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## Up Close on *Close Up*: Publishing Culture and Cinema in Britain 1927-1933

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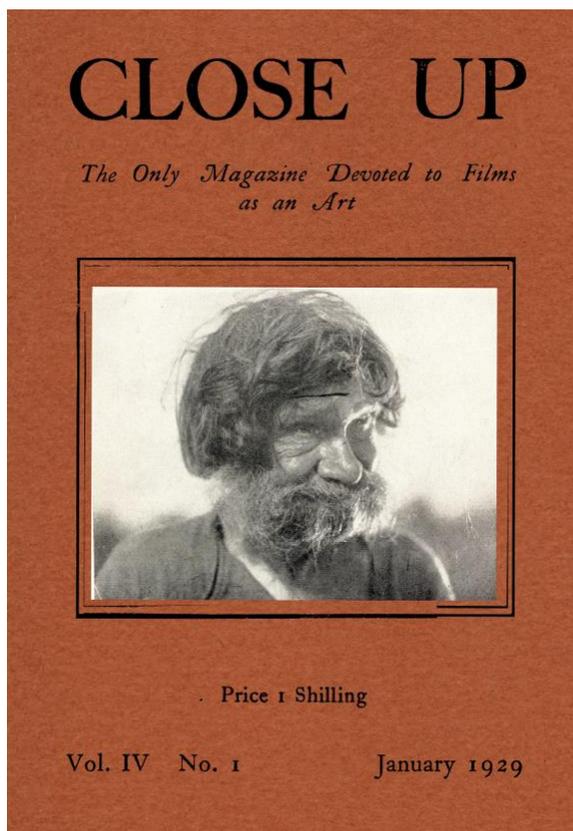
### Abstract

When a new cultural form emerges, critical practices develop in order to absorb it into cultural imagination. Film developed as a cultural product in the early twentieth century and literary commentators such as Q.D. Leavis reviled it, seeing the ascendancy of cinematic entertainment as heralding the decline of culture, dulling the senses of the already senseless masses. However there were intellectuals who emerged and sought to elevate cinema to the level of a legitimate and avant-garde art form; a trio of Swiss based, British critics began writing and producing *Close Up*, an early film magazine, self-styled as the only publication devoted to films as an art. The rhetorical origins of the new critical discourse they helped to create lie in the modernist literary tradition. However film publishing did not simply emulate the literary field, but developed its own complex hierarchy, informed by, yet autonomous from, existing cultural structures, allowing serious intellectual discussion to filter into mass culture.

### Key Words

*Close Up*, cinema, Modernism, publishing, avant-garde

The battle between high and popular culture over the status of cinema was waged in textual responses to film throughout the modernist period. Despite the initial fears of some modernist cultural commentators, the cinema was not merely a rival for the attentions of the reading public and therefore a threat to the dominance of literature: rather, it was a



new cultural form, recognised and rapidly explored by the publishing industry. One of the earliest intellectual publications to view film as an art was *Close Up*, edited by Kenneth Macpherson, Bryher and H.D., and published by them under the name POOL between 1927 and 1933. The magazine was the first significant, British publication to critically assess the aesthetic possibilities opened up by cinema, engaging with issues of commercialism and opposing censorship. The theoretical frameworks of two key theorists inform this article's critique. The terminology of the field of cultural production and symbolic capital comes from Bourdieu (2007, 2010). The other central frame of theoretical reference is John Carey's work identifying a growing tendency amongst the educated classes in the modernist period to deride popular culture

(1992). When film entered the cultural arena of early twentieth century Britain it similarly polarised views of its strata of cultural value and relevance. A discourse was quickly established within the literary publishing industry which contested the new technology's position within the established field of cultural production, providing the foundational grammar and rhetoric of film consumption, and giving birth to a new group of intellectuals informed by, but autonomous from, existing cultural structures.

In *Fiction and the Reading Public* Q.D. Leavis dryly acknowledged the opportunistic dimension of the profitable myriad of publishing responses to cinema; "there appears to be money in 'literature associated with the film'" (1932, 16). She undertook an analysis of "the stock of typical newsagents" which included: "nine film magazines—not technical but filled with fiction and articles of film interest, and film publicity designed to create 'film fans'[...] a newsagent, asked of this section 'And do they sell?' replied 'Vastly'" (1932, 11-12). Film

magazines first emerged in the UK in 1911 and initially functioned only as additional, fictional material designed to communicate the narrative of the film's images to the audience, through the familiar written medium. The effect of these publications, such as *Motion Picture Story Magazine* (1913-1914) was, according to Andrew Shail, to “urge viewers to revise their perception of the film experience to incorporate the idea of an isolated, private ‘reading’ subject interacting with the unfolded privacy of fictional equivalents” (Shail 2008, 181). The magazines were necessary intertexts for viewers to approach the new technology and signified “early cinema’s efforts to transform itself into a story telling medium” by providing instructions for how the film should be culturally consumed; they were the origin of published materials designed to enhance the intellectual experience of cinema for the common reader/spectator. However intellectual culture responded negatively to the emergence of film-publications. Leavis is unequivocal in her distaste for the development of film related publishing, in which “the distinguished man of letters has been dropped in favour of the American film-producer” (1932, 16). The dichotomy and inherent value-judgement in her accusation assumes the inferiority of mass culture values within the cultural field: Leavis blames the publishing industry for abandoning their duty and deferring to, rather than actively shaping, mass culture. She derides the Novel Library which “stopped publishing Wells and Galsworthy for the masses and now produces the book of the talkie”, a fickle pursuit of commercial demand that neglected the bastions of culture. Leavis's elitist perspective is subject to the irony of a double negation; the intellectuals deride mass culture's lack of interest in high culture, while asserting the lower classes innate inability, due to lack of fineness of perception, to comprehend, recognise and respond to artefacts of true cultural value (Carey 1992, 14).

Cinema had become an alternative, populist culture which bypassed intellectuals, in a similar manner as journalism, which “circumvented the traditional cultural elite,” rendering them redundant (Carey 1992, 7). Efforts to reclaim lost cultural territory were made by a new group of intellectuals who recognised the power and the cultural possibilities of an *artistic* cinematic tradition. Although French magazines of film criticism such as *Cine Pour Tous* (1919-1923) and *Cinemagazine* (1921-present) had existed almost a decade earlier, the first British “little magazine” devoted to the discussion of film as an art form was *Close Up*, which began publication in 1927 (Marcus 2010, 237). In a sense it sought the same ends as the motion picture stories; to teach an audience how to decipher the signs and symbols of moving images: it sought to instruct, both inside and outside the parameters of the film-text, in how film ought to be culturally absorbed. Yet *Close Up* is more than a concerted effort to define a discipline, focusing on the experience of spectatorship and the symbolic value of individual films. Donald, Friedberg and Marcus note in their anthology that *Close Up* consciously sought not only to write about the art of the cinema, but to create a radical,



of the Russian revolution which was adapted for the cinema. Films had begun to stimulate book sales, so that “whenever a super-film was released [ ... ] ‘the book of the film’ was published too (and advertised as such on the dust cover with photo-gravures from the film inside)” (Leavis 1932, 15). This reveals that publishing and film products were already functioning in tandem to mutually cultivate an audience for one another with a cultural, as well as commercial, presence. However the advertisement emphasises the critical



From *Freie Fahrt (Free Trip)*, a film made by Erno Metzner for the German Social Democratic Party. See review elsewhere.



possibilities of this increasing synergy; “more than being ‘the book of the film’ however, [the memoir] may be described as the key to all Russian films” (Vol. V No. 2 August 1929, 95). Not only were the cultural products related, textual responses were necessary in order to access cultural capital within the film itself and in co-ordinating taste, behaviour and opinions. Or, as Wasson recognises, “if reading about movies became a basic condition for watching movies, then [textual forms] played a key role in forming expectations, framing debates, defining interests and augmenting experience before and after people attended the movies” (2006, 156).

The ambivalence of intellectuals about cinema appertains to their acknowledgment of cinema’s potential to transcend class-based cultural difference. The producers of literature were

threatened and offended by cinema’s mass audience, yet envious of its wide circulation, which could be harnessed for their own purposes, namely the cultural education of the masses; although as Carey observes, “the intellectuals believed in giving the public what the intellectuals want; that, generally speaking, is what they meant by education” (1992, 6). In her correspondence the poet and editor H.D. articulated her intentions for *Close Up*:

I am in fact now doing a little critical work for a new very clever movie magazine, supposed to get hold of things, from a more or less ‘artistic’ angle but not the highbrow attitude... it is to be called CLOSE UP, a splendid title I think... I feel film is

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the living art, the thing that WILL count but that is in danger now from the commercial and popular sources. (Letter from H.D. to Viola Jordan, 6 June 1927, quoted in *Cinema and Modernism* 1998, 96)

Laura Marcus recognises that “throughout [H.D.’s] writings on film we find not only claims for the new art of the cinema as a ‘universal’ art and the dream of a mass audience for minority or avant-garde culture, but an insistence on the role of film in bridging national difference” (*Cinema and Modernism* 1998, 104). However H.D. indicates the potential of film to bridge class as well as national differences; the key to this is her distinction between the artistic angle, and *highbrow attitude*, an “ominous new term” according to Carey (1992, 10), which emerged in the period and considered cinema a vulgar and unacceptably mass medium. In Vol. 1 no. 1 (July 1927) H.D. presents a class-culture-based exploration of film’s impact, and therefore the magazine’s mission, in her series of articles “Cinema and the Classics.” By inquiring “what would be our word-reaction to Classics? What to Cinema?” she addresses the consecration of one form of cultural production, its symbolic value evoked by the word alone, and by juxtaposition indicates that cinema is both equal and, as yet, culturally unconsecrated. The irony of this attribution of symbolic prestige is made apparent; “[f]or I don’t in my heart believe one out of ten of us highbrow intellectuals...know the least little bit about either” (H.D. *Cinema and Modernism* 1998, 105). For Bourdieu, instruments of classification are products in the struggle for recognition and the monopoly of legitimacy which helps to reinforce the notion of legitimacy itself (2010). Consequently H.D.’s criticism of them is in keeping with her mission to consecrate cinema itself. H.D. describes the fear and excitement of the cinematic audience: “the cinema or the movies is to the vast horde of the fair-to-middling intellectuals a juggernaut crushing our mind and perception in one vast orgy of the senses” (H.D. *Cinema and Modernism* 1998, 105). This “vast horde” is a provocative re-imagining of the homogenized, urban lower middle-classes of T.S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland* and the modernist trope of denigrating the senseless crowd; she combines conflicting images of the masses and the intellectuals who are at once numerous and educated, confounded (yet aroused) by the prospect of cinematic experience, unable to comprehend its sensual complexity. The critique of “fair-to-middling intellectuals” refers to those such as Q.D. Leavis who believed film to be a degrading influence on culture. Yet as cinematic experience crushes “our” mind she gestures towards the inclusive and self-consciously articulates both the conventional response to cinema and the necessity of a new system of cultural mediation to supersede “old reactions.” The educated group, facing the new medium with distaste and prejudice, requires the cultural revelations of H.D.’s “vast-increasing, valiant little army of the advance guard” (H.D. *Cinema and Modernism* 1998, 105).

The magazine crucially re-organises the field, publishing not simply in opposition to the unrefined tastes of mass culture that threatens this cultural art, but also against the literary intellectuals who devalue cinema, viewing it as inferior. Amongst some members of the cultural and literary establishment cinema was not only devoid of cultural value but was in fact detrimental to its audience. The effect of cinema to “destroy among the masses a desire to read anything which by the widest stretch could be included in the classification ‘literature’” was a genuine anxiety of the dominant class (Leavis 1932, 17). Dorothy Richardson, who contributed significantly to the magazine, defends “the movies” from the prejudices of the upper class against film arguing “against the critique, coming from both the cultural left and the right in this period, of popular cinema as a narcotic” (*Cinema and Modernism* 1998, 152). This perceived lack of intellectualism in cinema is addressed pointedly in the emergent film criticism of the period. Paul Rotha's *The Film Till Now* is dedicated to “those among cinema audiences who wonder why and think how” (Rotha, 1930). Film consumption can therefore be segregated into the categories of a consciously engaged audience partaking in active spectatorship, and an audience who merely see but do not inquire, simply stupefied by moving pictures. Richardson indicates the aesthetic merit of cinema and “conjures up a community of spectators becoming educated for modernity” (*Cinema and Modernism* 1998, 152) admitted as citizens by virtue of critical engagement. Displaying the quintessentially modernist attitude as exposed by Carey, H.D. similarly perceives the cultural field as split into the “lump” (the masses) and the “leaven” (the avant-garde) yet her arrangement is rather more complex. She positions both the magazine and the discipline at once inside “the lump” but also against it, with the avant-garde championing the art of cinema not from a culturally remote elite but rather “wedged securely in the lump (we won't class ourselves as sniffingly above it)” (H.D. *Cinema and Modernism* 1998, 105) This conceptualisation must be at least partially a fallacy; H.D. was clearly not one of the masses as an independently wealthy, educated woman living mostly in Paris and Switzerland and associating with the literati of the day. The archetypal modernist rhetoric of deriding unenlightened mass culture does creep into her critique, “why can't the lump, for its own good, for its own happiness, for its own...beauty be leavened just a little quicker” (H.D. *Cinema and Modernism* 1998, 105). Although the lump/leaven dichotomy is steeped in a class prejudice, it does indicate that the lump *can* rise, but has so far been hypnotized by low-quality, commercial culture or “the thud-thud of constant repetition”. As “the lump under its own lumpishness is perforce content, is perforce ignorant, is perforce so sated with mechanical efficiency, with the whir and thud of various hypnotic appliances, that it doesn't know what it is missing” (H.D. *Cinema and Modernism* 1998, 106). The *Close Up* manifesto is to awaken the lump from this hypnosis of commercialism to a realisation of the possibilities of visual art. Such socio-cultural mobility reveals that “the borders and boundaries between popular and elite were never entirely

sealed, however, either in the new medium of the film or in the discourses that accompanied it" (Marcus 2010, 238).

It is both a prerequisite of the avant-garde and a signifier of cultural legitimacy for producers of artistic goods to oppose the externally imposed strictures of censorship upon "pure" art. *Close Up's* campaign against the strict film censorship laws of the UK mobilizes this symbolic energy and is therefore an indicator of the cultural ambitions that the publishers and contributors had for both the magazine itself and the discipline it advocated. The group's sustained petitioning protested against the way the Cinematographic Act of 1909 was imposed, which was either by hacking offending images and scenes from the film reels, with little consideration for the aesthetic implications of this violence, or by simply

It is impossible at present to bring many films of proved artistic merit into England on account of the censorship and of the heavy duties which preclude the importation of any film other than one judged likely to be a popular success. The payments per single film often amount to as much as between one hundred and two hundred pounds.

Films dealing with social problems in a serious manner, such as are widely shown on the continent, are either barred by the censor or so cut as to be incoherent, with one or two exceptions, notably the very "dangerous for ignorant" *Dangers of Ignorance*. Vulgar and suggestive films are constantly passed provided they possess a conventionally "moral" ending.

It is impossible to change the present conditions of affairs unless you will help. If you desire the same intellectual liberty as the continent of Europe possesses, will you not sign and forward to us the following request which will go forward with as many as can be collected to be presented for consideration in the House of Commons.

I desire films of artistic merit to be submitted in their original form for grading in a category other than A. or U. and for limited showing to a board of censors that will include individuals of proved artistic and scientific capacity who will judge these films according to their educative and artistic and not their commercial worth.

I understand the words "limited showing" to mean that these films may be shown either by film societies or in general cinemas that advertise fully the certificate letter they are granted and to which children under sixteen will not be admitted except by previous written request of parent or guardian.

I consider that such films on account of their limited possibilities of showing, should be automatically entitled to a large rebate of customs duties.

Signed.....

Address .....

Sign and post above in unsealed envelope (halfpenny stamp) to Pool, 24 Devonshire Street, London, W.C.1.

COLLECT YOUR FRIENDS' SIGNATURES ON BACK.  
(P.T.O)

refusing licenses to show certain titles altogether (*Cinema and Modernism* 1998, 271). Inserted within the pages of the magazine was a slip of paper, which the editors requested to be signed and returned by readers (*Close Up*, Vol. III No. 6 December 1928). The petition form asked readers to testify that they "desire films of artistic merit to be submitted in their original form" in order to overcome the "mutilation to the point of destruction of almost all films shown in this country" (Richardson *Cinema and Modernism* 1998, 272). Censorship is a force which threatens the artistic integrity of the cultural product, and criticism of censorship functions as a classificatory scheme to position the magazine within the structured space of art production in which, by challenging the moral authority of the dominant culture

they gain intellectual legitimacy (Bourdieu 2007, 102). If the basis of censorship is the prevention of damage to the vulnerable populace then defending film against censorship ties in to the high-art claim of attempting to extend the cultural scope of serious art through film, providing both a larger space for intellectual freedom and simultaneously a larger audience for aesthetic exploration. In the February 1929 issue, "with an evident degree of ironic satisfaction, a *Daily Express* report about *Close Up's* role in the anti-censorship campaign is quoted" identifying the group as a "pro-Russian propagandist organization"

(*Cinema and Modernism* 1998, 272). The celebration of their identification as both antithetical to censorship and irreverent towards the mainstream press illustrates their role in the contest between “dominants whose strategy is tied to continuity... and dominated, new entrants, whose interest is discontinuity...and revolution” (Bourdieu 2010, 157).

The process of conceptualisation of cinema within the cultural field was engineered by the literature published about it, as the cultural battlefield shifted from the cinematic artefacts themselves to the surrounding critical discourses. Publications such as *Close Up* begin a process which resulted in the penetration of informed aesthetic discourse beyond the exalted sphere of literary cultural discussion, and the widespread adoption of the linguistic field of cinematic discussion and acceptance of its cultural capital. The hierarchy of cultural product within the spectrum of film production itself is articulated in critical discourse around the films, from populist fan magazines to specialist theory texts. *Close Up* was a self-conscious cultural enterprise which narrated and engineered the development of cinema beyond the commercial, as the opiate of the masses, to a legitimate zone of cultural activity. Articles such as “The Cinema in Retrospect” formulated theory on the body of work and the evolution of film-making practices and spectator experience so far, a process of assembling a cinematic canon for a discipline which “as an art-form [...] can scarcely be said to have a past” (*Close Up* Vol. V No. 2 January 1929, 47) orientated toward the identification of culturally pertinent features. It encouraged the potential of cinema as a new way, an appealing, broader sphere of influence for serious cultural values which threatened high culture as a popular medium, but also provided a vehicle for the wider dissemination of serious culture to a large public. As film critics such as Iris Barry emerged, writing on film and publishing criticism in the mainstream press, rather than in low circulation periodicals, the rhetoric of film analysis and appreciation was fully introduced into newspaper print culture. In the *Daily Mail*, with circulations of around 2 million per day (Wasson, 2006, 155), film criticism could access readership numbers unimaginable for artisan periodicals like *Close Up*. The professionalization of cinema criticism began, as “film struck an increasingly serious pose in periodicals and daily newspapers; professionalised and dedicated ‘film critics’ became regular contributors” (Wasson 2006, 155). In a crucial period of cultural change *Close Up* negotiated symbolic capital for a new medium, reflecting changes in social and intellectual culture; it both reclaimed film as high art for the intellectuals and opened up cultural admittance to a broader audience based on engagement rather than status.

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Images included are reproduced from *Close Up*, Vol. IV No. 1 January 1929.

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