Transatlantic Modernism in Film and Literature

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The inquiry about the present and its representation was one of the major issues of concern among modernist artists and writers at either side of the Atlantic. This paper intends to examine films and articles depicting their present time. Thematically, they allude to central topics of the period, such as international commerce and war in a rapidly changing global scheme. The corpus selection aims to provide some variety regarding the different material each writer and filmmaker considered appropriate for a relevant depiction of their present time depending on their dreams, intentions, and worldview.

In the context of modernist experiments in literature and the arts, cinema underwent radical changes as a new form that, as well as in the case of the older sister arts, challenged its purpose, aesthetic, and identity. In Britain, a distinctive film movement emerges calling to the "creative treatment of actuality", in the famous words by John Grierson. During the 1930s, articles and essays populated the art magazines, defining—not without contradictions (Marcus)—the new genre of documentary. In spite of such contradictions, the primary concern of these filmmakers seemed to be to build an "actuality narrative" or a "narrative of the actual." As Paul Rotha explained: [the] "use of the film medium to interpret creatively and in social terms the life of the people as it exists in reality" (Rotha, *Documentary Film* 5, quoted by Marcus). In fact, a similar approach can be observed in journalistic articles written by otherwise recognised fiction writers of the period.

Let us begin by examining an article Virginia Woolf published in December 1931 in the magazine *Good Housekeeping*. The piece deals with issues of global commerce and focuses on its consequences on the city of London and its people.

As shown from the first line, a quote from Robert Bridges' poem "A Passer-By," the article is rich in historical insight. The poem evokes sailboats and imaginary romantic scenes from the past, as the narrative in present tense places the reader gently on a boat. It is the beginning of her stroll along the Thames. Images from a greener past and a present marked by labour and filthy material conditions depict the city as the heart of an empire. Derelict warehouses, factories, and workmen's houses stand where there used to be lawn and terraces. A tree is so incongruous here that it seems from a previous civilisation; and yet, as in the narrator's memory, past and present, in this space, coexist. The description continues from East to West; the heaps of garbage are followed by the Tower Bridge until we arrive at the docks. Here, there seems to be no place for human life but only for cranes, barrels, sacks, and crates.

Let us not forget that this is a text by Woolf: there is beauty here. The lines in these passages are poetic and rhythmic, but also the narrator discovers "aesthetic delight" in the mechanic and calculated toil at the docks, and beauty is to be found in the proper value of each item unloaded there. However, description and analysis focus on a very practical matter, international commerce. We learn how the docks operate, that "whatever the ship has gathered from the plains, from the forests, from the pastures of the whole world is here lifted from its hold and set in its right place. (…) And not only is each package of this vast and varied merchandise picked up and set down accurately, but each is weighed and opened, sampled and recorded". The paragraph continues thoroughly about the way every merchandise is evaluated, organised and distributed, to later explain how, in the end, are the citizens the ones who guide this global dance. Woolf writes,

> It is we—our tastes, our fashions, our needs—that make the cranes dip and swing, that call the ships from the sea. Our body is their master.

Scholars have noticed the fact that the narrator identifies herself with the readers; in the quoted lines above, this is evident in the first-person plural, "we". Susan Squier has argued that such a technique was a way for Woolf to "avoid friction" with the middle-class magazine's audience (488-9). By contrast, Jeanette McVicker and Alice Wood consider readers of *Good Housekeeping* a proper audience for Woolf's social criticism in account of

recent transformations that increased women's participation in political matters–for instance, due to a newly acquired right, the vote for women. It should additionally be noted that this empathy provides fertile ground for a more fluid communication between writer and readers. Indeed, there also seems to be a matter of didactic intention of the author to educate the reading public. This issue can be associated, in fact, with one of the principles of documentary film, as pursued by Grierson and Rotha: Woolf's text appears to be closer to the documentary method than to any literary genre. As much as Grierson, Rotha insisted upon the importance of showing social, economic, and political matters in film. He expressed disapproval of those movies that only presented the daily activity of a city, failing to denounce the injustice that also lived there (109). As opposed to those visually exciting films, such as Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin*, Woolf succeeds in presenting past and present of social and economic life in London, as much as their citizens' influence in global trade. In the following lines, I will examine two documentary films that can be associated with Woolf's article.

Shipyard (1935) and *Farewell Topsails* (1937) are not the best-known works of the British Documentary Movement. Nevertheless, they offer us a chance to compare how artists working in other media have treated and interpreted themes of local work and international commerce, and activities in England dictated by trade in different periods.

Shipyard, from 1935, was directed by Paul Rotha. The film shows the building of a ship, from the beginning until its launch into the sea. In ten months, from March to December, "job 697" becomes a finished vessel, the "Orion". The chronology is established through captions that indicate the month, while voice and image present the progress of the work. In quick cuts, the scenes alternate between long, medium, and close-up shots. Aerial views of men at work that look a little more than moving dots and lines in almost abstract, rhythmic compositions, are followed by close-up shots of hands handling a drill or the face of someone shouting directions at his crew. Metal sheets, bolts, wires, and wooden beams against the sky gradually take the form of a ship, while men appear tiny in one shot and big and strong in the next one, but clearly it is the hard work of the group what tames the elements.

Complementing the image, sound is divided in noises product of the labour, a commentary that provides the viewer with facts, and voices associated with individual men in the film. The commentary and the individual voices offer, in turn, a well-balanced counterpoint, which supplies general information as well as personal thoughts. Thus, the viewer learns that the shipyard is in Barrow-in-Furness, that between 50 to 60 thousand people lived there at the time, and that the main activity of the town was building ships. The liner will be destined to tropical voyages, where people will dance and have a good time. Casual chatting between the workmen contribute to incorporate a common perspective and humanise the workers; in contrast, technical vocabulary related to the tools and parts of the ship appears as a highly specialised speech that might have instructed the viewers from other occupations and parts of England.[1] Social observations are linked with the image of one man; his soft voice indicates we are listening to his thoughts while he is working, reflecting about the future of the ship:

> I wouldn't mind going on her myself. Queer to think that women will be walking about here just in silk dresses, and chaps in natty suits trying to keep cool. Don't suppose they'll think of the bloke that hit the blinkin' rivets.

These words are barely a fleeting remark; and yet, they align with Rotha's social interests and with the educational intentions of documentary film. They also highlight, by the end of the film, the class condition of the men the viewer has been watching tirelessly working until then, as well as call to mind the differences with those who will enjoy the material products of their hard labour. The commentary voice explains what is the workmen's gain when it asserts: "The town is well fed as long as the men are working in the shipyard", and "The life of the town is the work of the yard". It is, first and foremost, a collective profit. However, soon this community extends to London and from there to the world, since the propellers are made in the capital city, specifically in a factory that supplies parts for the "largest and fastest ships in the world". In this manner, *Shipyard* is not only about the building of a liner, but —in the magnificence of this ship that is made to cross the oceans of the world— it also intends to show how the common man is an essential part in modern industry. Now,

[1] Cfr. "He cited the case of Shipyard, which had been shown only briefly and without publicity in a Newcastle cinema". (Chapman 83).

although this film presents the power of contemporary ship industry, the one I will address below attends to old forms that soon will only be the poets' concern.

Farewell Topsails (1937), an 8-minute-long film directed by Humphrey Jennings, offers a nostalgic approach to the way international maritime commerce was changing in the first decades of the 20th century.

The film opens with a sailor playing a musical piece with an accordion, a piece that he will keep playing until the end of the film. The voice-over narrates the story "of the last survivors of a great race of seamen" who had to withdraw from the waters and now work for the clay factory in Cornwall. Perhaps it is not casual that these quarries are not modern; actually, the factory's workers continue to use almost "primitive" equipment. The images of the pits are vast views of hills and the sky and the few men that appear might as well be the last survivors on the planet. The commentary continues with details about the kaolin extraction process and its transportation to Glasgow. This is the cue for the focus on the sailboats' past and present, as the accordion music changes for a slower tune. If the commentary has been descriptive for the first two minutes of the film, from now on, it shows a hint of regret. Close-up scenes of the sailors' saddened looks that alternate with shots of a boat sailing away to the horizon endorse the spoken words.

Like Virginia Woolf's article, the film by Jennings alludes to past and present, but here melancholy seems to dictate the subject. Even if the film was an exercise in the use of a colour process (Logan 70),[2] it also presents a detailed explanation of part of the economic activity in the south of England at the time. The title sings to the topsails, but the heart of the film are the sailors that had to abandon the oceans. The other side of the technological developments celebrated by Rotha in *Shipyard* is that the old ways must be left behind and not everyone appears to be pleased with the change. Therefore, what in the piece by Woolf was a matter of landscape and reminiscence of pastoral life, Jennings here identifies in the experience of individual people. And when progress for Rotha seemed to be expansion, in

[2] "Dufaycolor, one of the various colour processes that were being developed in Britain throughout the 1930s." Kevin Jackson, *Land of Promise*, 11.

the figure of the enormous ship that can cross the oceans and make the world look small, for the topsails means to gradually disappear. They used to navigate the Atlantic to the Azores; now they are applied only in national travels, through the coast and rivers of Britain.

Farewell Topsails´ nostalgic mood opens the way for our last stop, an article written by Djuna Barnes in 1917. The piece, entitled "The Hem of Manhattan", is the chronicle of a boat trip around the island and, with all its share of daydreaming and subjectivity, presents a version of the world's transatlantic relations in a different time.

The account is the dark version of a holiday excursion. The main obstacle at first seems to be presented by the fact that the author lacks the advised distance with the subject. Because, the narrator imagines, Europe, for instance, would offer instead historical and literary scenes. Over there, she asserts, an afternoon tea in Russia is worthy of a word picture, while -in France- Verlaine and Baudelaire wrote their poems, and one can also visit Napoleon's tomb. In general, it may be said that even the most trivial things look interesting in a foreign land. Here, instead, all Barnes is faced with is "misery, poverty, death, old age, and insanity".

The trip could be compared with the one Woolf would take in London a little more than a decade later; it lasts a few hours and passes by the landmarks of the metropolis. There is as much garbage in New York as in London, but the gloom here seems to be inescapable. Where Woolf found an occasion to ponder over the world economy, Barnes is reminded of past personal experiences; at other times, the people in the boat catch her eye. Since this is a guided tour, there is a "megaphone man" who tells facts of the city and the buildings they encounter during the journey, although these are not recorded for posterity. In contrast to the documentary films, and even Woolf's article, Barnes' piece does not include these details. Instead of offering figures, the article states that the Woolworth Tower "stands so-many-and-so-many feet high". Fact and precision seem to be so trivial that the illustration that appeared with the article in the *Morning Telegraph* was not of the city, but the portrait of an unnamed man who said a phrase the text quotes in passing.

The disdain for the actuality detail, however, the focus on ostensibly trivial matters, the digressions, and even the tendency to fiction appear to underscore a more important fact.

One of the attractions selected by the "megaphone man" is a transport steamer filled with "boys in khaki". Indeed, the article was published in July 1917, three months after the United States entered World War I, and these "boys" seem to be headed to "defend democracy" in Europe. In this article, then, the merchandise is not clay, nor tourism, but human lives, which –as the narrator explains- are treated as cheap and become pointless when "something goes amiss".

Djuna Barnes is well known for opposing the war. In 1915, she exhibited a group of anti-war paintings and drawings (Doughty 138). One of the paintings, *The Doughboy (man with bayonet)*, appeared in the cover of *Trend* magazine in October 1914. Another one, *The Bullet*, illustrated the pages of *Four Lights*, the bulletin of the Woman's Peace Party of New York City, in June 1917, only a month prior to the publication of "The Hem of Manhattan". In this context, the article, with its apparent shallow complaining, appears not only as a statement against the war, but also as a testimony of the darker side of life.

The articles and films mentioned in this paper present a global, historic look from a local standpoint. The world of international commerce was a central topic during the 1930s; it is depicted in film productions as well as in the non-fiction article by Virginia Woolf. The educational interest can be associated to the documentary method as proposed by the documentary movement in Britain. From this perspective, the world seems to be divided in those who build it and those who enjoy it, but everyone seems to earn some profit from it. If they paint past times as milder and simpler, technological developments also present advantages, and some social classes appear to have greater liberty to choose than the lower ones. Finally, Djuna Barnes' article offers a view from her present in 1917, that does not seem to be nicer at all. Barnes observes her home city, and the international conflict taint her vision. Criticism here is directed not to the economic arrangement of the world, but to the political decisions of a few "pompous gentlemen".

Even if Woolf and Barnes did not conform a group like the filmmakers of documentary, the films and texts addressed here seem to exhibit a similar preoccupation with the present and drastic change in history. Moreover, if a central issue is the responsibility of human kind in

these developments, modernist artists and writers took the role of narrating and interpreting the age for themselves and others. These narratives of actuality might have appealed to a strictly contemporary audience, but also remain, forever, a testimony of their time.

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Filmography

Farewell Topsails. UK, colour, 8 min. Dir. Humphrey Jennings, 1937.

Shipyard. UK, black and white, 24 min. Dir. Paul Rotha, 1935.