

Close Up, After Close Up
Life and Letters To-Day as a Modernist Film Journal

In *British National Cinema*, Sarah Street writes that ‘When *Close-Up* folded in 1933, discussion of art cinema and the work of film societies continued in *Film Art*, edited by B. Vivian Braun...’¹ In *Moving Forward, Looking Back*, Malte Hagener lists *Close Up*, *Cinema Quarterly* (1932-35), *Film Art*, *Sight and Sound* (1932-) and *World Film News* (1936-38) as the *fora* in which modernist Anglophone film criticism developed in the mid 1930s.² James Donald, in the influential selection from the magazine that he co-edited comments that ‘the compartmentalization of cinematic modes evident by 1930 suggests that the aesthetic moment of *Close Up* was probably over before the magazine ceased publication’.³ These commentators overlook that from 1935 the critical model developed in *Close Up* was re-established in the more culturally diverse journal *Life and Letters To-day* (henceforth *LLT*) under the same fiscal model as *Close Up* - underwritten by Bryher (Annie Winifred Ellerman). Rather than an ‘aesthetic moment’ ending, what *Close Up* had begun was continued by other means. Its critique evolved to address the economics, technologies and modes of the later 1930s. However, what had been narrowly defined within *Close Up* was now placed in a wider context: film was granted equivalence to literature, rather than being cordoned off within a specialist title. *LLT* was owned by Bryher’s publishing company Brenwin, which bought it in the guise of *Life and Letters* in mid 1935. It was edited by her close associates: Dorothy Petrie Townshend and Robert Herring, who had contributed to *Close Up* as its London Correspondent. Townshend was an old school-chum of Bryher’s who, as an experienced editor on literary and commercial magazines, was responsible for *LLT*’s business management.⁴ The incorporation of *Close Up*’s critique into the wider culture might be taken as a sign that the journal had done its job: alerting the audience for modernist literature to the importance of the moving image. There were pressing historical reasons not to end the debates that *Close Up* had initiated, but to extend them into a wider register. *LLT* is, perhaps, an attempt by Bryher and her circle to move the promotion and critique of cultural experiment beyond the framework of a tiny clique; undertaken not despite the circumstances of the mid to late 1930s, but because of them. In contrast to the tiny print runs and intermittent appearances of Braun’s *Film Art*, the print run for the first issue of *LLT* was 3,000, and it sold out.⁵ This was six times the initial run of *Close Up*, and given the announced

doubling of trade orders that precipitated *LLT*'s switch to monthly output in September 1938, the figure probably grew beyond that.⁶

Close Up was started by Bryher, H.D. and Kenneth Macpherson in 1927, announcing itself as the first English review 'to approach films from the angles of art, experiment, and possibility'.⁷ At the same time they formed POOL Group as an experimental filmmaking and publishing enterprise. Both H.D. and Bryher were experienced writers with extensive connections in the modernist avant-gardes. Bryher had the additional virtue, through first allowance and then inheritance, of being able to support other artists' projects. From the first issue those connections were called upon for material on the basis of affiliation and regardless of expertise: thus we find in an early issue both Gertrude Stein and Arnold Bennett – surely a unique confection for a modernist journal – whilst Dorothy Richardson would become a regular contributor. Anne Friedberg observes that the magazine became 'the model for a certain type of writing about film...theoretically astute, politically incisive, critical of films that were simply entertainment'.⁸ *Close Up* was wide-ranging in its approach, providing, for example, informed commentary on Japanese cinema and commissioning a special issue on Black cinema with several of its contributors being luminaries of the Harlem Renaissance. *Close Up* also established itself as the representative on the one hand of a cinema that emphasised interiority and character, exemplified in the work of G.W. Pabst, and on the other of Soviet montage, with its production of meaning through the juxtaposition of seemingly disassociated images.

Founded in 1928, *Life and Letters* could hardly have been more different. Edited by Desmond MacCarthy until 1933, it was indebted to British strains of culture that did not accord with either earlier developments of European modernism or the innovations of the late 1920s. As Jane Goldman notes:

Life and Letters' standard commercial printed magazine format, tame typography, bereft of illustrations, cartoons, or photographs, hardly makes it a pioneer of experimental modernist aesthetics... Its political stances, moreover, even accounting for its interventions against censorship, pale alongside the more extravagant and extreme gestures and energies of its modernist and avant-garde contemporaries.⁹

The first issue of *Life and Letters* under Brendin's aegis (September 1935) saw radical changes in style and content.¹⁰ The magazine also reverted to quarterly publication.¹¹ The first contributors demonstrated the magazine's reconfiguring within both the higher orbits of international modernism and the lesser circles of a younger British avant-garde with connections that did not include Bryher or H.D. but did include Herring and Oswald Blakeston, one of *Close Up's* foremost writers; amongst the latter were Charles Madge, Humphrey Jennings, Ruthven Todd, Dylan Thomas (at this point a protégé of Blakeston), Norah Hoult, and Mary Butts (another from Blakeston's circle). Of this roster only Butts and Hoult had previously appeared in *Life and Letters*. H.D and Bryher both contributed to the first issue and appeared regularly thereafter. However, most of *Close Up's* contributors would never write on film for the new title: 'amateur' contributors to *Close Up* like Richardson, Marianne Moore, and Hanns Sachs now concentrated upon fields where they possessed appropriate critical resources. One important way in which *LLT* differs from *Close Up* is that writing on film is left almost exclusively to professionals within the domain of their expertise. Laura Marcus remarks that 'Bryher continued to see and write about films after the demise of *Close Up*'.¹² But Bryher does not write about film in *LLT*: her principal post *Close Up* piece is an essay in *Cinema Survey*, originally announced for publication in *Caravel*.

Marcus observes that this tendency towards professionalisation had begun in the later issues of *Close Up*, with the recruitment of figures such as Andor Kraszna-Krausz.¹³ In fact it had begun as early as 1928: the studio scriptwriters Roger Burford, Clifford Howard and Ernest Betts had all written at least once for *Close Up* by January 1929 and contributed regularly thereafter. Burford wrote scripts for mainstream productions such as the comedy *Cocktails* (BIP/Wardour Films, 1928) or *Abdul the Damned* (Alliance-Capital/Wardour Films, 1935) whilst publishing experimental poetry, for example 'damn big guns' in Blakeston's journal *Seed* in January 1933. The development of criticism in *LLT* is in large part conditioned by Herring's choice of professionals such as Dallas Bower and Alberto Cavalcanti from within the nascent media industry, alongside filmmakers such as Len Lye, to explore the potential of new technologies. Herring's desire for such professionalism is already manifest in one of his most important contributions to *Close Up*, in 1929: 'the avant people of the cinema are the technicians, just as the real

modernity of architecture is due to engineers and not to architects'.¹⁴ Once he assumes an editorial role Herring expedites a policy of employing technical experts as critics.

It is notable that several of the professionals who wrote for *Close Up* barely wrote on film in *LLT*. Blakeston contributed only fiction and book reviews, and there is some suggestion of a cooler relationship with Herring and Bryher as the first issue of *LLT* was planned.¹⁵ He declined an invitation to interview Lye about his colour films.¹⁶ Blakeston nonetheless remained an important figure in the networks of friendship that structured critical discourses – placing Bower's *A Plan for Cinema* with a publisher.¹⁷ He also promoted Lye's projects and the work of composer and experimental sound artist Jack Ellit (Avrom Yitzhak Elitski), who had written the music for Blakeston and Francis Bruguière's film *Light Rhythms* (1930). Ellit – who occupied a liminal position between the avant-garde and the media industry - contributed a crucial essay on sound as an autonomous art form to *LLT*. Lye's technique of developing patterns of movement within the frame, rather than through edited juxtaposition, seen as early as the animation *Tusalava* (1929) and praised accordingly by Blakeston in *Close Up*, presaged the theorisation of flow that characterised the later critical writing in *LLT*.¹⁸

I point below to *LLT*'s acknowledgement amongst filmmakers of what Andrew Stephenson terms 'strategies of situation': the expedient of sustaining experimental work within state or commercial institutions.¹⁹ We might see the re-positioning of the art film within the literary magazine as a similarly contingent response to the turbulent economic and political conditions of the 1930s, and one that 'democratises' the 'little magazine'. *Close Up* was conceived as a typical modernist publication for coterie collection.²⁰ Eric Bulson observes that 'the little magazine was not a commercial medium', yet in the 1920s such titles carried a certain elitist cachet for the consumer.²¹ The 1930s produced a different kind of journal: little magazines did not simply register historical shocks but responded to them 'by establishing literary and critical communication when it could prove difficult, if not impossible'.²² Historical circumstances – not simply the rise of Fascism, but the appearance of new industrial and capital modes in Britain in the wake of the recession, and the rise of new media technologies – made expedient the expansion of cultural critique from within the networks of the avant-garde to the public

sphere. The closing lines of Bryher's final missive for *Close Up* might be understood as calling for such engagement, even if it is two years before she is able to deliver it.²³ *LLT* thus represents a shift both in the scope of modernist media criticism and the audience it addresses. There were probably logistical and personal reasons within Bryher's circle for folding *Close Up*; as the subsequent discussion of cinema and other media in *LLT* shows they were certainly not aesthetic. Far from reflecting any compartmentalising of filmic modes in the 1930s, *LLT* widens the traffic between emergent media-industrial practices and practitioners and the avant-garde that had already begun in *Close Up*.

Whilst it has continuities with *Close Up*, *LLT* gradually shifts its critical emphasis to endorse new technologies, including synchronised sound and colour film, and the new medium of the 1930s, television. This is accompanied by a growing disillusion with both Soviet cinema and the pervasive montage technique deriving from its influence. This dissatisfaction stems, initially, from the failure of Soviet filmmakers to develop non-naturalistic uses of sound to accompany the non-naturalistic model of temporal and spatial relations established for the image through montage. This is put into contrast with the use of sound by filmmakers such as Renoir, Hitchcock and von Sternberg. The endorsement of new technologies is accompanied an emphasis upon camera movement and the flow of images that ultimately embraces both the distinctive style of certain Hollywood directors and television drama as a live medium. I trace these changes in critical position through the work of four writers: Herring, Blakeston and Eric Walter White, who were intimately connected to Bryher and H.D.'s circle and contributed to both *Close Up* and *LLT*, and Dallas Bower. He contributed only to *LLT*, but also collaborated with Bryher and Herring on *Cinema Survey* (1936). White and Blakeston lost faith in montage during the early 1930s. Where an initially sceptical Herring eventually saw a future for the use of sound in film, and indeed for the development of television, White shifted his attention wholly to music and poetry. Blakeston similarly moved away from film towards literature and the visual arts, having worked in the film industry through the 1920s. Bower, by contrast, is both a practitioner within and supporter of new media technologies, and an indefatigable foe of montage filmmaking.

White met H.D. in 1931 and became a regular guest at Villa Kenwin, Bryher and H.D.'s home, whilst working as a translator at the League of Nations. Blakeston became Bryher's life-long confidant: first corresponding with her in 1927.²⁴ By 1932 he was Assistant Editor on *Close Up*. In the 1930s Blakeston was developing a literary career in experimental writing, as an editor, and under the pseudonym 'Simon' as a crime novelist in collaboration with Roger Burford. Herring began writing film reviews after leaving Cambridge in the early 1920s, working for large-circulation national newspapers including the *Manchester Guardian* and the *Glasgow Herald*, and was a regular contributor to J.C. Squire's *London Mercury*, taking over film reviews in July 1926. By late 1928 he was closely involved with POOL Group, a prolific contributor to *Close Up* and on nickname terms with Bryher. It was Herring with whom Paul Robeson established the contact that would lead to his participation in Macpherson's film *Borderline*.²⁵ Meic Stephens shows that Herring at *LLT* was a discriminating editor who encouraged diversity, quality and new writing.²⁶ Bower does not seem to correspond with Bryher, H.D. or Macpherson. His connections were largely with Blakeston, despite a frosty start to their relationship, and with Herring as *LLT*'s editor, after being introduced in 1935.²⁷

Life and Letters had sometimes printed reviews of mainstream releases such as *Lives of a Bengal Lancer* (Paramount, 1935) or *Evelyn Prentice* (MGM, 1934); these lacked any formal analysis. By contrast, the new editors immediately emphasised the cinema within a wider cultural framework. Furthermore, where criticism in *Close Up* had sometimes been cryptic and allusive, in *LLT* it is generally precise and accessible. Herring wrote in his first editorial: 'The film-section has been enlarged. We have done this because the cinema, which plays so great a part in our lives, plays it uncontrolled and receives little serious or sociological consideration'.²⁸ This text had been preceded by correspondence between Herring and Bryher, in which the former suggested 'a sort of symposium' explaining the importance of the cinema to readers whose interests were likely to be mainly literary.²⁹ The first issue included a translation by Ivor Montagu of Eisenstein's recent 'Film Form, 1935 - New Problems'. Its publication demonstrated continuity with *Close Up*: Eisenstein's thought about film had been vital to the journal's critical platform. Seven different texts authored wholly or partly by the Russian director had appeared there, including 'The Principles of Film Form' in September 1931, on which this new essay reflected. The first Eisenstein text

in *Close Up* was perhaps the most important, however, not least to the subsequent understanding of the journal's ambivalence towards technological innovation in film. Co-authored with Pudovkin and Alexandrov, 'The Sound Film. A Statement from the U.S.S.R.' is described by Marcus as 'perhaps the most significant single document in the shaping of attitudes towards the coming of sound'.³⁰ That essay diagnosed the new technology of synchronised sound as a threat to the development of cinema as an art. The use of sound in 'photographic performances of a theatrical nature' (as dialogue synchronised to the images on screen) would 'destroy the meaning of mounting [*montage*]'.³¹ The prescription was for the development of non-coincidental relations of sound and image that would, in time, be contrapuntal. The failure of Soviet directors to achieve these aspirations, I suggest, inspires revisionist thought amongst Anglophone critics that recognises and eventually endorses other creative uses of sound.

The initial reaction of *Close Up* critics to synchronised sound was profoundly hostile. Blakeston, responding to Sydney Carroll's 'Talking Pictures' in the *Daily Telegraph*, would write 'The so-called talking picture is not a separate art form; it is a possible future for the stage. Really it should be called "the photographed play", not the "talking picture"'.³² Blakeston's hostility is as much towards naturalistic proscenium-arch performance, paralleled in narrative cinema's adoption of the archaic convention of the fourth wall, as it is towards recorded sound. What transpired in the mediation of performance across the subsequent decade would do much to challenge those conventions and modify his position. Herring was critical but not straightforwardly antipathetic, directing his ire towards diegetic sound: 'sight and sound of the same thing is tautological and they do not blend'.³³

However, it would be simplistic to understand *Close Up* as adopting a cohesive, antagonistic stance towards sound, and indeed other technologies, though this is precisely what Ian Christie does in describing *Close Up* as a rearguard defence of the aesthetics of silent art cinema.³⁴ The first Soviet ventures in sound were eagerly anticipated, even as silent cinema was mourned in its passing. Blakeston would write: 'Now that Pudovkin is busy with a sound film, it might be profitable to review the last crop of silent films which Russia has produced; perhaps the last batch of important silent pictures which the world will know'.³⁵ The fear was that sound, and indeed colour, would do nothing more than enhance a

staid theatricality and reduce an inchoate art to spectacle. This likelihood did not preclude more creative applications for the new technologies. Donald acknowledges the degree to which contested critical positions evolved: ‘There was a debate and not just a line about sound in *Close Up*’.³⁶ Donald, Friedberg and Marcus establish an aetiology for this debate through discussion of Macpherson’s treatment of Hitchcock’s *Blackmail* (1929), and by including in their collection contradictory essays by Jean Lenauer and Ernest Betts.³⁷ Macpherson observed in *Blackmail* a use of contrapuntal sound ‘in the best Pudovkin manner’ – which was prescient since Pudovkin had not so far completed such a film, only theorised it. What Macpherson ultimately praises is a quality of self-reflexivity in sound and image that does not depend upon contrapuntal effects. ‘*Blackmail* deserves our attention...because it has a conscious effort to bring technical thoughtfulness to bear on its own construction’.³⁸ As Macpherson shows, in discussing the voices of Hitchcock’s actors, an element of that self-consciousness was to be found in the apparently naturalistic dialogue. Attitudes towards sound clearly evolve in *Close Up*: as early as 1929 some of its writers are open to non-contrapuntal uses of the technology, in films far removed from the register of the avant-garde, anticipating the discourse that will be developed in *LLT*.

Eric Walter White contributed a feature on Brecht to the September 1935 issue of *LLT*. Its significance lies in White’s criticism of G.W. Pabst’s adaptation of Brecht and Weill’s *The Threepenny Opera* (*Die Dreigroschenoper*) (1928) on the grounds of both politics and aesthetics:

...there is no doubt that the author’s and the film company’s conceptions of what *Der Dreigroschenfilm* should be differed very radically from each other. The company had bought the rights of a popular stage success and wanted to make as literal a screen-translation of it as possible; Brecht on the other hand, realising only too clearly the essential difference between the theatre and the cinema, was opposed to such transliteration and wanted to reshape the whole material and readapt it thoroughly for its new medium.³⁹

Pabst’s role, and his conception of film is problematised in passing here: either he is content to acquiesce to the production company’s demands and direct a work of filmed theatre or he does not recognise the vital difference between the reification of the Brechtian epic theatre and the working out of that theatre’s self-conscious activity of spectatorship within a filmic framework. (Which White acknowledges the inexperienced Brecht as attempting in his film *Kuhle Wampe* with only limited success.) If the publication

of Eisenstein's essay represented *LLT*'s continuity with *Close Up*, this criticism of Pabst immediately emphasised a new direction. Support for Pabst's lyrical, psychological realism had been a defining editorial stance in *Close Up*; the German director was friends with H.D. and Bryher, and he had been amongst the first to endorse the POOL Group films *Foothills* and *Borderline*. Elsewhere White signalled a further shift in temper. He had published two small but important monographs on art film: *Parnassus to Let* (1928) and *Walking Shadows* (1931), a study of the German director Lotte Reiniger, for whom he sometimes composed music. In the earlier volume White deployed his considerable musicological and poetic skills to interpret film as a time-based art. He particularly emphasised the importance of montage, as a cutting into time that establishes a metrical relation of images, as the basis of cinematic practice:

...may it not be that the basis of cinematic metre is caesural and not accentual? That rhythm is built up by motion and emotion from shot to shot? Whether in a continuous pattern or a richer and more complicated woof wherein a certain thread of motion or emotion, instead of being developed straight forward, is dropped out of the pattern for a time, only to be taken up again later and the loose thread drawn on right across the intervening warp?⁴⁰

This privileging of rhythmic montage would be repeated in *Walking Shadows* even as, in attending to Reiniger's neo-romantic animations, White undermined any commitment to social realism. Commenting on documentary as film's closest approach to that aesthetic, White remarks that '*Turksib*, *The Ice-breaker Krassin* and *World Melody* are examples of news reels which have been cut and edited with such art and distinction as to give the finished film a rhythmic significance that appeals through the senses to both senses and mind'.⁴¹ This enthusiasm for montage preceded White's encounter with Bryher and H.D. White contributed only once to *Close Up*, with a commentary on his creative process in arranging a pasticcio of Baroque compositions to fit the score of Reiniger's *Harlequin* (1931). Whilst he would be a regular contributor to *LLT*, discussing music and opera, elsewhere in his writing one senses a growing disillusionment with the Soviet film.

As early as 1931, White implied that montage was inimical to the sophisticated use of sound. 'It cannot be said that the sound version of Eisenstein's *Potemkin* proved of any interest, except perhaps in its employment of silence at the climaxes, and the same producer's *Romance Sentimentale* was an incredibly banal illustration of his theories of montage, accompanied by an uninteresting Russian folksong and

redeemed only by the superb photography of Tissé'.⁴² In 1932 White would further criticise Eisenstein, remarking that his 'recent films have suffered from the fact that they are meant to illustrate a rigid and somewhat artificial theory'.⁴³ That theory would be the material that was being published at that moment by *Close Up*. In 1934 White visited the U.S.S.R. and observed that the cinema was in a state of transition, with material constraints - a shortage of copper - preventing silent cinemas outside the major cities from being converted to sound. A damning conclusion was that 'The present season's production contains no films of striking merit, with the exception (perhaps) of *Groźa* [*Storm*] and *Paruchik Kizhe* [*Lieutenant Kizhe*]'.⁴⁴ This visit confirmed White's earlier opinion that 'Sound films appear to have put back Soviet film production two or three years'.⁴⁵ Concern with the Soviet failure to deal with sound was already apparent in Kraszna-Krausz's 'The First Russian Soundfilms' in *Close Up* at the end of 1931. This blamed not only raw material shortages but problems in licensing patents, which led to a reliance on internal experiment. Whilst attempting to exculpate Eisenstein for *Romance Sentimentale*, Kraszna-Krausz undertook an all-out assault on Dziga-Vertov's *Enthusiasm: Symphony of the Donbas* (1930) as an example of a Russian film experimenting with the sound-image relationship, with sound only a new vector added to the optical chaos of Vertov's earlier work.⁴⁶

In 1936, *LLT* would offer a fresh assessment of sound in Soviet film, with Leo Lania assessing its effect on 'the perfect art of the silent film'.⁴⁷ Lania felt that it was only now that Soviet cinema had discovered any originality akin to its experiments in silent film. Lania's prime example, however, was Erwin Piscator's *Revolt of the Fishermen* (1934) – a film that was three years in production, by one of Germany's leading experimental theatre directors, which was then suppressed due to official distaste at its style, if not its politics. And whilst Lania also praised Efim Dzigal's *We From Kronstadt* (1936), that film was perhaps more notable for employing visual effects that harked back to the heyday of the Soviet silent era – as Graham Greene noted in reviewing it.⁴⁸ Kristin Thompson argues that Soviet 'counterpoint' films were rare, but not as rare as has been suggested. Yet her sample of eleven films made between 1930 and 1934 includes the problematic *Romance Sentimentale* and *Revolt of the Fishermen*, as well as Vertov's *Enthusiasm* and *Three Songs of Lenin* that were unlikely to be embraced by most *Close Up* critics.⁴⁹

After his initial circumspection, Herring used *LLT* to promote innovative uses of sound technology outside Soviet film. In December 1935 he reviewed both *Housing Problems* (Edgar Anstey, 1935) and *Coal Face* (G.P.O. Film Unit, 1935), ‘presented at the Film Society as an experiment in sound’ with ‘an interesting poem by Auden’, paying particular attention to the antiphonal chanting of Auden’s text.⁵⁰ Similarly, the review of *Housing Problems* attends to the importance of its dialogue. In *Coal Face* unsynchronised sound helps situate within modernist aesthetics a politically radical commentary on the coal industry. In *Housing Problems* what seems to be a mediocre social-realist documentary - Herring opens by calling it ‘the old stuff’ following ‘*The March of Time* method’ - is rendered significant by its introduction of synchronised sound: ‘...after we’ve been looking at the slums - leaking roofs, cracked and bulging walls - the slum sufferers speak’.⁵¹ In *Coal Face* the authenticity of the miners’ experience had been turned, in an unsynchronised sound track, into self-conscious performance. In Anstey’s otherwise conventional documentary, synchronised sound rendered directly the authentic speech of a class previously left inarticulate or patronised by those who spoke on its behalf. By the spring of 1938 it was clear that Herring’s attitude to sound had shifted fundamentally. He would remark of Renoir’s use of dialogue in *La Grande illusion* that the French director had achieved precisely the psychological depth that Pabst and others had striven for in the silent film – and by implication failed to achieve.⁵²

Blakeston’s disillusion was, perhaps, connected with an increasingly didactic streak in Soviet film, typified by Eisenstein’s *The General Line*. Furthermore, the Soviet montage style was easily copied by tyro avant-gardists eager to affirm their radical political credentials. For Blakeston in the wake of his first encounters with *Potemkin* and *October*, the Soviet cinema was clearly the most important and advanced in the world.⁵³ He would even be thanked personally by the Soviets for his critical endeavours.⁵⁴ Yet in 1931 he would write ‘Now, with the Russians, it has all turned to preaching and pedagogy. As Cinema this mathematical cutting only links on to something that Eisenstein or Pudovkin once did’.⁵⁵ In a remark evoking Herring’s *Close Up* essay on the magic of cinema, and condemning the ideological load that Soviet montage had come to bear, Blakeston writes: ‘The Russians, as an organized body, have a single line of development, and it is useless to try to limit the magic of Cinema’.⁵⁶ Whilst Eisenstein’s writing of the later 1930s remained important for H.D. – as Susan Edmunds shows in her discussion of its influence -

for this member of POOL Group, it was now almost irrelevant.⁵⁷ After 1931 Blakeston barely writes about montage. He has discovered within Lye's work a model of achieving an accentuated, modulated flow of images: it is this that he and Bruguière employ in *Light Rhythms*.

The limitations of montage had also been challenged within *Close Up*. In December 1931 Dan Birt, offering a prospectus for an experimental British cinema could still write: "The straight cut, in which two visual images (or, now-a-days, two sounds) "explode," to use the words of Eisenstein, "into a new concept," is the *only way of expressing an idea on the screen*".⁵⁸ However, in the same issue, discussing Teinosuke Kinugasa's *Before Daybreak* (1931), Yashushi Ogino criticises Kinugasa's switch from 'the beautiful depiction of individual scenes or sequences' in his earlier films to a Soviet inspired montage.⁵⁹ Ogino argues this is 'a gross failure' premised on Kinugasa seeing montage as an abstract theory of universal validity, whereas it is a technique predicated on historical specificity in Russia.⁶⁰

What is extraordinary in the context of Birt's prospectus is that in 1931 Blakeston had already discerned the emergence of a British avant-garde, and its basis was the antithesis of montage.⁶¹ His examples would not have been especially palatable to Birt: they included Lye's *Tusalava*, which I have already highlighted as a model of internal modulation, *Light Rhythms*, which he here cites solely as Bruguière's, and his own *I do love to be beside the seaside!* Lest we dismiss this as mere puffery – *which Blakeston was certainly not above* - he then goes on to include Hitchcock's *Murder* (1930) as 'a credible talkie using sound, and distortion of sound, in a really pioneering way'.⁶² An earlier essay, mocking the "highbrows" investment in contrapuntal sound, had already suggested that emphasis within diegetic sound was crucial to the development of cinema.⁶³ Thus, even before *Close Up* ceased publication one of its most important contributors had developed a radically different concept of experimental film, stressing not the discontinuities and juxtapositions that characterised montage but rather the continuous flow of signs, initially to be found in Lye's abstract and anthropomorphic forms; and it employs sound in a variety of ways. Furthermore, that employment might not be within 'avant-garde' practices, but in the product of a studio such as Wardour Films.

This embrace of a commercial enterprise perhaps derived from the circumstances of artists such as Lye and Ellit in the 1930s. Ellit was a composer of experimental music who provided technical consultancy and editing services to the film industry through his company Synchronised Sound Continuity.⁶⁴ The ‘strategies of situation’ compelled by the economic circumstances of the 1930s rendered permeable the boundary between ‘avant-garde’ and ‘industry’. This was the case with Lye’s work. In September 1935 Herring contributed an important feature to *LLT* on Technicolour, praising Lye’s early hand-painted films. He remarked of *Colour Box* (1935) that one was ‘seeing the first ballet in film’ before concluding that: ‘...it is perhaps interesting that an advertising film should show what colour means, and that the G.P.O., an official English body, should have sponsored so early a use of colour, in an abstract advertising film made without cameras’.⁶⁵ Herring recognises those strategies that characterised British modernist activity in the wake of the economic recession of the early 1930s. Vanguard artists found niches to accommodate their practices, with acceptable compromises, within commercial projects or state-sponsored institutions. Those situations would allow them to pursue radical aesthetic and political projects, with access to technologies previously denied to the avant-garde. There were limits to this, as the G.P.O. Film Unit project *Negroes* (1935/38) demonstrated: Keith Williams notes that ‘Auden’s verses subverted Grierson’s brief – converting image of Empire into Commonwealth of Nations – by exhuming ‘acts of injustice’ buried in its foundations as conquest and slavery’.⁶⁶ Grierson’s response was to shelve the film. One might add that Auden and his collaborators had got away with a similarly subversive critique in *Coal Face*. *LLT* would acknowledge some of the tensions implicit in these relationships in a stern critique by Arthur Calder-Marshall, published shortly before he began working as a scriptwriter for M.G.M.⁶⁷ However, *LLT* was generally sympathetic to the filmic products of ‘situation’, with Lye as the leading example. He spent five years trying to find backing for another film after completing *Tusalava*. Between 1934 and 1938 he made only two non-commercial films, yet completed four projects for the G.P.O. including *Colour-Box* (1935), one for Imperial Tobacco, *Kaleidoscope* (1935), one for Shell-Mex, *Birth of the Robot* (1936), and one for Imperial Airways.⁶⁸ Herring would write, in a piece that also reflected favourably on *Birth of the Robot*, ‘*Colour-Box* and *Kaleidoscope* weren’t at all what the words “advertising films” suggest. They were an artist’s experiments’.⁶⁹

The theorisation of continuous flow begun by Blakeston in *Close Up* after seeing Lye's work was further developed in *LLT* in a long essay on Josef von Sternberg. A.E. Mackenzie's title, 'The Leonardo of the Lenses', suggested a hyperbolic privileging that had never been extended to Pabst or Eisenstein, even if H.D. had used much the same comparison in describing Macpherson's filmmaking. Mackenzie's emphasis was upon von Sternberg's use of camera movement within space as a way of establishing a cohesive totality.

His camera travels (usually opens) *within the scene* to reveal sectional designs, each representing a tonal facet of the whole in point or counterpoint, and finally unveils the dynamic highlight in an established relationship to all of its component elements. (...) In reality the technique is a form of cinema in suspension, with the internal movement of a picture dependent upon percussions, and with camera mobility substituted for the "cutting" process of montage.⁷⁰

Mackenzie thus found within the work of one of Hollywood's foremost directors a dynamic continuity of time and space analogous to that understood by Blakeston as 'avant-garde', even if exercised here on the megalomaniac scale. Furthermore, Mackenzie recognised in von Sternberg a profoundly imaginative use of constructed sound: 'In the train sequences of *Shanghai Express* he utilized conversation to sustain an effect of motion'.⁷¹

LLT manifests an early attentiveness to the new medium of television, and discovers within its dramas an expedient practice of image flow that paralleled what was now being valorised as aesthetic choice within the film. Yet, here *LLT* builds upon an interest already manifest in *Close Up*. Herring had contributed a feature on the Baird Company's broadcasting venture and its mooted co-operation with the BBC, describing the evolutionary moment as 'the nickelodeon state of television'.⁷² The BBC introduced a 405 line television broadcasting service, to a tiny audience, in November 1936. For their winter 1936 issue Herring and Townshend commissioned an introductory essay. Its author, Dallas Bower, had more than a decade of experience in radio and the film industry, including working as a sound engineer on *Blackmail*. He was now in the BBC's television service. He had also recently published *A Plan for Cinema* (1936). In the following year Bower would collaborate with Bryher and Herring on Brendin's compilation, *Cinema Survey*. This volume contained Herring's 'Film in Entertainment', Bryher's 'Film in Education' and Bower's 'Film in the Social Scene', and it reinforced a profound change in positions

within Bryher's circle. Bower savaged montage in a manner unthinkable within the pages of *Close Up*: he described it as a word 'hauled into use to confound the foolish', remarking of Pudovkin's and Eisenstein's films that 'the pomposity they occasioned amongst the very young was unbelievable'.⁷³ Bower's essays for *LLT* showed that television drama depended upon a flow of images conditioned by the medium's technical limitations, particularly the inability to pre-record. *LLT* contributors worked towards a theory of liveness and spectatorial relation that contrasts starkly with both the foreseen future of the cinema as 'theatrical' and recent theorisations of early television drama as static.⁷⁴ Jason Jacobs shows that by 1937 a spatial mobility achieved first through camera movement and later also by switching between cameras was a fundamental characteristic of studio dramas: '...one alternative to editing for live television drama was to use a continuous take with reframing to follow each actor's movement and to emphasize aspects of the performance'.⁷⁵ Thus a twenty minute production of scenes from Auden & Isherwood's *The Ascent of F6* in May 1937 had an average shot length of 30" – which does not mean that the camera was static for that time. The shooting script for a longer version of the play in September 1938 indicates that the producer Royston Morley wanted to mix between cameras within scenes and planned movement whilst a camera was transmitting.⁷⁶ Bower used this practice to directly challenge the idea of montage.

As I said in my *Plan for Cinema* (much to the irritation of the montage-mongers who cannot stomach it) the future of monochromatic scenographic cinema we know today lies in television... A montage form of technique is inevitable, yet no longer will the joy-word of the avant-garde cinéasts strictly apply - for there are no strips of celluloid to build, no 'cells' to place in significant juxtaposition. The 'montage' must be instantaneous, as the intervening medium... is now eliminated: there is no film.⁷⁷

This flow of images within the discrete programme was further emphasised by S. John Woods' contrasting of television with filmic spectacle: 'Like radio, television is an art of intimacy and actuality'.⁷⁸ Woods showed how the mobile camera and continuous selection of different points of view within the transmission produced a new spectatorial relationship with the actor, which was completely different from that of the stage - even within the experimental theatre - or of film.⁷⁹ Bower had commented on fixed points of view, in cinema and theatre: 'watching the development of a drama... through a frame does not make for psychological intimacy'.⁸⁰ Woods argued that what film necessarily did with an edit, a television broadcast did by live transitions between differently positioned cameras.⁸¹ Thus, in television

the spectator was immersed within a 'continuous state of flux' with every transition apparent.⁸² Where montage depended upon the discontinuity of time and space, television offered a continuous stream where the only transitions were shifts in perspective. Furthermore, those points of view were in themselves so 'untheatrical' that they transformed the subjective relationship between spectator and actants. If one of the concerns for *Close Up* critics had been that the introduction of sound would see film revert to 'stage acting', the combination of sound and movement in live television, and the rapid evolution of sound technologies, suggested that there was little to fear. Especially since similar models of visual and aural flow were to be found within mainstream and avant-garde film far beyond the current endeavours of the Soviet cinema.

Eisenstein would remain an important contributor to *LLT*; the journal would publish his 'Montage in 1938' across five issues in 1938-39. However, by then the editorial position had shifted to the point that montage had been challenged by the privileging of a continuous flow of images and sounds. Whilst *LLT* remained beholden to Bryher as its backer, the old-guard of 'amateur' *Close Up* critics was displaced by professionals. The hybrid practices of those contributors, straddling industrial and experimental work, also signified an important shift in definition of the filmic avant-garde. By the late 1930s there was a clear sense in the journal that criticism, and the filmmaking it addressed, had moved on. For Bower and Blakeston the continued use of montage was a universalising parody by the naïve of something that had once possessed historical specificity. Pabst – that other tocsin of *Close Up*'s values – was equally flawed. White implied purblindness in his refusal to address Brechtian self-referentiality within the cinema, whilst Herring would recognise sound as offering a capacity for psychological depth which the German director had never fully achieved. Herring's endorsement of new media technologies and employment of industry professionals meant that *LLT* evolved radically different, and novel critical stances to address the technical and stylistic problems faced by the avant-garde in coming to terms with sound and colour, and to make creative interventions in theorising the early forms of television.

- ¹ Sarah Street, *British National Cinema*, 2nd edn. (London: Routledge, 2009), 192.
- ² Malte Hagener, *Looking Forward, Looking Back: The European Avant-Garde and the Invention of Film Culture* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007), 123.
- ³ James Donald, 'Introduction' to 'Part I, 'Enthusiasms and Execrations'', in *Close Up, 1927-1933: Cinema and Modernism*, edited by James Donald, Anne Friedberg & Laura Marcus, 32-33. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).
- ⁴ Townshend worked on *The New Witness* after coming down from Oxford in 1918. She edited an issue of *Land and Water* on 'Women in the War' (April 1919), then became assistant editor of *The Queen* (the leading British women's magazine) and from 1921 edited the women's page of the *Sunday Despatch* newspaper. She left *LLT* when she married in July 1937 and moved to Ireland. Her autobiographical manuscript was published posthumously under her married name, Carew.
- ⁵ Herring to Bryher, autumn 1935, Bryher Archive, Beinecke Library, Yale University, Box 19, Folder 715. "...every damned copy of the three thousand has been ordered or sent out". It is worth noting that *Close Up* quickly went to having print runs of 1500 by March 1928.
- ⁶ *Life and Letters To-day*, 19, no. 3 (September 1938): 3.
- ⁷ *Close Up*, I, no. 4 (October 1927), dust wrapper.
- ⁸ Anne Friedberg, 'Introduction. Reading *Close Up*, 1927-1933' in *Close Up, 1927-1933: Cinema and Modernism*, 3.
- ⁹ Jane Goldman, 'Desmond MacCarthy, *Life and Letters* (1928-35) and Bloomsbury Modernism', *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines. Volume I, Britain and Ireland 1880-1955* edited by Peter Brooker & Andrew Thacker, 431. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
- ¹⁰ Carew, *Anything Once*, 110.
- ¹¹ Begun as a monthly, *Life and Letters* was a quarterly between March 1932 (8.1) and February 1934 (9.4), Goldman, 'Life and Letters', 439.
- ¹² Laura Marcus, *The Tenth Muse: Writing about Cinema in the Modernist Period* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 511 n.3.
- ¹³ *Ibid.* 323.
- ¹⁴ Robert Herring, 'A new cinema, magic and the avant-garde', *Close Up*, IV, no. 4 (April 1929): 54.
- ¹⁵ Herring to Bryher, summer 1935, Bryher Archive, Beinecke Library, Yale University, Box 19, Folder 713. "O.B., seen yesterday, is antagonistic. I think this is partly because he says he only hears from you when you are leaving for Suisse. But he implies we are vieux jeu. Not explicitly, but definitely. Most effusive in congratulations to me [on editorship of *LLT*], but implied I had been "bought". (...) I gather he will send and recommend people, but will not send much himself".
- ¹⁶ Herring to Bryher, 25 June 1935, Bryher Archive, Beinecke Library, Yale University, Box 19, Folder 713.
- ¹⁷ Oswald Blakeston, 'Appointment with X', undated typescript, 233. Oswald Blakeston Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin. Series II. Works, 1927-1985. Box 4, Folder 1-2.
- ¹⁸ Oswald Blakeston, 'Sketches by Len Lye', *Close Up*, VI, no. 2 (February 1930): 155-156.
- ¹⁹ Andrew Stephenson, "Strategies of Situation: British Modernism and the Slump, c. 1929-1934", *Oxford Art Journal*, 14, no. 4 (1991): 30-51.
- ²⁰ Lawrence Rainey, 'The cultural economy of Modernism', *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, edited by Michael Levenson, 33-69. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
- ²¹ Eric Bulson, *Little Magazine, World Form* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 48.
- ²² *Ibid.* 5.
- ²³ Bryher, 'What Shall You Do in the War?', *Close Up*, X, no. 2 (June 1933): 192.
- ²⁴ Bryher to Oswald Blakeston, 25 January 1967, Oswald Blakeston Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin. Series I, Correspondence. Box 1, Folder 3.
- ²⁵ Herring to Bryher, 21 December 1928, Bryher Archive, Beinecke Library, Yale University, Box 18, Folder 703.
- ²⁶ Meic Stephens, 'The Third Man: Robert Herring and *Life and Letters To-day*', *Welsh Writing in English: A Yearbook of Critical Essays*, edited by Tony Brown, no. 3, 157-169. (1997).
- ²⁷ Herring to Bryher, summer 1935, Bryher Archive, Beinecke Library, Yale University, Box 19, Folder 713. "We met Dallas Bower, who blew O.B. up for saying he didn't care about Eric Walter White. He asked what he knew of his. As O.B. didn't, he went for him...which pleased me and also saved me from what would have been breach of tactics, to speak harshly myself". On Bower's early career see John Wyver, 'Dallas Bower: A Producer for Television's Early Years, 1936-9', *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 9, no. 1 (2012): 26-39. Dallas Bower, 'Live Television drama – 1936', *Television. Journal of the Royal Television Society* (December 1986), 338-341.
- ²⁸ Robert Herring, 'Editorial', *Life and Letters*, 13, no. 1 (September 1935): 2.
- ²⁹ Herring to Bryher, 29 June 1935, Bryher Archive, Beinecke Library, Yale University, Box 18, Folder 705.
- ³⁰ Marcus, *The Tenth Muse*, 324.
- ³¹ Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin & Gregori Alexandrov, 'The Sound Film. A Statement from the U.S.S.R.' trans. Ivor Montagu, *Close Up*, III, no. 4 (October 1928).
- ³² Oswald Blakeston, *Daily Telegraph*, 5 July 1928.
- ³³ Robert Herring, 'The Talkies', *The London Mercury*, XIX: 110, 201.
- ³⁴ Ian Christie, *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents, 1896-1939*, ed. by Ian Christie & Richard Taylor, 6. (London: Routledge, 1994).
- ³⁵ Oswald Blakeston, 'Russia's New Pictures', *The Bioscope*, 1193 (14 August 1929): 27.
- ³⁶ James Donald, 'Introduction. Part II. 'From Silence to Sound'', *Close Up, 1927-1933: Cinema and Modernism*, 81.
- ³⁷ Jean Lenauer, 'The Sound Film: Salvation of Cinema', *Close Up*, IV, no. 4 (April 1929): 18-21; Ernest Betts, 'Why "Talkies" are Unsound', *Close Up*, IV, no. 4 (April 1929): 22-24; Kenneth Macpherson, 'As Is', *Close Up*, V, no. 5 (October 1929): 257-263.
- ³⁸ Macpherson, 'As Is' (October 1929): 260.
- ³⁹ Eric Walter White, 'Berthold Brecht', *Life and Letters*, 13, no. 1 (September 1935): 66.
- ⁴⁰ Eric Walter White, *Parnassus to Let. An essay upon rhythm in the films* (London: Hogarth Press, 1928), 35.

- ⁴¹ Eric Walter White, *Walking Shadows* (London: Hogarth Press, 1931), p. 7. The films White refers to are *Turksib* (Viktor Turin, 1929), *Turksib* (V. Ermolaev, 1930) or *Turksib otkryt: Kino-ocherka* (Gaiana Room, 1930), together with *The Ice-breaker Krassin* aka *Feat on the Ice* (Georgi Vasiliev, 1928) and *Die Melodie der Welt* (Walther Ruttmann, 1929). Since White was regularly seeing films in Berlin as well as London, where only Turin's version of *Turksib* was shown, we cannot be certain which film of that title he saw.
- ⁴² *Ibid.* 29.
- ⁴³ Eric Walter White, 'The Rise of the Cinema in Soviet Russia', lecture, unpublished ms., read to the Bristol Theosophical Society, 5 April 1932, 16. Eric Walter White Papers, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin. Container 7.1.
- ⁴⁴ Eric Walter White, 'Soviet Jottings', unpublished ms. June 1934, 17. Eric Walter White Papers, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin. Container 7.1.
- ⁴⁵ White, 'The Rise of the Cinema in Soviet Russia', 24.
- ⁴⁶ Andor Krasznai-Krausz, 'The First Russian Soundfilms', *Close Up*, VIII, no. 4 (December 1931): 301-302.
- ⁴⁷ Leo Lania, 'A New Stage in the Development of the Soviet Film', *Life and Letters To-day*, 14, no. 4 (summer 1936): 161.
- ⁴⁸ Graham Greene, 'The Cinema. *We from Kronstadt* at the Film Society', *The Spectator*, 26 February 1937: 16.
- ⁴⁹ Kristin Thompson, 'Early Sound Counterpoint', *Yale French Studies*, 60 (1980): 115-140.
- ⁵⁰ Robert Herring, 'Reviews of Releases', *Life and Letters To-day*, 13, no. 2 (December 1935): 191.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁵² Robert Herring, 'Old Lang Sync', *Life and Letters To-day*, 18, no. 11 (spring 1938): 142-143.
- ⁵³ Oswald Blakeston, 'The Russian Film, part II', *The Educational Screen*, VIII, no. 8 (October 1929): 232.
- ⁵⁴ M. Karlovitch to Oswald Blakeston, 20 August 1929. Oswald Blakeston Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin. Series I. Correspondence 1933-1985, undated. Box 2, Folder 5. Karlovitch was Director of the Soviet Service Cinematographique, based in Paris.
- ⁵⁵ Oswald Blakeston, 'Some Thoughts on the Magic of Cinema', *The Sackbut*, XI, no. 11, (July 1931): 313.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁷ Susan Edmunds, *Out of Line: History, Montage, and Psychoanalysis in H.D.'s Long Poems* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 115-119.
- ⁵⁸ Dan Birt, 'Be British', *Close Up*, VIII, no. 4 (December 1931): 285, my italics.
- ⁵⁹ Yasushi Ogino, 'Before Daybreak: A Japanese Film by Teinosuke Kinugasa', *Close Up*, VIII, no. 4 (December 1931): 291.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁶¹ Oswald Blakeston, 'The Cinema in England', *The Educational Screen* (Chicago), X, no., 5 (May 1931): 141-143, 151.
- ⁶² *Ibid.* 143.
- ⁶³ Oswald Blakeston, 'Approach to Sound', *Kinematograph Weekly*, 158 (April 24, 1930)
- ⁶⁴ Roger Horrocks, 'Jack Ellit: The Early Years of Len Lye's Collaborator in Sound', *Cantrills Film Notes*, 93-100 (December 1998-January 2000): 20-26.
- ⁶⁵ Robert Herring, 'Technicolossal', *Life and Letters*, 13, no. 1 (September 1935): 195-196.
- ⁶⁶ Keith Williams, 'The Cinema', *W.H. Auden in Context*, ed. by Tony Sharpe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 212.
- ⁶⁷ Arthur Calder-Marshall, 'Propaganda in the Films', *Life and Letters To-day*, 15, no. 6 (Winter 1936): 157-161.
- ⁶⁸ Kevin Jackson, 'The Joy of Drooling: In Praise of Len Lye' in *The Projection of Britain: A History of the GPO Film Unit*, edited by Scott Anthony & James Mansell, 90. (Farnham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).
- ⁶⁹ Robert Herring, 'Film in Focus', *Life and Letters To-day*, 15, no. 5 (autumn 1936): 180.
- ⁷⁰ A.E. Mackenzie, 'The Leonardo of the Lenses', *Life and Letters To-day*, 14, no. 3 (spring 1936): 171.
- ⁷¹ *Ibid.* 172.
- ⁷² Robert Herring, 'English Television', *Close Up*, VIII, no. 4 (December 1931): 288.
- ⁷³ Dallas Bower, 'Film in the Social Scene', *Cinema Survey* (London: Brendin, 1937), 23-24.
- ⁷⁴ John Caughie, 'Before the Golden Age: Early Television Drama', *Popular Television in Britain: Studies in Cultural History*, edited by John Corner (London: BFI, 1991); Carl Gardner & John Wyver, 'The Single Play: From Reithian Reverence to Cost-Accounting and Censorship', *Screen*, 24, nos. 4-5 (1983): 114-124.
- ⁷⁵ Jason Jacobs, *The Intimate Screen: Early British Television Drama* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 17.
- ⁷⁶ *Ibid.* 70-71.
- ⁷⁷ Dallas Bower, 'Television', *Life and Letters To-day*, 15, no. 6 (December 1936): 144.
- ⁷⁸ S. John Woods, 'Television Theatre Film', *Life and Letters To-day*, 17, no. 9 (Autumn 1937): 146.
- ⁷⁹ *Ibid.* 147.
- ⁸⁰ Dallas Bower, *A Plan for Cinema* (London: Dent, 1936), 124.
- ⁸¹ Woods, 'Television Theatre Film': 148.
- ⁸² *Ibid.*