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Perspectives

"Lux upon Lux": A Report on the 2006 Zurich James Joyce Foundation Workshop, 6-12 August 2006

The 2006 Zurich James Joyce Foundation Workshop, on the theme of "Cinematographic Joyce," got off to a hairy, if highly entertaining, start when, with the opening dinner barely over, a lively discussion sprang up in one of the Foundation's darkening rooms as to whether or not Leopold Bloom wears a moustache on 16 June 1904. The question arose from the casual observation that Milo O'Shea gives a moustacheless rendition of Bloom in Joseph Strick's 1967 adaptation of *Ulysses*, while Stephen Rea's Leopold wears an ample sculpted moustache in Sean Walsh's 2003 adaptation, *bl.,m.* The moustache cup on display in one of the Foundation's exhibition windows shed little light on the matter, and, as the mystery thickened and personal preferences surfaced, participants rushed to the surrounding bookshelves in search of copies of *Ulysses*, handlists, and illustrations in attempts to find out the truth about Bloom. But as references were checked in the growing penumbra, all that could be established was that the text itself, as so often happens, allows the moustache to hover or not hover equally legitimately in the mind of the reader.

This lively, Fendant de Sion-fueled opening set the tone for a week of the free-style debating for which Zurich Foundation gatherings are famous. Workshop discussions, participants had been reminded a few weeks previously, were to be thought of as jam sessions. Solo parts would be scheduled but mainly to provide pretexts for other players to join in at any point. The set-up lent itself particularly well to the most passionate and controversial discussions of the week, such as the one that saw the room split in animated discussion of the value of Werner Nekes's 1982 film, partly inspired by *Ulysses* (as well as by Homer's *Odyssey* and Neil Oram's *The Warp*): *Uli iss es*. After a collective viewing of this dizzyingly noisy, fast, and narratively resistant movie, Jörg Drews defended the movie (which has failed to attract significant critical interest for over two decades) as an attempt to replicate in film some of the stylistic and technical innovations of *Ulysses*, and to offer, as Joyce's "Oxen of the Sun" does for the English language, an anthology of cinematic techniques developed since the medium's inception. As the discussion progressed, many in the room were uncomfortably compelled to recognize that the objections they

were bringing against the film were identical to charges which have long been leveled against Joyce's own work: incomprehensibility, meaninglessness, lack of aesthetic value, lack of emotional appeal, even obscenity. The debate, spirited though it was, left the question wide open, but for an hour or so of this particular jam session, the minds in the room seemed to be moving to the breathless pace of *Uli iss es* itself.

The question of the value of cinematographic adaptation was to be at the heart of many of the week's debates. At the other end of the spectrum from Nekes's *Uli iss es* was the film adaptation of *A Painful Case* (1992) presented by Jolanta Wawrzycka. It seemed to some that the film was far too traditional to convey anything of the complexity and subtlety of Joyce's writing—though it appealed to others, perhaps all the more so in the aftermath of *Uli iss es*, by featuring characters that a viewer might relate to emotionally. A protracted costume drama filmed in sepia colors and running to over fifty minutes, the film vastly expanded the content and the virtually nonexistent dialogue of the Joycean original. Discussion of the film brought up questions echoing the week's recurring attempts to arrive at some kind of consensus regarding cinematic adaptations of Joyce's works. The group, mirroring Joyce's own changing attitude to the idea of an adaptation of *Ulysses* in the 1920s and 1930s, oscillated between two conflicting positions. On the one hand, film was hailed as a medium perhaps uniquely suited to produce effects comparable to Joyce's own. On the other, the translation of *Ulysses* into film was frequently thought to be unrealizable.

The conundrum also came to the fore in the course of most morning sessions, during which, by creating an artificial night, we carried out close viewings of the screen adaptations of *Ulysses* made by Joseph Strick and Sean Walsh. The exercise, and the discussions that ensued, helped relieve some of the skepticism regarding the value of the adaptations by illustrating just how revealing the choices of individual directors can be. As Fritz Senn reminded us, these adaptations, whatever their failings, are useful in that they return us to the texts, acting as stark reminders of their extreme complexity. Marianna Gula brought many of the strands of the ongoing debate together in her threefold comparative analysis of the Strick and Walsh films and of a film script written by Jerry Reisman and Louis Zukofsky in 1935. The script for *James Joyce's "Ulysses"*—an original copy of which recently arrived at the Foundation as part of the Hans E. Jahnke bequest—was never produced. Despite some glaring departures from the novel, Joyce himself commented rather favorably upon the endeavor, optimistically stating that "there are also gross errors. These can be changed" (*Letters III* 368). Indeed, some of Reisman and Zukofsky's ideas still seem almost revolutionary in contrast to later

efforts. Particularly remarkable were plans to interpolate, or “flash insert,” sketches by Max Ernst, and to divide the screen into several parallel sections—most notably for the “Nausicaa” and “Ithaca” episodes. In “Ithaca,” for instance, telescopic images of the moon on the left of the screen were to be juxtaposed with the scene unfolding in Bloom’s kitchen at the center and with various scenes from *Hamlet* to the right.

Our inquiries into the relationship between Joyce and the cinema were not confined to cinematic takes on Joyce’s works. Many presentations explored the connections between the newly emerging medium of cinema and Joyce’s writing. Christiane Heuwinkel took as her starting point Joyce’s entrepreneurial attempt to set up the first cinema in Ireland in 1909 and led us on an illuminating tour of the archives of early cinema as well as of the Volta itself. She reminded us of the occasional cinematic displays that took place in Ireland even before 1909 at town fairs and vaudeville shows and of the fascination with the new medium that caused cinemas to open rapidly throughout Europe at a time when Joyce’s own venture failed, and she speculated as to possible motivations for Joyce’s choice of films for the Volta’s opening program. The talk was followed by some very early cinema footage—short scenes (mesmerizing to the defamiliarized twenty-first-century viewer’s eye) set up so as to appear to have been filmed through microscopes, telescopes, or binocular field-glasses; a romantic castaway film; and some early erotic films, which were not, of course, without serious bearing on our understanding of *Ulysses*.

Marco Camerani showed a series of films by Georges Méliès, which suggested fascinating connections between the French filmmaker’s works and the “Circe” episode of *Ulysses*. Many of Méliès’s films consist of short sequences in which the main interest resides in a cinematic “trick”—an optical illusion achieved by techniques such as stop-motion substitution or double exposure. In *L’Homme à la Tête en Caoutchouc* (1901), a man uses bellows to blow up his own head, detaches it, and places upon a table set there for the purpose; in *Le Monstre* (1903), an Egyptian mummy is brought back to life to perform a strange dance against a background of sand dunes and pyramids; in *Les Affiches en Goguettes* (1905), figures from advertising posters come to life and jump out of their frames. Marco also suggested the possible influence of Leopoldo Fregoli, the world-famous Italian stage “transformist,” who could become (by means of extremely speedy and elaborate costume changes) up to ten different characters in the space of thirty minutes and whose international career spanned the years 1890 to 1922. Marco showed footage of Fregoli’s shows, some of which were taken backstage as Fregoli performed his astounding transformations. As in the case of the Méliès films, the proposed connections with “Circe” were compelling.

Further suggestions of influence were put forward in a presentation on the ways in which Gustave Flaubert's writing anticipates both early cinema and Joyce's use of cinematographic techniques. Flaubert, it was argued, may well have blazed a trail for Joyce by producing in his own novels many of the effects we have retrospectively come to think of as quintessentially cinematic. Heyward Ehrlich provided a useful context for these musings, sketching out a vast historical vista of technical developments in the fields of representation—particularly photographic and cinematographic—from the 1720s. Heyward suggested that a possible source for *Ulysses's* interest in metempsychosis might be found in an early twentieth-century traveling fair-show called "Le Salon de la Métempsychose," of which various films were made between 1903 and 1909 and shown at screenings in England and Ireland (where the show was featured under its English title, *Metempsychosis*), as well as in Paris. Heyward also unearthed some interesting references to the cinematograph in Joyce's 1909 letters to Nora, before making some concluding comments on the relations between Joyce and the thinking of Walter Benjamin. Jesse McKnight focused on the contemporary cinematographic context of Joyce's later works, suggesting some possible connections between the films of Charlie Chaplin and Joyce's writing.

Laurent Milesi analyzed Joyce's and Ezra Pound's respective dealings with speed, highlighting the ways in which pure speed and its representation in art became a particularly urgent concern for Futurist and modernist artists. Laurent's close comparative reading of Joyce's theory of the epiphany in *Stephen Hero* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and of Pound's statements on the image, demonstrated convincingly that both authors were interested in movement, dance, and rhythm. John Paul Riquelme, taking Sergei Eisenstein's essay on "Dickens, Griffith, and the Film Today" as his starting point, outlined various intersections between modernist narrative and conceptual montage. Joyce, he argued, is linguistically, as well as visually, "myriadmontageminded." Jamileh Talebizadeh drew on parallels between the language of film theory and the language of psychoanalysis to suggest connections between the eye and the "I" in *Ulysses*.

In "Grace," the story originally envisaged by Joyce as the last one in *Dubliners*, the men gathered at Tom Kernan's bedside mistakenly attribute the motto "*Lux upon Lux*" to Pope Leo XIII (*D* 167). The phrase (with its likely *clin d'oeil* to the Lumière brothers, who invented the cinematograph in 1895) may well be Joyce's earliest literary allusion to the contemporary world of cinema. At the end of a very full week of jamming, in which much time was spent in darkened rooms gazing at lighted screens, "*Lux upon Lux*" turned out to be a very apt description of the numerous lights shed upon many, and widely varying, aspects of our theme. The phrase would undoubtedly-

ly hold true for any Joycean research project undertaken at the Zurich Foundation. Its resources are amazing. More than just a treasure trove of collectors' items, it is also the ultimate Joycean library. With Fritz Senn, Ruth Frehner, and Ursula Zeller always available to point one in the right direction or pick out a crucial volume, the Foundation is the place to go for Joycean "*Lux upon Lux*" experiences.

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