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# Joyce the Filmmaker

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McCourt, John. *Roll Away the Reel World: James Joyce and Cinema*. Cork University Press, 2010. xiii, 248 pp. $ 55.00 cloth.

*John McCourt's* Roll Away the Reel World: James Joyce and Cinema *provides a complete vision of Joyce's relationship with cinema. It combines biographical studies and textual analyses from a cinematographic perspective. This collection of papers presented at a conference held in Trieste in 2009 will appeal to readers interested in Joyce's biography, and in his project as a cinema manager in particular. It is an interdisciplinary study, pointing to the relationship between literature and film.*

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The cover of John McCourt's *Roll Away the Reel World: James Joyce and Cinema* displays a colourful Warholian collage representing Joyce in the background together with Marilyn Monroe reading *Ulysses*. The interpretation of this image is logically related to the reader's expectations of the book, which are clearly interdisciplinary. The four pop-art portraits in which Joyce's face replaces Marilyn's seem to question whether the Irish author has been as influential in cinema as to become a film icon. The actress reading Joyce's masterpiece with interest can be interpreted as either showing the influence of Joyce's work on cinema or as a statement on its cinematographic quality. Taking a closer look, one can discover that Marilyn Monroe holds the book open. Richard Brown believed that Marilyn Monroe's shocked expression was produced by a dirty passage from the final pages.[1] However, one can also understand that, since the actress is unquestionably reading a passage from "Penelope," she may not just be reading *Ulysses*, but studying her part of the script as Molly Bloom. She could definitely have made a great Molly if she had not died five years before Joseph Strick directed his film version of *Ulysses*.

The structure of this volume edited by John McCourt is divided into three parts. The first part focuses on the Volta Cinematograph. Here we discover biographical details regarding Joyce's time as manager of an Italian cinema in Dublin, the background of the project, and the variety of

[1] Brown, Richard. "Marilyn Monroe Reading Ulysses: Goddess or Post-Cultural Cyborg." In *Joyce and Popular Culture*, ed. R. B. Kershner, 170-179. Gainesville, University of Florida Press, 1996.

films that were shown at the Volta in Dublin. These first two essays contextualise the history of the cinema in Trieste until the First World War, and Joyce's role as an entrepreneur in the film industry. The reader will also find analyses of Joyce's contract, of his interests, and a detailed account of his business partners, some of which correct mistakes in Ellmann's biography.

The first essay, "James Joyce and the Volta Programme" by Luke McKernan focuses on how Joyce approached three businessmen in Trieste in September 1909 and convinced them to open a cinema in Dublin. Three months later the Volta opened to the public. However, the business was sold in June to a British company. Luke McKernan points out the possible reasons why the cinema did not survive, such as the distance between Trieste and Dublin and the titles of the films, which were mainly French and Italian, instead of American. In his research, Luke McKernan has traced half of the films shown at the Volta in Dublin during the period in which Joyce was in charge, and the reader can find the Volta filmography in the appendix of the book. This information is extremely useful for discovering new sources for the writing of *Ulysses*. Revealing details can also be found here, like the absence of opera films in the Volta programme, which ran against Joyce's taste. McKernan's essay mentions that Joyce was mainly interested in Italian and French comedies because, like *Ulysses*, they showed "young men going through their comic routines." McKernan draws attention to some scatological films shown at the Volta. The reader will undoubtedly agree as to analogies between scenes in *Beware of Castor Oil!* and the ending of the "Sirens" episode. All this proves that Joyce was unquestionably attracted to what Luke McKernan calls the "new language of the visual."

Erik Schneider's paper includes new biographical aspects of Joyce during the period in which he managed the Volta cinema. Schneider informs the reader that most details related to Joyce's biography are based on interviews his brother Stanislaus had with Richard Ellmann in 1953, nearly forty-five years after the Volta project, thus warning that some conclusions of Ellmann's research are questionable. Schneider's rigorous research yields reveals that one of Joyce's business partners was Lorenzo Novak, and not Francesco Novak, as Stanislaus Joyce has it. Schneider contextualises the reasons for Trieste's leading role in cinematography at the time. He throws new light on Joyce's contract as a manager. One will discover that one clause in the contract made Joyce believe that he had been cheated when the Volta was sold seven months after its opening. Schneider provides alternative reasons why the Volta cinema failed in Dublin; these came from the partners' ambitions and not only from the choice of films, as Luke McKernan assumes in the previous chapter.

The second part is interdisciplinary and pays attention to analogies in techniques and topics between Joyce's work and films produced between the 1890s and the beginning of the 20th century. The first three scholars, Katherine Mullin, Maria DiBattista and Philip Sicker, share the idea that "Circe" is the most cinematographic episode that Joyce ever wrote. They also believe that George Méliès had a strong influence on Joyce. Mullin renews the approach to Joyce's work, and to *Ulysses* in particular, by comparing some of the most cinematographic excerpts of Joyce's work with films the author was familiar with. Her study focuses on films from the 1890s to 1904. They show scenes that display what she calls "the erotics of everyday life." They put on view men observing women in different contexts. A common element in these films is the "accidental" display of legs and stockings by means of a close-up. Mullin proves that Joyce's sources were not only taken from literature but also from films. Finally, Katherine Mullin remarks that Bloom's voyeurism, which is clearly influenced by the Mutoscope, becomes masochistic fascination in 'Circe' when Bloom watches his wife with Boylan.

Maria DiBattista and Philip Sicker also discuss the importance of George Méliès as a cinematographic influence on Joyce. Maria DiBattista focuses on spectres in the silent cinema and reflects on the cinematographic quality of scenes in *Ulysses* like those in which the reader witnesses apparitions of characters who take the shape of ghosts, such as Paddy Dignam, Stephen's mother, and Bloom's son Rudy. All these passages bear resemblance to a series of trick films directed by George Méliès between 1898 and 1909 in which illusionism played an important role.

In a similar way, Philip Sicker draws parallels between Joyce's "Circe" and Méliès' dream cinema. He does not only allude to the techniques of trick cinema but also to details, motifs and sequences used by the filmmaker and later on adopted by the writer. One of these tricks is what he calls "the suspension of chronological time," a device created by Méliès by stopping the camera. The multiple exposure achieved by filming over recorded images produced phantasmagoric scenes. Philip Sicker draws attention to another device, self-visualisation. In this rigorous research, Sicker provides evidence that these cinematographic tricks appear repeatedly throughout "Circe."

Carla Marengo Vaglio examines the analogies between futurist aesthetics and Joyce's work. She disagrees with Stanislaus Joyce when he pointed out the huge gap between his brother and the futurists in terms of ideas and theories. She stresses the importance of "Wandering Rocks" as a theatre of varieties and provides numerous examples in which common people play a central role within these "protean sketches" of everyday life in Dublin. Drawing parallels between passages of this chapter and futurist

art, Carla Marengo argues that Joyce had more in common with the futurists than what his brother claimed.

Similarly, Marco Camerani shows the strong resemblance between "Circe" and Leopoldo Fregoli's films. Unlike George Méliès' films, in which the filmmaker played with time by stopping the camera, Leopoldo Fregoli's tricks and transformations succeeded thanks to the artist's outstanding performing skills. Camerani gives an account of both Fregoli's works and his skill as a quick-change artist. Camerani also makes use of a series of passages that contextualise Bloom's transformations and even transvestism throughout "Circe," which are clearly related to Fregoli's films. Both "Circe" and films by Fregoli have something else in common, the ability to use unexpected turns of events to surprise the audience or the reader.

Cleo Hanaway examines the intertextual use of film in *Ulysses* and reflects on Joyce's interest in film: was the author attracted to film by its objectivity, as David Trotter argues in *Cinema and Modernism,*[2] or rather, as she claims, by its "ability to *blur* the subjectivity/objectivity binary"? Hanaway is convincing when she discusses the three forms of filmic allusions in *Ulysses,* parody, illustration, and emulation. She links these with Merleau-Ponty's model of perception. One can agree with this theory and observe how in "Nausicaa" Joyce parodies the voyeuristic nature of early erotic films first, how trick films provide illustrations for "Circe" and finally how "Wandering Rocks" emulates early 20th century documentaries. Hanaway concludes that these different uses of film in *Ulysses* have certainly influenced the model of perception conveyed in the work.

The third part deals with the influence of Joyce on modern film. The three essays focus on filmed versions of Joyce's works, and also on Joyce's work as an inspiration for directors. According to Louis Armand, Jean-Luc Godard adopted cinematographic effects from Eisenstein and Vertov so as to renew film as dynamic structure. Eisenstein was attracted to Joyce's use of language as a means to blend different subjects while criticizing the Irish author's failure to widen the frame of literature. However, Armand observes that Eisenstein was in fact unable to discover Joyce's skills as filmmaker, or as author of the "museum of the real." Armand notes that it was Godard who shared Joyce's notion of cinema as language. They both understand the image as a discourse or as dynamic structure. Armand compares Godard's *Histoires du Cinéma* with Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*: they both can be understood as examples of dreamworks or montage machines.

In the next essay, Kevin Barry surveys difficulties generated by adaptations of "The Dead" for the screen. Comparing the two versions by

[2] Trotter, David. *Cinema and Modernism*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2007.

Rossellini and Huston, he notes that the former adopts an arbitrary method of composition, whereas the latter is much more faithful to Joyce's text. Barry's meticulous research leads to comments on the political background of Huston's 1987 version as a crucial element in the reception of the film. He also points out that the relation between Joyce's story and Huston's version can be studied considering his three departures from Joyce's text: Mr Grace's recitation, the on-screen appearances of Lily the maid, and Freddy Malins' embarrassment in the bathroom. These genetic transfers allow Huston to introduce his own life into the film. Barry concludes that Huston's version proves that Joyce's story can be transposed across mediums and cultures.

Keith Williams studies the film adaptations of *Ulysses* in order to assess the degree of fidelity of the various versions. Even those of us who have a special predilection for Strick's film will have to agree with Williams' analysis and admit that there are a number of limitations in the film, such as Maurice Roeves' anachronistic interpretation of Stephen Dedalus as a young Beatle. Williams believes that Strick and Walsh share the same focus on the plot. He underlines the importance of Eisenstein's remarks on the "cinematicity" of Joyce's interior monologue. Williams deduces from this that no filmic version of *Ulysses* should take Joyce's text as a script. According to Williams, Werner Nekes' film goes a step beyond and can be considered as the most faithful version in so far as technique is concerned, thanks to the "protean kaleidoscope of audio-visual styles" created by the German filmmaker.

Finally, Jesse Meyers presents a series of parallels between *Ulysses* and three modern films: Mel Brooks' *The Producers* (1968), Sam Mendes' *American Beauty* (1999), and Martin Scorsese's *The Departed* (2006). After commenting on their correspondences, Jesse Meyers wonders whether the audiences witnessed theft or subliminal screenwriting. Although the screenwriters of these films were familiar with Joyce's work, Meyers believes that all these "astonishingly similar" details are the result of Joyce's subliminal influence. The correspondences provided by Meyers are convincing, and point to Joyce's influence in modern art.

John McCourt's *Roll Away the Reel World* is a good tool allowing one to approach the multifaceted aspects of Joyce as a manager, an entrepreneur, and a writer – and maybe as a scriptwriter and a filmmaker as well. It explores the importance film had for Joyce from a number of perspectives, first by showing how the author was attracted to this new artistic manifestation as business and as a way to make a living, then how his works reveal cinematographic qualities, and finally how Joyce's appeal became a source of inspiration for modern film-makers. McCourt's careful editorial work is remarkable; the essays are interconnected and complement

each other. The book as a whole provides a thorough portrait of the artist as a filmmaker.

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