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The Cinematic Woolf

In Virginia Woolf's books, there is a distinct feeling of looking at scenes through the lens of a camera. The reader is given such descriptions and perspectives that much of her writing can be called cinematic. She does this in several different ways: through the use of color and description, showing us settings as though we're actually seeing them on screen; by giving us fragmented moments, as though we're watching one scene after another slowly building a cohesive whole; and through her changing points of view, letting us jump from one character's mind to the next, much in the same way a voice-over or narrator would allow us this privilege in a film. Because her words create such a vivid mental image, one would think that her novels would translate seamlessly into movies. Often, as readers, we feel as though we're behind a camera, panning across bustling scenes of London, or zooming out to see not only an entire dinner party, but also what a servant is doing in the next room. Woolf's rich descriptions of scenes, especially colors and the small details of inconsequential fringe characters, give the reader a whole picture of what we should be seeing at that moment in the story. We're often given one distinct scene on top of another, moving quickly between one character's point of view on to the next, the way a jump cut would work in a film that takes us rapidly from one setting to the next. And as we focus on one character and hear his or her thoughts, it's as though each of her novels has its own voice-over, telling the audience what each person is thinking at that moment. These would all lead a reader to imagine the splendor that her novels could create in a visual medium. Unfortunately, one can see that this has not been

the case. The cinematic view of Virginia Woolf's writing would seem to lend itself beautifully to film, yet when translated to the screen, much of the brilliance of her writing is lost. Three of her books have been adapted to film: *To the Lighthouse*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, and *Orlando*. And while each movie may be successful in its own way, as representations of Woolf's work, they have failed.

Let's first look at each of her books that we've read this semester and see some examples of how her writing could be described as cinematic. Even starting with *The Voyage Out*, we see glimpses of Woolf's talent that emerges later in her career. The reader is given beautiful, descriptive scenes of London, the voyage on the boat, and of life in the hotel in South America. Woolf does a great job of describing very vivid settings through which her characters move. Once the *Euphrosyne* has reached its destination, the passengers board a smaller boat in the bay to take to land. Through the eyes of the people on the boat, we get our first glimpses of South America. "Moving very slowly, and rearing absurdly high over each wave, the little boat was now approaching a white crescent of sand. Behind this was a deep green valley, with distinct hills on either side. On the slope of the right-hand hill white houses with brown roofs were settled, like nesting sea-birds, and at intervals cypresses striped the hill with black bars (*Voyage* 88). And the description continues on, especially focusing on the colors, in order to give the reader a very vivid visual image of the small boat's trek to land. "Mountains whose sides were flushed red, but whose crowns were bald, rose as a pinnacle, half-concealing another pinnacle behind it. The hour being still early, the whole view was exquisitely light and airy; the blues and greens of sky and trees were intense but not sultry" (*Voyage* 88). Woolf does an equally excellent job at setting a scene filled with people as well.

When Rachel and Mrs. Ambrose take a walk through town at dark, we get an animated description of the local villagers moving about their nightly habits.

The young women, with their hair magnificently swept in coils, a red flower behind the ear, sat on the doorsteps, or issued out on to balconies, while the young men ranged up and down beneath, shouting up a greeting from time to time and stopping here and there to enter into amorous talk. At the open windows merchants could be seen making up the day's account, and older women lifting jars from shelf to shelf. (*Voyage* 99)

It is not only the very descriptive setting of scenes that create the cinematic views in *The Voyage Out*, but also Woolf's use of visual perspective. As in a film, our view is not only limited to the main characters' views, but we also see scenes and actions from afar, the way a camera would zoom in and out, or pan across a scene from a viewpoint that is far away from the main action. "From a distance the *Euphrosyne* looked very small. Glasses were turned upon her from the decks of great liners, and she was pronounced a tramp, a cargo-boat, or one of those wretched little passenger steamers where people rolled about among the cattle on deck" (*Voyage* 87). And later, inside the hotel, night has fallen, and all of its guests have gone to sleep. We are shown a discussion between Hirst and Hewet right before they go to sleep, and then we quickly zoom out to what night looks like all across the world.

All over the shadowed half of the world people lay prone, and a few flickering lights in empty streets marked the places where their cities were built. Red and yellow omnibuses were crowding each other in Piccadilly; sumptuous women were rocking at a standstill; but here in the darkness an owl flitted from tree to tree, and when the breeze lifted the branches the moon flashed as if it were a torch. (*Voyage* 111)

The reader is moved from a close-up of a conversation inside the hotel, out into the atmosphere to see what is happening on the other side of the world, and then we zoom back down to the darkness of the world outside the hotel.

As Woolf's writing became more experimental, it also became richer, more expressive and more visually stimulating. A great example is in her short story, "Kew Gardens." In class, we discussed that in reading this work, it was like setting down a camera in the middle of the gardens and letting life happen around it. People and conversations move in and out of view and earshot, and we see only snippets of life as it passes by. And while Woolf continued to use colors as a descriptive vehicle through much of her work, they are most prominent in helping to portray the scene at "Kew Gardens." It is actually astounding the number of times she uses color to describe the setting in such a short work. Just a few examples are: "red or blue or yellow petals" ("Kew" 39), "gold dust" ("Kew" 39), "brown, circular veins" ("Kew" 39), "grey back of a pebble" ("Kew" 39), "green spaces" ("Kew" 39), "white and blue butterflies" ("Kew" 39), "red water-lilies" ("Kew" 40), "angular green insect" ("Kew" 41), "brown cliffs with deep green lakes" ("Kew" 41), "cool brown light" ("Kew" 43), "green blue vapour" ("Kew" 45), "shiny green umbrellas" ("Kew" 45) and "yellow and black, pink and snow white, shapes of all these colours" ("Kew" 45). In fact, the references to color are too numerous to mention them all here, but it is Woolf's use of these adjectives that help capture a visual picture of Kew Gardens on a hot July day.

In Woolf's first full-length experimental novel, *Jacob's Room*, we are given cinematic views in a very fragmented way. Unlike in *The Voyage Out*, the reader is not given a smooth transition between one scene and the next. Instead, we see Jacob's life through a series of fragments, mostly seen through the eyes of people other than Jacob. Despite this fracturing, though, we still see very distinct scenes, described beautifully by Woolf. There is a scene in which Jacob is laying in a boat with some classmates, and they

have just stopped the boat near some trees. “Now there was a shiver of wind – instantly an edge of sky; and as Durrant ate cherries he dropped the stunted yellow cherries through the green wedge of leaves, their stalks twinkling as they wriggled in and out, and sometimes one half-bitten cherry would go down red into the green” (*Jacob’s* 35). What is also brilliant about this scene, is that Woolf continues on, not only describing how they look sitting in the boat, but then we move into the boat with them, and see what Jacob is seeing at that moment, from his perspective. “The meadow was on a level with Jacob’s eyes as he lay back; gilt with buttercups, but the grass did not run like the thin green water of the graveyard grass about to overflow the tombstones, but stood juicy and thick. Looking up, backwards, he saw the legs of children deep in the grass, and the legs of cows” (*Jacob’s* 35).

Another cinematic tool that appears in *Jacob’s Room* is the sudden fast-forward of time. At the beginning of the book, Jacob is just a small boy, then suddenly, he “went up to Cambridge in October, 1906,” and he is now a young man off at school (*Jacob’s* 27). This one sentence sums up the passing of time, and we’re instantly moved along to Jacob’s years as a student at university. The sudden passing of time in this way is very common in film as well, and often the viewer is not specifically told that a number of years has passed, but is merely thrown into the next stage of the character’s life, much as we are with Jacob.

Some may say that Woolf’s next book, *Mrs. Dalloway*, may be her most cinematic. In Elaine Showalter’s introduction to the novel, she even states, “Woolf makes use of such devices as montage, close-ups, flashbacks, tracking shots, and rapid cuts in constructing a three-dimensional story” (Penguin *Dalloway* xxi). Throughout

Mrs. Dalloway, we see many great scenes of a bustling London. Right at the beginning we're given a lengthy description of the setting that Clarissa is about to walk through.

[...] the whirling young men, and laughing girls in their transparent muslins who, even now, after dancing all night, were taking their absurd woolly dogs for a run; and even now, at this hour, discreet old dowagers were shooting out in their motor cars on errands of mystery; and the shopkeepers were fidgeting in their windows with their paste and diamonds, their lovely old sea-green brooches in eighteenth-century settings to tempt Americans [...] (*Dalloway* 5)

Part of what makes these descriptions of London so palpable is the amount of movement Woolf includes in them. They are not merely descriptions of a static scene, as one would see in a painting, but bustling, active movements of a city that is alive and energetic. In a later scene, a car backfires, which causes everyone to stop and stare at the motor car as it tries to navigate the busy streets. “[...] old ladies on the tops of omnibuses spread their black parasols; here a green, here a red parasol opened with a little pop. Mrs. Dalloway, coming to the window with her arms full of sweet peas, looked out with her little pink face pursed in enquiry. Every one looked at the motor car. Septimus looked. Boys on bicycles sprang off. Traffic accumulated” (*Dalloway* 15). Here again, we're shown all the movement that is happening in this one particular moment in the city. The reader is also shown reactions to the backfiring car outside of Mrs. Dalloway's perspective, as though the camera pulled back, out of the flower shop and showed us a larger view of the scene.

There are several points in the novel where it is as if a camera is zooming in and out of a particular scene, showing the audience what is happening in one room, as well as across town. During one of the moments when Big Ben is striking the hour, we see this movement of the camera as it moves from one character to the next. “Twelve o'clock

struck as Clarissa Dalloway laid her green dress on her bed, and the Warren Smiths walked down Harley Street. Twelve was the hour of their appointment. Probably, Reiza thought, that was Sir William Bradshaw's house with the grey motor car in front of it" (*Dalloway* 94). The reader is taken from Clarissa's bedroom to the street outside of Sir Bradshaw's house and into Reiza's head.

Since we now notice that we are inside Reiza's head, hearing what she is thinking, it is also necessary to mention the stream-of-consciousness writing that Woolf employs in the book. The reader moves seamlessly from one character's mind to the next, and we find ourselves being able to see what each is thinking. This technique is also used in films when there is a voice-over or narration. As viewers, we are granted the privilege of knowing what multiple characters are thinking, and we're granted the same in *Mrs. Dalloway* as well. Peter Walsh is one of the characters in the book whose thoughts we are allowed to know. There is one particular scene that Woolf creates which amazingly mixes the inner dialogue of the character with what he is doing physically. In constructing the scene in this way, the reader is able to know what Peter is thinking as well as create an image of how he is moving around the room. This works so well, because often, when we move to the interiority of a character, often the physicality of that character is lost. It is as if they become static and frozen in space and time. In this scene, Woolf intersperses movements within Peter's thoughts. As he contemplates how unusual he is, we learn "(he was now reading, with his bootlaces trailing on the floor)" (*Dalloway* 156). Then he is thinking about Daisy, the woman he is supposedly in love with, and we see that "[h]e pulled off his boots. He emptied his pockets" (*Dalloway* 157). Next, he is wondering why he never knows what others are thinking, "(so he thought as he shaved)"

(*Dalloway* 158). Then he ponders his own shortcomings as “(he was at the moment actually engaged in sorting out various keys, papers)” and then “(he buttoned his waistcoat)” (*Dalloway* 158). These short snippets are thrown in throughout Peter’s rambling thoughts as a way to keep us in the moment of what he is doing, and to continually provide a visual of the scene. This is another reason why *Mrs. Dalloway* is considered so cinematic, because if one were to watch a movie that included an extended voice-over of a character’s thoughts, such as the above scene with Peter, the actor would not be just sitting in one spot, staring off into space. The scene would look much like the way Woolf wrote it, showing how a character moves physically, while also showing his or her inner thoughts.

In 1926, Virginia Woolf wrote an article titled “The Cinema” for a journal called *Acts* (“Cinema”). She wrote this around the same time that she was writing the “Time Passes” section of *To the Lighthouse* (Hankins). Because these two works were being written simultaneously, we are going to pause and take a look at this essay before moving on to look at the cinematic aspects of *To the Lighthouse*. As we look at this essay, we may also be able to see why adaptations of Woolf’s books to film have not been successful. At the time Woolf wrote this article, movies were just starting out. She was impressed with what they were able to do with moving images, but doubtful of books being adapted onto the big screen. Some of the reasons she gives for their failure are some of the same reasons that her books today do not translate well to film. On reviewing an adaptation of *Anna Karenina*, she says, “A kiss is love. A broken cup is jealousy. A grin is happiness. Death is a hearse” (“Cinema”). Everything is quite literal, and there is no way to translate the complexity of human emotions and thoughts into film.

She goes on to elucidate, “Even the simplest image ‘My love’s like a red, red rose, that’s newly-sprung in June’ presents us with impressions of moisture and warmth and the glow of crimson and the softness of petals inextricably mixed and strung upon the lift of a rhythm which is itself the voice of the passion and hesitation of the lover. All this, which is inaccessible to words and to words alone, the cinema must avoid” (“Cinema”). There is a whole array of thoughts and emotions that can be stirred up by words that cannot be replicated by visual images, and Woolf points out the subtleties that are lost when written word is transferred to film.

Woolf did not think all film was bad, however. In fact, it appeared to have quite an impact on her, and many say that she was influenced by cinema, especially while writing *To the Lighthouse* (Hankins). She was especially struck by the way in which reality could be portrayed, saying, “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?” (“Cinema”). And since film was such a new art form at the time, she emphasized that she saw it having a bright future. “Yet if so much of our thinking and feeling is connected with seeing, some residue of visual emotion which is of no use either to painter or to poet may still await the cinema” (“Cinema”).

Leslie Hankins wrote a journal article titled “A Splice of Reel Life in Virginia Woolf’s ‘Time Passes’” which talks extensively about Woolf’s relationship with cinema and how it impacted her work, specifically within “Time Passes.” Hankins points out that, “The engagement with film theory enabled her to explore and revise her aesthetics, developing innovative parallel strategies with words.” This is Hankins way of explaining

all the cinematic tendencies of Woolf's writing and perhaps where she found some of her inspiration. Also, Hankins goes on to talk about the way Woolf used movement and action in her work, which created the active characters in her novels, much like how we saw Peter Walsh in the scene where he is thinking and moving at the same time, as well as her descriptions of bustling London. "Film forms encouraged her to incorporate movement more effectively into her spatial discourse by broadening 'significant form' to go beyond the strictures of the static visual arts to include moving figures" (Hankins). Woolf also talked about creating a new art form, almost as if she found the term "novel" too constricting, and Hankins viewed it as this: "The unnamed new art form which she projected was wrought in part from her effort to fulfill in the verbal art what she analyzed and imagined for the medium of film in 'The Cinema,' an art on the boundary, poised on the threshold of cinema and literature" (Hankins).

In *To the Lighthouse*, we're given many descriptions of the water and waves that permeate the lives of the Ramsay's at their summer home near the shore. In typical Woolf fashion, we see beautiful portrayals of the space surrounding the characters, so it's as if we're seeing the landscape through their eyes. "For the great plateful of blue water was before her; the hoary Lighthouse, distant, austere, in the midst; and on the right, as far as the eye could see, fading and falling, in soft low pleats, the green sand dunes with the wild flowering grasses on them" (*Lighthouse* 16). And more description of the water follows, this time with more movement and action.

First, the pulse of colour flooded the bay with blue, and the heart expanded with it and the body swam, only the next instant to be checked and chilled by the prickly blackness on the ruffled waves. Then, up behind the great black rock, almost every evening spurted irregularly, so that one had to watch for it and it was a delight when it came, a fountain of white water; and then, while one waited for that one watched,

on the pale semicircular beach, wave after wave shedding again and again smoothly, a film of mother of pearl. (*Lighthouse* 24)

The reader can see a very visual image of the water crashing up onto the rocks, and the movement inherent in the writing creates a sense of action, which prevents it from coming across as a painting or static image of a bay.

The reader also sees moments of changing perspective, as if the camera zooms out, or in another case, focuses closely on one character, zooms out to a larger view, and then comes to rest on other characters in another location. In the third section, we see the camera zoom in and out on Lily Briscoe and the small boating party on their way to the lighthouse. “She turned to her canvas. But impelled by some curiosity, [...] she walked a pace or so to the end of the lawn to see whether, down there on the beach, she could see that little company setting sail” (*Lighthouse* 165). Here the camera pans out to see the boats in the bay, as seen from Lily’s view. “Now they got the sail up; now after a little flagging and hesitation the sails filled and, shrouded in profound silence, she watched the boat take its way with deliberation past the other boats out to sea” (*Lighthouse* 165). The text then continues, as the camera then zooms in on the boat, and suddenly we’re sitting with Mr. Ramsay, James and Cam, on the way to the lighthouse.

The most cinematic aspect of *To the Lighthouse*, however, is the middle section, “Time Passes.” Here, we have a passing of years, with no characters present (with the exception of Mrs. McNabb and Mrs. Bast, coming to clean). Instead of seeing time fast forward through the lives of the Ramsay family and how they have been affected by the passing of years, we see it through the eyes of the empty house. The reader is granted the privilege of seeing what happens when time continues without our presence.

So with the house empty and the doors locked and the mattresses rolled

round, those stray airs, advance guards of great armies, blustered in, brushed bare boards, nibbled and fanned, met nothing in bedroom or drawing-room that wholly resisted them but only hangings that flapped, wood that creaked, the bare legs of tables, saucepans and china already furred, tarnished, cracked. What people had shed and left – a pair of shoes, a shooting cap, some faded skirts and coats in wardrobes – those alone kept the human shape and in the emptiness indicated how once they were filled and animated [...] (*Lighthouse* 133)

Woolf spoke about this continuation of life, even when it is unseen by human eyes, in her essay “The Cinema.” This aspect of film, being able to see events that occur without our participation, fascinated her, and it can be argued that this may have been part of her inspiration for this section of the book. “We behold them as they are when we are not there. We see life as it is when we have no part in it. As we gaze we seem to be removed from the pettiness of actual existence” (“Cinema”). Leslie Hankins also points out this connection between Woolf’s interest in film techniques and her construction of this section of the book. “In ‘Time Passes’ Woolf explored verbally the artfully disinterested perspective on home and landscape recorded by time-lapse narration” (Hankins).

Another cinematic technique that Woolf uses in “Time Passes” is interspersing sentences into the narrative with brackets, which reflect what is happening to the Ramsay family during the passing of this time. What is most shocking about these interruptions is the dramatic nature of what is occurring and the casual way in which they’re thrown into the description of the disintegration of the house. Between two paragraphs describing the effect of spring and summer on the house, the reader is given this abrupt interruption:

“[Prue Ramsay died that summer in some illness connected with childbirth, which was indeed a tragedy, people said, everything, they said, had promised so well]” (*Lighthouse* 136). Hankins explains Woolf’s reasons for these interruptions as, “Rather than attempting cutting for continuity or transitional smoothness between the text and

brackets, Woolf chose the technique of cutting for discontinuity so the juxtaposition of the joined segments became the site for the release of energy” (Hankins). And she goes on to explain it literally as a film technique in that, “the brackets literally, like a frame inserted in a strip of film, intrude on other material [...]” (Hankins). With this description, as readers, we are able to see how this section could very well have been inspired by cinema and many of the techniques that filmmakers used to tell a story.

Woolf’s next book, *Orlando*, is filled with rich descriptions of Orlando’s adventures and sweeping panoramic views of his/her travels to foreign lands, the streets of London and the paths of the lush gardens. Because Orlando’s mansion is such a main part of the book, the reader is given many visual images of the splendor and grandeur of the house. We see it through many different lenses. Up close, we see as Orlando moves through its halls and rooms, seeing everything through her eyes: “sat now in this chair of state, now reclined on that canopy of delight; observed the arras, how it swayed; watched the huntsmen riding and Daphne flying; [...] slid along the polished planks of the gallery, the other side of which was rough timber; touched this silk, that satin” (*Orlando* 171). And we see the house from afar, as Orlando looks down on it from the base of the Oak tree at the top of the hill: “Courts and buildings, grey, red, plum colour, lay orderly and symmetrical; the courts were some of them oblong and some square; in this was a fountain; in that a statue; the buildings were some of them low, some pointed; here was a chapel, there a belfry; spaces of the greenest grass lay in between and clumps of cedar trees and beds of bright flowers” (*Orlando* 106).

These rich descriptions are not only limited to Orlando’s house, however. As Orlando comes home from being abroad, from serving as an ambassador in Turkey and

traveling with a group of gypsies, she watches the skyline of London come into view from the deck of her ship. “She caught glimpses of broad and orderly thoroughfares. Stately coaches drawn by teams of well-fed horses stood at the doors of houses whose bow windows, whose plate glass, whose polished knockers, testified to the wealth and modest dignity of the dwellers within” (*Orlando* 166). And later, Orlando lives in London for a bit, so we get to view her experience of London right there on the streets with her. “She walked out into the Strand. There the uproar was even worse. Vehicles of all sizes, drawn by blood horses and by dray horses [...] were inextricably mixed. Carriages, carts, and omnibuses seemed to her eyes [...] alarmingly at loggerheads; [...] the uproar of the street sounded violently and hideously cacophonous” (*Orlando* 274). Later, decades later, in fact, Orlando jumps into her motorcar and speeds off, out to her mansion in the country. As she is flying past London, we get fractured images thrown at us as she speeds through the city. “Vast blue blocks of building rose into the air; the red cowls of chimneys were spotted irregularly across the sky; the road shone like silver-headed nails; omnibuses bore down upon her with sculptured white-faced drivers” (*Orlando* 299).

Another specific cinematic element of *Orlando* is again the way in which time passes. We’ve seen how Woolf has used various techniques to indicate the passage of time in her other works. Here, she simply states the date at that moment, or rather straightforwardly says, “The Eighteenth century was over; the Nineteenth century had begun” (*Orlando* 226). And just like that, she has moved us forward through another century. This abrupt passing of time works well in film, as there are many ways to

convey to the audience, visually, that time has passed and that we've moved on to a different decade or century.

The cinematic techniques used in *The Waves* are very different than in Woolf's other books. We are given less sweeping descriptions or pans of the camera across a vast space. This book is more restrained and contained, as we're given the entire narrative through only the characters' dialogue. However, we can still see cinematic elements in it, as we see each speaker give us a different fragment, as though each sentence were an image flashed on a screen. This fragmentation starts immediately, as the book opens with a description given by all six of the characters.

“I see a ring,” said Bernard, “hanging above me. It quivers and hangs in a loop of light.”

“I see a slab of pale yellow,” said Susan, “spreading away until it meets a purple stripe.”

“I hear a sound,” said Rhoda, “cheep, chirp; cheep, chirp; going up and down.”

“I see a globe,” said Neville, “hanging down in a drop against the enormous flanks of some hill.”

“I see a crimson tassel,” said Jinny, “twisted with gold threads.”

“I hear something stamping,” said Louis. “A great beast's foot is chained. It stamps, and stamps, and stamps.” (*Waves* 9)

One image after another is shown to us, until it slowly creates a full and cohesive whole. Also, as the book progresses, each of the characters is often describing what the other characters are doing, physically. Because of this, we see a lot of movement and action, and we're given visuals of the characters moving around each other. “Now they vanish,” said Louis. ‘Susan with Bernard. Neville with Jinny. You and I, Rhoda, stop for a moment by this stone urn. [...] Jinny, pointing with her gloved hand, pretends to notice the water-lilies’” (*Waves* 229). Because there is so much description of physical activities

and movement throughout the book, we are able to see, visually, how the characters interact with each other.

Interspersed throughout the book are chapters that take us out of the minds of the six main characters, and we see waves crashing into the sea and the rising and setting of the sun. “The sun rose higher, Blue waves, green waves swept a quick fan over the beach, circling the spike of sea-holly and leaving shallow pools of light here and there on the sand” (*Waves* 29). Not only are these interruptions in the text extremely rich and descriptive, they are ways of showing the passing of time, again, in a new and different way. And once again, it is done in a way that would lend itself beautifully to film. As we read these sections, we can visualize the waves pounding the shore and the slow ascent and descent of the sun, as one day passes.

Virginia Woolf’s last book, *Between the Acts*, contains a performance of a play, which really shows some of her cinematic tendencies in writing. The performance is easily transferable to the screen, in that the reader is basically given a script of the play. There are speaking parts designated to each actor and stage directions so that we know where everyone is moving on stage, as well as when the gramophone should start playing and when the intermissions are scheduled.

ELEANOR (taking the ring). *Perfect happiness! But hist!* (She slips the ring into her pocket.) *Here’s Mama!* (They start asunder.)

(Enter Mrs. Hardcastle, a stout lady in black bombazine, upon a donkey, escorted by an elderly gentleman in a deer-stalker’s cap.)

MRS. H...*So you stole a march upon us, young people. There was a time, Sir John, when you and I were always first on top, Now...*
(*Between* 113)

We're taken out of the story of the audience and the Oliver family, and put directly into the story that is happening on stage. But just as quickly, Woolf pulls us out of that story, and the camera zooms out, to show us how the audience is reacting, as well as what is happening backstage.

MR. HARDCASTLE...(brushing flakes of meat from his whiskers). *Now...*

"Now what?" whispered Mrs. Springett, anticipating further travesty. (*Between* 115)

The reader spends most of the novel, being pulled back and forth, from close-ups to shots of the whole ensemble and audience, as they watch the production on the Olivers' lawn.

Even between the acts of the play, though, we still see Woolf's usual stylistic descriptions and changing perspectives. During one scene, Mrs. Swithin and Mr. Dodge are moving about the house, as she is giving him a tour of the family estate. During one scene, they are upstairs, leaning out a window. "Down in the courtyard beneath the window cars were assembling. Their narrow black roofs were laid together like the blocks of a floor. Chauffeurs were jumping down; here old ladies gingerly advanced black legs with silver-buckled shoes; old men striped trousers. [...] Together they leant half out the window" (*Between* 50). The reader gets to see what they are seeing, as their eyes have become the camera lens and we see the tops of the cars and the legs sticking out of doors. We feel as though we're leaning out the window with Mrs. Swithin and Mr. Dodge.

Now that we've established the ways in which Virginia Woolf's writing is cinematic in nature, and possibly even some instances where she was directly inspired by film, let's take a look at the films that have been created from her books. To date, three

of her novels have been turned into movies: *To the Lighthouse*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, and *Orlando*. We're going to take just a brief look at how each of these has been adapted to the big screen and at the success of each adaptation. We'll start with *To the Lighthouse*, as this is the first of the three, coming out in 1983. In the section, "Time Passes," the viewer is shown the decay of the house through seasons. The filmmaker chose to use completely black screens as representations of Woolf's brackets. Interrupting the seasons passing through the house, we see a black screen, followed by a visual of Mrs. Ramsay's death, book-ended again by a black screen. Then we see the house to continue to decay as the seasons wear on once more. It was an interesting way to portray the use of the brackets, but I found the visual of the disintegrating house lacking, in comparison with Woolf's rich, haunting description in the book.

One of the most disturbing differences, however, is that Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay are given first names in the film. Throughout the book, we see them as Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, the institution of marriage and family, personified. This subtlety is lost in the movie. And this is where the major problem lies in translations of Woolf's books to screen. While a director may change aspects to fit his or her depiction of the characters and settings, the greatest failure is the loss of subtlety and complexity that Woolf gives her characters. By the time the story gets put on screen, it has become a skeleton of its original form. We lose the richness of Woolf's words and the poignancy of moments in her writing.

This loss of complexity was most telling in the film version of *Mrs. Dalloway*. While the story may be the same: spanning a single day, Clarissa Dalloway throws a party and Septimus Smith throws himself out a window. However, it is the complexity of

the characters that is lost in the move from book to film. While the filmmaker attempts to convey the inner thoughts of Clarissa through voice-over, we still lack the subtlety and depth of her character. We also lose the inner thoughts of Septimus, Peter, Elizabeth, Reiza and Richard. Something that the viewer does gain by watching this film, though, is a renewed admiration of the brilliance of Woolf's writing. Her use of stream of consciousness and the way the story flows seamlessly from character to character cannot be duplicated in the film. In the book, we're whisked effortlessly from one character's mind, through the busy streets of London, and then into the turmoil of someone's life across town. Despite the filmmaker's best efforts, she is unable to successfully replicate this flow of writing on the screen, and we're left with a rather traditional, flat movie, instead of the inventive, fast-paced story in the book.

Another aspect that I was disappointed to see lost in the adaptations to screen is Woolf's subtle sense of humor. By not being able to see the thoughts of each character, moments of humor are completely lost when put onto film. One specific example of this is in *Mrs. Dalloway*, when Hugh is going to have lunch with Lady Bruton. This is one of my favorite scenes in all of Woolf's work, and it was completely taken out of the movie, as it couldn't be portrayed visually. Hugh has just arrived at Lady Bruton's home and asks her secretary, Miss Brush, how her brother is doing in South Africa (*Dalloway* 103). "Miss Brush, deficient though she was in every attribute of female charm, so much resented that she said, 'Thank you, he's doing very well in South Africa,' when, for half a dozen years, he had been doing badly in Portsmouth" (*Dalloway* 103). In the film, we don't know what Miss Brush is thinking, so the humor of the whole scene is lost, and instead, it merely looks like Hugh is making conversation with Lady Bruton's secretary.

The most successful adaptation Woolf's work would have to be *Orlando*. Part of why this may have succeeded the most is, while there are certainly moments of poignant interiority in *Orlando*, it may be one of the most physical of all of Woolf's books. Woolf, herself, admitted that it was a "treat" to herself, and "abandoned" herself "to the pure delight of this farce" (*Diary* 115). In a diary entry a few days later, she also states that, "I like these plain sentences; and the externality of it for a change. It is too thin of course; splashed over the canvas" (*Diary* 116). This "externality" of the book is why it is the most successful of Woolf's books to be adapted to film. We're given sweeping descriptions of all the lives that Orlando lives, which translate beautifully to visual images on screen. The cinematography and elaborate costumes in the movie help to create these very rich, vivid scenes that seem to come alive off the pages of the book. Sally Potter, the director, also tried to keep some of the humor and playfulness of the text. The movie itself is somewhat of a romp through time and space that insists that the viewer suspend disbelief and just go along for the ride. The film employs asides, where Tilda Swinton, who plays Orlando, looks directly at the camera, as though speaking to the audience, and offers a personal thought or quip before we're whisked away onto the next adventure of Orlando's life. Each chapter is divided visually by a black screen that gives the date and chapter title, starting with "DEATH" and ending with "LIFE" (*Orlando*). The heart of its success truly is in that fact that the reader seems to spend more time outside Orlando's mind, rather than inside of it.

The reason why these movies were not successful representations of Woolf's books is because they are unable to show on screen the depth of emotion and complexity that is in her writing. While they may be able to show some of the physical scenes of

Woolf's work, they are unable to replicate the inner thoughts and feelings that Woolf gives her characters. That level of complexity that each of her character's has is lost when transferred to the big screen. This is not to say that we cannot still call Woolf's writing cinematic, nor say that she was not perhaps influenced nor inspired by film techniques, but, to date, there has not been a way to successfully transfer the brilliance and interiority of her writing onto film. However, I am of the belief that it may be done eventually. Perhaps someday we will come up with a new way of capturing all that is unsaid and unspoken into a visual form. I believe that Woolf, with her constant embrace of a new form, would have felt the same way, as she states in her essay, "Then indeed when some new symbol for expressing thought is found, the film-maker has enormous riches at his command" ("Cinema").

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