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Modernist Women and Cinema

Abstract: Matching the ever-increasing numbers of female participants in the commercial venues of department stores and cinemas in the 1920s, modernist women writers enjoyed a new visibility in the intellectual world of cinema journalism. Yet cinema modernism, like literary modernism, was veined by masculinity in the 1920s. The paper argues that modernist women writers, including Colette, H.D., Dorothy Richardson, and Virginia Woolf, created a feminist standpoint. By replacing the prescriptive male gaze with a feminist aesthetics: identifying with stars and women viewers and by describing audiences as socially constituted and gendered.

Key words: modernism, women, cinema, viewer, feminist aesthetic

Overview

"Modernity realized itself in and through the cinema".[1] As Miriam Hansen argues, the industrialization of art, most notably the invention of cinema, is a quintessential modern development. Equally, the main features of modernity, its mass urban subjectivities and new modes of perception, mark modernism's artistic strategies and new technologies of perception and representation. The pivotal decades of twentieth-century modernist art, from Roger Fry's 1910 Post-Impressionist Exhibition to the end of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1930s, are also the decades of the founding of the influential London Film Society, "Close Up", the major avant-garde film journal, as well as the flourishing European cinema of Sergei Eisenstein, G.W. Pabst and Carl Dreyer. Just as the invention of cinema is part of other technological and cultural changes that characterize modernity, so too cinema encouraged changes in modernist aesthetics.[2]

Matching the ever-increasing numbers of female participants in the commercial venues of department stores and cinemas in the 1920s, women writers enjoyed a new visibility in

1 M.B. Hansen, *America, Paris, the Alps: Kracauer (and Benjamin) on Cinema and Modernity*, [in:] L. Charney, V.R. Schwartz (eds.), *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1995, p. 363.

2 A. Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1993, p. 163.

the intellectual world of cinema journals. Modernist women founded several small journals: Bryher financed "Close Up", and women writers including Colette, Dorothy Richardson and H.D., were regular contributors to film journals as well as to film practice. H.D. helped to script and act in Ken Macpherson's film *Borderline*. Colette acted in and scripted several films. The convergence of experimental film, the new institutional freedoms of small journals and cine-clubs shaped by a radical anti-establishment aesthetic created an intellectual space apparently welcoming to women. But although these new cross fertilisations of modernism crossed the boundaries of nations and media, men and women did not equally share such a culture. Just as going to the cinema was a more quotidian experience for women than for men so women's cinema writing focuses on the everyday world of women's spectatorship and has a very different autobiographical quality that the authoritative distancing of popular audiences by male critics.

Analysing the interweaving of visual stylistics and the stylistics of journalism in women's cinema writing, which is the topic of this paper, reveals how modernity's technologies did not necessarily force women into a mechanical, masculine critical rhetoric. Although more recently Laura Marcus has significantly brought about a revision of the cinema writing of H.D. and Richardson, mainstream film histories often ignore the work of women modernists both as film theorists and practitioners.[3] For example, three summative texts about cinema of this period: Don Macpherson's *Traditions of Independence*, Jay Leyda's *Kino* and Rachael Low's *The History of the British Film 1918–1929* make little mention of women.[4]

If literary modernism, as Andreas Huyssen argues, was veined by masculinity in the 1920s, so too masculinity shaped cinema modernism.[5] Just as it is often argued that the poets Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot sometimes share a hard, objective polemics so too the critics Ken Macpherson and Herbert Read's articles projects tough, anti-sentimental rhetoric.[6] Many cinema essays and texts by male critics, including those by Macpherson and Read, are inflected with tropes of masculinity at a discursive level and therefore inevitably circumscribe progressive aims. Whether or not writers were conscious of such inflections, the generous numerical space of journal pages given to women writers is not matched by a generosity of rhetoric. This is not to say that male critics were creating a homogenous cinema culture. For example Paul Rotha's *The Film Till Now* contains detailed accounts of cinema practice and is diametrically different from Huntley Carter's *The New Spirit in the Cinema* which

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3 Zob. L. Marcus, *Introduction*, [in:] J. Donald, A. Friedberg, L. Marcus (eds.), *Close Up 1927–1933: Cinema and Modernism*, Cassell, London 1998.

4 Cf. D. Macpherson (ed.), *Traditions of Independence*, BFI, London 1980; J. Leyda, *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film*, Macmillan, New York 1960; R. Low, *The History of the British Film 1918–1929*, George Allen and Unwin, London 1971.

5 Cf. A. Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1986.

6 Cf. S. Vanacker, *Autobiography and Orality: The Work of Modernist Women Writers*, [in:] T.L. Boughton, L. Anderson (eds.), *Women's Lives/Women's Times: New Essays on Autobiography*, State University of New York, Albany 1997.

contains somewhat lightweight mysticism.[7] Yet, without proposing an essentialist binary between masculine and feminine film writing, it does seem that male writers' choice of forms of address, metaphor and syntactics shape a style which has a characteristically masculine assertiveness, one which is both ironic and casually dismissive of popular audiences, particularly women.

The main champion of an abstract art cinema was the art historian Herbert Read whose articles in "Cinema Quarterly" parallel Macpherson's attempt in "Close Up" to celebrate a polemically aggressive aesthetics. In "Towards a Film Aesthetic", in the first issue of "Cinema Quarterly", Read set out his vision of cinema. Critics need, Read claims, to discover the "universal laws of art" in cinema whose primary law is "the exercise of sensibility in the interests of s standard".[8] Read celebrates the individual artist at the expense of cultural context, and argues that cinema can create a truly contemporary art only if cinema expresses the artist's mind. Film is limited by its engagement with the "lumbering material of the actual visible world" but a "poetic master" will control reality if he has the "visual sensibility of the painter, the vision of the poet and the time-sense of the musician".[9] Read draws on traditional tropes of artistic self-expression polarizing an individually created cinema art against the everyday world. Read's ideal cinema is intensely masculinist exemplified, for example, in his phallic image of the camera as "a chisel of light, cutting into the reality of objects".[10] In Read's view the art of cinema derives largely from an autonomous male artist remote from the lures of emotional identifications or audiences.

Not surprisingly, Virginia Woolf came to dislike Herbert Read. Although the Hogarth Press published Read's poems *Mutations of the Phoenix* in 1923 and his collection *In Retreat* in 1925, writing to Stephen Spender Woolf felt that she did not "exactly fathom the silent and inscrutable Prof. Read".[11] In his literary criticism Read had chosen Woolf along with Joyce as examples of good prose writers but dining with the Reads and Henry Moore and his wife Woolf felt „none of the charm of Bohemia mitigated the hard chairs, the skimpy wine, & the very nice sensible conversation (…) Read devitalised".[12] In her diary, Woolf noted at length Read's similarity to other examples of masculine modernity:

> I was finishing Herbert Read's autobiography this morning at breakfast. Little boys making sand castles. This refers to H. Read; Tom Eliot, Santayana, Wells (…). I think I can follow Read's building; so far as one can follow what one cannot build. But I am the sea which demolishes these castles. I use this image; meaning that owing to Read's article on Roger, his self that built the castle is to me destructive of its architecture. A mean, spiteful Read dwells outside. What is the value of a philosophy which has

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7 Cf. P. Rotha, *The Film Till Now: A Survey of World Cinema*, Vision Press, London 1949; H. Carter, *The New Spirit in the Cinema*, Harold Shayler, London 1930.

8 H. Read, *Towards a Film Aesthetic*, "Cinema Quarterly" 1932, no. 1 (1), p. 7.

9 *Ibidem*, p. 11.

10 *Ibidem*, p. 8.

11 V. Woolf, *The Sickle Side of the Moon: The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 5: *1932–35*, ed. N. Nicolson, J. Trautmann Banks, Hogarth Press, London 1979, p. 341.

12 V. Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 4: *1931–35*, ed. A.O. Bell, Hogarth Press, London 1982, pp. 280–281.

> no power over life? I have the double vision. (…) It is essential to remain outside; & realise my own beliefs: or rather not to accept theirs.[13]

In rejecting her masculine peers, Woolf rejects a powerful discourse of the symbolic, ideal qualities of artistic masculinity. Woolf's use of a metaphorically feminine image "the sea" and her positioning of women's "double vision" on a beach, a quintessentially "modern" place and subject matter for modern art, brings into vivid visibility the difference between masculine and feminine modernism. To Woolf, like her sister Vanessa Bell, artistic expression was "intimately bound up with the distillation – rather than the rejection or transcendence – of social experience".[14]

Women writers in the 1920s and 1930s were forging novel, "feminine" critiques to describe the new cinema-going experiences of women and children. Film's novelty was a major theme for commentators and film writings address film's new models of the specular. H.D., Richardson, Colette and Woolf wrote in an accessible, autobiographical, often experimental idiom attentive to issues of gendered spectatorship. Modernist women explore the cinema worlds of women and children and simultaneously give detailed accounts of cinema's aesthetic and technological processes. In addition, by addressing Hollywood's economic power and issues of national censorships, modernist women's journalism reveals a real material understanding of the social and economic contexts of 1920s and 1930s cinema.

Without rashly claiming essentialist differences between men's and women's film criticism, I think there are marked differences in the ways in which women modernists, more frequently than men, understand film experiences to be gendered as well as scopic processes. Unlike their male counterparts, particularly Ken Macpherson and Herbert Read, women writers refuse to engage in patronising dismissals of popular audiences. The cinema writing of modernist women makes an important intervention in the public sphere of cultural modernity, not only by exposing the ideological power of the visual but also by addressing women's ways of looking.

Colette

From 1914 onwards, Colette indefatigably wrote film reviews, film scripts, sub-titled the key German film *Mädchen in Uniform*, and many of her novels were adapted for the screen.[15] Colette's vision of cinema in her vivacious, anecdotal reviews is one in which women and children are active viewers enjoying the performances of powerful women stars like Mae West. Colette was intensely interested in the impact of film on audiences and in

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13 V. Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 5: *1936–41*, eds. A.O. Bell, A. McNeillie, Hogarth Press, London 1984, p. 340.

14 L. Tickner, *Modern Life and Modern Subjects: British Art in the Early Twentieth-Century*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2000, p. 121.

15 A. Virmaux, O. Virmaux, *Introduction*, [in:] S.W.R. Smith (ed.), *Colette at the Movies: Criticism and Screenplays*, transl. A. Virmaux, O. Virmaux, Frederick Ungar, New York 1980.

how spectators choose and experience particular films. Rather than crafting a universalising criticism, Colette's reviews dramatise her own reactions to film, together with the reactions of fellow viewers and actresses. While watching a film of Scott's 1910 expedition to the Antarctic, Colette realises that film can powerfully transform spectators into "seated travellers" and she celebrated working class women's filmic identifications. "A female observer – age eighteen with needle-pricked fingers and dewy eyelids (…) «No, no» begged the young woman «don't tell me! Don't tell me! I don't want to know how it ends!»".[16]

Colette's film reviews describe cinema as if the cinema was women's public space in modernity and she created a specifically feminine style for this audience. For example, her work abounds in domestic metaphors. In a 1917 review of *Maciste Alpin*, soldiers carry captured men back to camp "a little like a housewife bringing home the leeks".[17] Yet Colette was equally interested in avant-garde and science films and she was very sensitive to cinema's mis-en-scène, including in her reviews details of lighting, sets, clothing and the activities of women cinema workers.

> This young woman, the star, has been cooking under the glass roof, since nine in the morning. She made eleven changes of clothes, stockings, shoes, hats, hairstyle. The day before, half-naked in the gardens, she shivered under lilacs dripping with rain, tomorrow at 7am an automobile will carry her to the still snowy mountains.[18]

A newly heroic feminine subject emerges in Colette's reviews. Colette's celebration of Mae West's acting, in an essay *Les Cinéacteurs*, is exemplary here. Colette praises West as an auteur like Balzac, "the principal interpreter of her films"[19]. Colette also admired the way in which West escapes women's stereotypical roles, "does not get married at the end of the film, does not die, does not take the road to exile"[20]. Colette's construction of herself as a specifically female viewer in her writing, identifying with West as a woman, is also a key feature of other modernist women's film criticism.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Virginia Woolf was deeply moved by Colette's writings. In a rapturous letter to Ethel Smyth, describing Woolf's first encounter with Colette's work, Woolf claims "I'm almost floored by the extreme dexterity insight and beauty of Colette. How does she do it? (…) I'm green with envy".[21]

"Close Up" and H.D. (Hilda Doolittle)

The first issue of "Close Up" in July 1927 contains H.D.'s first essay inaugurating her series of twelve substantial pieces grouped as *The Cinema and the Classics*. The essays bring together H.D.'s ideas about cinema montage and Imagism in critiques of Carl Dreyer,

16 S.W.R. Smith (ed.), *Colette at the Movies…*, *op. cit.*, p. 29.
17 *Ibidem*, p. 28.
18 *Ibidem*, p. 68.
19 *Ibidem*, p. 62.
20 *Ibidem*.
21 V. Woolf, *Leave the Letters Till We're Dead: The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 6: *1936–41*, eds. N. Nicolson, J. Trautmann Banks, Hogarth Press, London 1980, p. 49.

G.W. Pabst and Russian cinema together with interviews with filmmakers and actresses. Working with Bryher and Ken Macpherson, H.D. helped to script, edit and possibly co-direct the film *Borderline* as well as the now vanished film *Wing Beat*. H.D.'s film essays are much the longest and most carefully structured of any contribution to "Close Up". The scale of the series enabled H.D. to combine the detailed analysis of films with discussions about cinema as an institution including her own spectating experiences and observations of cinema audiences.

The degradation and devitalization of European film stars, by Hollywood, such as Greta Garbo, "a Nordic flower"; troubles H.D. as well as the American domination of the film industry.[22] In Pabst's film *Joyless Street* Garbo is more appropriately a "classic ancient beauty", a symbol of pre-Periclean Athens like "the greatest master-pieces of the Renaissance".[23] H.D. contrasts those Greek and Renaissance images, the classics, with the paper flowers and paste-jewel exterior of Garbo's American incarnation.[24] By staging self-reflexive memory scenes combined with descriptions of popular stars, H.D. interpellates an everyday reader/viewer into her more complex cinema theory. As H.D. optimistically envisages in her essay *Conrad Veidt*, cinema could be "a universal language, a universal art open alike to the pleb and the initiate".[25]

The intuitive deep unconscious connections between women spectators and screen stars which so fascinated H.D., she found theorized in Russian praxis and writings, although Eisenstein's own essay *The Cinematographic Principle and Japanese Culture*, describing how film interpellates a spectator with hieroglyph montage, was not published until 1930 in transition.[26] The mixing of hieroglyphs in a dialectical montage of different times and places is a key trope in modernist cinema and literature.

Describing herself as a paradigmatic female viewer is a crucial theme in H.D.'s cinema essays. In *Conrad Veidt*, for example, H.D. first carefully describes her own experiences before describing the film itself.[27] As if panning past her physical location in the cinema, H.D. cinematically recreates her moment of arrival. "I have got a front seat on the little balcony at the room's rear. Languages filter into my consciousness".[28] H.D. creates a gendered film spectator because she is looking at her own image. In *Conrad Veidt* H.D. refuses to paraphrase the film's plot in a straightforward way, but instead records her own impressionistic responses in very short sentences encouraging the reader to share her intellectual and emotional experiences.

H.D.'s weaving of autobiographical narrative into critical narrative is at its most potent and persuasive in those essays directly about women stars like Garbo and in essays about

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22 H.D. [Doolittle], *The Cinema and the Classics: Beauty*, "Close Up" 1927, no. 1, p. 27.
23 *Ibidem*, p. 29.
24 *Ibidem*, p. 27.
25 H.D. [Doolittle], *Conrad Veidt*, "Close Up" 1927, no. 3, p. 44.
26 S. Edmunds, *Out of Line: History, Psychoanalysis and Montage in H.D.'s Long Poems*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1994.
27 H.D. [Doolittle], *Conrad Veidt..., op. cit.*
28 *Ibidem*, p. 43.

films with female heroines like Carl Dreyer's *Joan of Arc*. To H.D. Garbo signifies beauty, a Helen of Troy, a silver goddess whose photographs H.D. mounted in a special scrapbook. "Greta Garbo, as I first saw her, gave me a clue, a new angle and a new sense of elation".[29] Garbo, H.D. believes, offers a new, feminine language an intensity of representation too powerful to be dominated by a male gaze.[30] As Cassandra Laity points out, H.D. performed her character Astrid in the film *Borderline* in "heavy, Garbo-like make-up" with "dark intensity".[31] H.D.'s deep desire to locate the feminine within any cinematic diegesis shapes her interview with Pabst in "a warm corner of an exclusive Berlin restaurant just before Christmas".[32] H.D. believes that Pabst depicts all his actresses, including Garbo and Louise Brooks, with unconscious realism. H.D. identified so mimetically with Louise Brooks' performance in *Pandora's Box* that she felt "a personal right to *Pandora*, that it personally was partly of my making".[33]

H.D. positions herself as a woman not just as a general spectator. Pabst is a "magician" precisely because he "creates women" and "brings out the vital and vivid forces in women as the sun in flowers".[34] Louise Brooks portrayed Lulu as a multiple persona, both a skilled performer and a prostitute, and in general the Lulu figure, as Rita Felski argues, exemplifies "the quintessential manifestation of a feminized modernity".[35] This is because Lulu combines both an erotics and an aesthetics of the feminine.

Other female representations interested H.D. Carl Dreyer's *Joan of Arc* (1928) "is too perfect (…) a series of pictures, portraits burned on copper".[36] Dreyer's film depicts Joan's trial by a fanatical church and the face of actress Maria Falconetti, playing Joan, became an icon of silent cinema. H.D. graphically describes the physical sensations of her film viewing. A "nervous" reaction to the film causes her hands "to feel that they are numb and raw and bleeding".[37] Because H.D. distrusts Dreyer's masculinity H.D. here does anticipate Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze the idea that in classic Hollywood cinema, films create structures of looking in which spectators, the cinema and actors share a masculine gaze.[38] H.D. particularly dislikes the way in which Dreyer forces the spectator to adopt a male gaze for example, by employing high camera angles from the point of view of Joan's male tormentors.

H.D. progresses from this technical analysis to a social critique of cinema spectatorship, sitting with "the baker's boy beside me and Mrs. Captain Jones-Smith's second maid", and describing differing responses to film. H.D. is attentive both to the likely cultural expec-

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29 H.D. [Doolittle], *The Cinema…*, *op. cit.*, p. 28.
30 Cf. C. Laity, *H.D. and the Victorian Fin de Siecle*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996.
31 *Ibidem*, p. 145.
32 H.D. [Doolittle], *An Appreciation*, "Close Up" 1929, no. 4 (3), p. 56.
33 *Ibidem*.
34 *Ibidem*, pp. 64–65.
35 R. Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1995, p. 4.
36 H.D. [Doolittle], *Joan of Arc*, "Close Up" 1928, no. 3 (1), p. 15.
37 *Ibidem*, p. 16.
38 L. Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, "Screen" 1975, no. 16 (3).

tations of a general audience as well as to the power of cinema to expose that audience's unconscious. "We all have our Jeanne, each one of us in the secret, great cavernous interior of the cathedral (if I may be fantastic) if the subconscious".[39] While it is possible to read Dreyer's film more positively than H.D., for example by noting Dreyer's powerful closure which focuses on the faces of strong peasant women, it is true that Dreyer's insistent close ups always image Joan as a beautiful, but tortured self-victim.

Rather than insisting on a distancing and analytic critical style, H.D.'s gaze is social and collective. H.D., like other modernist women, addresses a popular audience speaking in an engaging personal voice which is always gendered. This blurring of boundaries between the psychic and the social and between the critic and the common viewer is a major theme of feminist modernism.

Dorothy Richardson

Throughout her twenty-three film essays in "Close Up", Dorothy Richardson shares her sister modernists concern with an autobiographical, feminine standpoint. Richardson's themes are visibly "feminine": refusing to discount women's need to identify with stars; refusing to separate life from art; frequently addressing an everyday woman spectator; and thinking through what a feminine language of film might involve. Under the rubric title *Continuous Performance*, Richardson's essays contain extensive reviews of cinema practices, of cinema architecture, the roles of music and sound as well as critiques of particular films. The essays also continually evoke the experiences of ordinary cinema goers. Richardson grouped her essays under the title *Continuous Performance* in order to highlight film's key feature: its continual process of exhibition and spectatorship.

In Richardson's first contribution to "Close Up", she immediately personalizes the essay form. Richardson describes how she gave up theatre going "all too high pitched", in favour of cinema because her first sight of the screen "the balm of that tide", and "the shining eyes and rested faces" of women viewers had such an impact on her.[40] Richardson now prefers film's continuous performance to individual theatre plays. She democratically positions herself as an ordinary cinema goer sharing the experience of other women in the cinema, on "a washday" Monday "tired women, their faces sheened with toil and small children".[41] Drawing this portrait of a female audience encourages Richardson to reflect on the issue of how art should be experienced because cinema is "with an audience" rather than plays in which actors are "acting at" the audience.[42] Richardson persuasively engages the reader in her critical reflections by means of an openness to typical women cinema goers. The essay has no obvious starting point. Richardson begins with ellipses "(…) So I gave up going to the theatre" as if Richardson herself is experiencing cinema going as a weekly Monday

[39] H.D. [Doolittle], *Joan of Arc*, *op. cit.*, pp. 16–18.
[40] D. Richardson, *Continuous Performance*, "Close Up" 1927, no. 1, p. 36.
[41] *Ibidem*, p. 35.
[42] *Ibidem*, p. 36.

"continuous performance".[43] The style of this first essay signals what became a key theme in Richardson's film aesthetic: the idea that good cinema must not be reserved for an elite avant-garde audience and that popular cinema can be of value and as educative as art cinema.

In Richardson's major essay *The Film Gone Male* she genders silent film as feminine and the talkies as masculine.

> And the film, regarded as a medium of communication, in the day of its innocence, in its quality of being nowhere and everywhere, nowhere in the sense of having more intention than direction and more purpose than plan, everywhere by reason of its power to evoke, suggest, reflect, express from within its moving parts, and in their totality of movement, something of the changeless being, at the heart of all becoming was essentially feminine.[44]

It is impossible to say whether Richardson regards this construction of masculine and feminine film form as a fundamental opposition. But certainly by adding speech to film, Richardson argues, film becomes "a medium of propaganda (…) it is a masculine destiny".[45] Sound brings cinema into the masculine symbolic, that is to say, into a masculine social agenda.[46] In *The Film Gone Male*, Richardson reverses a gendered binary opposition in which the symbolic is privileged and instead praises silent film as feminine because it is antilinear, not directive, continually "becoming".[47] The feminine is primarily affective rather than logically connotative because Richardson argues, the feminine can "suggest, reflect, express".[48] The French feminist writer Hélène Cixous's account of the female Imaginary is helpful here in understanding Richardson's attack on male logocentricity and Richardson's innovative linguistic strategies. A feminine Imaginary, Cixous argues, will be an "effort of the unconscious (…) which is unanalysable, uncharacterisable"; in other words very like Richardson's feminine, the feminine Imaginary is part of the unconscious, playful and endless.[49] In many ways Richardson's essays resemble Cixous's writings both in content and in style, particularly the way in which both writers do not structure arguments in a linear fashion but use associations and metaphors.

In the social world female speech is often a "façade" Richardson suggests, and she argues that although women's "outpouring torrents of speech" are frequently dismissed as mere gossip, such "torrents" suggest a performance in which women deliberately "snatch at words to cover" their "palpitating spiritual nakedness".[50] This description of women's speech as a gendered performance in which gossip and trivia create a behavioural façade matches Judith Butler's concept of gender performance and Sheila Rowbotham's claim that

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43 *Ibidem*, p. 34.
44 D. Richardson, *Continuous Performance: The Film Gone Male*, "Close Up" 1932, no. 9 (1), p. 37.
45 *Ibidem*, p. 38.
46 J. Radford, *Dorothy Richardson*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1991.
47 D. Richardson, *Continuous Performance…*, *op. cit.*, p. 37.
48 *Ibidem*.
49 H. Cixous, *The Character of "Character"*, "New Literary History" 1974, no. 5 (2), p. 387.
50 D. Richardson, *Continuous Performance…*, *op. cit.*, pp. 36–37.

women's gossip is often a feminine, behavioural defence strategy.[51] In *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler makes a powerful analysis of the discursive dimensions of bodies and of how language is performed. "Sexual difference also operates in the formulation, the staging of what will occupy the site of inscriptional space".[52] According to Butler, the reiterative character of performativity opens up the possibility of women's agency. Sheila Rowbotham groups gossip together with giggling and old wives' tales as features of women's thought, suggesting that gossip provides women with important ways of perceiving and describing the world.[53]

These contemporary feminisms match Richardson's pioneering ideas about women's "continuous performance" and her own performances of her experiences in reviews as well as those of a quotidian female audience. Richardson describes women's spectatorship as active agency not passive, and as rapidly feminising the cultural space of cinema. Women's memory is not a masculine "mere glance over the shoulder" but made of "universal, unchanging, unevolving verities".[54] Richardson's concept of women's universal verities presages another contemporary French thinker, Julia Kristeva's description, in *Women's Time* of women's monumental time.[55] Like Richardson, Kristeva represents sexual difference in terms of memory and time. The symbolic, according to Kristeva, is the masculine time of history which is linear opposed to feminine time which Kristeva calls cyclical and monumental. "As for time, female subjectivity would seem to provide a specific measure that essentially retains repetition and eternity".[56]

Richardson's *The Film Gone Male* is a remarkable, prescient condensation of these current feminist themes. It is silent cinema, according to Richardson, which captures the feminine: our memories, our time, our fluidity and our language. Richardson argues that spectators are not passive consumers nor is cinema itself a social narcotic. Women spectators who identify with women stars are not simply identifying with total artifice, with impossible fantasy but are engaging in a form of cultural appropriation, investing their own lives with some glamour. For example, in *Animal Impudens*, Richardson claims that women stars place "the frail edifice of my faith in woman at last upon a secure foundation".[57] Women audiences do enjoy happy endings but this desire Richardson celebrates as "a tribute to their unconscious certainty that life is ultimately good".[58]

Richardson's cinema essays make a major contribution to modern visual theory by focusing on the ways in which film, as well as the experience of watching film, is fundamentally gendered and how cinema can encourage a feminine standpoint. Richardson's celebra-

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51 Cf. J. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, Routledge, London 1993; S. Rowbotham, *Dreams and Dilemmas*, Virago, London 1983.
52 J. Butler, *op. cit.*, p. 52.
53 S. Rowbotham, *op. cit.*
54 D. Richardson, *Continuous Performance*, *op. cit.*, p. 36.
55 J. Kristeva, *Women's Time*, [in:] N.O. Keohane (ed.), *Feminist Theory*, Harvester, Brighton 1982.
56 *Ibidem*, p. 32.
57 D. Richardson, *Continuous Performance VIII – [Animal Impudens]*, "Close Up" 1928, no. 2 (3), p. 52.
58 *Eadem*, *Continuous Performance IX – The Thoroughly Popular Film*, "Close Up" 1928, no. 2 (4), p. 50.

tion of the dialogue nature of women's cinema experiences, women's identification with stars and desire for happy endings (which are the experiences specifically devalued by male contributors to "Close Up") opens up the possibility of assessing film by means of women's situated and subjugated knowledge rather than only by means of a high art aesthetic.

Virginia Woolf and *The Cinema*

Ken Macpherson invited Virginia Woolf to contribute to "Close Up" in 1927. Woolf declined suggesting that she had no available essay or free time in that specific year (*The Cinema* had already been published in 1926). *The Cinema* is one of the first British essays to identify cinema's "potential in modernism".[59] The essay was triggered by Woolf's interest in *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, directed by Robert Wiene in Germany in 1919. The film depicts a story told by a madman about a psychopathic murder, and interweaves nightmare and reality. Woolf's essay is only tangentially about the film itself and focuses more on the issues of the psychoanalytic and film spectatorship in general. *The Cinema* addresses the central concerns of other women modernist film critics: how "common viewers" experience film and film's psychic power; the relationship between film and the arts and film's status and future. Woolf's account of the unconscious optics of film and film's future, described by Michael O'Pray as "astonishingly prescient", is based on a clear and repeated premise that film is a new dynamic, psychic and cognitive process.[60] When the eye and the brain together, Woolf suggests, "look at the King, the boat, the horse, and the brain sees at once that they have taken on a quality which does not belong to the simple photograph of real life. They have become not more beautiful in the sense in which pictures are beautiful, but shall we call it (our vocabulary is miserably insufficient) more real, or real with a different reality from that which we perceive in daily life".[61]

Woolf's image of the eye and the brain, which appears also in her essay *Walter Sickert*, in *The Three Guineas* (1934) and elsewhere in her work matches Freud's model of the unconscious. Both Woolf and Freud represent visual thinking as an archaic consciousness. The differences between manuscripts/essays reveal a writer fully aware of cinema techniques. In one essay version Woolf praises character representation "Annas and Vronskys – there they are in the flesh".[62] In another version, Woolf vividly adopts a more cinematic vocabulary of close ups "the very quivers of his lips" and she understands how the filming of everyday objects such as "pebbles on the beach" can function as a visual metonymy of character emotions.[63]

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59 M. O'Pray (ed.), *The British Avant-garde Film 1926–1995*, University of Luton Press, Luton 1996, p. 7.
60 *Ibidem*.
61 V. Woolf, *The Cinema*, [in:] A. McNeillie (ed.), *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 4: *1925–28*, Hogarth Press, London 1994, p. 349.
62 *Ibidem*, p. 595.
63 *Ibidem*.

Woolf's description of film as a cognitive source of psychic transformations is a pioneering radical theme. Woolf argues that the power of cinema lies in its antimimetic power and that spectators experience a dynamic visual process which releases buried memories and dreams. Crucially, in terms of a woman spectator, film best surtures the spectator, Woolf suggests, through cinematic processes which catch our layered Imaginary. Significantly, Woolf's account of cinema presages Eisenstein's theory of montage, the way in which filmic collisions can create spectator identifications. Eisenstein's theorization of his montage practice, *The Dramaturgy of Film Form* was published in "Close Up" in September 1929 three years after Woolf's essay.[64] What Woolf is describing very clearly is what Eisenstein later refers to as overtonal montage which can connect scenes, Woolf suggests, by means of "something abstract, something moving".[65] Woolf acutely understands that spectators are surtured into film by means of cinematic associations, montage and repetitions. Like her sister modernists, Woolf is engagingly self-reflexive, placing her own experiences into her writing to entice a common reader. Reader and narrator are "we" as in "we have time to open the whole of our mind wide to beauty".[66]

Conclusion

Woolf's discursive engagement with common viewers is a vivid feature of women's modernism shared by Colette, H.D., Bryher and Richardson and contrasts markedly with the splenetic acerbity of many male modernist critics. Michael Kaufmann, in a comparative study of Virginia Woolf and T.S. Eliot's literary reviews, notes a similar gender disparity. Where Eliot, Kaufmann argues, imagines the mind as a rational chemical process, "if the critic has performed his laboratory work well, his understanding will be evidence of appreciation", Woolf adopts "an unassuming critical persona in her TLS reviews".[67] The cinema modernism which Woolf and her sister modernists were creating for their readers involved a democratic, communal learning experience rather than the scientific "laws" set out in the dogmatic pedagogy of male critics such as Eliot, Read and Macpherson. Women's cinema writing explores a far wider range of visual emotions and feelings in dialogue with spectators and cinema practice.

The cinema writings of Colette, H.D. and others show that modernist techniques can be used towards progressive ends. By heightening their personal, even idiosyncratic subjective responses to film and often revealing their anxiety of authorship, modernist women's criticism is not prescriptive but very engaging. Such writing adopts what Drucilla Cornell calls

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64 S. Eisenstein, *The Dramaturgy of Film Form*, [in:] S.M. Eisenstein, *Selected Works*, vol. 1: *1922–34*, ed. and transl. R. Taylor, BFI, London 1988, pp. 161–180.

65 V. Woolf, *The Cinema*…, *op. cit.*, p. 351.

66 *Ibidem*, p. 349.

67 T.S. Eliot, *Studies in Contemporary Criticism*, "Egoist" 1918, no. 5 (9), p. 113; M. Kaufmann, *Virginia Woolf's TLS Reviews and Eliotic Modernism*, [in:] B.C. Rosenberg, J. Dubino (eds.), *Virginia Woolf and the Essay*, Macmillan, Basingstoke 1997, p. 140.

a complicated interaction with the unconscious (through enactment) close to the embodied experiences of women cinema-goers.[68] Between screen and spectator, by creating an ontology (what we believe we see) through a subjective process.

> It is something one feels, that you feel, that the baker's boy, that the tennis champion, that the army colonel, that the crocodile of English and Dutch and mixed German-Swiss (come here to learn French) feels. We are numb and beaten. We won't go a second time. The voice behind me that says wistfully, taken unawares "I wish it was one of those good American light things" even has its place in critical consciousness.[69]

H.D. shares her fellow spectators' refusal to see Carl Dreyer's film *Joan of Arc* again, and critic and common viewer gain a new knowledge of themselves from the shared situation of a gendered spectatorship.

Because such an anxiety of authorship reveals knowledge to be situated and perspectival, it could be argued that the connections which modernist women make between self reflection, everyday experience and the aesthetic create a feminist standpoint. In recent decades, debates about feminist standpoint theory have dominated much of feminist theory. A number of classic, influential approaches include Dorothy Smith's construction of an "everyday world" in sociology and Patricia Hill Collins' *Black feminist standpoint*.[70] Although criticism of standpoint theory has mounted, most forcibly by Susan Hekman in her view that feminist standpoint "denies the life world is, like every other human activity, discursively constituted", feminists agree that we must speak from somewhere and that somewhere is particular not universal shaped by relationships and embracing the everyday.[71]

In this sense H.D.'s essay *Joan of Arc* could be said to take a feminist standpoint. The essay is contextual, describing H.D.'s assumed interaction with an everyday audience. It combines personal revelation with a sense of aesthetic and historical urgency. Such declarations of subjectivity are a recurring motif in modernist women's criticism. The border between viewer and critic is crossed and the everyday lives of women viewers are incorporated into aesthetics. Without reifying an essentialist gender binary in critical writing it does seem to be the case that it is modernist women critics in the main, who vivify aesthetic desires coded as feminine: identifications with stars, the use of film as therapy, describing audiences as socially constituted and gendered. Modernist women critics replace the prescriptive individual male gaze by addressing a collective constituency of active cinema subjects and in doing so posit an explicitly gendered cinema modernism.

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68 D. Cornell, *What Is Ethical Feminism?*, [in:] S. Benhabib (ed.), *Feminist Contentions*, Routledge, London 1995.

69 H.D. [Doolittle], *Joan of Arc*, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

70 D. Smith, *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology*, Northeastern University Press, Boston 1987; P.H. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, Unwin Hyman, London 1990.

71 S. Hekman, *Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited*, "Signs" 1997, no. 22 (2), p. 341.

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