

# Cinematic Modernism

## Modernist Poetry and Film



SUSAN MCCABE

CAMBRIDGE

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*Modernist Poetry and Film*

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**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge, CB2 2RU, UK  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA  
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain  
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2005

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

*Typeface* Adobe Garamond 11/12.5 pt.    *System*  $\text{\LaTeX}$  2 $\epsilon$  [TB]

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

ISBN 0 521 84621 8 hardback

## CINEMATIC MODERNISM

Susan McCabe juxtaposes the work of four American modernist poets with the techniques and themes of early twentieth-century avant-garde films. The historical experience of the First World War and its aftermath of broken and shocked bodies shaped a preoccupation with fragmentation in both film and literature. Film, montage, and camera work provided poets with a vocabulary through which to explore and refashion modern physical and metaphoric categories of the body, including the hysteric, automaton, bisexual, and femme fatale. This innovative study explores the impact of new cinematic modes of representation on the poetry of Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, H. D., and Marianne Moore. *Cinematic Modernism* links the study of literary forms with film studies, visual culture, gender studies, and psychoanalysis to expand the usual parameters of literary modernism.

SUSAN MCCABE is Associate Professor of English at the University of Southern California. She is the author of *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Poetics of Loss* (1994) and a member of the Board of the Modernist Studies Association.

## Acknowledgments

I owe my deepest gratitude to Cassandra Laity whose belief in this project made it possible. Without her urging, the book in its present form would not exist.

I thank the College of Letters, Arts and Science at the University of Southern California for funding some of this work through a Zumberge Research Grant. I thank the staff of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University for its archival materials as well as for its providing several stills. I am grateful as well to the Museum of Modern Art / Film Stills Archive for its assistance. Portions of this book have been published in other forms in journals: “The *Ballet Mécanique* of Marianne Moore’s Cinematic Modernism” in *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, vol. 33 no. 2 (2000), “‘Delight in Dislocation’: The Cinematic Modernism of Stein, Chaplin, and Man Ray” in *Modernism / Modernity*, vol. 8 no. 3 (2001), and “Borderline Modernism: Paul Robeson and the *Femme Fatale*” in *Callaloo*, vol. 25 no. 2 (2002).

Among my colleagues in the English Department at USC, I would like to thank my dear friends, Joseph Allen Boone for his attentive scrutiny of the manuscript, Carla Kaplan for her unrelenting encouragement and support, and Tania Modleski, whose film scholarship and friendship served as guiding lights. I also thank Leo Braudy for his kind and tutelary words (they came at the right moment), David St. John, whose immediate and abiding excitement about my writing, kept me afloat throughout these labors. I appreciate as well Annalisa Zox-Weaver (my tireless Cesare) who proofread and helped edit the manuscript.

In addition, I owe much thanks to the anonymous readers for Cambridge University Press for their suggestions and observations, and to my editor, Ray Ryan.

Among the academic community at large, I thank Judith L. Sensibar whose friendship consistently provided me with searching and stimulating insights. Others who have helped this work in various ways include Steven

G. Axelrod, Sam Girgus, Cynthia Hogue, Laura Hinton, Cristanne Miller, Robin Schulze, and Marjorie Perloff.

My sister, Marilyn McCabe, gave an inexhaustible array of emotional and intellectual help, sharing her knowledge of psychoanalysis and reading the manuscript in its multiple incarnations. I could count on Brian Lizotte, an honorary family member, to accompany me to many silent screenings. His wise and quirky perceptions have certainly contributed to this book.

Finally and always, I am grateful to Kate M. Chandler beyond the power of words to express. She is the book's veritable midwife and muse, who shepherded, inspired, criticized, questioned, admired, and begot all phases of it. Without her, mind and body would not be together.

## *Abbreviations*

<i>SE</i>	<i>Freud</i> , Standard Edition
<i>CU</i>	<i>Close Up</i>
<i>CPP</i>	<i>The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot</i>
<i>SA</i>	<i>Spring and All</i> , William Carlos Williams
<i>KH</i>	<i>Kora in Hell</i> , William Carlos Williams
<i>CP</i>	<i>The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams volume 1</i> (chap. 3)
<i>CP</i>	<i>Collected Poems 1912–1944</i> , H. D. (chap. 4)
<i>CP</i>	<i>Complete Poems</i> , Marianne Moore (chap. 5)

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## Introduction

### Cinematic modernism

This book arose from a conflux of scholarship and serendipity. I had long been familiar with H. D.'s poetry when I discovered her passion for cinema through Anne Friedberg's essay on *Borderline*, a 1930 silent film that the poet both acted in and helped to edit.<sup>1</sup> In 1995, I rented the only circulating copy from the Museum of Modern Art to screen in my modernism course; about a year later, I chanced upon it airing on Turner Classic Movies as part of a Paul Robeson retrospective. I quickly rushed for a video tape, and by this stroke of luck was able to watch the film repeatedly.

The charge that *Borderline* gave me, I imagined, was akin to the thrill H. D. and other modernists must have felt in response to the emergence of film in its revolutionary ability to represent somatic movements and gestures as they had never been represented before. The body could be deliriously elsewhere, uncannily absent, yet viscerally present. *Borderline* dramatically recasts H. D.'s poetry as cinematic. She claimed that seeing Greta Garbo in *Joyless Street* in 1925 was her "first real revelation of the real art of the cinema."<sup>2</sup> Yet by setting the poems of *Sea Garden* (1916) in the context of early silent film and contemporary film theory, they appear precursors to the embodied "revelations" H. D. experienced. What intensified my excitement about *Borderline* was how its avant-garde montage deftly portrays the way sexual and racial fantasies are inscribed upon the body. In its seventy-five minute length, it exposes the projection and displacement of white desires upon the black body, disrupting the myths formulated by D. W. Griffith's 1915 *Birth of a Nation*, a film often credited with the invention of montage.

Along with her performance in several silent films, H. D. was one of the founders of *Close Up* (1927–33), the first film journal in English to treat cinema exclusively, and she contributed eleven reviews. Dorothy Richardson, Gertrude Stein, and Marianne Moore were among its other literary contributors.<sup>3</sup> Prominently, the journal translated Sergei Eisenstein, featured work by the psychoanalyst Hanns Sachs, and articulated a progressive politics that overlapped with its fostering of an avant-garde aesthetic.

H. D.'s explicit involvement with film catalyzed for me a number of questions about the relationship of other modernist poets to cinema. What impact did this medium have upon poets before *Close Up*? What films might they have seen and enjoyed? To what extent were poets intimidated by the upstart medium? What otherwise unexpressed desires were projected upon the screen? What techniques did they borrow, or conversely, what might their poetic styles have anticipated in the medium of film? Aside from the fairly well worn sense that modern poets juxtapose their images through a method akin to film montage, how could this notion be more fully elaborated? This book is the result of my investigation of these largely neglected questions.<sup>4</sup>

H. D. was clearly not the only film enthusiast among modern poets. Stein broadly and retrospectively announced in 1933: "I cannot repeat this too often any one is of one's period and this our period was undoubtedly the period of the cinema and series production."<sup>5</sup> Her intimate relationship to modern painting has eclipsed the cinematic dimension of her writing, yet Stein claimed the "period of cinema" and her place in it as extending back to 1903 when she wrote her epic *Making of Americans* cinematically without knowing it. Likewise, H. D.'s admiration for the medium did not become publicly manifest until 1927 when she began publishing her film reviews.

The period Stein designated, roughly between 1903 and 1933, coincided with the beginnings of "series production" (the ability to reproduce successive identical images), the burgeoning of technical and artistic experiment in early film, and finally the demise of film as a silent medium.<sup>6</sup> It was also during this era that a stunning number of historical shifts irrevocably altered human epistemology and variously rendered modernity as "an experience of crisis."<sup>7</sup> Among the array of scientific discoveries, cultural movements, and political upheavals Stein witnessed, she identified cinema as a foundational term for the syntax of modernism.

Miriam B. Hansen has argued that cinema constitutes "the single most expansive discursive horizon in which the effects of modernity were reflected, rejected or denied, transmuted or negotiated."<sup>8</sup> It is, as Hansen writes, "the critical fixation on hegemonic modernism" that unnecessarily separates artistic practices from "the political, economic, and social processes of modernity and modernization, including the development of mass and media culture."<sup>9</sup> As this book brings into relief, modernists could be profoundly cinematic even when not fully cognizant of it. Even for those modernist poets who were intensely ambivalent about the medium (as we shall see with Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot), cinema's material presence

asserted a tremendous impact upon them. As Michael Wood states, “the principle of montage” along with “the construction of imaginary space through the direction of the gaze” is “quintessentially modernist.”<sup>10</sup> I consider the direct historical links between modern poetry and film where and when they can be established, but I also attend to more indirect connections, including those that challenge “the direction of the gaze.”

In the spirit of montage, my project links texts and silent films not previously brought together, primarily connecting the American poets, Stein, William Carlos Williams, H. D., and Marianne Moore (hereafter referred to as “the four poets”) with the period of silent cinema. The four poets shared an excitement for the vital flux of modernity. H. D., the one in this quartet most affiliated with the high modernist goal of excavating and resuscitating the past, nevertheless admired “the lean skyscraper beauty of ultra modernity.”<sup>11</sup> Stein made a kinesthetic practice of refusing literary tradition; Williams sought to draw “the whole armamentarium of the modern age” into his poems;<sup>12</sup> and Moore zestfully absorbed popular culture, including baseball games, travel and fashion magazines, “business documents and school-books.”<sup>13</sup> Most important, all four are bound by their enthusiasm for film, expressed both in their critical writing and in their poetic techniques.

With some significant exceptions, the four poets were drawn to European avant-garde films, crossing continental and stylistic boundaries, including Soviet film, French Dada and Surrealism, and German Expressionism. As I will demonstrate, these films not only evoke the “peculiar atmosphere of a modern poem,”<sup>14</sup> but also raise questions about cohesive corporeality, emphasizing bodily rhythms and gestures rather than narrative continuity.

By pairing poetic texts and films, I clarify a central modernist paradox: a desire to include bodily experience and sensation along with an overpowering sense of the unavailability of such experience except as mediated through mechanical reproduction. Cinematic montage and camera work often exposed the body’s malleability. Sped up or slowed down, the pacing and piecing of film could recreate the moving “lived” body, while these methods ruptured fantasies of physical self-presence or wholeness. Broadly speaking, film showed that the temporal present could be endlessly repeated; it was mechanical yet created a *felt* immediacy; and consequently, it subordinated the inherited conceit of the Cartesian mind to less aggregated kinesthetic processes. In sum, film crystallized a cultural debate in modernity over the unstable conjunctions between the mind and the sensate body.

The medium of film opened up a new vocabulary for modernist poets not only to challenge modes of mimetic representation, but also to explore and

reconstruct cultural tropes of fragmented, dissociated corporeality, most notably the hysteric and mechanical body, newly fabricated in modernity. The larger argument of this book is that the four poets engaged in an ongoing dialogue that emerges on one axis through the concourse between modern poetry and film, and on another between versions of embodiment generated by the prominent discourses of psychoanalysis and experimental psychology.

Modernist poets were not only of “the period of the cinema,” as Stein puts it, but also “of” the period of psychoanalysis; these domains, frequently configured as a twin birth, seem ineluctably part of modernity’s production of forms of corporeality.<sup>15</sup> The problematic place in feminist theory of psychoanalysis in general and the figure of the hysteric in particular has been debated at length. My book shares to some extent contemporary film theory’s preoccupations with the legacy of Freud. At the same time, I reveal how cinematic writing reshapes psychoanalytic notions of embodiment.

Modern phenomenology, as important to film theory as psychoanalysis, dovetailed with “the new psychology” in its goals of studying the “lived body,” how it could be extended, trained, shaped, or mechanically reproduced. Derived from the laboratory studies of the German scientist Wilhelm Wundt in the 1860s and 1870s, experimental psychology privileged physiology, viewing the brain as an organ whose processes could be measured empirically. Vivian Sobchack differentiates phenomenology through its recognition of “the activity of embodied consciousness realizing itself in the world and with others as both visual and visible, as both sense-making and sensible.”<sup>16</sup>

The Freudian model is most visible in H. D.’s work, whose therapy with Freud both allowed her to “name” her bisexuality as much as it pathologized her. Williams too borrowed from Freud’s theories of masculine desire and amplified upon their fluidity. Stein and Moore, on the other hand, bypassed the psychoanalytic tropes of female hysteria, invoking an alternate but related tradition of experimental psychologists, including Charcot, William James, and Pavlov, who adumbrated bodies styled by conditioned and unconditioned reflexes.

The modern disease of hysteria, a phenomenon central to both psychoanalysis and experimental psychology, is of particular significance to the liaisons between poetry and film for multiple reasons. First of all, hysteria is a disease of the part, and in this sense, a disease exemplary of modernity. As such, it was linked to series production, Ford’s assembly line, and the bodily shocks Walter Benjamin attributed to mechanical reproduction. In fact, from Benjamin’s point of view, mechanical

reproduction and the emergence of film threatened to render the lyric obsolete. Secondly, the simultaneous prominence and elusiveness of hysteria made it readily adaptable for modern poetry and film. For Louis Aragon, for instance, hysteria was among the “greatest poetic discoveries” and is “a supreme mode of expression” paralleled only by film.<sup>17</sup> It would appear that the hysteric performed her dis-ease, as if in a silent film, through somatic gestures and oblique images rather than through transparently denotative language. Conversely, film had the capacity to induce in the spectator the hysteric’s physical symptoms of dislocation, amnesia, suggestibility, and even anesthesia.

Most significantly, modernist hysteria brought into the open the blurred ground between corporeality and consciousness, undermining absolutist categories of sexual difference. Rita Felski reminds us that the hysteric in this period was most often linked with the female body and conflated with that of the “new woman” and the modern feminist.<sup>18</sup> As this book elaborates, the hysteric became contiguous with other fragmented bodies, including the automaton, the bisexual, the femme fatale, the masochist, the fetishist and the effeminized male hysteric. Operating within a kind of hydraulic system, these idiosyncratic bodies, both literal and figurative, populated the modernist landscape, gaining visibility during a period when potentially liberating notions of bodily difference proliferated, and when heightened Aryan ideals of masculinity and whiteness began to be widely disseminated.

Finally, the body of the hysteric fascinated poets as a correlative for what Eliot refers to as “dissociation of sensibility,” a concept I touch upon throughout. Literary and film representations of the hysteric confirmed a “compliance,” if dissociated, between mind and body. The resulting bodily ego engendered an epidermal poetics that could be cut up and fashioned anew. I thus argue that the hysteric body was not simply a figure depicted *in* the modernist poem or film, but more provocatively, coincided with the fragmented and dissociated bodies created *as* montage.

Eisenstein specifically linked film to modern poetry, clarifying a key methodology for the enactment of hysteric bodies. He theorized a rhythmic dynamism produced through the “collision of independent shots,” in which the “*irregularity of the part* exists in relation to the laws of the system as a whole.”<sup>19</sup> If film is viewed as a material corpus, the disproportionate, fragmentary shot registers as an “irregular” body part. In principle then, montage fractures while it embodies. Moreover, a montage poetics represents a kinesis where the “irregularity of the part” and its explosive “impulses” reverberate in an economy of hysteria. As we will see, poetic

and cinematic texts supply somatic maps of erotic displacements and investments in fragments.

#### A PHENOMENOLOGY OF FRAGMENTATION

In 1891, Thomas Hardy expressed a particularly modern phenomenology in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, a novel that existed at the cusp of a number of cultural transformations. Four years after its publication, Breuer and Freud published *Studies in Hysteria*, and the Lumière brothers produced the first film documentaries, "Arrival of the Train" and "Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory." At one point in the novel, Tess tells Angel that "[t]he trees have inquisitive eyes"; he is surprised to discover that she "has feelings which might almost have been called those of the age, the ache of modernism."<sup>20</sup> Like the prototypic male poet/seer in Baudelaire's "Correspondences" who discovers his own sensibility encrypted in the "temple" of nature with its watching leaves, Tess self-consciously intuitively herself as both seer and seen. Tess expresses and projects the "ache of modernism," Hardy implies, because her "corporeal blight had been her mental harvest."<sup>21</sup> That Tess's bodily predicament directly and unpredictably impinges upon her mind suggests the "compliance" as well as disconnection realized in the modern hysteric.

Moreover, Tess has a "double and reversible" perspective, which for Sobchack characterizes the phenomenology of film experience, its "communication based on bodily perception as a vehicle of conscious expression" (*Address of the Eye* 9). In effect, a desire for the "directly felt, sensuously available" translates in film as a displaced but "expressed perception of an anonymous, yet present, 'other.'" This "anonymous 'other'" – like the seeing trees in *Tess* – stirs a recognition that the "I is someone else," to quote the proto-modernist, Arthur Rimbaud.<sup>22</sup> Modernist cinematography externalized this literary legacy of the doppelgänger and perceiving "other."

Film's ability to represent and mediate bodily "otherness" both created and exposed what I will develop as a phenomenology of fragmentation. In brief, poets could be captivated by early cinema's "*embodied existence*" (*Address of the Eye* 4) or "corporeal subjectivity."<sup>23</sup> At the same time, the very mechanics and constraints of the medium as well as the use of experimental film techniques exposed the disintegrative and indeterminate aspects of the body.

Film's role as a specifically embodied medium that has contributed to the revolution in modernist literary practices has been partly obscured because



of the compelling intercourse between modern painters and poets.<sup>24</sup> However, the non-narrative underpinnings of early film corresponded as well to the abstract strategies of painting. Indeed, Malcolm Le Grice argues that the gradual divorce of cinema from the influence of painting and cinema's consequent alignment with narrative was an "historical mistake," leading us to lose sight of early film's brief but nonetheless significant period of radical experiment.<sup>25</sup>

The revolution in painting as in film pivoted upon the fracturing, cutting and reviving of the "lived body." Marcel Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase" (1911), with its fragmentation of the body and attempt to sequence its motion within time, epitomized the closeness of modern painting to film. In fact, the series photography and motion studies of Eadweard Muybridge and Etienne-Jules Marey in the 1870s prefigured the dislocated body in Duchamp's painting. His painting signaled the paradigmatic transition from a static model of art to a cinematic one, subverting the expectations of a human body idealized, pinioned or framed by Cartesian perspective. Further, as Elizabeth Joyce suggests, the painting alluded to the "classical academic nude" while making it "impossible to objectify" or even to assign a fixed gender identification to the figure.<sup>26</sup> This "outrageous" work, like others featured in the Armory Show (1913), underscored modern art's capacity to blur, to enlarge, to cut away outlines, particularly those which fix or delimit gender morphology.

Enter cinema. It made visible a body never visible before – one that is at once whole and in pieces. Cinema's departure from prior representational mediums resided, as Gilles Deleuze proposes, in its turn away from an absolute "higher synthesis of movement," its "abandoning figures and poses" for "the any-instant-whatever."<sup>27</sup> The physical body became visible through parts in continual mutation and flux, displaced as the "film's body," Sobchack's phrase denoting both the materiality of the medium and the spectator's physical investment in it (*Address of the Eye* 23). The visceral yet preternatural mechanisms of film, distinct from painting, projected the body as a mass of moving "parts," and at the same time, enacted Merleau-Ponty's revelation that "[o]ur body is not in space like things; it inhabits or haunts space."<sup>28</sup> Cinematic bodies haunt, permeate, fragment and are fragmented by representation.

The crosshatching between avant-garde painters and filmmakers extended to their relationship to poets, most recognizably those of the French avant-garde. Apollinaire, who like Stein wrote scenarios, invoked a lyric phenomenology, and by 1917 urged poets to take part in the "new discoveries in thought and lyricism" and the physical "liberties" made