings for Boas,” with Boas’s concept of *isolable actions* “reflected, for example, in Hurston’s footage of children playing: they are made into “types,” holding up pieces of paper with their ages, filing past the camera frontally and then in profile.”⁴² However, Rony also highlights Hurston’s departure from her Boasian training, particularly in the way that her “observing participation” in the scene “breaks with both the anthropological and the ethnographic film tradition of being the cool, distanced, observing, scientific eye.”⁴³ Finding Hurston to be “alternately insider and outsider, subject and object,” Rony understands her documentary style to be one of transgression.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Womack, “‘The Brown Bag of Miscellany’”, 126.

⁴² Rony, *The Third Eye*, 204.

⁴³ 211

⁴⁴ 210

Responding directly to Carby's charge of "dislocation" leveled at Hurston, Kelley Wagers argues that *Commandment Keeper* should be "Understood as a comment upon rather than an enactment of historical dislocation and methodological dissonance." Wagers reads an image that she calls "the Beaufort shot" (not recreated here). The image includes three worshippers, one of whom is Sister Julia Jones, who will most prominently enter a trance later in the footage, as well as Hurston herself. For Wagers, the shot "crystallizes Hurston's method of recording cultural practices in overlapping modes of representation that register their practitioners' unsteady and incomplete agency."⁴⁵ The complexity of the image lies in its simultaneous invocation of and performance of negotiated authority with respect to representation and representability: "By showing the women as at once authors and objects of various acts of vision, the shot reveals Hurston's dual investment in attaining and interrogating representational authority. Hurston's place in the pew indicates her director's role as well as the complex negotiations that she undertook." Wagers points out that, while she is to an extent free to perform as she would like, "Jones is subject to Hurston's subtle direction and the team's recording acts while she moves and speaks in a state of trance. The young woman in the middle also registers the ambivalence of this multilayered representational process; when she looks into the lens, her expression reflects and confronts the disruptive, captivating presence of the camera."⁴⁶

These scholarly readings of *Commandment Keeper* admirably explicate its insurrectionary take on anthropological representation, but they do not answer the question: why a church, specifically? What is it that guided Hurston not only to this style of "observing participation" but to pick this setting as exemplary for it? My argument throughout this chapter is that the church is a unique space of participatory, nuanced, and negotiated spectatorship. Hurston

⁴⁵ Kelley Wagers, "'How come you ain't got it?': Dislocation as Historical Act in Hurston's Documentary Texts," *African American Review*, Vol. 46, No. 2/3 (Summer/Fall 2013), 203.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 202.

was still thinking of the church as a dynamic and polyvalent space of negotiation and lateral spectatorship. In the Beaumont footage, Hurston is not merely using an unusual anthropological technique of “observing participation” – she is deriving this technique from her setting.

I have landed on the language of *thick witness* to describe this participatory, roving, lateral form of spectatorship. Thick witness is spectatorship that gathers, consolidates, and expresses social meaning. It is not merely receptive, optical, or contemplative – rather it is dialogic, vocal, and performative. Here, Rony’s distinction between participant observation and “observing participation” is vital to clarify what is it that makes this witness *thick*. “Observing participation” names Hurston’s unusual ethnographic methodology – whereby she joins the throng she studies – but names also, and crucially, the very social practices that *Commandment Keeper* documents. Hence, her method is also her object: she gestures to the patterns of “observing participation” endemic to the church by enacting them. Thick witness is a form of testifyin’, a modality of shared seeing inextricable from a modality of shared being. It is an involved, multilaterally negotiated, always interpretive mode of expressive vision. In thick witness there are no onlookers: the spectator cajoles, amplifies, enjoins, provokes. In my thinking on Hurston’s anthropological attitude, thick witness is a dialectical concept, as it is both the ethnographer’s tool and the subject of inquiry. Through observing participation, Hurston refuses to bifurcate these two forms of witness (the camera’s gaze as distinct from the churchgoer’s). Instead, by acting as both director of the gaze and participant in the scene, she further thickens the overlap between anthropologist’s look and the congregant’s. *Commandment Keeper*’s aesthetic specificity is its attempt to perform the practice it depicts.

The “thickness” of thick witness is a play on anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s notion of thick description, although I am not exactly claiming that Hurston is a Geertzian *avant la lettre*.

Rather, it is his sense of the describer's role as a mediator and interpreter, rather than a transparent pane, that I hope to connote. Conceptually, I differentiate "witness" from "description" insofar as the latter is always anthropological, whereas the former describes both the subject of the anthropologist's gaze *and* the gaze itself. In her Commandment Keeper documentary, Hurston is witnessing a specific form of witness. She uses the camera as a reflexive tool, both embedded within, conversing with, and capturing a group of worshippers. Through *mise en scène*, action, and the structure of her footage, Hurston calls attention to looking as a strategy of anthropological knowledge *and* a gnostic (insofar as it resists being known) practice of expression. For Geertz, thick description is the best language adequate to describing what it is anthropologists do, which is interpret. Arguing against the use of behaviorist models that break cultural practices into discrete units of action, Geertz says that, "The concept of culture I espouse, and whose utility the essays below attempt to demonstrate, is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning."⁴⁷

Before turning to the "thick witness" of Hurston's filmmaking, I would like to dwell briefly with two images of what "thick witness" is not. The first image is taken from Oscar Micheaux's 1925 *Body and Soul*, which we cannot be sure Hurston ever saw (though her description of Father Watson, a Voodoo doctor in *Mules and Men*, as resembling Paul Robeson at the very least confirms that Hurston could imagine Robeson in a pseudo-pastoral role).⁴⁸ The

⁴⁷ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 5.

⁴⁸ Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men*. "Before my first interview with the Frizzly Rooster [Father Watson's moniker] was fairly begun, I could understand his great following. He had the physique of Paul Robeson with the sex appeal and hypnotic what-ever-you-might-call-it of Rasputin" (214).

second is taken from the ending of *Commandment Keeper Church*, when the congregation performs outdoors for an as-of-yet undisclosed audience. In the first, Robeson's smiling and sexually predatory is set apart from his congregation, preaching from the pulpit. He and his congregation are 180 degrees across from each other, their co-presence in the church sequenced through shot-reverse-shot editing. In the second, the congregation of *Commandment Keeper Church* is organized in a chorus, a river behind them. The spatial organization of each sequence is frontal, with a distinct planar division between the front of the church and the congregation (in the case of *Body and Soul*) or between the worshipping performers and their presumed audience (in the case of *Commandment Keeper*). In each, the visual field is reminiscent of the proscenium, with a clear demarcation between an audience and a stage. The frontality – reminiscent of the very earliest silent films – has a distancing effect. In the case of *Body and Soul*, the profilmic distance between Robeson's preacher and his congregation harbors a dramatic irony; far from the pedestaled leader of the community, he is a charlatan and a sexual predator. In the case of *Commandment Keeper*, the distance has an altogether more complex effect when it is revealed that the spectators are young, lounging white boys, who seem to fidget (in nervousness or disdain, or some altogether different affect of racialized encounter?) when they are asked to donate for the performance they've witnessed. I read this sequence at greater length below; for now it will suffice to say that the encounter is filmed in a way wholly unlike the scenes set within the church, in which a different organization of gazes and logic of performance is endogenous.

Compare the frontal nature of the images above – in which the preacher and/or choir is centered, as if perched on an implicit proscenium – to the first shot of *Commandment Keeper* set within the church itself. The camera lands on three young women, caught mid-worship, before it

pans to the right. As it pans, it brings into view two other worshipper, the last of whom stares directly at the camera. Setting, staging, camera technique, and bodily proxemics immediately distinguish this sequence from those briefly discussed above. The rigid, proscenium-like pictorial frame – the image’s frontality – is replaced by a more fluid organization of space and more complicated relation between background and foreground. The camera pans, scanning five worshippers. They are grouped at the perimeter of a circle, visible to and responsive to each other. And they look – intermittently but frankly – right at the camera. Rather than merely delineating the object of vision from the audience that observes it, depth of field in this shot works to create a negotiated proximity to – and a dynamic relationship with – the camera. When it arrives at the final point in the arc of its movement, the camera meets the gaze of a woman set somewhat apart in the pew. She looks right back at the camera and doesn’t blink. Rather than purporting to ‘merely’ represent – while simultaneously eliding itself – the panning camera stages several opportunities for confrontation. As it relocates the z-axis, shifting the terrain of the visible, it solicits the worshippers’ scrutiny rather than phantasmatically separating profilmic space. More importantly, some of the worshippers take the opportunity given: they return the camera’s gaze. These moments of ‘eye contact’ exemplify the representational self-reflexivity scholars have located in Hurston’s documentaries.

Even when the camera is least obtrusive, as if fading into the background, the organization of the visual field is centripetal rather than planar. In the sequence I describe below, when Sister Jones enters her trance, what stands out most is the way that Jones is amidst an encircled throng of beholders. In Fatimah Tobing Rony’s account, Hurston’s interest, like Belo’s, lay in the social phenomenon of the trance, which Rony connects to Hurston’s insistence on Black culture’s *liveness*: “Hurston’s filming of trance, the movement from consciousness to the

speaking in tongues, the jerks and the spasms, is connected to her belief in black culture as not dying but as an ever-emerging and dynamic culture.” I would add that just as important as the individual worshiper’s entry into trance is the form of witness that surrounds it; the movement of Jones’s body is constellated through circle of onlookers whose witness of her ecstasy further elaborate and amplify its meaning. In departing from Rony, then, I would warrant that while Hurston was contracted by Belo to document trance, she was just as if not more interested in the dynamics of on/looking – of interlocking and mutually beholding gazes – that encircle the phenomenon and make it mean.

Standing out from the footage is a long panning shot, arcing across the entire terrain of the church. Amidst so much uncertainty in Hurston’s footage (how should shots be sequenced rhythmically? In what order? By what principles of montage did Hurston intend to organize her footage?) this shot stands out for its sheer duration and integrity of space. As a long shot and a steady pan, it has a formal integrity and a geometric logic that warrant further scrutiny, highlighted by the rhyming guitars at the beginning and end of the shot. We can take these guitars (roughly) as two points in the diameter of a circle, with the camera moving elliptically from one side to the other. The congregation is captured in one shot, as if a single body. But unlike in the first sequence analyzed above, the congregants are looking away from the camera, their gaze averted as they turn inward to pray.

It is useful to notice how different this sequence is from the many that surround it, especially contrasting it with the oppositional axes of looks discussed above. With this panning shot, we seem at first to be experiencing a technique more conservative than those we’ve encountered thus far, closer to the camera-elliding protocols of narrative cinema. The congregation is seemingly caught in a moment of private reflection – the camera simply a

registering-machine, an innocuous instrument of mere representation. Hurston's camera lens is briefly coterminous with a voyeuristic gaze that sees without being seen. At best, this naturalized camera would approximate the codes of classical Hollywood narrative film — the demand for an invisible observational vantage without any formal disruptions that would reflexively remind viewers of their *own* visibility. At worst, it would emulate the anthropological will-to-neutrality Rony insists Hurston does not do.

But I read this panning shot as no less reflexive, no less experimental, than Hurston's other methods of representation in *Commandment Keeper*. Contextually, one must remember Hurston is just as likely to have choreographed this sequence as she did any of the others; given, in other moments, the congregation's relationship to the camera — gazes alternately wary or inviting, indifferent or inquisitive; bodies oriented obliquely or frontally — this sequence carries the weight of being granted. It is not a scene devoid of representational negotiation; rather, representational negotiation is its condition of possibility. Even taken as an excerpt outside of its context, however, the shot is formally complex and unstable. The rhyming guitars and upright piano insinuate the end of suspended, prayerful silence. And the shot ends with a lingering pause on the same woman who had most boldly stared down the camera some minutes prior. She, unlike every other worshiper, may open her eyes to once more confront the camera that introduces.

The worshipper who stares boldly into the camera is the same woman to end both panning shots; the first, which only includes the women in the sanctuary, and the second, which includes a full 180 degrees of axial turning and incorporates the preacher and male musicians. In each panning shot, this woman's face is the last image, almost like a punctuating articulation, at the end of each unfolding pan. In the first, this worshipper boldly returns the camera's look. In

the second, she need only open her eyes to do so again. The tension that this possibility of exposure creates prevents this panning shot from performing the detached observational mode that I've sketched above. The possibility of such a reprimand positions the camera not as an removed observer but instead as an aberrant worshipper, whose eyes should also be closed. More the look of a curious child than an overknowing adult, the sequence performs a kind of eye-closing – cutting away before the admonishing look can be received. The effect of what I am reading as an “aberrant gaze,” one hoping not to be caught in the act of looking, is that it gathers from left to right, from guitar to guitar, the congregation as a body. In this moment when the congregation's eyes are closed in prayer, the witness is less clearly thick; the camera more clearly articulates the subject-object relation that Hurston on the whole eschews within the church. The object in question in this moment of aberrant glimpsing is not trance, or “liveness” – the purported aim of Belo's expedition – but the congregation: gathered, inward-turning, and opaque. In this moment most clearly aligned with anthropological coolness (a coolness just on the edge of disruption), what Hurston gathers – the object of her search – is congregation.

The Outside of the Look

The thick witness I have been describing is consolidated by a powerful filmic act of exclusion, even excommunication. If Hurston is bringing her viewers in to the Beaufort church – and I hesitate to say that she admits every viewer – she expels white viewers in the sequence's final shots. She accomplishes this through a Brecht-like moment of alienation through which white spectators must confront their status as consumers of *Commandment Keeper* and consider their reasons for doing so.

Hurston demarcates the world outside the church – and therefore the world surrounding and exceeding spaces of thick witness – first by elaborating sequences of arrival. Before spectators get to church, we are driven there. Indeed, Hurston takes the same approach her 1927 logging community footage – I have juxtaposed the images alongside each other to bring out the technique. In both the logging community and *Commandment Keeper*, Hurston documents the voyage into the anthropological scene. In one, her camera is perched on a pushcar riding the same railway by which logs and loggers are transported between forest and camp. In the other, the camera is in a car navigating Beaufort on its way to church. When I first encountered these films in 2017, I read these make-shift tracking shots as the articulation of an argument about medium – the conflation of camera with train or moving car, meant the images produced could not be divorced from the vehicles enabling them. In my thinking at the time, the camera, train, and car formed a medial nexus within which Hurston expressed a fundamental interconnectivity. Nothing is outside of cinema’s media ecology; no matter how isolated or distinct, every community is touched by the horizon of modernity expressed through technologies of communication, representation, and transport.

I no longer understand these sequences in the same way. Autumn Womack’s readings of Hurston’s filmmaking changed its meaning for me, as she posits that Hurston exhibits the grayzones of representation, forging an “interface between blackness and filmic technology” while refusing to make the former fully or ever representable by the latter. Following Womack, I understand the journey into the ethnographic scene to be aspirational – even asymptotic – rather than conclusive. These shots are best understood as insinuating admission in two contradictory senses. First there is the sense of admittance: the shots permit a spectator’s entry into the scene of ethnography, mimetically indexing Hurston’s own journey and incorporation. But these opening

shots also admit – that is, confess – the representational contingencies subtending a documentary production: they demonstrate the process by which the ethnographer arrives, thereby calling attention to the outside from which the ethnographer emerges and the inside she now inhabits and (however irregularly) represents. In this more reflexive sense of admission, Hurston's opening shots do not permit the spectator's admittance so much as they *propose* its possibility. The journey-shots do not index an arrival; rather, they index an outside.

Having become more critical of my own spectatorship as an object of analysis, I am not certain that every viewer can make it out of this outside. The viewing conditions under which I most recently watched *Commandment Keeper* brought greater clarity to this problematic. I rewatched the film in December of 2020 and then again in January 2021 – this second time with my friend and colleague Kristen, a PhD candidate in Africana Studies at Brown University. She and I were thrilled to watch *Commandment Keeper* together because of our shared love of Hurston, but as our viewing continued, an atmosphere of inquiry and excitement was slowly replaced by one of subtle tension. When we finished, Kristen turned to me and asked, *what's it to you, Nolan?*

Familiar with the realities of Southern Black churches in a way I cannot be, Kristen articulated her sense that we were watching two very different films. *Commandment Keeper's* final shots make this reality especially pronounced. In the final moments of *Commandment Keeper*, Hurston films (and perhaps, given her role in choreographing the scene, coordinates) the congregation's performance of Gospel songs at the edge of a river. For the first few moments of the sequence, it appears as if the group is performing only for the camera – a moment that, once again, flirts with the naturalized profilmic space and elided camera emblematic of Hollywood narrative, or Flaherty's romanticized "ethnographic reconstructions," discussed above.

But at one point, the reverend leaves his congregation and exits the frame camera-right. The edited version I saw then cuts to a group of young white boys in the grass, the figure of the reverend moving between them, holding out his hat for donations. I say the figure of the reverend because one cannot be fully sure it is him: the clothing is identical, but his face is out of frame and nothing – save, of course, the editor’s cut – explicitly links the space of spectatorship (the giggling boys) with the space of performance. They are rather differently lit, as you can see in images 16 and 17 below, and the oblique angle at which the boys are shot creates a troubled asymmetry, a canted mirror that does not quite confirm that co-presence of audience and performance. I am not interested in questions of whether the boys were “really” there, or whether it is a trick of editing – the effect is the same. As Rony argues, “this particular section of the footage reveals Hurston's great awareness of the politics of spectatorship: in the scenes of the service on the river, the Reverend George Washington is represented as being fully in command of an impassioned congregation, but when the footage cuts to the lounging white male onlookers he becomes merely a hand passing a hat. The entertainment value of black spirituality to white onlookers is foregrounded here in a manner that is unthinkable in Boas's or Mead's ethnographic films, revealing again Hurston's third eye sensibility to Subject and Object double consciousness.”

While the car shots take spectators *inside* “Commandment Keeper” (as text and space), these final shots take white spectators *out*. It is not only that Hurston is documenting a real practice of asking for money; nor just the abstracted relationship of Black art and white patronage (though she certainly is); but also that she is articulating an outside. She is not only depicting but *performing* a separation, a kind of enclosure. It is not that she “entraps” but rather

that she creates a boundary, encloses *away from* the gaze of white viewers, by troubling the would-be untroubled waters of spectatorship.

In an 1895 essay on Hurston, Barbara Johnson states that “One of the presuppositions with which I began was that Hurston’s work was situated “outside” the mainstream literary canon and that I, by implication, was an institutional ‘insider.’ I soon came to see, however, not only that the insider becomes an outsider the minute she steps out of the inside but also Hurston’s work itself was constantly dramatizing and undercutting just such inside/outside oppositions, transforming the plane geometry of physical space into the complex transactions of discursive exchange. In other words, Hurston could be read not just as an example of the ‘noncanonical’ writer but as a commentator on the dynamics of any encounter between an inside and an outside, any attempt to make a statement about difference.”⁴⁹ There is something about the lounging boys at the end of *Commandment Keeper* that challenges Johnson’s deconstructionist brio, a sharp snapping into place, a distance that seems unbridgeable by white viewers whose filmic avatars turn nervously away from the supplicating man. Hurston seems to be closing, enclosing, the congregation, scurrying them away from a gaze that will only extract.

What’s it to you Nolan? Really, that could be the question of this whole dissertation. The question has always been here, implicitly, but Kristen brought to a head under conditions of shared, and fraught, spectatorship. One way to confront the provinciality and partiality of one’s own viewing – to know that in seeing, one does not see or know very much – is to watch with others whose experiences before and during viewing viscerally expose of a neutral vantage from which to witness. Paradoxically, there is no way to really find one’s way inside the conditions of one’s spectatorship except from outside of it. I resist any utopian premise here – I won’t pretend

⁴⁹ Barbara Johnson, “Thresholds of Difference: Structures of Address in Zora Neale Hurston,” *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1, “Race,” *Writing, and Difference* (Autumn 1985): 279.

that viewing together across axes of difference does anything more than expose the edges of those differences. Put another way, I still do not and cannot know what Kristen knows about *Commandment Keeper Church*. I am convinced, having rewatched the film many times, that I cannot really see Hurston's film – I can only articulate a distance between the film I saw and the film that she made.

Chapter Four: H.D.'s Fandom and *Trilogy's* Star System

London. Aug. 27. Reaction to the strikes by German bombers on film houses in Margate on Sunday (25) and Folkstone the day before was felt severely by the large cinemas here last night (Monday). All of the picture theatres, regardless of the b.o. calibre of their wares, were virtually deserted.

Variety, August 28 (1940)

In 1940, cinema admissions figures actually rose, to just over 1 billion for the year, and they continued rising steeply for the next few years, reaching over 1.5 billion in 1943, 1944 and 1945.

Mark Glancy, *Going to the Pictures: British Cinema and the Second World War*.

An incident here and there,
and rails gone (for guns)
for your (and my) old town square :

[...]

there, as here, ruin opens
the tomb, the temple ; enter,
there as here, there are no doors :

the shrine lies open to the sky,
the rain falls, here, there
sand drifts ; eternity endures :

[...]

Pompeii has nothing to teach us,
we know crack of volcanic fissure,
slow flow of terrible lava,

pressure on heart, lungs, the brain
about to burst its brittle case
(what the skull can endure!):

over us, Apocryphal fire,
under us, the earth sway, dip of a floor,
slope of a pavement

[...]

yet the frame held:
we passed the flame: we wonderful
what saved us? what for?

H.D., *The Walls do Not Fall* (1944)

The bombed multiplex haunts what many consider the Golden Age of British film history.¹ A Blitz-era paradox: a space of escapist refuge and very real danger. Its promise of collectivity and fellowship is accompanied by the threat of mass death, pandemonium in the dark. And yet, despite the initial bans, it was during the Blitz (Fall 1940 - Spring 1941) that the English began flocking to the movies in ever-greater numbers, a pattern that continued through the war.

I take this uniquely perilous era of moviegoing as an invitation to rediscover cinema in H.D.'s poetry a decade after her most obviously cinematic period –1927-1932 – the years during which she made films and edited *Close Up* with Bryher and Kenneth Macpherson. The rising numbers of English moviegoers risking spectatorship parallels H.D.'s choice to remain in London despite her easy access to America (as a citizen) or Switzerland (through Bryher). Lara Vetter recently argued that H.D. experienced the war – a period Vetter calls “a curious peril,” lifting the phrase from H.D.'s poem “Loss” – as a “therapeutic” episode “in what had become a lifelong struggle to come to terms with the trauma of the Great War.”² For Vetter, remaining in London during the war rejuvenated H.D.'s writing practice and restored her optimism in her countrymen.³ H.D. spent most of WWII in South Kensington, writing *Trilogy*, processing her time spent in Vienna under analysis with Freud, and sketching out her post-war novels. The experience of wartime London occasioned what C. D. Blanton calls a “new war poetry” whose

¹ The period David Lean, Carol Reed, Michael Powell, and Emeric Pressburger came to prominence.

² Lara Vetter, *A Curious Peril: H. D.'s Late Modernist Prose*, (Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 2017), 2.

³ *Ibid.*, 3.

“peculiar quality” is “its shifting relation to languages and conceptual structures *evacuated* by recent events”⁴ (emphasis mine).

The opening stanzas of *Trilogy* mirror the visceral Blitz-era problematic of mass evacuation and refuge: “there, as here, ruin opens / the tomb, the temple ; enter, / there as here, there are no doors”⁵. The disorientation afforded by this ruinously “open” architecture is both profit and loss: since tomb and temple are everywhere accessible, a broken city is precisely the grounds for H.D.’s vision of a “new religion” synchronizing modern and ancient worship. The bombardment unearths the present-past; the ruins are not there/then, but here/now. *Trilogy*’s worshipers are a “we” emerging implicitly and tentatively from “your (and my) town square,” a “we” that gathers traction as “Walls” unfolds, later becoming “we, the latter-day twice born” who “have not crawled so very far // up our individual grass-blade / toward our individual star.”⁶ Though these worshipers are miniscule – oysters, insects, and worms – they have a special fondness for stargazing.

In these pages, I relate *Trilogy*’s idiosyncratic and much-debated theology to cinema’s star system, arguing that H.D.’s idealization of divine femininity in *Trilogy* amplifies the erotics of her silent-era fandom: the identifications, fantasies, pleasures, and preferences she cultivated as a star-admiring spectator. More specifically, I argue that H.D.’s relationship with movie stars and her relationship to classical mythology share significant overlap: each requires the contemplation of a profound distance, distance itself obtaining a dense erotic charge. The stars are far away from us in space, as the Ancient Greeks are far away from us in time;⁷ this distance

⁴ C. D. Blanton, *Epic Negation: The Dialectical Poetics of Late Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 288.

⁵ H.D., *Trilogy* (New York: New Directions, 1998), 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁷ The phrasing here is Sarah Cole’s.

is a source of both anguish and powerful attraction, particularly during those moments when the distance can be foreshortened – through fantasy or poetic innovation – and the spectator can experience the intensity of a brief *slackening* in the tension between herself and her star.

My cinematic reading of *Trilogy*'s ruinous new religion serves three critical purposes. First, it grants us new antecedents for her epic, antecedents beyond her exuberant occultism and her time with Freud. It is true that she first explicitly asks herself the question, *do I wish to be the founder of a new religion?* during psychoanalysis in Vienna. But I argue that the eroticism that fuels this project – the desire to compass and collapse the distance between the worshipped and the worshipper – is evidenced in earlier, more ostensibly secular incarnations: H.D.'s fandom and the columns that come of it.

Second, it opens up a reading of the cinematic H.D. that does not rely on montage. There is a critical tendency to overemphasize H.D.'s mechanical tinkering with the cinematic apparatus — and for good reason. In addition to writing about her pleasures and displeasures as a viewer, she pushed for Eisenstein's theories of montage to be translated and extolled in *Close Up*; she brought a small projector into her home to throw private images on the wall; she both starred in and edited *Borderline*. H.D. was not content to inhabit one position in relation to the film machine; as spectatrix, theorist, projectionist, editor, and diva, we see her moving around and, as it were, *through* the camera and projector, inhabiting as many nodes as possible in the network of film production. In short, a medium-specific analysis of H.D. (where film is the medium, film production the technique) makes a lot of sense, given how invested she was in exploring that medium and stretching it to its limits. However, as I argue throughout this dissertation, there are cinematic techniques that exceed, surround, and transform the material basis of cinema: those of performance, spectatorship, and criticism. A medium-driven approach privileges two more

conventionally “technical” and conventionally masculine positions (projectionist and editor) while ignoring the more feminine, and feminized, circuit between the fan and the movie star. This tendency risks erasing H.D.’s self-reflexive spectatorship in service of a over-applicable theory of montage potable for poets. It erases, too, what Jonathan Crary calls “techniques of the observer,” what we could repurpose as the techniques of the fan.

Finally, my reading of *Trilogy* addresses the question of the cinema’s long-lasting influence, the traces cinema might leave in the works of writers who long ago left the movies. H.D. is a rich figure for this question because of the intensity of her (relatively brief) involvement. Where critics turn to the interplay between H.D.’s cinematic practices and her poetry of the 1910 and 1920s, it is less common to look for or understand the cinematic quality of her later work. To this end, I develop a concept of “movieleaving” drawn from Roland Barthes’ 1975 essay on the subject. Rather than a stark departure or clean break, I understand movieleaving to be a complex and dilated experience, a sluggish and uncanny wandering counterbalanced by the stubborn undertow of what’s “behind” us.

H.D.’s Star Turn: The Diva’s Death in *Borderline*

A reliance on film and on film techniques limits us to a very narrow time frame and an even narrower range of poetic experiments. H.D. worked with the Pool group as writer, actress, and editor between 1928 and 1930; she wrote for *Close Up* from 1927 to 1933. In her “Projector” poems, in her film journalism, in her star turn as Astrid in *Borderline* (1930) and her editing of the same, H.D. seems to have exhausted the cinema, its surfaces and discourses. More striking still is the relative brevity of H.D.’s formal engagement. The year 1927 alone is notably intense:

with Bryher and Kenneth Macpherson, she got *Close Up* off the ground and formed the Poole Group, an independent publishing and filmmaking collective which would go on to make *Borderline*. But it was also in 1927 that she published her essay “The Mask and the Movietone” bemoaning the coming of sound to cinema, an aesthetic affront she would never forgive. In the span of a single year, H.D. was enchanted and disenchanted, smitten and spurned. As is often the case with her intellectual pursuits, this trajectory was motored by and articulated as a spiritual inquiry: she depicts her devotion to the screen and its idols in Hellenistic, worshipful terms, laying the groundwork for renunciation.

But it is H.D.’s filmmaking that holds pride of place in the critical account of her engagement with the movies, for obvious reasons. *Borderline*, her only feature-length film, is taken as the apotheosis of a certain cinematic strain, largely because of the virtuoso editing, which H.D. did herself. The film tells the story of an interracial love triangle set in a Swiss guesthouse populated by a handful of vacationers amidst queer-coded, increasingly xenophobic locals. Astrid (H.D.) is jealous of the affair her husband Thorne (Gavin Arthur) is having with Adah (Eslanda Robeson). But Adah’s husband, Pete (Paul Robeson) is arguably the erotic center of the film: the camera lingers on his body, and his scenes are consistently lit softest. Hazel Carby and others have pointed out the film’s complicity in fetishistic racism, with Carby arguing that “the effect of the modernist aesthetic in *Borderline* was to freeze Robeson into a modernist ideal of the Negro male, outside of history.”⁸ I am focusing here on H.D.’s positioning of herself in the film rather than, as has often been done, her role behind the camera.

For Carrie Preston, one of my primary interlocutors throughout this chapter, the film is vital because of H.D.’s attitude, in the classical sense. Whereas H.D. “rarely looks back from the

⁸ Hazel Carby, *Race Men* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2000), 67-68.

covers of her books”, she “stares directly at the camera in [her] silent films”.⁹ For Preston, the frank address across the films and particularly in *Borderline* exposes a career-long series of strophic and anti-strophic poses, modulations in what Preston calls H.D.’s “mythic performance” (a term to which I will return below). Astrid’s motions mix “Delsartean and melodramatic gestures with the acting style of the turn-of-the-century poetic and symbolist theater”,¹⁰ a gestural concert which, Preston argues, transfigures Astrid “into a hieroglyph”¹¹ to be read alongside the many “solo performances” that define H.D.’s career. Susan McCabe goes a step further in asserting *Borderline*’s superlative importance, arguing that film’s “phenomenology of fragmentation” gave H.D. the perfect medium to explore both her bisexuality and her Freudian understanding of the body’s intense ambivalence. Through its complex and unconventional editing, *Borderline* “expresses multiple trajectories of desire [...] even while it shows the cultural suppression of these trajectories.”¹² For McCabe, film – more than poetry or prose – viscerally heightens and (dis)articulate the twoness and violence of desire through its continual fragmentation.

Both McCabe’s and Preston’s accounts rely on the conceptual centrality of montage. Preston provocatively labels montage a “classical technique,” and highlights the juxtaposition of different stances, like so many tableaux. Susan McCabe’s tendency is to single out montage as both modernist poetry’s secret method and the means of intervening in that method. In McCabe’s study, “montage pieces” (the phrase is Eisenstein’s) “coincide with the jerks, tics, and flailing of

⁹ Carrie J. Preston, *Modernism’s Mythic Pose: Gender, Genre, Solo Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 191.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 223.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 225.

¹² Susan McCabe, *Cinematic Modernism: Modernist Poetry and Film*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 168.

hysterical and automaton bodies.”¹³ This conflation of the hysterical body and the shock of montage subtends McCabe’s “phenomenology of fragmentation,” allowing her to argue that Eliot and Pound register a “montage poetics founded on [...] bodily tropes,”¹⁴ that H.D.’s *Sea Garden* “employ[s] film methods of cutting and splicing,”¹⁵ or that Moore, using “the avant-garde mechanics of her montage [...] bridges (without integrating) the often-divorced realms of mind and body through strikingly cinematic means.”¹⁶ Here, McCabe evinces what David Trotter warned would become the rule if left unchecked: a tendency towards “argument by analogy” that blithely substitutes one medium for another even as it preaches medium specificity.¹⁷

What Preston calls “mythic performance” hinges, pivotally, on mythic spectatorship. H.D.’s performance in *Borderline* indexes not only her love of sculpture and esoteric gesture, but her attitudes towards the divas she admired as well. Take two images from the climax of *Borderline*, in which Astrid (H.D.) attacks her husband (Gavin Arthur) with a knife, the same knife he will use in turn to murder her. One could read these images as consolidating H.D.’s role as montagiste: waving her knife like a baton across this tightly edited sequence, she orchestrates the many cuts that coordinate this exhilarating, doomed confrontation.

But a second shot, a zoom onto Astrid’s knife-bearing hand, both brings us closer to and obscures the image behind: a glamour shot, we realize, now in soft focus – a cloche-clad, gently smirking woman, her own hand at her chin, as if she is contemplating the camera that captures her. Her poise is counterposed to Astrid’s frenzy; her iconicity to Astrid’s indexical blur.

¹³ McCabe, *Cinematic Modernism*, 21.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 184-5.

¹⁷ David Trotter, *Cinema and Modernism* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), 10.

The two images contrast H.D. as montagiste and H.D. as movie star; crucially, Astrid etymologically invokes godliness, phonetically evokes astronomy. Astrid is in so many ways a diva – cycling through tropes of vanity and jealousy, clutching her dressing gown about her even as she brandishes a weapon. *Borderline*, and Astrid’s melodramatic death, opens us to a cinematic reading of H.D. that relinquishes celluloid in favor of stars and fans, the multimedial networks and complex erotic identifications that relate each to each. In lieu of the photographic image, we have that more variegated and abstract thing: the star-image.

Movieleaving

How do we trace the effect of cinema on the work of writers who left the movies long ago? This is the question animating my reading of *Trilogy*, distinguishing the coming-going periodicity of moviegoing from the long, seemingly unidirectional arc of movieleaving.

We might think of movieleaving, initially, as a concept that begins in refusal. A long tradition of thinkers imagined and enacted cinema by deploying celluloid perversely or omitting celluloid entirely. Pavle Levi’s *Cinema by Other Means* presents a theory and a history of such practices. Levi proposes “a multitude of unorthodox ways in which filmmakers, artists, and writers have pondered, created, defined, performed, and transformed the ‘movies’ – with or without directly grounding their work in the materials of film.”¹⁸ Examples include unfilmable screenplays (whose authors still referred to them as “films”) and photoless lightscapes. One of the most famous example of “cinema by other means” would be the “rayogram” – the method

¹⁸ Pavle Levi, *Cinema by Other Means* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), xiv.

Man Ray and Tristan Tzara invented for improperly developing film (without a camera) which culminated in Man Ray's *La retour à la raison* (1923). To describe this and other phenomena, Noam Elcott elaborates what he calls "the Cinematic Imaginary and the Photographic Fact," concepts which "help explain how specific techniques or even individual artworks could be viewed as quintessentially cinematic in the interwar period and archetypally photographic after the War."¹⁹ Elcott demonstrates how a single artifact could "be" cinema for some but not others, implying that the historical concept of the "Cinematic" is itself necessarily aspirational and indeed "Imaginary", untethered (or obliquely tethered) to the cinematographic apparatus.

But what I am after is better exemplified by Roland Barthes' essay "En sortant du cinéma." The essay was published in a 1975 issue of *Communications*, which he was then editing. The special issue, *Cinema and Psychoanalysis*, published what would become seminal essays in "apparatus theory," including the first section of Christian Metz's *The Imaginary Signifier* and Jean-Louis Baudry's neo-platonist "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus." As French literary historian Philip Watts describes it, the journal partook in "a moment in intellectual history [...] when film theorists were intent upon resisting the pleasure of the movies, the passivity in which films were said to throw the spectator" (65). The central frame of apparatus theory is the *dispositif*, the apparatus itself: a comprehensive system (architectural, distributive, ideological) that yokes viewers into sensuous collaboration with the dream-machine.

As Watts points out, Barthes' essay seems at first to fit rather well, since it describes the screen as a "lure" to which viewers are "glued," spectatorship itself formulated as a twilight

¹⁹ Noam Elcott, "The Cinematic Imaginary and the Photographic Fact: Media as Models for 20th Century Art," *PhotoResearcher* no. 29 (2018): 10.

hypnosis. But Barthes takes circuitous paths in and out of the theater, and in his first paragraph seems to be walking away from the very object of his analysis.

There is something to confess: your speaker likes to *leave* a movie theater. Back out on the more or less empty brightly lit sidewalk (it is invariably at night, and during the week, that he *goes*), and heading uncertainly for some café or other, he walks in silence (he doesn't like discussing the film he's just seen), a little dazed, wrapped up in himself, feeling the cold – he's *sleepy*, that's what he's thinking, his body has become something *sopitive*, soft, limp, and he feels a little disjointed, even (for a moral organization, relief comes only from this quarter) irresponsible. In other words, obviously, he's coming out of hypnosis.²⁰

Barthes deploys the register of confession precisely because leaving the movie theater means leaving the movie itself out of analysis, the same move Levi traces in other anti-filmic cinematic gestures. Contrast Barthes' essay, which runs 5 or 6 pages, to Raymond Bellour's virtuosic 120-page analysis of *North by Northwest*, printed in the same issue of *Communications*, in which he attends to no fewer than 297 film stills. Barthes' stance is embarrassing, "even [...] irresponsible," "soft" and "limp" amidst the rigors of film criticism. Within this particular issue of *Communications*, with ideological critique at the forefront, the penitent's pose should be understood as a strategy of address. When the speaker admits (parenthetically) that he "doesn't like discussing the film he's just seen," he is relinquishing the film theorist's toolbox: the harmonies of composition, the cultic rules of montage, the fetishized grainy chiaroscuros of celluloid. Instead of theory's organizing object, the film is precisely what cannot be remembered, an experience undergone under "hypnosis." Reflexively, the essay relates movie-leaving as a somatic sensation to movie-leaving as a counterintuitive and embarrassing critical practice.

²⁰ Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (NYC: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1986), 345.

But even in this essay most paradigmatically *about* movie-leaving, Barthes seems unable to linger in the leaving for long. Only one paragraph, quoted above, is devoted to the somnambulist's return to the waking world. In the opening sentences of the next paragraph, Barthes retreats: "This is often how he leaves a movie theater. How does he go in?" As the essay progresses, the speaker finds himself once more in "the darkness of the theater" and asks, "what does the 'darkness' of the cinema mean?" Eventually, he discusses not only the darkness but the screen, the projector's beam of light, and the "glue" by which spectators are joined to the "lure" of the image. In short, Barthes' essay on movie-leaving seems never to leave, or to stage leaving as the first step in an inevitable return.

The essay remains adamantly allergic to any *specific* signification on the screen, opting instead for an ambience. Eager to come unstuck from the "glue" of the image, Barthes describes a split within the experience of moviegoing that allows him to be both within and without the film. The essay's last paragraph leaves us with this final impression, a body caught between two fascinations:

[...] as if I had two bodies at the same time: a narcissistic body which gazes, lost, into the engulfing mirror, and a perverse body, ready to fetishize not the image but precisely what exceeds it: the texture of the sound, the hall, the darkness, the obscure mass of the other bodies, the rays of light, entering the theater, leaving the hall; in short, in order to distance, in order to "take off," I complicate a "relation" by a "situation." What I use to distance myself from the image – that, ultimately, is what fascinates me: I am hypnotized by a distance; and this distance is not critical (intellectual); it is, one might say, an amorous distance.²¹

The speaker — his perverse body knelt in confession — wants, sees, even occasions, much more than the conventional delights of a "film (any film)." As D. A. Miller has argued, the "I" of this essay desires a queer cinema, or desires cinema queerly: the bodies to his left and right, the

²¹ Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, 349.

patterns of dust in the projector's beam, the "texture" of everything that "exceeds" the film itself, cleaves two pleasures from each other: the pleasure of absorption and the pleasure of distraction. Both are erotic, but one immerses while the other disperses. Here, the "amorous" element is distinctly *poly*-amorous (a relation complicated by a situation, as it were). How could the speaker, surrounded by an eroticized and fertile darkness, possibly love *just* film alone? Barthes finds the "fascination of the film (any film)" to reside in the ambient, erotic darkness. He describes the image as a "lure" to which the spectator is "glued," but he also fails to specify a "film (any film)" that would have any unique allure.

Barthes demonstrates how the cinematic begins when the movie ends. Leaving the theater is the movement (both physical and rhetorical) that leads Barthes right back to the cinema: *en sortant, on rentre*. Leaving, walking, thinking, the speaker can only return through his confession back to the "eroticized" darkness and luminous "lure" of the cinema he purportedly leaves behind. But this is the essay's point, I think: it is *only* "en sortant" that we see the cinema. Barthes' essay, though titularly fixed on the "leaving," is truly about how "leaving" opens us into a new orientation. Departure marks the beginning of apprehension. The physical leavetaking lets a thought travel, holding something both more and less than the feature film in your mind. It is hard to say whether it is an opening or a closing; on the one hand you are taking what was contained (a crowd) and dispersing it. On the other you are taking what was ongoing (a film) and confirming its conclusion. We seal the film as we steal away. But we steal it, too, taking it along as an imprint, a map of the past.

For Barthes, certain details pulse with odd vibrancy (the dust circling while others (the movie itself) fade into mnemonic irrelevance. He leaves the cinema with what psychologists call a "gist." This is the guiding concept of Andrew Elfenbein's *The Gist of Reading*, which argues

that literary theory has neglected the cognitive processes that underlie and constitute reading in favor of idealized readers and fantasy reading practices. Drawing on studies in psychology and cognitive science, Elfenbein points out the gap between reading as it actually occurs and paradigms of literary theory reliant on attentiveness and aesthetic balance. Instead of retaining the many nuances of a text with a kind of inexhaustible equivalency, readers forget (they certainly misremember) even in the process of finishing a single sentence. The gist is “the simplified mental representation that the mind retains in long-term memory. When faced with a complex visual scene, or even a moderately long sentence, the mind does not remember everything it has perceived. Instead, it holds on to a drastically reduced, simplified version, something like a sketch rather than a full representation.”²² Elfenbein makes schematic what Barthes leaves implicit: the mental reduction of that which is taken away in taking away. In movieleaving, details drift, leave luminous pearls in their place.

I end this reflection on Barthes with two thoughts that make “movieleaving” more portable for this chapter as a whole. First, what Barthes gives us in this essay is a phenomenology of cinema. But it is one that eschews projection, shrugs off the sacred flicker of the photographic image, turns its back on narrative: it is a phenomenology not of absorption but of partial (in both senses) retrieval. *Leaving* is its heart, *looking back* its orientation. Movieleaving is less a single, discernible moment of departure than it is a mental process of consolidation and recall: the long retrospect of theory, the reviewing (instead of *viewing*) by which spectators distinguish the Cinema from the cinema they just exited. That is, leaving the movie theater is the first moment in which the “cinematic” as a concept – and, as I elucidate below, an orientation – can first be differentiated from moviegoing as a practice.

²² Andrew Elfenbein, *The Gist of Reading* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2018), 13.

Movieleaving lives in the tension (better yet, the “amorous distance”) between two tendencies: one tendency towards the world temporarily suspended during spectatorship, and a countervailing tendency towards the experience recently put “behind” us as we emerge. Sara Ahmed quips: “A queer phenomenology, I wonder, might be one that faces the back, which looks “behind” phenomenology, which hesitates at the sight of the philosopher’s back.”²³ I do not mean to imply that movieleaving is in itself queer, that our reveries and musings in departing the theater will lead us inevitably towards critique or subversion. What I suggest instead is that the “behind” of the movieleaver is uniquely sensitized, alert to and lingering on that which it no longer faces. The movieleaver incorporates this “behind” in the very process – mental and peripatetic – of moving forward, dragging the cinema into the street and the street into the Cinema. In place of a gist understood as an abstract object lodged in the neural wheelwork, I would have us think of an *orientation*, one we body forth *en sortant*. The “amorous distance” between the movie and the movieleaver lengthens, stretching to the point of breaking; what remains is a disposition, an attunement, that is fondly and embarrassingly backwards.

Second, while there are many cinematic phenomena that only inhere in the long arc of movieleaving, fandom and stardom are perhaps the most profoundly extra-filmic. The contact (such as it is) between fans and stars *during* a film is remarkably brief compared to the time spent producing and distributing the star on the one hand, and the time spent venerating the star on the other. Seeing the star on-screen is the privileged encounter, surely; but the love between fans and stars does not occur only in these moments. It must be seeded through a concert of

²³ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 29.

multimedial strategies (poster, pinup, tabloid, tell-all) and must be cultivated through diverse and unpredictable forms of worship (imitation, identification, fantasy, fervor).

Movie Stardom: an Amorous Distance

What is a movie star? What was a movie star in the earliest decades of cinema?

I foreground two concepts in this brief scholarly survey: first, the diffuse and multimedial nature of stars; second, my own understanding of stardom as a relation, not only between images of the star herself, but between viewers and the objects of their veneration. The star is a distance.

Across the 1910s and 1920s, Gaumont, Pathé, Biograph, and Universal Studios developed a panoply of intermedial strategies to consolidate, reproduce, and disseminate that new and singular thing, the *movie star*. Some of these strategies were more obvious – the interview, the travelogue, the glamour shot – but some were subtler. Film historian Jennifer Bean describes “a complex discourse designed to enhance the believability of real peril to the player’s body” for female action stars, a phenomenon peculiar to the 1910s.²⁴ An actress might share a first name with her characters: Pearl White played “Peal Dare, Pearl Standish, and Pearl Travers.”²⁵ More striking still, the actress Rose Gibson, in taking over for Helen Holmes, was remonikered “Helen Gibson.” It is precisely the multiplication of conflations – between player and role, between player and player, between spectator and screen, between fan and star – that sustains cinema’s promise of absorption and incorporation (but not verisimilitude). It is these conflations that early cinema’s fans either disentangled or left – lovingly – in knots.

²⁴ Jennifer M. Bean, “Technologies of Early Stardom and the Extraordinary Body,” in *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema*, ed. Jennifer Bean and Diana Negra (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 414.

²⁵ Bean, “Technologies of Early Stardom and the Extraordinary Body,” 414.

Given these earliest strategies of conflation and substitution, we can see how defining the movie star can be tricky. Because they inspire naive practices and affects – idolatry and ardor – movie stars seemed a trivial object of analysis until the 1980s, one reason Star Studies has lagged behind Film Theory in academic writing on cinema. With Richard Dyer’s 1979 *Stars*, stardom gained recognition as the patently bizarre phenomenon that it is.²⁶ Scholars draw distinctions between the star as a means of signification, a tool of commerce, and a persona (not to mention a person). Stars are ontologically diffuse, wrought through a thick interplay; arguably this is their most distinctive feature – their distribution across text and image, their curiously self-identical constellation. A star tends toward itself, the product of wide discursive dispersal (tabloids, interviews, head shots, not to mention films) and nominal consolidation (throughout them all, she’s Lauren Bacall, not Betty Joan Perske). Indeed, a star’s name provides a kind of gravitational field towards which its diffuse matter tends. The intricacy and multimediality of a star’s image means that stars are hard to chart, to situate. Yet this, I argue, is precisely the loving labor of fandom: worshiping stars is an effort to fix their position. Stardom can be understood as a complex relation between the beholder and the beheld, all the more complex because of the

²⁶ The academic interest in movie stardom (and celebrity more generally) has widely expanded across the last forty years, but scholarship on stars remained institutionally diffuse until what media historian Martin Shingler calls “a period of consolidation” from the 1990s into the 21st Century. This moment marked a turn to industrial and global frameworks, adding cultural, institutional, and geographical specificity to Star Studies’ long-held Marxist vocabularies of production and consumption. More and more, considerations of place and space govern Star Studies: monographs on European celebrities challenge the “Hollywoodcentric” assumption that conceptual models of American celebrity are easily transferable, and more recent scholarship on non-Western contexts highlights the culturally distinct pressures and pleasures in Bollywood and Chinese cinema, to name only a few. In a 2017 collection titled *Revisiting Star Studies: Cultures, Themes, and Methods*, editor Sabrina Qiong Yu addresses one of the major conceptual problems occasioned by this global turn, namely the binary opposition between “Hollywood stardom” and “national stardom.” Noting that this approach cannot serve for the cinema of, for example, Hong Kong, Yu proposes “local” and “translocal” as terms instead.

thickness of mediation; the fan's veneration sounds an amorous distance between herself and the star.²⁷

This affixing role of the spectator is crucial because the star drifts. By necessity intertextual and paratextual, stars solicit our investment while testifying to the world beyond that of the film. Diegetically ambivalent, they work for and against narrative and character. They become repositories for affects and meanings that cannot cohere in respective films (temporally) or in film (materially), manufactured as they are through a concerted multiplication of intermedial strategies. As Miriam Hansen put it, "The star phenomenon not only eludes the formalist focus on narrative (principles of thorough motivation, clarity, unity, and closure), but also complicates the psychoanalytic-semiological preoccupation with the illusionist mechanisms of the classical apparatus and the unconscious workings of classical modes of enunciation."²⁸ Stars must disrupt the very things which they are made to sell: the "illusionist mechanisms" and story-worlds of narrative cinema.

For many scholars, the emergence of movie stars testifies to the affordances and attributes of film as a medium. Barry King traces the long pre-history of movie stardom, arguing that David Garrick's actorly prowess coincided with 18th-century economic philosophies that consecrating the individual and justifying high reward. But even in an account steeped in economic philosophy, King argues that "it was only with the development of cinema that the persona, as an animated double, could ensure the endurance of a star's apparent stage personality beyond the moment of the performance."²⁹ A second twist in the argument extends the medium

²⁷ A note on pronouns: the queerness of fans and stars, or at the very least the importance of fan/star relationships between women, guides my consistent use of the pronoun "she."

²⁸ Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 246.

²⁹ Barry King, *Taking Fame to Market: On the Pre-History and Post-History of Hollywood Stardom* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 102.

specificity: “A moving image has another effect. As it separates the actor’s live performance from a record of that performance, it inscribes a material gap between being and seeming which are co-present, if fleeting, in a live performance.”³⁰ This gap between being and seeming corresponds to a gap in spectatorial experience, as well: that between the role and the persona, one that continues to be worked through long after the film is finished. In Richard Dyer’s book *Heavenly Bodies*, he argues that the close-up insinuates an authenticity, the “coherent continuousness within” which we believe is “what the star ‘really is’ [...]Key moments in films are close-ups, separated out from the action and interaction of a scene, and not seen by other characters but only by us, thus disclosing for us the star’s face, the intimate, transparent window to the soul.”³¹

The medium-specific qualities of film stardom cannot be denied, but stars can only be corroborated by spectators appraising them and compassing the distance that separates the two. The star’s face is bigger, her costumes more detailed, her gestures sharper, her body phantasmatically nearer to us than in the theater. Crucially, however, she is much further away from us than are the divas of the opera or the Victorian stage. Perhaps she is in another country, another continent; perhaps she is dead. The devotion of fans relies on a cinematographic apparatus that promises a new proximity, a close-up-ness, which masks the vast distance which separates us from where, to riff on Dyer, the star “really is.” Yet the proximity does more than distract from the distance; it incorporates distance into the very pleasure of the image, making distance the secret substance of our wide-eyed rapture.

Whereas the earliest film stars could afford to disappear or merge within their roles as Jennifer Bean indicates, stars from the 1920s onward required a longer discursive shelf-life, a

³⁰ Barry King, *Taking Fame to Market*, 102.

³¹ Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*, 2nd Ed. (London: Routledge, 2004), 10.

name behind which their talent and reputation could stand. Much of the scholarship on stars highlights the “persona” as the solution to this problem: a useful, elaborate, and economically viable fiction, alternately termed the “star-text”, “brand”, or *eidolon*, the word of choice for Barry King in his book, *Taking Fame to Market*, to which I return shortly. Dyer, the first to give stardom purchase within Film Studies, proposes a capacious “star-text” to bring together the stars’ multiple functions as commodity, image, and sign. For Dyer, the star-as-image (“a complex configuration of visual, verbal, and aural signs [...] the general image of stardom or of a particular star”)³² and the star-as-sign (“the more precise and detailed question of how stars function in films themselves”)³³ together participate in and can only occasionally subvert an essentially disciplining and corrective cinema, one that forges, tests, and defends cultural values and social types. Dyer pushes this logic a step further in *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (1986), arguing that “stars are examples of the way people live their relation to production in capitalist society”³⁴ and, more ambitiously, that they “articulate what it is to be a human being in contemporary society; that is, they express the particular notion we hold of the person, the ‘individual’.”³⁵ Stars teach us how to ‘be’ – with that ‘being’ understood to be forever constrained by branding.

With regards to H.D., King’s description of the star as *eidolon* is most useful. King argues that “the persona inheres as a potential, which to distinguish from persona proper, I have termed an *eidolon*: a dispersed figural presence that circulates between disparate texts, but does not attain the putative status of a being.”³⁶ This conceptualization of “*eidolon*” is key in

³² King, *Taking Fame to Market*, 34.

³³ Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: British Film Institute, 1979), 88.

³⁴ Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, 5.

³⁵ Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, 7.

³⁶ King, *Taking Fame to Market*.

understanding H.D.'s attraction to individual stars, and to stardom as a phenomenon. "Eidolon" is the title for H.D.'s last section of *Helen in Egypt*; her textual treatment of Helen takes her for "a dispersed figural presence that circulates between disparate texts," as King writes, rather than an inert and knowable person. According to Eileen Gregory, H.D. takes her concept of the *eidolon* from her study of Euripides, with *Helen in Egypt* itself working something like a translation or adaptation of Euripides' *Helen*. Gregory explains that "this theme of the *eidolon*" concerns "the relation of illusion to reality, dreaming to waking."³⁷ For Gregory, the question Achilles poses to Helen ("Which was the dream, / which was the veil of Cytheraea?") opens up the problem of the real across the entirety of *Helen in Egypt*'s: which narrated events are closest to the real, which are oneiric drifts or musings? For the purposes of this chapter, what most matters is H.D.'s sense that every figure (whether Helen, Iphigenia, or Greta Garbo) is more properly a "dispersed figural presence," one to be multiply apprehended and considered, perhaps best engaged through the viewer's own performance. By implication, every figure is a choice; it is the spectator's task to behold the leaky "dispersal" and to choose which face or facet of the "figural presence" is, in the most personal sense, realest. The "potential" King describes inhering in a star's "persona" cannot be grasped or resolved within the dense network of stardom; put another way, the star's potential is not for the star herself. This potential is realized through a willful, subjective, and profoundly invested observer, one who can, as it were, choose the star.

This relational contour, the amorous distance between film stars and their fans, drives my reading of H.D. Historiographically, stars – despite their distributed, multimedial subtlety – are easier to "see" than those who went to see them. The spectator lacks the star's archival tenancy: in sharp contrast to the immensity of materials producing and circulating silent-era stars,

³⁷ Eileen Gregory, *H.D. and Hellenism: Classical Lines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 228.

systematic records of moviegoing can be hard or even impossible to find. For good and bad, scholars have relied on theorization to give shape to historical spectators, drawing especially on the psychoanalytic models touched off by Laura Mulvey's game-changing 1975 essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." But this sometimes means scholars have been afraid of "dirtying their hands with empirical material" which, according to cultural theorist Jackie Stacey, "has led to an inability to think about active female desire beyond the limits of masculine positions."³⁸ Noted feminist film theorist Mary Ann Doane has gone so far as to say, "The female spectator is a concept, not a person,"³⁹ succinctly articulating the scholarly preference for mass-applicable theories in place of data sets.

Yet efforts to flesh out the spectator by means other than psychoanalysis have flourished from the 1990s onward. To prepare for *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship*, Jackie Stacey placed ads in film magazines, soliciting women's recollections of their 1940s moviegoing practices in much the same way sociologists like J. P. Mayer and Harold Blumer did in the 1920s. Dissatisfied with the presumptions around scopophilia, masochism, and narcissism coming out of feminist psychoanalysis, Stacey organized her findings around three general but internally complex pleasures: escapism, identification, and consumption. Each harbors more complexity than unity: within the overarching rubric of "identification," for example, Stacey highlights distinctions between veneration, aspiration, adoration, imitation, and others, compellingly arguing that the differences between these practices are substantial and substantially overlooked by psychoanalytic models.

³⁸ Jackie Stacey, *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (London: Routledge, 1994), 29.

³⁹ Mary Ann Doane, untitled entry. *Camera Obscura* 20/21 (1989): 142.

These and other approaches have established spectatorship as a kind of knowledge, rescuing spectators from mere passivity. Hilary Hallett proposes that “the mounting centrality of women as consumers and producers of American popular culture continued to create variations in the melodramatic aesthetic that subsequently shaped the development of motion pictures during the 1910s.”⁴⁰ She points out that, in an 1867 play by Augustin Daly, it is “a heroine, not a hero, executed the first hair’s-breadth rescue of a victim strapped to railroad tracks.” Zooming forward from the melodramatic stage into the star-creating efforts surrounding actresses like Mary Pickford and Pearl White in the 1910s, Hallett suggests female film stars enabled a democratization of fame: “the personas of the first film stars often involved elaborating the means by which a seemingly conventional girl could incarnate a type of fame that arose from meeting the challenges and opportunities confronting the progress of her sex.”⁴¹ Similarly, Jennifer Wild argues that fans saw *themselves* when they saw stars, or more precisely saw themselves within an increasingly convoluted network of images and appearances. In *The Parisian Avant-Garde in the Age of Cinema, 1900-1923*, Wild argues that stars allowed moviegoers to find their own place within the “mediated chaos of the age of cinema.”⁴² For Wild, this reflexivity is the difference between cinema-specific models of spectatorship and older aesthetic models of beholding: “the spectator beholds with the recognition that she too is photographable.”⁴³ The spectator sees herself seeing another and knows that she too can (rather, must) be seen.

⁴⁰ Hilary A. Hallett, *Go West, Young Women! The Rise of Early Hollywood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 40.

⁴¹ Hallett, *Go West, Young Women! The Rise of Early Hollywood*, 44.

⁴² Jennifer Wild, *The Parisian Avant-Garde in the Age of Cinema, 1900-1923* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 70.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 73.

Wild goes beyond Stacey's three modes of relation – escapism, identification, and consumption – to bring out what she calls a “diagrammatic” knowledge by which viewers make sense of the crisscrossed circuitry of the film star. Spectatorship is taken as a complex visual practice, far complexer than merely watching a screen. The fan's amorous gaze travels many paths through a dense virtuality: “spectatorship [...] jettisons the natural contingencies of beholding in a world space for the conceptual contingencies of cultural production that take place in the intersections between media.”⁴⁴ That is to say, spectatorship requires a double or triple vision, incorporating images from different media and from different moments into an always-virtual composite of the star. Describing Francis Picabia's chance encounter with film actress Stacia Napierkowska on a transatlantic cruiser and his subsequent 1913 painting *Mechanical Expression Seen Through our Own Mechanical Expression* – in which the actress's name appears (misspelled) next to Picabia's signature – Wild finds the artist translating chance physical proximity into conceptual proximity, mapping his person and his practice in relation to the moving target *Npierkowska* [sic]. This is, for Wild, a new semiosis: “the moment when [...] artists exploit their own potential to signify and circulate neither as content nor as substance, not as icon, symbol, or index, but as an abstract machine called a ‘star.’”⁴⁵ We reach the extreme version of this logic when Tristan Tzara gets on stage pretending to be Charlie Chaplin and the performance ends in a riot.

H.D.'s “potential to signify and circulate as a star” is how we should understand her efforts in *Borderline*, which have been largely reduced to her admittedly bravura editing work. When we recognize that “star” is a seme beyond “icon symbol, or index,” it is all the easier to reconcile H.D. montagiste with H.D. the diva, each the extension and flourish of the other.

⁴⁴ Wild, *The Parisian Avant-Garde in the Age of Cinema*, 72.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 73.

H.D.'s writing about Garbo and then playing Astrid suggests an advancement of this reflexivity. H.D. both admires Garbo and practices being a star.

I do not suggest that stars shine brightly enough to expose the system of their own manufacture, nor that early fans' idolatry belies a secret institutional intelligence which laid bare or deconstructed the industry that made them. To look for and love the star does not lead inevitably to the diagrammatical savvy that Wild finds in Picabia's ode to Stacia Napierkowska. Indeed, I would argue that the affective temperature of fandom is often too hot to permit such cool appraisal. But even the least reflexive, least interrogated love fans harbor for stars should be understood as the contemplation of a complex and changeable distance. Unlike the cinematographic image, star images are not "glued" (echoing Barthes) to the screen; they travel. Through pinups and clippings, gossip rags and the rare in-person sighting, stars move and in moving describe a constellation. I use the term not in its general sense – a figure composed of many stars – but as a curious quality that movie stars themselves possess, an autoconstellating quality. Fandom then might be understood as the partial mapping of these heavenly movements. The distance between fans and stars contracts and expands, its intensity warms and cools. It is hot with ardor but fraught with disappointment. Stars gave viewers in general and women in particular a measure of distance by which they could make sense (inevitably partial, always slack) of their place in a commodity culture which solicited them as subjects and objects simultaneously.

The pleasure of stargazing cannot be reduced to simple narcissism or objectification, though of course it masquerades as both. It is not that *I am the star* or that *she is mine* but rather that an impossible distance separates me from her; this distance *rather than the star* is the secret substance of our adoration. The interval is wondrously elastic but irreducible: it can be altered

but cannot be annihilated. Our pleasure is measurement. To love movie stars is to eroticize distance, to make distance itself a strange object of wonder and repository of desire. When we fall into the star's image, when we read the interviews with frank delight, we attempt to find an exceptional slack in the system, hoping the taut line suspended between us and the faraway, ever-moving star might briefly be loosened, beholder and beheld brought impossibly near. This slack is intermittent, brief, and unreal; mercifully, since it is the distance we're after anyway.

Despite the apparent naturalness of stardom, there is something inescapably bizarre about our appetite and engrossment. Adolescent, overfond, unproductive; erotic but unconsummated; the impulse to adore the star is queer, even if that impulse is circumscribed and straightened by commodification. Sara Ahmed asserts that phenomenology, even as it attends to the subject's orientation towards that which it perceives and the flow of perception therefrom, has not often accounted for the orienting behind the orientation, the way "the body gets directed in some ways more than others."⁴⁶ Ahmed's queer phenomenology looks around and behind our tendencies, "showing how 'orientations' depend on taking points of view as given. The gift of this point is concealed in the moment of being received as given."⁴⁷ The studio and star systems perfectly exemplify how points of view are produced rather than inevitable — tested, packaged, and sold; this labor is "concealed," the point of view "received as given." What is meant to feel like a natural affection for the star is solicited through marketing and manufacture. On the other hand, stars produce — indeed they require — multiple orientations from us. Traversing roles and media, pulling us in or repelling us away from their performances, opening space for furtive same-sex attraction or transgender identification, stars awaken many — sometimes conflicting — tendencies all at once. One may tend toward the heterosexual resolution of a Garbo film while

⁴⁶ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 15.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

tending a little too much towards Garbo, or tending, with Garbo, towards other women. Such phenomenological torque keeps us as it were in suspense: “orientations are effects of what we tend toward, where the “toward” marks a space and time that is almost, but not quite, available in the present.”⁴⁸ Just as the distance between fans and stars derives its charge from its being unbridgeable, these various orientations keep us animated towards the star as it moves — the pleasure it that our orientation towards the star will never be final.

Garbo of Troy: “The Cinema and the Classics”

H.D.’s first three essays in *Close Up* share the collective heading “The Cinema and the Classics.” They are notable for their “associations between their moment and Christian and classical myth,”⁴⁹ and their attempt to prescribe not only a classical cinema but an invested and co-creative spectator. The first of these – economically titled “Beauty” – takes Greta Garbo as its Helen, arguing that she possesses “something of a quality that I can’t for the life of me label otherwise than classic.”⁵⁰ While H.D. glimpses this classical “quality” in Garbo’s performance as Greta Rumfort in Pabst’s *Joyless Street* (1925), she is eager for other models in contemporary cinema, her inquiry extending much further than any single film. There is a certain urgency to this inquiry: latent but threatened by censorship and over-ornamentation, silent cinema’s classic potential is characterized as rather vulnerable. As we will see below, it must be either safeguarded or mourned: this is the project of “The Cinema and the Classics.”

⁴⁸ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 20.

⁴⁹ Preston, *Modernism’s Mythic Pose*, 231.

⁵⁰ James Donald, Anne Friedberg, and Laura Marcus, *Close Up: Cinema and Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 107.

Published in July, August, and November of 1927, the essays articulate H.D.'s sense that cinema's purest achievement and ambition was the rediscovery of a classical model through austere filmmaking. Rather than a quintessential emblem of technological novelty, H.D. took the cinema for something extremely old: a medium that, when finely tuned, could receive ancient signals. Like Vachel Lindsay and D. W. Griffith before her, she understood cinema as a hieroglyphic system, full of irreducible gnostic signs. As Laura Marcus explains, H.D.'s "film aesthetics and her model of vision are predicated on symbol, gesture, 'hieroglyph', 'the things we can't say or paint' [...] Her model of cinematic 'language' is closer to, in Freud's terms, 'thing-presentation' than 'word-presentation', with the work of writing-about-film acting as a form of translation from one to the other."⁵¹ Whereas Lindsay equated cinema's "hieroglyphic" status to that of commercial advertising – a vertiginous explosion of new signs flooding urban space – H.D. sought other, older correspondences.

There are some overarching questions we might ask before diving into the essays in detail. What precisely did H.D. mean by classic? Why Garbo rather than Pabst, the director of *Joyless Street*? Why does H.D. draw inspiration from the ineffable "something" of an actress's performance rather than, for example, the systematic theories of montage which she would champion throughout her tenure at *Close Up*? Is there perhaps a "quality" in movie stardom itself that makes celebrity personae especially fertile ground for the classic(al) to flourish? This last question grants us greater purchase on the questions that precede it. I argue that H.D.'s classicism and her fandom are interrelated, sometimes indistinguishable, projects. The female movie star – so often referred to as a goddess, conceived of as impossibly desirable or otherworldly – gave H.D. an ostensibly secular, ostensibly modern site for experimentation, a place where her

⁵¹ Donald, Friedberg, and Marcus, *Close Up: Cinema and Modernism*, 103.

unorthodox Hellenism, her syncretic religious devotion, and her erotic investment in ideal femininity could converge.

Ultimately, I argue, H.D. uses both classicism and movie stardom to contemplate the phenomenon of distance. The stars are far away from us in space, just as the classics are far away from us in time. Yet it is the promise of intimacy with each that drives our veneration or study. Thinking about the erotic and phenomenological dynamics of movie stardom – rather than montage or film specificity – lets us grasp the continuities between H.D.’s explicitly cinematic period and the preoccupations that characterize her entire career. Rather than undermining or trivializing her classicism, movie stars gave H.D. a vehicle for expressing it.

Of course, the concept of the “classical” is only ever what we make of it; it reflects our immediate preoccupations and aesthetic doxa. By the mid 1920s, the classical had taken on connotations of obduracy and rigor: a tight, well-tempered sufficiency distinguishing it from the ornamentation of the Baroque or the vociferation of the Romantic. In the long wake of Walter Pater’s 1876 essay on the Classic and the Romantic – in which he argues that each term designates a transhistorical “tendency” rather than a specific respective era – Hulme, and following him Pound and Eliot, turned to the classical as a paradigm wedding tradition with control. As Eileen Gregory describes it, a certain “classical orthodoxy” emerged in the criticism of Pound and Eliot, one that valued obduracy, objectivity, and cool appraisal.⁵² Many modernist ideals and justifications – Vorticism’s muscularity and Imagism’s restraint; T.S. Eliot’s appreciation of mythology as an order-giving structure – are related to a classic template with its attendant pressures and constraints.

⁵² Gregory, *H.D. and Hellenism*, 13.

By the time she was composing “The Cinema and the Classics,” H.D.’s own classicism had come under attack and she was an increasingly marginal figure in English modernist circles. As Eileen Gregory argues in *H.D. and Hellenism*, H.D.’s approach to classical texts and mythological figures did not adhere to the agreed-upon protocols (Gregory calls them “fictions”) of modernist classicism, the hard and impersonal aesthetics that had become synonyms for a classical style. Instead, Gregory suggests, H.D. “veers from the linearity, seminality, and totality of certain classical models,” instead cultivating “something like an antimodel involving dissemination, dispersion, and diaspora.”⁵³ In place of tradition and straight lines, H.D.’s “antimodel” features swerves and synchronicity, sudden intimacies. Gregory notes H.D.’s preference for the lyricism of Euripides over the epic of Aeschylus,⁵⁴ while Diana Collocott argues that Sappho’s oblique and fragmented voice constitutes the single greatest poetic influence across H.D.’s oeuvre. Whomever we situate at the center of H.D.’s classicism, the classicism itself was always too slack, too unruly or subjective, to be valorized by the modernist gatekeepers. Gregory argues that H.D.’s canonical marginality (“burial” is Susan Friedman’s term) “lies not only [...] in her problematic status as a woman poet [...] but also in the character of her classicism.”⁵⁵ By the mid-1920s, critics were setting the record straight, revising their appraisal of a poet once considered an exemplar of austere classicism, but whose recent output Pound was now calling “Alexandrine Greek bunk.”⁵⁶

Much of this contempt was, I think, a response to the naked sincerity with which H.D. sought intimacy with and through antique figures. Here I derive my sense of intimacy from an insight in Jean Mills’ book on Virginia Woolf and Jane Harrison. Mills argues that Woolf and

⁵³ Gregory, *H.D. and Hellenism*, 2.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

Harrison shared a remarkable intellectual fellowship, carving out a “transpersonal zone” (the term is Nancy Miller’s) wherein an alternative classicist modernism could develop. In theorizing this relationship, Mills draws on a linguistic concept of Harrison’s, the *holophrase*. In a letter to Ethel Smyth, Harrison writes that, “Language, after the purely emotional interjection, began with whole sentences, *holophrases*, utterances of a relation in which subject and object have not got their heads above water but are submerged in a situation.”⁵⁷ An example would be *mamihlapinapai*, which means “*looking-at-each-other,-hoping-that-either-will-offer-to-do-something-which-both-parties-desire-but-are-unwilling-to-do.*” For Mills, this compounded bundle of relations – less a complete sentence than a *situation* – bespeaks the sort of inchoate relationships between female intellectuals at the turn of the century. More than a theory of language, a holophrase also “represents a kind of longing for intimacy that is inclusive of but also amplifies [...] Woolf’s theory and practice of ‘thinking back through our mothers.’”⁵⁸

While Preston suggests that H.D. read and subscribed to Harrison’s work on ritual, she certainly did not read as deeply as did Woolf. Yet *holophrase* is indicative of the sustained intimacy H.D. desired with the classics. She did not view them as impersonal artifacts, “containers” of history or tradition, but living tissues. Her attitude towards them exceeded cool appraisal; she was not afraid of projection or identification. Poems like *Helen* and *Eurydice* examine mythological women from shifting, frankly sympathetic perspectives. But perhaps the clearest example of her desire for intimacy is her scrapbooks, where H.D. kept cherished photographs of Bryher and herself posing for each other in the nude, approximating “classical” stances. These photographs signify an promiscuous, loose classicism, one which permits fond

⁵⁷ Jean Mills, *Virginia Woolf, Jane Ellen Harrison, and the Spirit of Modernist Classicism* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 2014), 34.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

conflations, erotic overidentification, and emulation. Indeed, this is classicism as a kind of *fandom*. Lara Vetter interprets these photographs as an expression of the tension between stasis and movement that runs through H.D.'s early poetry: "The ivory starkness of their bodies against a darker backdrop suggests a marble statue, but bodies are caught mid-movement – the tentative gesture of an arm outstretched, a head bowed, a leg raised to step into the water."⁵⁹ But I would suggest that we take into analysis not only the images themselves but the two bodies – Bryher's and H.D.'s – necessarily present at the moment of capture. These classical photographs articulate an amorous proxemics, a distance – both described and traversed by the camera – between the lover and her beloved. The classical itself takes on the charge of erotic proximity; statue, icon, diva become placeholders for a problem, the problem of how the supplicant closes the gap between herself and her goddess.

With these contexts in mind, the "Cinema and the Classics" essays carry a tension between the more conventional classicism of the era – characterized by austerity and obduracy – and an over-intimate classicism characterized by partiality and identification. We see this tension most markedly by contrasting the essays' aesthetic arguments with the rhetorical strategies by which these arguments are expressed. H.D.'s essays are aesthetic manifestos, prescriptive and provocative – in keeping with *Close Up*'s ethos not to mention the bossiness of *Blast* and others a decade prior – with an underlying ambition to write into the emerging genre of "film theory." They are, on the other hand, unapologetically desirous acts of fandom. Really, my argument requires we not too hastily distinguish the one from the other: venerating stars performs its own intellectual discernment, its own theory. In place of rigor, the classical – in tandem with the star system – gave H.D. a libidinally permissive slack.

⁵⁹ Lara Vetter, *A Curious Peril*, 6.

As stated earlier, the H.D.'s sought-after classic "quality" suffers (or benefits) from under-definition. The assessment of a properly classical cinema depends on an "I" who can designate but cannot define. Garbo's "something of a quality that I can't for the life of me label otherwise than classic" remains ambiguous throughout the essay. The precision of definition is subordinated to the intensity of recognition, and the implicit expertise (or enthusiasm) of the observer. H.D. is at her clearest when contrasting two Garbos: apparently, Garbo had that "something" in 1925 for *Joyless Street* but not a year later in the American production of *The Torrent*.

The Censor, this magnificent ogre, had seen fit to devitalize this Nordic flower, to graft upon the stem of a living, wild camellia (if we may be fanciful for a moment) the most blatant of obvious, crepe, tissue-paper orchids. A beauty, it is evident, from the Totem's stand-point, must be a vamp, an evil woman [...] Beauty and Goodness, I must again reiterate, to the Greek, meant one thing. To Kalon, the beautiful, the good. Kalon, the mob must, in spite of its highbrow detractors, have. The Ogre knows enough to know that. But he paints the lily, offers a Nice-carnival, frilled, tissue-paper rose in place of a wild-briar.⁶⁰

"Crepe" and "tissue-paper" domesticate the wildflower, killing the "living, wild camellia" or "wild-briar." Here, H.D.'s fixation on a feral unadorned beauty is reminiscent of the resilient, salt-toughened florae in her *Sea Garden* (1917). They are meant to endure, not to be plucked, collected, or arranged; a classical flower is not decorative. But the aesthetic sentiment is undermined by an excess in the style, an over-ornamentation; the speaker herself is overdressed. She allows herself "fanciful" comparisons and freewheeling nomenclature. The American censor is sometimes a Cyclops, occasionally but not always Polyphemus; at others he is an Ogre or, most incongruously, a Totem.

⁶⁰ Donald, Friedberg, and Marcus, *Close Up: Cinema and Modernism*, 107.

It is worth lingering on the contrariety of H.D.'s idealized Garbo. Certainly, every celebrity persona occasions ambiguity. Richard Dyer calls this the “structured polysemy” of the movie star: a multiplicity of attitudes and postures extending from the epistemic hollow at the star’s heart, the nullity that is its intensest and most transgressive pleasure. American writer Ruth Suckow argued that the “image of Greta Garbo is the first among the goddesses of the screen with enough subtlety to puzzle anyone.”⁶¹ But this “subtlety” is that of the 1920s cosmopolitan, a subtlety rendered such by European border-crossings. She has always known too much to be an ingenu. Garbo’s accent (“I want to be alone”), her conveniently indeterminate provenance, and her practiced scowl are not actually enigmatic (in the sense of something that blocks meaning); rather, the enigma *is* precisely the meaning, the thing that allows her star persona to cohere. And *The Torrent* – the film H.D. despises because she sees her Helen choked with paper orchids – is arguably Garbo’s arrival as a star. Trading Pabst’s dark interiors for chrome and glitz, *The Torrent* contains what film historian Lucy Fischer calls “Garbo’s first cinematic glamour shot.”⁶² Wearing “a full-length lamé evening coat completely bordered with fur,” Garbo dons the mantle of celebrity she would always carry with a certain froideur. For Fischer, the star-making conflation is precisely between Garbo’s dress and the art deco stage-sets she inhabits. Garbo’s celebrity is premised on the consolidation of two markedly modern styles: that of architecture and that of fashion. The diva’s body inhabits and articulates both idioms. For Fischer, Garbo’s grand entrance in *The Torrent* pushes the conflation into apotheosis: “an art deco diva is born.”⁶³

⁶¹ Ruth Suckow, “Hollywood Gods and Goddesses” (1936) in *Red Velvet Seat: Women’s Writing on the First Fifty Years of Cinema*, ed. Antonia Lant and Ingrid Periz (New York: Verso, 2006), 447.

⁶² Lucy Fischer, “Greta Garbo and Silent Cinema: the Actress as Art Deco Icon” in *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema*, ed. Jennifer Bean and Diana Negra (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 477

⁶³ Lucy Fischer, “Greta Garbo and Silent Cinema: the Actress as Art Deco Icon”, 477.

So we should understand H.D.'s attachment to 'the right Garbo' as oppositional, choosy: it is the irascible certainty of fandom. H.D. extends this certainty in her second essay for *Close Up*, aptly titled "Restraint." She begins by stressing that "we need, I think, next more precision, more 'restraint' in the presentation of classic themes."⁶⁴ This requires a whittling down of the *mise en scène*, an uncluttering: "We want to remove a lot of trash, wigs in particular, Nero's wig, the blond Mary Pickford curls of the blind Nydia in Pompeii, hair piled and curled and peaked and frizzed like old photographs of our 1880 great aunts. Sweep away the extraneous."⁶⁵ This austerity applies not only to costuming but to set design: "we should be *somewhere* with our minds, lines should radiate as toward a centre not out and away from the central point of interest."⁶⁶ A centripetal intensity should lead spectators towards vital nodes ("central point[s]") within the image: "*somewhere*" is achieved through the interplay of planes rather than an overabundance of historical signs. Every aspect of what Metz would later call the "codes" of film should be reduced to its skinniest semiosis, and loving attention given to the detail: "The pure classic does not depend for effect [...] on a whole, a part has always been important, chiselling and cutting, shaping and revising."⁶⁷ The model here is the Sapphic fragment: mere, stark, wrought.

H.D.'s attempts to prescribe a classical cinema are ultimately for the benefit of an engaged and imaginative spectator. She writes her final and most famous of the essays on "The Cinema and the Classics" in impassioned response to the advent of sound, which rudely disbars the spectator from co-presence in the image. In "The Mask and the Movietone," H.D. argues that sound and image (the Movietone and the celluloid Mask, the voice and the face) are "welded"

⁶⁴ Donald, Friedberg, and Marcus, *Close Up: Cinema and Modernism*, 110.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 111.

rather than “wedded,” the two technically but inharmoniously synchronized. The effect alienates the “co-operative” viewer who might otherwise lose herself in the permissively silent screen.

As with her description of Garbo’s “something of a quality,” H.D.’s aversion to the talkies succumbs to (better, celebrates) an inescapable partiality: “I didn’t really *like* my old screen image to be improved (I might also say imposed) on. I didn’t *like* my ghost-love to become so vibrantly incarnate” (emphasis in the original).⁶⁸ Here, H.D. is writing less as a theoretician and more as a cinephile or, really, a *fan*. Looking back through all three essays, we find H.D. embracing the unrigorous, over-amorous position of the spectator, the *single* spectator, the *single queer female* spectator. Like Matilde Serao’s “A Spectatrix is Speaking to You” (1916) or Elizabeth Bowen’s “Why I Go to the Cinema” (1937), H.D.’s essays on the classical element in film not only allow for the personal, they rely upon it. But I think it is H.D.’s fandom – too fond, too picky, too fanciful to qualify these essays as scrupulous aesthetic theory – that serves, ultimately, as her “central point,” her latent object of study. This is not a failure but a specific and successful rhetoric, a reflexive achievement in early studies of spectatorship.

Despite its fantasy of rigor and structure, the Classical actually offered H.D. a liberating looseness. She draws on mythological figures in ways that are, for lack of a better word, slack. While placing a premium on minimalism and restraint, she practices a freewheeling identificatory looseness, a spectatorial promiscuity. Take, for instance, a description of ideal decor in “Restraint”: actresses should be set against “a plain room wall” because “a figure without exaggerated, uncouth drapery becomes Helen or Andromeda or Iphigeneia more swiftly, more poignantly against just such a wall, obtainable by anyone, anywhere, than in some enormous rococo and expensive ‘set’ built up by the ‘classicists’ of Hollywood.”⁶⁹ “Helen or

⁶⁸ Donald, Friedberg, and Marcus, *Close Up: Cinema and Modernism*, 115.

⁶⁹ Donald, Friedberg, and Marcus, *Close Up: Cinema and Modernism*, 111.

Andromeda or Iphigeneia”, just as the American censor is a cyclops, ogre, or totem. The substitutions bespeak an exuberant plurality of identifications, a polyform inexactitude. Is it the wall that is “obtainable by anyone, anywhere,” or is it our erotic identification with “Helen or Andromeda or Iphigeneia” that might be so easily obtained, by “anyone, anywhere”? Here, the many confluences produced and sustained by the star system are mapped onto a vaster reach, a larger field of erotic play.

We might understand H.D.’s urge to declutter the screen in the context of debates about the modern surface within painting and architecture. As Anne Cheng has explored in her work on Josephine Baker, clothing and nudity play out a dialectic between the surface and the ornament, the form and the filigree – a set of oppositions themselves dissolving into indeterminacy, more shimmering than stark.⁷⁰ But this aesthetic concern is forever shot through with erotic charge. And there is something frankly desirous underlying H.D.’s frustrated attitude towards the “crepe” and “crinoline” that interrupt and offend her gaze as it travels towards the divas on the screen. It marks a tactile desire for closeness, an impossible proximity between the beloved’s body and the eye that caresses her.

Trilogy, Book of Stars

As Alik Barnstone makes clear in her introduction to the New Directions edition, *Trilogy* is a theological epic, an attempt to answer the question raised in analysis with Freud, “Do I wish myself, in the deepest unconscious or subconscious layers of my being, to be the founder of a

⁷⁰ Anne Cheng, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker & the Modern Surface* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

new religion?”⁷¹ The “new”-ness of H.D.’s would-be religion is forever in question since, as Barnstone points out, “*Trilogy* synthesizes the Judeo-Christian tradition (including Gnosticism) with the Egyptian and Greek pagan traditions.”⁷² I venture here that movie stardom is an instructive way into the question of *Trilogy*’s theo-poetical project because movie stars carry the uncanny charge of age-old divinity even as they so self-evidently manifest and articulate contemporary structures of mediation and industrial production. They stand – not in all cases, but certainly for H.D. – at the intersection of antique and modern impulses: both revenant of the gods and triumph of technology, they solicit classical models of worship and contemporary models of consumption simultaneously. I hinge the following reading of *Trilogy* on the two principal concepts that I established in my prior sections: first, that the movie star is a phenomenon of distance; second, that veneration is the spectator’s means of phantasmatically foreshortening that distance, effecting a provisional slack.

Before we enter into a reading of *Trilogy*, a gloss of its structure and a short reflection on its critical legacy are necessary. *Trilogy* is composed of three 43-stanza poems: “The Walls do not Fall,” “Tribute to the Angels,” and “The Flowering of the Rod.” The first of these opens on a harrowed Blitz-era London whose survivors wonder, “what saved us? what for?” As “Walls” progresses, a community of believers emerges: “we, the latter-day twice-born.” This congregation of sorts – diffuse, unhoused – stumbles towards its divine objects, figured as transhistorical deities inflected by Christianity, Greek mythology, Egyptian hieroglyphics, and astrology. In the second poem, “Tribute to the Angels,” the speaker becomes an alchemist, calling on Hermes Trismegistus (father of hermeticism) to create a jewel with which she might call forth the figure of the Lady (I will discuss this passage in detail below). Finally, “The

⁷¹ H.D., *Tribute to Freud* (1956; reprint ed., Boston: David R. Godine, 1974), 50-51.

⁷² H.D., *Trilogy*, IX.

Flowering of the Rod” retells two biblical stories: the Nativity and Mary Magdalene’s perfuming of Christ’s feet. Through the witness of Kaspar – the third magi whose gift was myrrh and who also, in this telling, sells Mary Magdalene her perfume – the Bible becomes a kind of Mobius strip. Different episodes open unpredictably into each other; exegetical linearity is eschewed in favor of mystical conflation and reverberation.

However, despite *Trilogy*’s esotericism and its constant rewriting of sacred texts – itself included – a set of theological impulses does emerge across the whole. I would propose the following loose scheme, arranged as a set of three questions. *The Walls do Not Fall* asks, “who are we, and who are our gods?” *Tribute to the Angels* asks, “how might we worship them?” and *The Flowering of the Rod* asks, “what comes of our worship?”

The precise rites or doxa of H.D.’s would-be religion are smudged, since *Trilogy* moves forward by means of proposals, reprisals, and revisions. *Trilogy*’s speaker repeatedly qualifies or contradicts earlier convictions, moving us through a cycle of singular images which are polished and set aside to be re-incorporated or re-worked later on: the threshold, the shell, the pearl-of-great-price, the gem in the crucible, the Lady in white, the Book, the jar of myrrh. An overarching compositional metaphor of the palimpsest – upon which inscriptions cross and overwrite each other – renders her theology both singularly syncretic and singularly illegible (better, over-legible). In describing the “invisible, indivisible spirit” (83) she pursues across the poem’s pages, she must rely on a vague but expressive negation: “This is no rune nor riddle, / it is happening everywhere; // what I mean is – it is so simple / yet no trick of pen or brush // could capture that impression” (84).⁷³ Hoping to excavate what is already immanent, “happening everywhere”, H.D. insists that it cannot be written – it can only be revised, erased, rubbed out.

⁷³ H.D. goes on to recapitulate this phrase later, but with a twist: “This is no rune nor symbol / it is happening everywhere” (106).

Trilogy abounds in syncretist conflations: Hermes and occultist scribes, Venus and Mary, the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene, Osiris and the Judeo-Christian God, etc. H.D. breaks apart religious signifiers in a search for homophones and homologies, vast theological continuities. In [21] of *The Walls do Not Fall*, H.D. subordinates deities to their linguistic mediation and mutability: “here am I, Amen-Ra, / *Amen*, Aires, the Ram.” Polytheist Greece and Egypt bubble up in the most mindless, kneejerk of monotheist refrains, *Amen*. These oft-said, underthought words are abuzz, for H.D., with unhatched possibility: “I know, I feel / the meaning that words hide: // they are anagrams, cryptograms, / little boxes, conditioned // to hatch butterflies” (53). Words carry a revelatory potential, but “hatch”-ing requires splitting them apart. This prayerful speaker splits words to make new spiritual arrangements, anagrammatically recasting the past in an unfolding “resurrection.” As C. D. Blanton puts it, this recycling is *Trilogy*’s primary poetic operation: *Trilogy*’s “scene of writing is [...] also a scene of rhyming, an ongoing prosodic fission in which no single word is ever left entirely to its own devices but is instead absorbed, gradually rewritten in an expansive accretion of isolated lexical clusters.”⁷⁴ Every word, once rendered, is susceptible to reconstitutions, bifurcations, elastic conflations, and “hatching.”

Critics have come at this theo-poetic process from various approaches. Prioritizing the psychoanalytic, Susan Friedman argues that “personal initiation became poetry of prophecy as H.D. transformed her psychic experiences and esoteric researches into art. The flaming ruins of war served as the catalyst, Hermes was her patron, and alchemy was her metaphor for artistic creation.”⁷⁵ In Friedman’s lucid and instructive schema, psychic trauma and a devastated

⁷⁴ C. D. Blanton, *Epic Negation*, 310.

⁷⁵ Susan Friedman, *Psyche Reborn: The Emergence of H.D.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 207.

cityscape together opened up a new mythology for H.D., one that counterposes the “androcentric” models of Eliot and Pound with feminine “metamorphoses” standing at “a complex intersection of individual vision and female re-vision.”⁷⁶ Opting to avoid both psychoanalysis and exegesis, Adelaide Morris makes the case for *Trilogy* as a singular work of cultural mediation, one that employs acousticity as a mode of transcription; its shifting linguistics testify to a polyglot world translated many times over. More recently, C. D. Blanton has argued that H.D. “formulate[s] late modernism’s dialectical passage, the antistrophic practice through which a certain high modernism is dismembered and incorporated again.”⁷⁷ For Blanton, this constitutes an “afterness” through which the historical premises of the modernist epic are “translated into impossibilities.” Pound’s epic poetics of “containment” cannot hold when history itself seems to be leaking.

These critics offer consistently compelling analysis of *Trilogy* through the lenses of psychoanalysis, canonicity, gender, and high modernism, but none of them leaves much room for cinema. This lacuna appears not only because of the marginal status of cinema in H.D. criticism generally but, more specifically, because of the phenomenological problems occasioned by movieleaving, as I argued at this chapter’s outset. In walking away from the cinema, spectators relinquish the immediacy of the image while retaining a gist of the experience. More than that, they retain a set of attitudes and tendencies produced by their orientation towards and away from the movies. The conceptual gambit of “movieleaving” is the idea that we etch pathways through spectatorship that remain and obtain — in subtle and far reaching ways — in other modes of expression and apprehension. When I argue that H.D.’s experiments with movie stardom — both

⁷⁶ Ibid., 212.

⁷⁷ C. D. Blanton, *Epic Negation*, 289.

as idol and idolator — resurface in *Trilogy*, I mean that it is the tendencies and orientations, the predispositions, that we can trace in her most ambitious poetic achievement.

Unlike other critics, Carrie J. Preston offers a reading of *Trilogy* that retains the cinematic, even finding a kind of cinematic apotheosis in the epic poem. I have already rehearsed some of Preston's arguments concerning the relationship between H.D.'s theories of cinema and her classical "attitudes," but here I engage her analysis of H.D.'s late career, especially her argument that "film's capacity for altering visual and kinesthetic experience through techniques like the close-up, pullback, and fade influenced her World War II sequence, *Trilogy*."⁷⁸ For Preston, the poem relates to "the cinematic ritual she imagined but never achieved" which would precipitate "a version of ritualized reception."⁷⁹ Preston reads *Trilogy* as a series of solo performances, monologues, and dramatically gestural poses. As I argue above, Preston's understanding of H.D.'s various "attitudes" is brilliant in its bringing together her early poetry, her scrapbooks, and her film theory. The idea of H.D. *practicing* her classicism through a series of sculptural or dramatic postures allows us to track the continuities between diverse materials. Yet I offer two fundamental disagreements with Preston's reading of *Trilogy*. First, she makes too-tidy comparisons with film technique to explain the long poem's formal machinations, asserting for example that Kaspar's recollections of Mary Magdalene are modeled after the "cinematic flashback,"⁸⁰ and that Kaspar sees "an image projected on the blank screen of her hair" when she drops her scarf.⁸¹ The overextended analogy here obscures *Trilogy*'s detours and reveries, oversimplifying an oneiric and mystical logic with recourse to simple editing principles. *Trilogy* is not a montage poem; it moves by elaboration and fractal elongation, not jagged

⁷⁸ Preston, *Modernism's Mythic Pose*, 194.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Preston, *Modernism's Mythic Pose*, 235.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 236.

juxtaposition. As I will insist throughout this dissertation, there are many cinematic “techniques” in excess of those proper to the film apparatus.

Second, Preston depicts *Trilogy* as a series of solo performances (tableaux, monologues, supplications) where my understanding of *Trilogy*’s theology is fundamentally relational. Where Preston argues for “mythic performance,” I would counter with “amorous distance” and the interval between two figures. Where Preston argues that “the Lady of “Tribute” is adamantly solo,”⁸² I would insist that she is more richly understood in relation to her baffled witness, that their *relation* is charged with the sacred. In leaving behind her explicit investigations of the camera and projector, H.D. retained one of cinema’s most exciting questions: *just how close can we get to the star? Who am I to the star, and what is the star to me?* These are questions for the moviegoer, or more properly (following Barthes) the movieleaver. Rather than mediating these questions of proximity and desire through screens and celebrity magazines, rather than mediating them through the movies at all, H.D. labors to find her own medium proper to worship.

This medium is *Trilogy*. Here we find the “Star” expanded vertiginously beyond its cinema-specific sense, yet retaining its main feature: the aching apprehension of unbridgeable distances. Veneration remains the arduous, arduous attempt to collapse that distance. Returning to the questions I associate with each of *Trilogy*’s three sections, [“Walls”: “who are we, and who are our gods?” / “Tribute”: “how might we worship them?” / “Flowering” : “what comes of our worship?”], I re-articulate each in terms established in my prior sections. Hence, “Walls” measures and re-measures the distance between “we, the latter-day twice-born” and the gods they seek; “Tribute” offers an alchemical model of veneration by which we can bring the gods nearer; and “Flowering” offers a glimpse of the ecstatic vision made possible through our

⁸² Ibid., 235.

eneration. What we find throughout is that veneration is not merely *Trilogy's* subject but a model for its poetic procedures: veneration is an ardor so hot that it breaks down the object it would praise. It is a mode both of address and of apprehension.

The first book of *Trilogy*, “The Walls do Not Fall,” exhibits an exuberant astrological imagination, positioning stars both as faraway objects of idolatrous worship and as fractal marvels of the infinitesimal. H.D. is able to experiment with relative scale and internal complexity – and the ecstasy that accompanies sudden shifts in scale – by referring to stars both massive and miniscule. Describing “we, the latter-day twice-born” for whom a new religion might be founded, H.D. tells her reader not to look “into the air” because the congregants are small, insectlike. Even so near the ground, the worshipful few yearn for the heavens: “we have not crawled so very far // up our individual grass-blade / toward our individual star” (23). Elsewhere, the speaker reminds us of Yahweh’s injunction – “*Thou shalt have none other gods but me*” – and presents a series of celestial bodies who ought not be worshiped in His place, only to contradict herself in the final line: “not in the sky / shall we invoke separately // Orion or Sirius / or the followers of the Bear, // not in the higher air of Algorab, Regulus or Deneb // shall we cry / for help – or shall we?” (50). The stars need not be immense to worthy of apostrophic praise or supplication: “O stars, little jars of that indisputable // and absolute Healer” (33). Even strictly terrestrial phenomena are star-crossed: “every snow-flake / has its particular star, coral or prism shape” (52).

Obviously, the mere mention of stars does not index the phenomenology of movie stardom. More than a simple relationship of reference or indication, the stars in *Trilogy* take on the burden of distance and intimacy that H.D. explored in her columns as a fan. Across “The Walls do not Fall,” we can single out distance as a central preoccupation which H.D. works out

imagistically by shifting diegetic proximity to stars. The worshiper's ascent up the grass-blade towards an individual star dramatizes the dizzying problem of scale in worship. The reason distance recurs as a problem is that, within this new theo-poetics, the very objects of our veneration are ambiguous or plural. Torn between conventional orthodoxies and obvious heresies, the speaker complains, "The Christos-image / is most difficult to disentangle // from its art-craft junk-shop / paint-and-plaster medieval jumble // of pain-worship and death-symbol" (27). The speaker is eager to find the right media, to rid herself of these "paint-and-plaster" trappings that clog our channel with the divine. As in "Restraint," H.D. extols austerity as a means to clear the corridor; the impulse in both *Trilogy* and "Restraint" is to get closer to the beloved, to occasion a properly mediated encounter. We have given different names, the speaker suggests, to this mediation: The Holy Ghost (also called the Dream) "acts as go-between, interpreter // it explains symbols of the past / in to-day's imagery, // it merges the distant future / with most distant antiquity" (29). It is understood that language, civilization, time, and space cleave us from the gods. Immediacy is never really possible without drastic intervention, without a medium that could bring "the distant future" together with "most distant antiquity." Far, far away from the gods, we rely on go-betweens, or crawl up grass-blades.

But there is a sense that stargazing gives us a different kind of experience, a more powerful purchase on these vast distances. While incomprehensibly far away, the stars seem to know us. Shortly after she describes the tenaciously medieval "Christos-image" the speaker wishes to find herself "anywhere / where stars blaze through clear air, // where we may greet individually, / Sirius, Vega, Arcturus, // where these separate entities / are intimately concerned with us, // where each, with its particular attribute, / may be invoked // with accurate charm, spell, prayer" (33). These stars brim with intimate knowledge and reciprocal promise. In lieu of

lofty indifference, they “blaze” towards us with intention. The brightest stars in the Northern night sky – Sirius, Vega, and Arcturus – are depicted as proud and partial, open to praise and invocation. Their luminosity, in excess of the projector’s beam, is poetically intensified by “accurate charm, spell, prayer.” They seem to rely as much on our veneration as they do the astrophysical properties of light and heat; they are “intimately concerned” with us, and with our seeing them. Notice the care with which the speaker differentiates them – “each, with its particular attribute” – lest one outshine the other. Alongside their immense power, a certain vanity insinuates itself, a touch of the diva. These stars need their fans as much as their fans need them.

The star system takes on even greater significance in “Tribute to the Angels.” In one of *Trilogy*’s most frequently quoted passages, the speaker-turned-chemist fashions a jewel in a crucible. Curiously wrought, gorgeous but unnameable, the jewel stands meta-poetically for a religious project whose dimensions and edges are vague, whose creed is obscure, but whose beauty is unmistakable. Like costume-jewelry that refracts wavelengths more sharply that it may sparkle more brightly, this alchemical composite catches the light, bringing stars closer to earth.

[8]

Now polish the crucible
And in the bowl distill

a word most bitter, *marah*,
a word bitterer still, *mar*,

sea, brine, breaker, seducer,
giver of life, giver of tears;

Now polish the crucible
and set the jet of flame

under, til *marah-mar*
are melted, fuse and join

and change and alter,
mer, mere, mère, mater, Maia, Mary,

Star of the Sea,
Mother.⁸³

[10]

In the field-furrow
the rain-water

showed splintered edge
as of a broken mirror,

and in the glass
as in a polished spear,

glowed the star Hesperus,
white, far and luminous,

incandescent and near,
Venus, Aphrodite, Astarte,

Star of the east,
Star of the west,

Phosphorus at sun-rise,
Hesperus at sun-set.⁸⁴

⁸³ H.D., *Trilogy*, 71.

⁸⁴ H.D., *Trilogy*, 73.

Here, the poet's twin crafts are alchemy and astronomy: the melting and hardening of lexemes precipitates a galaxy in a crucible. Mary, "Star of the Sea," becomes one glinting star in a dazzling display, Hesperus and Phosphorus glowing with her. The alchemist scrapes "mer" against "mere" and "mère," the friction sparking Mary into life; the lapidary acoustics chisel out a "bitter jewel / in the heart of the bowl" at the opening of [9]. "Mere," one facet of the many-sided crystal in the crucible, phonetically anticipates the "broken mir/ror" (mir/mere) glimpsed by night in a rain-flooded ditch. The poet is master of both matter and distance. Her extant ambition is to "fuse and join" the material nearest at hand (for a poet, words) to bring syncretic divinity into view. Her latent ambition is to metamorphose the "far and luminous" into the "incandescent and near." This second ambition is especially noteworthy considering the preoccupation throughout "Walls" with mediated distances: the "far and luminous" bends, like light, into incandescent nearness. Her jewel catches the light of a twice-named star: Phosphorus/Hesperus, two names for Venus in her journey through the day of the sky. The jewel in the crucible is a visionary technology, but one only available to the poet: it uses words to see stars.

What H.D. gives us in this incredible passage is a model of veneration. We know this because when the jewel begins to cool and meanings begin to ossify, the speaker reacts quickly: "O swiftly, re-light the flame // for suddenly we saw your name / desecrated; knaves and fools // have done you impious wrong, / Venus, for venery stands for impurity" (74). The worshiper hopes to rescue Venus from her corrupted connotations, from "venery" and "venereal." As with H.D.'s attachment to the right Garbo in her columns, this preference is rooted less in systematic thinking than in fond devotion. The speaker draws her talents from traditions at the margins of

institutional knowledge. This makes her exuberantly unscientific; she prefers alchemy to chemistry, prefers a word-making based in love to a word-tracing based in philology. We catch the contrary note in her voice when she declares a new linguistic affiliation for Venus: “Venus whose name is kin // to venerate, / venerator” (75). The fan, fanning the flames, willfully reclaims her star. This is precisely the willfulness of veneration.

The New Spectator

Kaspar knew the scene was unavoidable

and already written in a star
or a configuration of stars

that rarely happens, perhaps once
in a little over two thousand years

In *The Intelligence of a Machine*, Jean Epstein argues somewhat mystically that the camera has taught humanity to rewrite reality. In a revision of Bergson, “the cinematograph instructs us that continuity and discontinuity, rest and movement, far from being two incompatible modes of reality, are two interchangeable modes of unreality, twin ‘ghosts of the mind’ as Francis Bacon called them.”⁸⁵ Humans misrecognize the world as continuous, unconsciously filling in the gaps in our vision and deleting our noses; machines misrecognize the world as discontinuous, splitting movements into disconnected pieces. Both fail, for Epstein, because “continuity and discontinuity, rest and movement, color and whiteness, alternatively play the role of reality, which is here as elsewhere, never, nowhere, merely a function, as we will make clear later on.”⁸⁶ Epstein arrives at this paradox by way of the camera’s ability to play film

⁸⁵ Jean Epstein, *The Intelligence of a Machine* (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2014), 15-16.

⁸⁶ Epstein, *The Intelligence of a Machine*, 16.

in reverse, or to severely accelerate or retard the flow of images. This is a cinematographic quality Laura Marcus pinpoints in her analysis H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine*: the traveller, seated spectator *par excellence*, watches his housekeeper dashing forwards and backwards at variable speeds through the flickering ambient grey of his machine. Epstein's premises are no less audacious than the time traveller's: played at the proper speed, we could witness the alarming surge of mountains or the absolute stillness of mosquitoes. Kinesis and stasis are no longer antinomies in this philosophy: they are variations in a frame rate.

H.D. gives us something quite similar in the final section of *Trilogy*, "The Flowering of the Rod." But it is a visionary gift that follows veneration rather than a metaphysical insight derived from the camera. Take the following excerpt, when Kaspar bends to pick up the Mary Magdalene's scarf and falls into fractaling slow motion:

As he stooped for the scarf, he saw this,
and as he straightened, in that half-second,

he saw the fleck of light
like a flaw in the third jewel

to his right, in the second circlet,
a grain, a flaw, or a speck of light,

and in that point or shadow,
was the whole secret of the mystery;

literally, as his hand just did-not touch her hand,
and as she drew the scarf toward her,

the speck, fleck, grain or seed
opened like a flower.⁸⁷

It is not only because of the line break that the eye lingers on "literally." There is an embarrassing sincerity, a slightly imbalanced pressure placed on the word. It is set apart by a

⁸⁷ H.D., *Trilogy*, 152.

semicolon on the one side, a comma on the other. It is the only adverb on the page; it is the only four-syllable word. Ungentle, it insists upon itself. Like the time traveller, who collects a band of sober professionals to corroborate, make literal, his fabulous adventure, Kaspar has gone on a journey too strange to be believed. From the littlest particle his eye can see – “speck, fleck, grain or seed” – springs the world’s unspooling.

When I argue that this is a vision that follows veneration, rather than one bequeathed by the camera, I am drawing attention to the zealous idolatry that marks both Kaspar’s world-opening reverie and Epstein’s rhapsodic machine-love. Both require more than a camera’s registration and reconstitution of the world; they require a sinuous and imaginative spectatorship that could meet and match the moving image. In Kaspar’s case, more is required still. It is not only that Kaspar sees Mary in slow motion, or in something like an extreme dolly zoom (a technique first popularized in *Vertigo*, some thirteen years after *Trilogy*’s publication). It is rather that he can see her playing one of many roles, “for technically / Kaspar was a heathen; // he might whisper tenderly, those names without fear of eternal damnation, // Isis, Astarte, Cyprus / and the other four; // he might re-name them, Ge-meter, De-meter, earth-mother // Or Venus / in a star” (145). What Kaspar sees in this resplendent figure is precisely her star quality: the “dispersed figural presence” of this many-named diva. “Kaspar was a heathen” – so are all of Mary’s fans.

Moviegoing's Weakness: a Coda

A few weeks into 2020's quarantine, *New Yorker* columnist Anthony Lane suggested – in an essay entitled “Perchance to Stream” – that coronavirus would accelerate the death of moviegoing. “In the olden days, which, according to historians, ended a few months ago, people used to do the strangest things [...] No activity from that far-off period, however, seems as inexplicable as this: humans went to the movies.”¹ Inexplicable, in the context of a pandemic, to expose oneself to so many vectors of transmission, in an unventilated room, for perhaps two hours of prolonged contact. It is true that a year and more of quarantine have intensified tendencies to stream movies at home; but anxieties about moviegoing's decline had predated coronavirus. In a speech to the Cinema Audio Society in February 2019, Steven Spielberg circumspcctly praised television writing and performance before, in the same breath, insisting that “there's nothing like going to a big dark theater with people you've never met before, and having the experience wash over you.”² A “firm believer that movie theaters need to be around forever,” Spielberg courted controversy the year prior by suggesting that films produced by streaming-service giants like Netflix or Amazon should be ineligible for Academy Awards: “Once you commit to a television format, you're a TV movie.”

In these final pages, I wish to pursue the question of what we are losing as we say goodbye to moviegoing – which we are most likely in the process of doing. What Spielberg singled out in his barbs at streaming-service film production studios is an aesthetic quality – there's “nothing like” it – that properly belongs to the movie theater. For him, that quality is a

¹ Anthony Lane, “Perchance to Stream,” *The New Yorker*, May 11 2020.

² Zack Sharf, “Steven Spielberg: The Greatest Contribution a Director Can Make Is the Theatrical Experience,” *IndieWire*, Feb 19 2019, <https://www.indiewire.com/2019/02/steven-spielberg-theaters-over-streaming-netflix-1202045064/>.

necessary and indeed constitutive ingredient for the weighty thing called cinema – without it, you are merely watching a “TV movie.” As I argued in my introduction to this dissertation, that aesthetic quality is more properly understood as a social aesthetic, where aesthetic perception is always already social, and sociality itself is beheld as an object of complex aesthetic value. But undoubtedly, cinema’s social aesthetic will not be replaced so much as it will be modulated. The online reappropriation of the Babadook as a queer icon; the Twitter hashtag #oscarssowhite; the use of Tik Tok to rewrite and circulate popular scenes from recently released films – all of these suggest that cinema’s social aesthetic is not dying but changing.

In place of the obstinacy that would fetishize a dwindling social practice or the nostalgia that would eulogize it, I wish to highlight just what it meant to be part of “big dark theater with people you’ve never met before,” an experience we are having in ever-diminishing numbers. Centuries from now, moviegoing may register as a rather short chapter in the history of the moving image; physically-assembled viewing may well come to be understood as a blip in the relentless privatization and mass-circulation of content. But time will tell.

What Spielberg (sincerely) and Lane (ironically) are mourning is moviegoing’s weakness. I draw here on the weakness espoused by Paul Saint-Amour in “Weak Theory, Weak Modernism.”³ Working with (among others) sociologist Mark Granovetter’s theory of “weak ties,” Saint-Amour argues that modernist studies’ “immanent theory of modernism is a weak theory, growing weaker.”⁴ Saint-Amour suggests that within modernist studies, the once-treasured notion of the coterie has fallen out of fashion as interest in extended, diffuse networks of influence take hold in literary methodology. Information travels more quickly through weak, diffuse networks, as Granovetter forcefully argues; this provides new

³ My thanks to Sarah Cole for guiding me to this pivotal idea, which consolidates many of the threads in my project.

⁴ Paul Saint-Amour, “Weak Theory, Weak Modernism,” *Modernism/modernity* 25.3 (2018): 446.

opportunities for scholars seeking to chart disseminations or widen shared contexts. Modernists have not yet taken the step, Saint-Amour opines, of assessing diegetic networks in texts; as he puts it, “While shying away from weak social ties in our diegetic analyses, however, we have for a while now been giving them pride of place in tracing the social networks in which modernist cultural producers were embedded.”⁵

Moviegoing is an especially weak form of sociality, connecting strangers rather than acquaintances. But its weakness is peculiar, too, because of the brief affective intensity of shared viewership. The audience gathers for the length of a feature, more or less. Once they leave, they are likely never to see each other again – at least, never again in this specific configuration. Anonymity, iterability, and transience are crucial features of the audience, a middle formation located somewhere between the extremes of movement and stillness, brevity and duration. Unlike a street crowd – or a protest, or a riot – the moviegoing audience is contained, but not for long. Like so many near-anonymous formations, the audience is defined as much by dispersal as by assembly. While nostalgia for moviegoing relies on a fetishized notion of the stranger (“a big dark theater with people you’ve never met before”) it relies all the more emphatically on a sense of communion, fellow-feeling, and affective vulnerability to that stranger. It is the ephemerality of this contact that those writing elegies for movie theaters are mourning, I think, since the social aesthetics of 21st-century cinematic reception will be *more* rather than less indexical, leaving discursive trails and swirling reposts. Counterintuitively, the ties forged between viewers in the age of streaming may well be stronger rather than weaker than those of the early 20th century, as movieviewing publics form in and through online textual correspondence.

For the four figures of this dissertation, moviegoing’s weakness was a provocation and an invitation to create. Moviegoing did not necessarily leave archival traces; this is one reason

⁵ Paul Saint-Amour, “Weak Theory, Weak Modernism,” 447.

Richardson and H.D. put such energy into wording their cinematic encounters. It was not only that a new public sphere was opening but that the ties threading that public together were peculiarly thin. Richardson responded through apostrophe, addressing herself to stylized types at the movie theater (the gabby self-involved woman, “herself in excelsis,” the jeering boys in the front row). She sought to make of this inconstant public a “strange hospice,” a realm that could host the many anonymous selves and transform them into congregants. Richardson’s religious rhetoric was less mere analogy than an attempt to strengthen, through liturgy, the tenuousness of her perceived congregation. In contrast, Fauset found in the social weakness of moviegoing a kind of liberatory possibility; Angela’s pleasure lies at the edge of disclosure. The weakness of her ties to her fellow viewers is a source of exhilaration, as that weakness is precisely what enables her to pass unnoticed. For Fauset, the weakness of “curiously intimate” assembly is also the source of its potentiality, the crackling possibility (of exposure, of a new life, of living otherwise) is bound up in the underarticulation of those relations between Angela and her fellow-viewers. H.D., on the other hand, exercises a frank libidinal pull on the stars that are far away from her in space and time, sidestepping moviegoing’s weakness by phantasmatically thickening her constellation of beloved stars. And Hurston, in her practice of “thick witness,” renegotiates the weakness of cinematic sociality by taking the cinema to church. In lieu of the thinness of classical spectatorship, she intervenes on normative viewing and returns the camera to a realm of congested, congregated beholding. Hurston strengthens moviegoing’s weak ties by resituating congregated spectatorship in the content of her filmmaking.

The moviegoing practices familiar to us coalesced in the late 1910s and across the 1920s amidst intensifying conceptions of totality; this coalescence must be understood, then, in relation to the interpellative appeals of nationalism, internationalism, communism, fascism, white

supremacy (the list goes on). While these ideologies sought to articulate, unify, and mobilize social bodies, moviegoing emerged as a practice through which strangers assembled *inconsequentially*. By naming this inconsequentiality, I do not mean to ignore the monumental ideological work of the cinema (to do so would be monumentally foolish). Rather, I am calling attention to the not-yet-activated politics of the gathering itself, the interval during which a group of strangers assembled in suspended intimacy, together and apart – of no immediate use or consequence. Judith Butler is not talking about moviegoers when she argues that, “Popular assemblies form unexpectedly and dissolve under voluntary or involuntary conditions,” nor when she singles out this very “transience” as being “bound up with their [the assemblies’] ‘critical’ function.”⁶ But Butler’s language, intended for contemporary mass-protest and acts of collective vulnerability, helps me express moviegoing’s inconsequentiality. The audience’s energy could dissipate as easily as it could explode; indeed, cinema’s ideological *work* is all about rerouting this energy, transforming inconsequentiality into consequence by turning strangers into fellow-citizens or heterosexuals or men or ...

Moviegoing audiences cannot and should not bear the weight of utopia, but they form a vital chapter in the history of public assembly. And in turning to figures like Richardson, Fauset, Hurston, and H.D. we should see moviegoing as they did: full of troubling possibilities, risks, and pleasures, producing intimacies of great depth and of no consequence.

⁶ Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 7.

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