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Cinema and Its Others

KEITH WILLIAMS: *James Joyce and Cinematicity: Before and After Film*.
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Nicholas Andrew Miller

James Joyce was thirteen years old when the Lumière brothers first demonstrated their revolutionary camera-printer-projector, the *cinématographe*, to a public audience. The location and date of the occasion—the basement Salon Indien of the Grand Café in Paris, December 28, 1895—lend a seductive particularity to that watershed moment, as though the spectators gathered to watch the first “actualities” were local witnesses to modernity itself being hand-cranked into motion. The birth of cinema as we know it has long served as an important backdrop and historical counterpart to Joyce’s own revolution of the written word. Although he was not personally present for it, the event heralded the formative development of the young man as an artist. Joyce’s adolescence coincided precisely with that of the new medium: the writer of *Ulysses* and the dominant narrative form of the twentieth century came of age together.

The traces of this coeval proximity are evident in Joyce’s writing, where experimentation with *ekphrastic* modes of representation (that is, the verbal imitation of the visual) is often prominent. As readers have frequently noted, Joyce’s narrative voices and representational strategies seem regularly to reflect or anticipate the language of the cinema, replicating formal structures such as those of film editing and cinematographic framing that were developing or would later develop based on what the earliest portable motion picture cameras had made possible. Moreover, as Joyceans are quick to point out (at times perhaps with more pride than historical precision), it was their man who founded the very first dedicated cinema in Dublin, the Volta theatre, in 1909. The success of that venture was fleeting of course. Yet the brevity of Joyce’s turn as film impresario seems only to have strengthened the view that his interest in the cinema was personal, not mercenary, that the Volta was an authentic exercise in artistic imagination rather than a dismal failure of business acumen.

In the face of such historical and textual evidence, it seems absurd not

to accept at face value the estimation to which so many readers and commentators, among them no lesser figures than Sergei Eisenstein and André Bazin, have consistently arrived, namely that Joyce is “the most cinematic of writers.” That assertion marks the launch point for Keith Williams’s marvelous study, *James Joyce and Cinematicity: Before and After Film*, which aims to complicate our understanding of Joyce’s affinity for the visual by expanding its scope of reference beyond cinema exclusively. Williams’s core observation, no less brilliant for seeming obvious as soon as he makes it, is that Joyce’s early visual education occurred during a time when the cinema either did not exist or did so in a form remote from the one his later readers would come to know. Williams contends that Joyce’s visual sensibilities as a writer were trained not only at the cinema, but by immersion in the larger visual culture that preceded and followed it.

As a matter of historical record, the world of Joyce’s youth was one dominated by lantern shows, panoramic spectacles, and hand-held motion devices or “optical toys,” all popular entertainments that had already existed for decades by the time the future writer was born. The period of Joyce’s early childhood, specifically, was one in which new technologies of the still photograph were becoming pervasive: high-speed photography rendered the mysteries of moving animal and human bodies newly visible; “spirit photography” supplied images of ethereal figures to fascinated viewers (and to credulous ones, documentary proof of their departed loved ones’ persisting presence as ghosts); aerial photography and photomicroscopy brought distant worlds close in scenes projected for the delight and edification of the public.

Cinema’s emergence in this context marks, iceberg-like, the existence of a sprawling, multi-linear, continuously developing collection of heterogeneous discourses and histories. The “invention” of cinema is grounded not only in technological innovations, such as perforated celluloid film and the Lumières’ new lightweight, portable machine, but also in the influence of social practices such as those associated with vaudeville, peepshows, and other popular entertainments, as well as in the scientific effort to understand the neurophysiology of visual perception and the biomechanics of musculoskeletal locomotion. In Dublin no less than anywhere else, the advent of moving pictures recalibrated notions of realism, spectatorship, privacy, and so on, but only because the cinema came into being in a world in which visual experience itself was already a dynamically charged site of social exchange and technological inquiry.

Williams’s project is an ambitious one. Widening his scope to take in this fuller view of the state, as well as the potentialities and prospects, of visual culture during Joyce’s lifetime, he sets out to correct the record on the writ-

er's relationship with the visual in comprehensive fashion. From the outset, he makes clear that his goal is not merely to point out that scholars and critics have emphasized Joyce's interest in cinema to the exclusion of other forms; that zoetropes and mutoscopes and magic lanterns deserve more airtime in discussions among Joyceans. What Williams asks readers to consider is the idea that, for Joyce, visuality as such is grounded in a history composed of elements and discourses and experiences that are far more diverse, dynamic, extensive, and interwoven than has been adequately recognized or appreciated. With respect to this history, he suggests, readers of Joyce have collectively failed at the task his texts fundamentally compel, namely that of "learning," as Richard Ellmann famously put it, "to be James Joyce's contemporaries" (qtd. in Williams 4).

Throwing open the doors to this expansive and variegated historical landscape of seeing, Williams proves himself to be a generous, capable, and engaging guide. The book is meticulously researched and renders the hidden histories of modern visual spectacle in astonishing detail; if the sheer amount of information can occasionally feel saturating, the energetic curiosity that drives Williams's careful investigation carries the reader along as the previously unacknowledged complexities of a world we thought we knew become freshly accessible on virtually every page.

An introductory chapter lays out the parameters and methodologies that define the project while offering a suggestive preview of its implications. To begin with, Williams proposes that we shift our focus from cinema to "cinematicity," employing a neologism that references the continuities of "cinema" and the "cinematic" as social practices while complicating their easy equivalence with the particular medium of celluloid film. Moving picture spectacle is a diverse and variegated phenomenon that spans a capacious and inclusive history of visual technology, media, and practice from Han Dynasty shadow plays to virtual reality headsets. "Cinematicity" directs us to engage that expanded frame of reference for the period of Joyce's lifetime, opening our awareness to include the disciplines and practices of seeing that existed "before and after film."

Williams invites readers to apprehend a richer and more complex visuality in Joyce's writing, grounded in the diversity of experiences that educated the artist's eye. By doing so, we stand to gain a different vantage on familiar passages, recalibrating our impressions, for example, of Gabriel Conroy reimagining his wife as a symbolic painting in "The Dead"; of Stephen expounding Thomistic aesthetic theory in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*; and of Bloom calling to mind "mutoscope pictures in Capel Street" (*Ulysses* 13.794 [301]) after watching Gerty MacDowell's performance

on Sandymount Strand in *Ulysses*. The diversity of discourses present in such examples underscores not only that Joyce's attention extended beyond cinema to other specific visual technologies in isolation, but also to their "intermediality"—that is, to their intersections and competing presences within visual culture broadly conceived. Painting and performance, philosophy and peephole devices, the presumed privacy of voyeurism and the social valences of cinematic projection all contribute narrative threads to the "cinematicity" that informs Joyce's writing.

By emphasizing intermediality in this way, Williams places his investigation in direct conversation with the work of scholars such as modern art critic Jonathan Crary, whose influential *Techniques of the Observer* explored nineteenth-century optical instruments as sites of sensory discipline, and media archaeologist Erkki Huhtamo, whose concept of the "media-cultural imaginary" Williams relies on heavily. Acknowledging his own intellectual kinship with such figures, as well as his indebtedness to their work, Williams sets out to reach beyond Joyce's personal interest in and experience of cinema to probe the complex and interwoven set of optical disciplines and practices and ideologies—the media-cultural imaginary of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—that contributed to his formation as a writer especially attuned to the language of the visual.

Such an approach frames Williams's project as an undertaking of both textual criticism and material history, a rereading of Joyce's writing in light of the conditions and instruments that formed his visual sensibilities. Methodologically, the argument follows a hybrid path that is neither purely analytical nor purely historical, bringing to light hidden practices and histories, while demonstrating their resonance, through reference, metaphor, linguistic experimentation, and so on, in Joyce's texts themselves. Williams pursues the potential intricacies of this dual method within a structure that is deceptively neat: following an introduction, his investigation unfolds in three novella-length chapters of roughly 70 pages each in which he pursues readings of *Dubliners*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and *Ulysses*, aligning those texts with the traditions and technologies of, respectively, magic lantern shows, series photography, and moving panorama spectacles. If this positioning of particular texts in relation to specific media forms seems to run counter to Williams's overall thesis concerning the "intermediality" of visual experience, the result is in the end far more clarifying than it is reductive; Williams's readings and examples function in effect as case studies demonstrating the multiple registers of Joyce's literary engagements with visual experience across the entirety of his work.

The advantages of this approach are immediately apparent as Wil-

Williams moves from the introduction into the first substantive movement of his argument, an exploration devoted to the performance tradition of the magic lantern. Citing the unexpected discovery of a significant collection of lantern slides at the site of one of the Joyce family houses, Williams opens an expansive reading of lanternism in the context of religious revival practices that are referenced in *Ulysses* (the unearthed collection was determined to have belonged to a Presbyterian evangelist whose residence at the house post-dated the Joyces' by several years). The episode confirms Joyce's personal proximity to lantern exhibition culture. Setting aside the unanswerable question of whether he saw these particular slides himself, Williams reveals the form's pervasiveness in his work, citing examples that stretch from Stephen's echo of Jesuit cultural critique in *Stephen Hero* ("these lanterns have magical properties: they transform and disfigure" [*Stephen Hero* 186]) to the verbal replication of their dissolving-view effects in *Finnegans Wake*. The chapter's focus on *Dubliners* emerges in particularly fine and persuasive readings of otherwise familiar passages featuring visuality in that text, as, for example, the moment in "A Little Cloud" when Chandler glances at the photograph of his wife and meets the hatred in her eyes; Gabriel's meditation on Gretta's figure on the stairway in "The Dead" ("he asked himself what is a woman standing on the stairs in the shadow, listening to distant music, a symbol of" [*Dubliners* 210]); the young boy's fantasy projection of Mangan's sister as love-object in "Araby" ("I kept her brown figure always in my eye" [*Dubliners* 30]); the emotionally stricken Eveline's view of Frank as her opportunity for escape into a new life fades; and the raising of ghostly lovers and other specters of the past in "The Dead."

A similarly productive juxtaposition of material history and textual close-reading attends Williams's investigation of series photography and chronophotography in the next chapter. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Williams suggests, is a novel that "epitomizes literary emulation of visual analysis of movement over time" (109). Noting that in his 1904 essay version of *A Portrait*, Joyce wrote that "the past is a succession of presents," Williams explores the novel in its various iterations as an expression of visual temporality—that is, of the ways the eye perceives in time. Eadweard Muybridge's running horse series images and Étienne-Jules Marey's multiple-exposure chronophotographs transformed public awareness not only of physical locomotion, but of seeing itself. Williams's point is not to suggest that Joyce's novel offers a literary replication of those visual technologies, but that in the novelty of its construction, it unfolds as their technological and aesthetic counterpart, the full expression of visual temporality in verbal form. Joyce's exploration of the periodicity and temporality of human development in *A Portrait* is new in the

same ways that high-speed photographic technologies were new: the novel stands beside Muybridge's zoopraxiscope and Marey's chronophotographic gun in this context, the *bildungsroman* remade as a literary machine for the linguistic accounting of time.

If Williams's readings of *Dubliners* and *A Portrait* reveal their formal and aesthetic correspondences with pre-cinematic visual culture, his exploration of *Ulysses* shifts that focus to emphasize the political dimensions of the novel's relation to moving panorama spectacles. The history of panoramas in Dublin forms a central, fascinating portion of Williams's chapter on *Ulysses*, and his descriptions of large-scale, multilayered, painted scrimms featuring landscapes rendered dynamic through front and back lighting and semi-transparent "wash" images that could be made to fade in or out using color filters and curtains, with scaffolded viewing platforms at the center from which one could be made to feel that one was rising in a hot air balloon, suggests something of the marvelous and otherworldly experience the form made available. The flowering of this practice as a multi-media variety show in the "myriorama" (from Greek *myrioi*, "various") that played at Dublin's Rotunda, offers a convincing objective correlative to Joyce's novel, with its localized vision of jocoserious personal dramas situated within a web of interconnected political, historical, and economic conflicts and discourses. The true protagonist in *Ulysses* is arguably Dublin itself, and through Joyce's immersive treatment of the city, the reader engages personally with the discourses of urbanism, colonialism, and imperialism that the author addresses throughout his works. These themes were, Williams argues, central to the experience of the panorama, a form that brought spectators into relationship with the breadth and scope of political and geographical spaces by placing them both physically and imaginatively within them. As in the chapters on *Dubliners* and *A Portrait*, Williams succeeds here in broadening our view of *Ulysses* as a kind of literary version of the filmed "city symphonies" of Walter Ruttmann and Dziga Vertov, and reveals the novel's cinematicity within a wider landscape of visual technology and practice.

Williams's final chapter is a short discursive "Coda" in which he argues that *Finnegans Wake* continues the engagement with the visual that Joyce pursued in his prior work, while amplifying textual effects, such as verbal dissolves, and particular post-filmic forms, such as animation. Much briefer than the preceding discussions, the chapter declines to offer a thorough reading of the *Wake* itself, but returns the study as a whole, *ricorso*-like, to the sources of its motivating questions in Joyce's experimental language of *ekphrasis*.

Given the scope and detail of Williams's engagement, it is hard to imagine a more comprehensive introduction to the historical and cultural

conditions that structured visual experience prior to and during Joyce's lifetime. Occasionally, I found myself wishing that the interpretive implications of Williams's newly contextualized readings had received fuller expression, but it is appropriate that further perspectives come to light as readers chart their own encounters with Joyce's "cinematicity" aided by Williams's careful investigation. Williams's textual analyses of passages, both the familiar and the less so, appear newly suggestive and freshly invigorating in the context of that research; his readings invariably reveal unconsidered valences of suggestion and meaning, as if he were holding the texts up for us to inspect by the aid of some especially illuminating sort of optical instrument. The result gives a strong impression of Joyce as a writer immersed in and influenced by the media cultural imaginary of his time, not one who merely applied visual technologies programmatically or opportunistically to his own literary projects. Thoughtful, meticulously researched, and beautifully presented, *James Joyce and Cinematicity: Before and After Film* succeeds in returning Joyceans to Joyce, inviting them to encounter "the most cinematic of writers" with fresh, and freshly educated, eyes.

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