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## Vision's Immanence

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## “Some Trashy Myth of Reality’s Escape”

Romance, History, and Film Viewing in *Absalom, Absalom!*

“I must be in the story (verisimilitude needs me), but I must also be *elsewhere*: an imaginary slightly detached, this is what I demand of the film.”

—ROLAND BARTHES, “Upon Leaving the Movie Theatre”

In the middle of narrating her chapter of *Absalom, Absalom!* Rosa Coldfield describes herself watching the “*miragy antics of men and women*” (134). Throughout her life, she claims, she has watched and seen the world as something dream-like or unreal, a “mirage” or a projection of her own longing, not a place inhabited by living people or concrete matter. “*I displaced no air*,” she declares, “*and so acquired all I knew of that light and space in which people moved and breathed as I . . . might have gained conception of the sun from seeing it through a piece of smoky glass*” (120). The filter through which Rosa observes events in which she does not participate, figured here as a piece of “smoky glass,” is also her romantic and sentimentalizing sensibility. Rosa asserts her belief in the “*might-have-been which is more true than truth*” (118) and refers to herself as “*I the dreamer*” (116) and as “*I [who] dwelt in the dream*” (122).

In the illusory, dream-like world that enthralls Rosa, Confederate soldiers possess the stature of larger-than-life heroes, and Thomas Sutpen is a “demonic,” fantastic figure. She particularly romanticizes Charles Bon, whom she admits never having seen and who may be a product of her imagination. “*I never saw [his body]*,” she tells us, describing Bon’s burial. “*Why did I not*

*invent, create it?*" (122). In her treatment of Bon as an exotic paramour and of Sutpen as the fateful "curse" on her family, Jefferson, and the South, Rosa reveals a pattern of thought that personalizes and romanticizes southern history rather than considering it critically. She reveals a similar perspective in her attitude toward Quentin as a southern gentleman, demanding that he escort her out to Sutpen's Hundred and expecting him to carry a pistol with which to defend her, and toward Judith as a southern lady. Judith, Rosa asserts, could not have been expected to work and take care of herself when Rosa lived with her and Clytie because she had been "*handicapped by . . . [that] which in her was ten generations of iron prohibition*" (129)—a reference to the Old South myth of gentility that prohibited work and self-sufficiency for a class of southern women to which, she believed, Judith belonged.

In chapter 5, Faulkner combines Rosa's romantic attitudes toward the South with a uniquely abstract and hypnotic voice. Rendered almost entirely in italics, Rosa's chapter presents problems concerning both its audience (to whom is Rosa speaking?) and its "source" (when does Rosa deliver this speech and under what circumstances?). Ostensibly free-floating and seemingly disembodied, Rosa's voice is attached to no clearly situated, "physical" narrator as are the voices of the novel's other character-narrators (Shreve and Quentin in the dorm room, Mr. Compson on his porch, Sutpen sitting on a log with Quentin's grandfather). As such, Rosa's voice exists in a particularly murky and ill-defined narrational "space." This shadowy ground for Rosa's narration is mirrored in her voice itself. At turns obscure, rhapsodic, and dense, Rosa's speech makes it difficult to "see" the object of her narration; we are often more aware of the difficulties of her language than we are of what exactly she is describing. This difficulty is related to Rosa's romanticizing attitude. Her monologue, like other manifestations of romantic thought, idealizes and modifies the world she sees: the confederate soldiers are not the crusading, chivalrous knights she admires (and whom she lionizes in hundreds of odes); Thomas Sutpen is not an agent of Satan (she says of him "*that only through the blood of our men and the tears of our women could [God] stay this demon*" [8]). Similarly, the language Rosa uses to narrate her portion of the Sutpen story never fully conveys what occurred, but rather gives a highly wrought impression of Rosa's state of mind. And this high style has a particular impact. What we experience with Faulkner's prose (throughout the novel, but especially with Rosa) is a narcotic, abstract, or surreal effect, such that the world of the novel appears exotic or strange and resists "objective" representation. Language and

a romanticizing tendency, then, come together in Rosa's section, demonstrating a habit of mind and a commensurate form of expression that similarly give reality the lie.

Rosa's language and her romanticizing narrative have much in common with another representational system of which Faulkner was aware and that he sought, in much of his 1930s writing, to critique: film. References in Faulkner's fiction to film and Hollywood abound, and several critics have traced Faulkner's problematic relationship to cinema as both a commercial and artistic medium.<sup>1</sup> I propose a reading of Faulkner's relationship to the movie industry that shows the way that several aspects of film practice and viewing, above all the relationship to the South's past that historical film produced, inform his strategies in *Absalom, Absalom!* In short, this understanding allowed Faulkner to use his novel to critique the reified, commodified relationship to history that he saw early film encourage.

The novels *Pylon* and *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem*, for instance, each contain pejorative references to the influence, infection, or "contagion" of the film industry.<sup>2</sup> In addition to the stories discussed in my introduction, "Dry September" and "Golden Land," other short stories from the 1930s, such as "Turnabout" (1932) and "All the Dead Pilots," (1932) suggest Faulkner's critical awareness of the film medium and industry.<sup>3</sup> In a letter from this period that was typical of Faulkner's correspondence about his film work, he lamented to one of his agents: "The trouble with the movies is not so much the time I waste [in Hollywood] but the time it takes me to recover" from the city and, supposedly, its products' excesses (*SL*, 90).

Perhaps most significantly for my consideration of *Absalom*, in the period in which he first indicated having conceived the story for this novel, Faulkner's disdain for the film industry was also evident in his description of a project that amounted to a critique of Hollywood practices and materials. In a letter sent from Oxford, Mississippi, to the editor, Harrison Smith, dated in February of 1934, Faulkner mentions a novel he intends to call *Dark House* that would be about "the violent breakup of a family from 1860 to about 1910" and that uses Quentin Compson as a narrator (*SL* 78). The next extant letter shows Faulkner writing about an idea for another new project:

I am going to work on something else right away, though I don't know what yet. I have a plan, a series to be called

A Child's Garden of Motion Picture Scripts

They will be a burlesque of the sure-fire movies and plays, or say a burlesque of how the movies would treat standard plays and classic plays and novels, written in the modified form of a movie script. (*SL*, 79)

Blotner indicates that Faulkner never completed his idea for a “burlesque of sure-fire movies and plays.” And Bruce Kawin asserts that Faulkner “abandoned” this project in the process of writing *Pylon*, a novel that, in Kawin’s words, “bled off some of the incoherent and frenzied energy that might have ruined *Absalom*” (“Faulkner’s Film Career,” 175).

### Film’s Immanence

Bloodletting notwithstanding, I disagree with Kawin that Faulkner got the idea for a critique of cinema out of his system as he prepared to finish *Absalom*. Rather, I contend, Faulkner’s ideas about the film industry were sharpening throughout the period in which he worked on *Absalom*, which included the completion of *Pylon*. Though *Absalom* is not written in the form of a movie script, as Faulkner describes his project above, it is nevertheless a “burlesque” of standard film treatments of the South. One clue to this aspect of the novel is a highly suggestive mention in it of film and narrative. The episodic, violent nature of Charles Etienne Saint-Valery Bon’s life after leaving Sutpen’s Hundred—corresponding to periods of stasis and recovery following his ritual beatings—are compared by the narrator to a “succession of periods of utter immobility like a broken cinema film” (170). Years later, Faulkner would again invoke film to describe a narrative effect when, referring to *The Sound and the Fury*, he wrote in a letter to Malcolm Cowley that the reasons for the novel’s delayed reception was that it resembled “the homemade, the experimental, the first moving picture projector—warped lens, poor light, clumsy gears, and even a bad screen—which had to wait eighteen years for the lens to clear, the light to steady, the gears to mesh and smooth” (quoted in Blotner 1974, 2:1216).

Faulkner’s use of a broken cinema as a metaphor in these instances is revealing, for it suggests a relationship between his self-consciousness about his literary experiment—his fractured, disjointed narrative structures—and his understanding of the apparatus of film. It also demonstrates that Faulkner’s sense of his modernism, or the terms he used to describe it, were connected to his awareness of other new cultural forms. In the decade in which he spent several extended periods as a screenwriter in Hollywood (including positions

at MGM, Universal Studios, and Twentieth-Century Fox), Faulkner gained a familiarity with the Hollywood product from working within the industry. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, a novel that occupied him throughout the period of his scriptwriting, he found a means to engage his cultural criticism and his literary practice concurrently.

In addition to the understanding of Hollywood he gained working as a screenwriter, Faulkner’s view of film was informed by the silent movies he had seen as a child.<sup>4</sup> Among the earliest film narratives, cinematic representations of the South from the period in which Faulkner grew up demonstrated a manner of representing its materials which, like Rosa’s account of the Sutpen narrative, was highly romanticized and unreal. The earliest film narratives about the South presented an idealized plantation-era period that was a product of the filmmakers’ imagination but that audiences embraced as real. This tradition began with films like Edwin Porter’s adaptation of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in 1903, which glossed over the novel’s more severe message about slavery, or David Ward Griffith’s “His Trust” (1911) and “His Trust Fulfilled” (1911)—films that depicted doting blacks faithful to their masters throughout the Civil War, repelling Union troops or forging their own Confederate regiments. Later movies such as *The Fighting Coward* (1924) or *Hearts in Dixie* (1929) similarly offered an image of benevolent race relations in which slaves labored in the fields while singing happily and without the presence of an overseer.<sup>5</sup>

Towering above these pictures in its historical revisionism as well as its impact on cinema, however, was D. W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation*. Monumentally influential, it was a film that Faulkner almost certainly saw and one that not only provided a basis for commercial cinema’s approach to southern history but also furnished the semiology and “grammatical” systems of narrative film.<sup>6</sup> *Birth* had an impact on the development of film history and thus on American cultural history that it would be difficult to overstate. In its depiction of the end of Reconstruction and the South’s redemption by the White Knights of Christ coming “to the rescue of the downtrodden South,”<sup>7</sup> *Birth* evinced a habit of thought about the region that later films emulated and that provided one of the earliest and most pervasive examples of film’s capacity to alter southern history. Griffith’s opus demonstrated a range of forward-looking, innovative techniques in storytelling that enthralled audiences but that contrasted with the film’s regressive ideology, an irony that helped it accomplish its more backward-looking goal: the seducing of audiences to the film’s sympathetic and nostalgic vision of the South.

Marshalling developments in visual narrative that he had gathered from earlier films—such as varied camera angles and distances, camera movement, location shooting, depth of field, the juxtaposition of events separated in space (through parallel editing), the “subjectivizing” of time (slowing or accelerating real time to dramatic ends), the eyeline match or 180° rule, cutting to movement, variations in shot duration, split-screen, and masking—Griffith produced a film of unparalleled expressiveness and impact. Several of these techniques are now standard practices of narrative cinema and generally go unrecognized by audiences long used to seeing them. Griffith, however, discovered these uses in the first years of learning how to effectively communicate with an audience and tell a story on film. Shooting outdoors and on location was for Griffith, as it would become for directors ever since, a key element of *Birth's* efforts at realism.<sup>8</sup> Keeping the camera on one side of an axis while shooting (the 180° rule) allowed a consistent background across different shots and thus a more uniform context for dramatic events. Likewise, maintaining the direction of action from right to left of the screen, or left to right, keeps viewers oriented spatially within a narrative sequence. (Avant-garde or experimental films revel in violating these sorts of “natural” visual strategies.) Varying the distance of the camera from the action, as in the close-up, to allow more intimate expression or a focus on only a portion of the action in a scene, was uncommon before Griffith's exploration. Perhaps the innovation that *Birth* exemplifies and for which Griffith is most well known is the variation in shot duration. In the famous climax of the film, he juxtaposes a more and more rapid cutting of shorter and shorter shots of the Klan with shots of the Old Colonel and other white characters defending themselves in the cabin. An example as well of parallel editing, this section of the film galvanized audiences by the sheer force of its accelerating visual rhythm, drawing otherwise neutral viewers into the drama of the “ride to the rescue” by the Klan.

One particular sequence demonstrates the new “language” Griffith used to create film narrative—as well as his efforts to instruct audiences in how to read it. Early in the picture Griffith masks, or darkens, a portion of the frame, revealing in its corner only the image of a grieving mother and her children. As the camera's iris opens, letting in more of the image, audiences discover the source of the family's grief: on a hillside opposite, Confederate troops are revealed, marching off to the battle in which many of them will die. Directing audiences, next, in how to read the film, Griffith edits between the shot of the troops and of the young mother—a montage that repeats the connection of

events produced earlier in the sequence through masking. In organizing the whole sequence this way, Griffith shows readers how to understand the principles of parallel editing while he applies them. Later in the film we see another of Griffith’s formal and visual flourishes, one that further draws viewers into the mind-set and experience of its characters (and into the film’s revisionist ideology). Using split screen to psychological as well as dramatic ends, in one shot Griffith superimposes the image of Atlanta burning over footage of retreating Southern troops. Positioned above the image of the retreating Confederate army, the picture of Atlanta in flames connects events that take place in different locations. More suggestively, this technique creates a psychological connection between the characters in the foreground (the defeated Confederates) and the kind of nightmare image of the South they might be harboring—a scenario that in fact occurred, as this shot reveals, but that Griffith’s new cinematic method made all the more forceful and haunting by connecting it to individual characters’ psychology.

This use of split screen to ally viewers with characters’ feelings or imagination also occurs in the film’s closing shot, in which Griffith produces an effect for his characters that is analogous to the process viewers go through in watching the film. As Ben Cameron and Elsie Stoneman sit together on a hillside overlooking the ocean, an image of the City of God appears in the left half of the frame—a paean to the Confederate dead and to southerners like Ben Cameron’s sister Flora (who dies fleeing a would-be black rapist) who have ascended there. Positioned within the frame, the image appears as a projection of the characters’ thoughts, a reminder of the losses they have experienced as a result of Reconstruction and the war. In closing the movie as he does, Griffith encodes its final image of union between a northern woman and a southern man with the ideological message that the new “nation” that will follow the film’s events (and that includes the suppression and re-disenfranchisement of blacks) will be built on the sacrifices of a region that has been terribly, tragically wronged.

As it is with the characters, who are depicted projecting their own understandings of the war onto imagery of death and sacrifice, so it was with audiences watching the film. For Griffith’s formal and ideological methods offered a similar projection of the story for viewers—a similar “meaning” of southern history that many of them, initially at least, believed. With *Birth*, Griffith told a history of the South in a manner that proved too compelling for audiences to resist, despite its interpretive extravagances.<sup>9</sup> In shaping narrative

so forcefully, Griffith revealed the capacity for film to captivate viewers and to sustain both an extended, complex plotline and audiences' collective imagination. In so doing, he created not only the "birth" of a new, imaginary "nation" from the tenets of southern racist ideology, but a veritable new nation organized around the cultural activity of film viewing.

The reasons for the success of Griffith's and others' films of the South were historical as well as aesthetic. During a period of national reconciliation, when northern and southern audiences alike were eager to find reasons to forget the Civil War, nostalgic depictions of Old South life were readily accepted as an alternative to the ravages of both contemporary and historical truth. At the time of the movie's release, northern cities had experienced a burst of civil strife following the social and economic dislocations created by waves of immigration from Europe and the Great Migration. Between 1898 and 1908, race riots occurred in New York, New Orleans, Wilmington, Atlanta, and in Springfield, Illinois.

The film's racial conflicts were also not contrary to those experienced by blacks in the period in which *Birth* appeared. They had been denied the ballot in several states, and many whites in the South saw in the 1912 election of Woodrow Wilson to the White House (the first southern president since the Civil War) an opportunity to expand Jim Crow.<sup>10</sup> Lynchings in the period before Griffith made the film were at their highest point in history.<sup>11</sup> The year the film was released, 1915, also saw the founding of "the second Ku Klux Klan." Its growth was stimulated by Griffith's movie and Dixon's novel as well as by the fervid patriotism inspired by American military action in the Philippines, Mexico, and, later, involvement in World War I.

Perhaps most significant to the film's reception were northern white attitudes toward immigration. Following the waves of European immigration at the end of the nineteenth century as well as the northern immigration of freed slaves, negative attitudes toward blacks and other ethnic minorities increased tremendously. At the time of the film's release, nativist sentiment and rhetoric were raging. The growing audience for movies, which by the teens was increasingly middle-class, took *Birth's* message about racial conflict as an earlier, regional manifestation of the contemporary and national "problem" they saw themselves confronting.<sup>12</sup> In this they were provoked by several public and "official" statements prior to the appearance of Griffith's film. A 1910 report to Congress by a federal commission detailed the impact on the supposed displacement of white labor by a younger, less-skilled European workforce and its

effect on American wage earning.<sup>13</sup> By the time of *Birth's* release in 1915 social dissent had peaked, epitomized in 1916 by the publication of an immensely popular, virulently anti-immigration tract by Madison Grant of the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Grant's polemic, nearly as extreme as that of Griffith or even Dixon, traced the breakdown in white power and "purity" to the Civil War: "The agitation over slavery [in the North] was inimical to the Nordic race, because it thrust aside all national opposition to the intrusion of the hordes of immigrants of inferior racial value and prevented the fixing of a definite American type. . . . The Civil War, however, put a severe, perhaps fatal check, to the development and expansion of this splendid type, by destroying great numbers of the best breeding stock on both sides, and by breaking up the home ties of many more" (*The Passing of the Great Race*, 79).

Faced with an influx of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe that was concentrated in the cities, white Americans saw in the immigrant populace a threat to what was already a fragile hold on an "American" national identity. As the historian Oscar Handlin describes it, this response found an outlet in the imaginative pastoral vision of the country's past: "The injunction that the newcomers must conform to an American style of life took for granted that such a style of life with a distinctive American character actually existed. . . . Perhaps it was because they themselves bore so little resemblance to this image of America, that many Americans insisted on ascribing the blame to the Outsiders, insisted on hoping that if only those others conformed, all might revert to a purer, pleasanter state" (*The American People in the Twentieth Century*, 98). The idea of a preindustrial, pastoral history as well as the longing for its supposedly "pure" life led by a white, nonimmigrant population informed cultural thought of the period; this vision was also central to the ideology (and hence the success) of Griffith's film.

In addition to a destabilized social climate in the teens, members of the country's increasingly dominant middle class felt threatened economically in ways that contributed to *Birth's* potency and relevance. The film represents two main sources of insecurity to the middle class in the early decades of the century: the rise of big business, and the prospect of organized labor. In a period of trusts and monopoly growth, the middle class feared the overwhelming power and concentration of capital in the conglomerates; as a representative of both northern liberalism and industry, Austin Stoneman offered an image of the threat to small businesses and farmers by the interests of monop-

olized ownership. Stoneman's opposition in the film to the class of small, independent farmers like the Camerons could have embodied middle-class fears of big business.<sup>14</sup>

At the same time and in the period in which the film appeared, the middle class was also threatened by opposition to its economic well-being from "below." Though hostile to big business, the country's emerging middle class was distrustful of organized labor. The vision of a violent—and successful—overthrow of government in the Russian Revolution in 1917 and the spread of bolshevism abroad contributed to the idea of an American workforce infiltrated from without. In Stoneman's decision in *Birth* to empower blacks and strip landholding southerners of their property, he could also have put contemporary viewers in mind of the threat posed by organized labor and "outside agitators," a threat to many Americans that was quite real. The "red scare" about domestic Communism eventually took hold in the federal government, epitomized in Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer's arrest and deportation of hundreds of alleged subversives between 1919 and 1921 during the so-called Palmer Raids.

Against this contemporary scene, audiences found visions of the antebellum South both relevant and appealing. Cinematic depictions of the South of the sort *Birth* offered were compelling because of their vision of an idyllic past that had overcome its own disorder, as well as a corresponding populist ideology that galvanized northern and southern audiences alike. Film was the perfect medium for this national reconciliation for several reasons. Centrally produced and widely distributed, it provided a singular consensus narrative for the entire country. And, beginning as an inexpensive form of popular entertainment, film—especially the early short subjects—relied on stock characters and simplified melodramatic plot lines that lent themselves to ready mass consumption and reification. The screen and the artificial settings presented there became the site of a collective national projecting of the southern "idea."<sup>15</sup>

Other films that followed *Birth* brought about this response through a nostalgic, artificial image of history. Two highly visible and widely viewed films of the period immediately following *Birth* suggest the Hollywood pattern of transforming the nettlesome details of southern history to a more palatable and comforting ideology. Both films, in particular, traded on distorted images of slavery. *Hearts in Dixie* (1929), directed by Paul Sloane for Fox Studios, and King Vidor's *Hallelujah!* (1930) for MGM, like earlier Griffith films, presented

blacks embracing their subjugation. One of the first Hollywood movies to employ an all-black cast, *Hearts in Dixie* was also a musical, and it relied on several stereotypical set pieces such as the African-American spiritual or workers singing while picking cotton. As in *Birth* and Griffith's two short films, "His Trust" and "His Trust Fulfilled," *Hearts in Dixie* presented an image of black contentedness in subservience, epitomized by the introduction of Clarence Muse as Stepin' Fetchit. Despite Vidor's reputation as an accomplished, serious artist, *Hallelujah!*, like other features, mocked African Americans and made use of what were already conventions of black screen behavior, including a docile temperament, mirthful work songs, and superstitious religious beliefs. In particular, the scene of a crowd of white-clad African Americans preparing for baptism (but fearful of the water) struck audiences variously as comic and condescending.<sup>16</sup> White viewers considered the film and this scene as evidence of Vidor's "sincerity" in depicting blacks. Paul Robeson, writing in *Film Weekly*, demonstrated a greater sensitivity to the movie's ideological strain when he pointed out that to British audiences "the burlesquing of religious matters appeared sheer blasphemy" (quoted in Noble, *The Negro in Films*, 54).<sup>17</sup> The depictions of plantation life in particular, like that of the faithful slaves and house servants in Griffith's films, relied on an ideological construction of the "natural" and peaceful condition of black servitude.<sup>18</sup>

### Rosa and the Mesmeric

It is this "natural" image and its accompanying ideology, evident in *Birth* and in other films that appeared in the period before *Absalom, Absalom!*, that Faulkner's novel reproduces and, in turn, critiques. One of the clearest ways Faulkner does this is through Rosa, for through her language and her romanticizing sensibility, Rosa represents a "filmic" consciousness, particularly as it regarded the Civil War. Rosa Coldfield offers a specific example of a consciousness in the throes of a fascination with the Old South myth. While not a character in a movie, or herself a film viewer, Rosa reveals tendencies of thought that resemble those encouraged by early southern film narratives. Moreover, her language reproduces the effect I have been attributing to the cinema—the capacity to mesmerize, captivate, or enthrall viewers confronted with a sensuous spectacle.

Rosa draws attention to this aspect of her narration herself in a manner that reflects on her style of speaking. Twice, in telling her version of the Sutpen

story, she refers to herself as “*I, self-mesmered fool*” (114, 116). It is as if Rosa recognizes that she has mesmerized or hypnotized herself in her gauzy, hazy vision of Sutpen—quite possibly through the “notlanguage” Quentin attributes to her in the novel’s opening (6). “Notlanguage” becomes, then, a useful way to consider the way Rosa’s chapter works differently than ordinary language, functioning “extra-verbally” or even visually. I suggest a connection between Faulkner’s critique of film and his use of language with Rosa that produces an effect of cinema, not as a realist medium, but as something unreal or mystifying.<sup>19</sup> While Rosa’s language is not as overwhelming as the film image, it is nevertheless notable both for its material density and for Faulkner’s presentation of it as a sensuous object to be marveled at or even “seen.”<sup>20</sup>

One passage stands as a clear example of this tendency in Rosa’s section, and it is of particular interest because it also draws attention to Rosa’s romanticizing habit of mind. At this point Rosa is speaking about the moment when she returns to Sutpen’s Hundred after Bon’s death and the moment of discovering Judith on the mansion’s stairs. In a passage typical of Rosa’s stylistic “excess,” she speculates about her willingness to face “facts” and reality:

*Or perhaps it is no lack of courage either: not cowardice which will not face that sickness somewhere at the prime foundation of this factual scheme from which the prisoner soul, miasmal-distillant, wroils ever upward sunward, tugs its tenuous prisoner arteries and veins and prisoning in its turn that spark, that dream which, as the globy and complete instant of its freedom mirrors and repeats (repeats? creates, reduces to a fragile, evanescent iridescent sphere) all of space and time and massy earth, relicts the seething and anonymous miasmal mass which in all the years of time has taught itself no boon of death but only how to recreate, renew; and dies, is gone, vanished, nothing: nothing—but is that true wisdom which can comprehend that there is a might-have-been which is more true than truth, from which the dreamer, waking, says not “Did I but dream?” but rather says, indicts high heaven’s very self with: “Why did I wake since waking I shall never sleep again?” (118)*

To begin, in describing the abstract quality of Faulkner’s style we need to note the strain produced by the length of the sentence. In reality, what Faulkner offers here is not a sentence at all, but rather a continuous sequence that (like the film image) commands rapt, unbroken attention. Stretching syntax to such a point that it “breaks,” Faulkner produces a cluster of words whose syntactic relation to each other is difficult to follow and that offers a flow of imagery that

evokes a vague and shifting pattern. In so doing, he also fashions a prose in which the sensuous or material properties of language overtake its referential function.<sup>21</sup> This quality also echoes certain properties or effects of film. Although the full meaning of Rosa's language is not immediately clear, it is present in the language—or more precisely, that meaning is immanent through the forward movement of the prose. In this way the passage above (like others in Rosa's section) produces the vivid and yet ephemeral, ongoing impressions characteristic of film.<sup>22</sup> Faulkner's prose with Rosa is particularly associative in its process of articulation; meaning or linguistic sense is spectral or vague, "haunting" readers' minds after one sentence ends and they move forward to another. As a verbal approximation of film, meaning is carried over in the form of ongoing hints, images, and traces of what we've only just read or "seen" and which blur with new references and images.

Other features of the passage produce this break in verbal signification. Words or phrases such as "relicts" or "miasmal-distillant," materially present with the sound of hard, sharp consonants, are also archaisms or inventions of language that deliberately fail to produce meaning in a conventional way. These moments show Faulkner's language at its most inventive and charged, forging uses that compel a kind of awestruck, uncomprehending response. Because the abstract quality of Faulkner's language causes the reader to be more aware of the language itself than of its referent, we do not engage fully with the objects of description or reference but rather "watch" that language perform or experience it in passing, like the shifting imagery on the film screen. It is in this respect that Faulkner's prose with Rosa resembles the sensory, material aspect of cinema.<sup>23</sup>

Other references of Rosa's to her own escapism—she describes her memory elsewhere, revealingly, as "some trashy myth of reality's escape" (119)—are significant in that they place Rosa's romanticism in a historical context and show the way in which it operates in a manner similar to film. In the middle of her chapter, at the moment of Rosa's discovery of Bon's murder and Henry's flight, she describes imagining Henry remaining at Sutpen's Hundred and emerging from a room to greet her. It is an important point in Rosa's narrative and memory, for the death of Bon and her subsequent confrontation with Clytie mark for Rosa a sharp distinction between an old and a new time: the past and the future of the South. In her imagined encounter with Henry, Rosa sees him endeavoring to wake her:

*What did I expect? . . . Henry to emerge and say, 'Why it's Rosa, Aunt Rosa. Wake up, Aunt Rosa; wake up'?—I the dreamer, clinging yet to the dream . . . waking into the reality, the more than reality, not to the unaltered and unchanged old time but into a time altered to fit the dream which, conjunctive with the dreamer, becomes immolated and apotheosized. (116)*

Like historical film, Rosa's dreaming shows a time that has become "immolated and apotheosized." Rosa knows that she cannot awaken to the "unaltered and unchanged old time." The South as she has known it before the war is gone, a fact that is driven home for her by Bon's death and Clytie's bold assertion of physical contact on the stairs. Her statement, however, shows Rosa's inclination to cling still to the past imaginatively, as she describes awakening to a time "altered to fit the dream." Rosa's dream, we know, is of a romantic, mythical world that defines itself less by the actual events of southern history than by her (and other southerners') idealized conceptions of gender, class, and race relations. That dream, however, "conjunctive with the dreamer," also performs an act of violence or negation. Time and history that have been "immolated" have been sacrificed or destroyed. To change or immolate the "old time" into a dream or something other than it actually was, as Rosa does, is to perform an act of historical revision and erasure. Similarly, time or events "apotheosized" have been abstracted or made into an ideal.

What Rosa describes herself doing in relation to the "old time" of southern history is a way of considering it that was common among southerners resistant to the forces of historical change—an attitude and approach to history that was also evident in films like *Birth of a Nation*. Film representations of history and the South also "immolated and apotheosized" the "old time," turning history into something other than it was and thereby "sacrificing" it (as in *Birth of a Nation*), or idealizing it (as in films like *Hearts in Dixie* or *Hallelujah!*). Faulkner's interest was with putting that attitude—evident in both Rosa's dreaming and in southern film narratives—on display for readers' critical recognition.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to the "film effect" produced by Rosa's voice and her treatment of the past, other passages from her chapter use a language that specifically connotes the processes of film production and film viewing. We have seen her describe the way she sees the world "through smoky glass," a description that sounds like the image of reality viewed or presented through the projector or camera lens. Rosa's treatment of Charles Bon, in particular, manifests attitudes

and perspectives we might most readily describe as "cinematic." To Rosa, Bon is always a romantic, "shadowy" figure, an object of projected desire or a "reflection" (121). Describing her feelings about Bon, she reveals the extent to which her longing is not for a real person but rather a projection of her own fantasy or desire. Having only seen his photograph in her niece's bedroom, Rosa claims that "*even before I saw the photograph I could have recognized, nay, described the very face*" (122). Elsewhere, continuing her rapturous account of her feelings for Bon—or for her romantic conception of him—Rosa suggests the specifically pictorial and technological dimensions of film. In a passage that stunningly relays her (and other young women's) longing for a means to retain an image of desire, Rosa invokes a mechanical instrument that sounds strikingly like a camera: "*And I know this: if I were God I would invent something out of this seething turmoil we call progress something (a machine perhaps) which would adorn the barren mirror altars of every plain girl who breathes with . . . this pictured face*" (122). Expressing a reverence for the transcendent, near-sacral powers of the technical image, Rosa voices a longing and perspective that was one of the hallmarks of her Victorian period as well as of modernity.

Part of the cinematic quality of Rosa's as well as other characters' attitudes toward Bon is the aspect of motion; he is depicted not only as a portrait or still photo but as a shadowy, impalpable presence that moves through the Sutpen narrative silently and over time. Narrating the Sutpen story to Quentin, Mr. Compson describes Bon and Judith walking in Sutpen's garden and uses a language that invokes both motion and the process of film presentation: "You can not even imagine him and Judith alone together. Try to do it and the nearest you can come is a projection of them while the two actual people were doubtless separate and elsewhere—two shades pacing, serene and untroubled by flesh" (80). The notion of an image—and, significantly, a moving image—of two people walking "serene and untroubled by flesh" offers a clear approximation of the ontological status of film.

These accounts of Bon's presence in the mind's eye of various characters, especially Rosa's, also suggests another optical property of film. The impression of a continuous, unbroken motion in the film image is really an effect on the retina, which itself "projects" complete images after they have been perceived as individual, discrete frames. Through the phenomenon of persistence of vision, audiences themselves "project" the phantom-like image of figures in film, analogous to the act of projecting an image of Bon that Rosa and Mr. Compson describe.

The most striking passage in Rosa's section that offers this cinematic rendering of the past, however, occurs in her description of Sutpen: "*Because he was not articulated in this world,*" she says of him. "*He was a walking shadow. He was the light-blinded bat-like image of his own torment cast by the fierce demoniac lantern up from beneath the earth's crust and hence in retrograde, reverse*" (142). In this passage we see a figuring of the process I have been attributing to Rosa's section generally and its "cinematic" quality: an acceding of speech to the visual, as she points out that Sutpen was not "articulated" (or spoken) in this world, but was rather "a walking shadow," a visual or silent (film) image of moving light. In addition, Sutpen's image is cast "in retrograde, reverse"—in the same fashion as photographic images were cast onto the receiving plate of a camera obscura. The "film account" that Rosa and Mr. Compson offer of Bon and of Sutpen is of characters cast as visual images or as shadows endowed with motion—dreamy and romantic (as Rosa views Bon), or phantasmagoric (as Rosa here describes Sutpen). As a demonic figure cast in light, one who reveals the overwrought terms of Rosa's imagination, Sutpen stands as the most forceful and potent influence on Rosa's sensibility—as well as another example of her section's cinematic method.

### Southern History, Film, and Melancholia

In my account of Rosa's "filmic" narrative, she stands as an example of what Richard Moreland, in his reading of *Absalom*, calls the "melancholic." Like Rosa, early film narratives of southern history appear as melancholy "nostalgizers" of a dead past, a state or condition that can only be endlessly, mechanically repeated or reproduced. Pointing to Rosa and the novel's other narrators, Moreland suggests that "if . . . the South is 'dead,' one potentially useful question to ask is whether the South's 'survivors' have undertaken the work of mourning and understanding that death, or whether they are melancholically stuck repeating the traumatic scene of loss" (28).<sup>25</sup> Film versions of the Old South, like Rosa's narrating, are rooted in an idealized and therefore nostalgic and moribund time. My interest is in the way Moreland's characterization of Rosa's narrating, which he calls melancholic, resembles the practices of commercial cinema. Both share an obsessive, nostalgic relationship with the past, one that for different reasons but no less assiduously, avoids the "work of mourning and understanding that death" and remains fixated on a repeated image of purity, innocence, and utopia. The film industry did this by capitaliz-

ing on an emerging film market's escapist fantasies, ideas that allowed audiences to consume wholly the screen version of an Edenic, southern agrarian life; Rosa's mythopoeic narrative maintains her version of Sutpen and his impact on her family and Jefferson. Both approaches avoid coming to terms with the real causes and developments in southern history that led to the war.<sup>26</sup>

With Rosa and, as we will see, with Shreve and Quentin (though to a lesser degree), we find a relationship to the South that epitomizes what was true for the country generally during the modern period: a willingness to be entranced by a romantic vision of southern history. In particular, Rosa's ahistoricism and romanticizing resembled that of other Americans, including northerners, when it came to considerations of the Civil War. This process had in fact begun earlier, in attitudes toward the Civil War that sought in it a heroic, noble memory on which to project, paradoxically, an image of national unity. It may not be incidental, then, that the dates of the present-tense events of the novel occur at a time when, as Alan Trachtenberg has suggested, the public taste for war nostalgia was at a peak: "Interest in the war and its images culminated in 1911 in a ten-volume *Photographic History of the Civil War*, assembled by Francis Trevelyn Miller, editor of the *Journal of American History*, on the fiftieth anniversary of the firing on Fort Sumter" (*Reading American Photographs*, 78–79). Like the films that followed it, Miller's "explanation" of the war in his introduction described it as a romantic period of high adventure, one in which both sides of the cause were "just" and that demonstrated above all a common American spirit of nobility: "This [the Civil War] is the American epic that is told in these time-stained photographs—an epic which in romance and chivalry is more inspiring than that of the olden knighthood. . . . No Grecian phalanx or Roman legion ever knew truer manhood than in those days on the American continent when the Anglo-Saxon met the Anglo-Saxon in the decision of a constitutional principle that beset their beloved nation."<sup>27</sup> Far from a violent, bloody, and bitter conflict, the war in Miller's treatment was a test of the honor of each side, equally devoted to their "beloved nation" in defending an abstract "constitutional principle." In the rarefied atmosphere of nostalgia, the war took on an edifying or even aesthetic dimension that contributed to the country's inevitable reconciliation.<sup>28</sup>

Though public taste for images of the war may have peaked in 1911 as evidenced by Miller's book, it surfaced in the reactions to Griffith's epic—and again in the period when Faulkner worked on *Absalom*. The crisis of national identity that in the teens gave rise to a nativist emphasis on an American "type,"

as well as nostalgia for the Old South, also troubled the popular consciousness in the thirties due to anxiety brought on by the Depression. Trachtenberg points to this reappearance of cultural anxiety in the thirties and to a repetition of a longing for a unified American heritage: "As the Depression deepened, the very meaning and identity of the nation were questioned, and a concerted search began in scholarship as well as in popular culture for American traditions."<sup>29</sup> As a cultural effect, narrative film of the South extended the role played by still photography in shaping popular conceptions of the war. By the time they found their way into the films, romantic notions of the war had been present for some time and through different historical periods. *Absalom, Absalom!* itself may have included its own mythified approach to southern history, as is clear in several of its characters' perspectives. But in its treatment of Rosa's romanticizing and, as we will see, Quentin's spectatorship, it seems far more aware of the need for exposing those perspectives as an object of critique.

Quentin, like Rosa, is another of the novel's characters who evinces a cinematic relationship to the South. In the novel's depiction of Quentin's act of hearing and later "telling" the Sutpen narrative, Faulkner further suggests a connection between his characters' experience of southern narrative and those of the audience for film. Throughout *Absalom*, Quentin occupies a position of passive, voyeuristic spectatorship. Immediately clear in the novel's opening is the way Quentin "watches" imaginary, visualized projections of the Sutpen narrative. In its insistence on Quentin's looking at silent moving images of the historical past as well as, significantly, the story's introduction of Sutpen, the novel evokes the atmosphere, apparatus, and aesthetic dimension of the cinema. "Abrupting" onto the past in Jefferson, into a scene "as decorous and peaceful as a schoolprize watercolor" (6), Sutpen's appearance in the novel—and into Quentin's mode of apprehending it—makes use of the aestheticizing and pictorializing of narrative on which early silent film depended. As Rosa's captive audience in her "dim hot airless" parlor (5), Quentin occupies a position similar to that of the film viewer. In this darkened space, Sutpen emerges into the silence of the "dim coffin-smelling gloom sweet and oversweet with the twice-bloomed wistaria against the outer wall" (6). Redolent of coffins, time past, and death, the gloom in Rosa's parlor is nevertheless "sweet and oversweet" with a reanimated southern aura—like the screen images of historical figures. And those figures are, quite literally, projected. Contrasting with this dark of the room, the "latticed . . . yellow slashes full of dust motes" from the "savage quiet September sun impacted distilled and hyperdistilled" are

filled with the density and saturation—again, like the film image—of myth (5). Finally, as a response to this staging of the scene, Quentin demonstrates a spell-bound state like that of the viewer before the film spectacle: "Then in the long unamaze Quentin seemed to watch them overrun suddenly the hundred square miles of tranquil and astonished earth and drag house and formal gardens violently out of the soundless Nothing" (6).<sup>30</sup>

Immediately following this vivid and aestheticized depiction of both Sutpen and the scene of Quentin watching him, Faulkner injects a direct reference to the popular cultural market for such images of the South. Initiating the Sutpen narrative, Rosa offers an invitation to Quentin (and to the reader) to recognize the commercial appeal of the kind of story he is about to "witness": "So maybe you will enter the literary profession as so many Southern gentlemen and gentlewomen too are doing now and maybe some day you will remember this and write about it. You will be married then I expect and perhaps your wife will want a new gown or a new chair for the house and you can write this and submit it to the magazines" (7).<sup>31</sup> Preparatory for hearing the Sutpen narrative, Quentin is both alerted to the story's marketability and positioned, along with the reader, as a spectator or "viewer" of its events.

From this point until nearly the end of the novel, Quentin maintains this position regarding the Sutpen narrative. Throughout the book Quentin is described "seeing," "watching," or "seeming to see" the Sutpen story as it is rendered to him by Rosa (10, 17), the narrator (109), his father (157), and even himself (308). His detached, voyeuristic position is sustained until the novel's conclusion when Quentin, with Shreve, narrates a portion of the Sutpen story that brings them into "direct" contact with the objects of their imaginative gaze—the highly celebrated passage in chapter VIII in which the boys appear to merge with their story of Henry, Sutpen, and Bon. As often noted, Faulkner's interest in this scene is with the peculiarly immediate relation Quentin and Shreve experience with their subject: southern history and a narrated episode from the Civil War. Faulkner's interest in this immediacy and this scene, however, also concerns its aftermath, his understanding of the painful and difficult transition Quentin goes on to experience when he is forced to give up his closeness to or involvement in the Sutpen narrative—to "come away," as Shreve puts it (180), from their film-like experience of watching.<sup>32</sup> In the novel's final chapters Quentin occupies a position that, through Faulkner's narrative machinations, resembles that of both Rosa and what film theory has described as that of the cinematic "subject." Yet unlike other characters or the

viewers of film, Quentin's struggle to cope with a stance both within and outside of southern history prove, as we will see, overwhelming.

Historians' comments about the need for American "audiences" of the war to see in it a cause for national unity and reconciliation point up that response's contradiction to the very real fissure that the war produced. Efforts at joining the populace or "healing" the country through a consensus, revisionist narrative also appear in Quentin and Shreve's section of *Absalom*. At the heart of a version of the Sutpen story fashioned mutually by a northerner and a southerner is a detail that tellingly invokes the violent fact of the war's effect. Figured in Quentin and Shreve's version of the story in which it is Henry, and not Bon, who is wounded in battle (283-84), we also find a suggestion of the psychic and political wounding that the war produced on another body—the body politic. That Faulkner was acutely, painfully aware of this wounding is unquestionable. In the boys' narrating of events from the war, however, its meaning and its violence are couched in a romantic treatment similar to that we've seen in *Rosa*. The closing sections of the novel, in their approximations of cinema and in their tragic treatment of Quentin, offer Faulkner's critical commentary on the way that southern film narrative falsely endeavored to heal or "suture" the national consciousness of its wounding from the war.

### Viewing History: Modernism's Suture

In a manner similar to viewers' relation to the imaginative space produced by the film frame, the end of the novel offers a crucial passage in which Quentin and Shreve are both drawn into the imaginative and exegetical space of the Sutpen narrative. The moment in question involves Quentin and Shreve merging with Henry Sutpen and Charles Bon in an extended italicized passage that has been described by critics alternately as supremely "compelling," "audacious," and even, by one critic, as "cinematic."<sup>33</sup>

My own reason for relating this section of the book to film is that the workings and effect of this passage involve a narrative process similar to that described by film theory as *suture*. As conceived by theorists such as Jean-Pierre Oudart and Daniel Dayan, suture refers to techniques that manage the relationship of spaces outside and inside a film's frame. In their account, the off-screen space of film narrative requires a viewer's sustained imagination of an image or shot that is located beyond the frame, such as the object of a character's look. "Entering" this space in the following shot, through an image

of what the character had been regarding, viewers are “sutured” back into the space of the film’s narrative. Stephen Heath describes the way the frame in cinema produces this palpable sense of loss and recovery:

The narrative elision of the image-flow, the screening of point of view as the ground of the image, the totalizing of image and space in the form of field/reverse field—these are some of the procedures that have been described in terms of *suture*, a stitching or tying as in the surgical joining of the lips of a wound. In its process, its framings, its cuts, its intermittences, the film ceaselessly poses an absence, a lack, which is ceaselessly bound up in and into the relation of the subject, is, as it were, ceaselessly recaptured *for* the film. (*Questions of Cinema*, 12–13)

In an earlier article and using the classic shot/reverse shot sequence in narrative film, Oudart initiated the discussion of suture by describing the way most film narrative relies on an absence (or signified content), suggested by a shot’s presence (or signifier), such as a character’s look off-screen.<sup>34</sup>

In a similar fashion, Quentin and Shreve furnish an imagined “presence,” the narrative of Henry and Bon, into which they will insert themselves through a crucial and extended passage of shared narrating. As narrating subjects in the present of 1910, Quentin and Shreve occupy a position outside of the history they tell. In this light, the Sutpen narrative can be seen as the “absence,” or signified, implied by their narration—and the novel’s efforts to inhabit the past with the present as a kind of suturing device. The gunshot to Henry’s body, like the narrative “wound” in film that suture endeavors to close, also binds the two Harvard freshmen together in their colorful and dramatic rendering of the events that surround it. We learn of this wound to Henry at a high point of narrative tension, both between Henry and Bon and between Shreve and Quentin as they vie for the privilege of “telling.” At this particular point in the narrative, the novel breaks into one of its several italicized sections. The passage is crucial to setting up the novel’s conclusion, leading, as it does, to Bon’s murder, and including the exchange between Henry and Bon about Bon’s intentions to marry Judith as well as Henry’s intention to prevent him from doing so. It also depicts what might be considered the novel’s emotional climax: Sutpen’s final denial of Bon as his son.

This climactic, italicized break, occurring when it does and sustained for several pages, signals a move back in time and to a different historical register—a move Faulkner makes several times in the novel but that here functions

ostensibly without the mediating presence of the novel's character-narrators. In a passage in which Quentin and Shreve "become" Henry and Bon and lose their own identities, Faulkner's narration moves, through a reference to the smell of wood smoke, out of the dorm room and to the scene of the campfire forty-six years before. "[N]ow neither one of them were there. They were both in Carolina and the time was forty-six years ago, and it was not even four now but compounded still further, since now both of them were Henry Sutpen and both of them were Bon, compounded each of both yet either neither, smelling the very smoke which had blown and faded away forty-six years ago from the *bivouac fires burning in a pine grove*" (289). In the move to italics and to the campfire in Carolina, Faulkner's narration attempts the novel's most radical fusing of identities and historical periods, extending beyond the present-tense scene in the dorm room into a sustained narration of events from the past. As he does so, Faulkner leaves his narrators behind in an effort to represent these past events "directly." These events, although separate in time from the present-tense act of narrating occurring in 1910, are notable for a certain immediacy or fullness of presence, a vivacity or heightened visual power that brings the reader, along with Quentin and Shreve, into an immediate apprehension of past events. Interestingly, and of a piece with the novel's earlier accounts of Quentin watching (and with my overture to cinema), this passage makes use of both readers' and characters' imaginative acts of looking. The section's first detail notes the strong visual contrast of firelight seen at night, as well as the

*gaunt and ragged men sitting or lying about [the fires], talking not about the war yet all curiously enough (or perhaps not curiously at all) facing the South where further on in the darkness the pickets stood—the pickets who, watching to the South, could see the flicker and gleam of the Federal bivouac fires myriad and faint and encircling half the horizon and counting ten fires for every Confederate one, and between whom and which . . . the Yankee outposts watched the darkness also.* (289)

Drawn into this scene of characters on "watch" and with an emphasis on the flickering play of light, tracing the direction of the Yankee and Confederate soldiers' scanning gazes, the reader is positioned to follow a particularly cinematic operation: the fashioning of narrative through the activity of the look.<sup>35</sup> Into this highly visualized passage, as the section continues, will appear the orderly who searches out Henry (290), as well as another exchange of glances—between Sutpen and Henry in the officer's tent.<sup>36</sup> Colleen E. Donnelly points to Faulk-

ner's move to the present progressive tense in this section to argue her view that it "becomes the most compelling and insistent found in the novel" and that "[b]y writing this passage in the historical present, Faulkner is also claiming that the 'true' historical experience is being enacted in the present" ("Compelled to Believe," 118). The switch to the present-tense narration, epitomized in constructions such as Faulkner's description of the orderly who "*passes from fire to fire, asking for [Henry]*" (290), is indeed key to this section's visualized or heightened impact. (The present tense aspect is also clear at the end of the passage when the narrator states that Henry is "*not as heavy by thirty pounds as he probably will be a few years after he has outlived the four years [of the war], if he do outlive them*" [290].) Yet despite Donnelly's assessment, the rhetoric of the entire novel argues against notions such as "true historical experience." If Faulkner represents the past here more immediately or "compellingly," in either an emotional or historical sense, he does so in an effort to examine the effects of doing so. For these effects, as we shall see, can be quite damaging—even fatal.

It is the joining of past and present registers in this chapter that contributes to the novel's formal resemblance here to cinema. That movement or identification, precisely because of the historical conditions of the act of narrating, produces an effect in this scene that is analogous to that of suture. The characters in this scene are drawn back into a "space" from which the narrative action of telling history has excluded them. Here, that absence is the space of history; in film practice, it is the off-screen space (or "signified") articulated by the frame. Quentin and Shreve are effectively sutured back into the historical narrative they have been both watching and telling; historical distance, like the distance between the viewer and the screen, is elided in this action of narrative conjoining. Both classical film practice and Faulkner's particular method in this scene rely on a process of making what was present absent, of reversing the position of subject and object or looker and seen. And as with suture, that process occurs repeatedly in Faulkner's narrative, accelerating as the chapter nears its formal climax in the bivouac campfires scene. Faulkner's narrator refers several times to the linking of the narrating subjects, Quentin and Shreve, with the "objects" of their narration, Henry and Bon. Like suture, the process occurs as a constant movement *back and forth* between the two periods and positions. "[N]ow it was not two but four of them riding the two horses through the dark . . . ; four of them and then just two—Charles-Shreve and Quentin-Henry" (275); "the two of them (the four of them) held in that probation . . . by Henry" (276); "Four of them there, in that room in New

Orleans in 1860, just as in a sense there were four of them here in this tomblike room in Massachusetts in 1910" (276); "two, four, now two again, according to Quentin and Shreve, the two the four the two still talking" (285).

It is important to note that following this scene, Shreve will provide one of the novel's most sentimental perspectives on the Sutpen story. Describing Charles Bon's decision to keep a photograph of his mistress in a locket he knows Judith will find, Shreve reveals a romanticizing ideology and turn of mind about southern history that resembles that of the early silent cinema. Correcting Mr. Compson's earlier account (he thinks) Shreve says, "'And your old man wouldn't have known about that too: why the black son of a bitch should have taken [Judith's] picture out and put the octoroon's picture in . . . But I know. And you know too. Don't you? Don't you, huh?'" (295). As the culmination of his act of narrating, Shreve's belligerence and vituperation give over in the next moment, and he offers one of the most patently romantic interpretations of the novel. As such, this moment reveals the true character of Shreve's imagining. Sounding faintly like Rosa Coldfield, he offers, "'It was because he said to himself, 'If Henry dont mean what he said, it will be all right; I can take it out and destroy it. But if he does mean what he said, it will be the only way I will have to say to her, *I was no good; do not grieve for me*''" (295).

Significantly, Quentin concurs. At the end of a chapter that "returns" the boys to an earlier moment of history and that purportedly corrects earlier versions of the story, we find a clear indication of the romantic turn of mind that the Sutpen story engenders. What I mean to suggest is the connection between the *manner* of Shreve's and Quentin's narrating, what I have described as similar to suture in film, and the *content* or *quality* of their narration. In depicting Shreve and Quentin in the thrall of a narrative that subsumes and contains them, as the film frame does its viewer through the effect of suture, and by showing the romantic shading of their narration, Faulkner points to a manner of conceiving history similar to that encouraged by early film. Quentin and Shreve participate in a production of narrative and a reproduction of romantic myth, processes that find a structural and ideological paradigm in the historical cinema.

In particular, Shreve offers a version of personalizing events of the Civil War, a habit of thought Rosa demonstrates and that, like her thinking, also relies on the conventions of melodrama. (It is worth noting that Shreve's section as narrator begins with the simple declarative: "'And now we're going to talk about love'" [260]). The determinant generic mode of early film, melodrama and its characteristic narratives, imagery, and structures of thought

appear as the boys' final "answer" to the conflicts of the Sutpen narrative. As such, they offer Shreve and Quentin, as they had Rosa, what seems a satisfying way to reduce and contain the historical, social, and economic complications surrounding the war into a personalized (and melodramatic) plot.<sup>37</sup> All of the boys' earlier efforts to understand Sutpen, and thereby a period of southern history, collapse at their narrative's end into a tragic image of failed romance. As with most of the films of Griffith's career, and in particular with *Birth of a Nation*, Shreve's and Quentin's version of southern history evinces a Victorian and melodramatic preoccupation with the family and an attitude that denies history's broader outlines by personalizing and domesticating it.

In the pages that follow, however, and in his treatment of Quentin in the novel's close, Faulkner pointedly critiques the effects of that ideology and of its (cinematic) reproduction. The problem with romanticizing southern history as Shreve does becomes evident when he and Quentin return to their dorm room and to their position outside of the historical past as subjects in their contemporary reality. At least, this is a problem for Quentin; Shreve, for reasons that will become clear, is able to maintain a certain comfort and distance from the effects of Sutpen's story. It may not be necessary to recall here the fate that awaits Quentin following the close of the novel. Returning to Quentin's freshman year at Harvard, which he had described seven years earlier in *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner leaves Quentin at the end of *Absalom* in a state of mind that will lead to his undoing. "Coming away" from his relationship to the South and its history, as Shreve describes it earlier—leaving the movie theatre, as it were—becomes for Quentin the problem. Lying in his bed in the dark after he and Shreve finish talking, Quentin begins to shake violently, and though the narrator confirms that physically "he felt fine," Quentin's anxiety and tension do not subside. Prompted by Shreve's ironic, prospective vision of a mixed-race "conquering" of western civilization, and by his pointed query, "Why do you hate the South?" (311), Quentin gives over to his shrill, interior denial, "*I dont hate it. . . . I dont. I dont! I dont hate it!*" (311). Faulkner does not depict Quentin's death in either *Absalom* or *The Sound and the Fury*. Yet as the earlier novel makes clear, Quentin is rent asunder by his confrontation with his family, modernity, and the southern past. Though Quentin's suicide is more central to the earlier novel, we can see here, at the end of *Absalom*, a manifestation of the conflict and self-division that hasten it. Asked a deceptively simple question by Shreve, Quentin reveals the pressure and self-hatred that Faulkner understood haunted many southerners and that in Quentin's case approaches hysteria.

As we know well and can see at the novel's close, Quentin does hate the South, or the part of him that identifies with it, and he will die in part because of this fissure and shame. Contributing to that state of mind at the end of *Absalom* is the pain of having to deal with the reality of the present following the roommates' act of narrating, or in Shreve's account, "playing" with the past (231). The suture-like process that Quentin and Shreve go through allows them to forget, temporarily—like the viewer of historical film—their place in the present and their remove from southern history.

By bringing the country imaginatively, if falsely, together through the image of a bucolic, pacific past, early cinema about the South had attempted its own act of "healing" or suture, contributing to a national reconciliation and recovery from the wounding of the war. To a large extent, as the career of a film like *Birth* suggested, that effort succeeded. Through *Absalom's* treatment of Rosa's monologue and its intimations of the cinematic experience, however, Faulkner's novel suggests the effects of that success: a broadly defined, cultural melancholia encouraged by film and its reproducible, technological images. Captivated and gratified, audiences gave over to the pleasant distractions of the new medium and, like the nostalgic market for photography, "forgot" the reality of violence, slavery, and the Civil War.

Unlike the viewer of historical film, however, Quentin finds matters more difficult. "Unstitched" by his return to reality and the dorm room, ripped open as it were, Quentin fails to undergo the healing, restorative process that historical amnesia and cinematic narrative effected. For Shreve, that process is simple, even pleasant. It involves an act like creative play, and he manages, unlike Quentin, to retain some distance from the objects of his narration because they seem to him unreal or even faintly absurd. He even compares talking about the South to watching *Ben Hur* (180), a 1925 release that performs its own romanticizing of history. For Quentin, however, the stakes of historical remembrance and of manufacturing nostalgia are much higher. Unlike Shreve he cannot "come away" from his contact with an historical past that marks him, as a southerner, as complicit with its violent events and its wounding of both the "body" of the South and of the country's political past. As long as Quentin, with Shreve, maintains a film-like identification with the images of his past narration and an unbroken reverie in their visual play, he is comfortable. Giving up that sense of aesthetic, imaginative pleasure, however, and returning to the reality of his position both in history and in the North is painful. And the psychological effects of being forced to forgo his detached, cinematic position prove, indeed, extreme.