

“LIKE A BROKEN CINEMA FILM”
RETHINKING FAULKNER’S FILMIC NOVELS

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

“LIKE A BROKEN CINEMA FILM”
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presented by Philip Derbesy,

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Every year the University of Mississippi hosts the Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference, a place for Faulkner scholars to explore the intersections between the author's works and various streams of literary or cultural criticism. The conference's plenary essays are published annually in the *Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha* anthology series. This series provides interesting snapshots that illuminate how critical interests in and approaches to Faulkner's work have evolved over time.

The anthology based on the 1978 Yoknapatawpha conference is entitled *Faulkner, Modernism, and Film*, and it contains two essays by Bruce Kawin, the undisputed godfather of Faulkner/film scholarship. The first of Kawin's essays explores Faulkner's working relationship with maverick filmmaker Howard Hawks, while the second theorizes that Faulkner used montage filmmaking as a paradigm for his novelistic imagery. Just this past year, the latest book in the series, *Faulkner and Film*, was published.¹ It was edited by Peter Lurie, the current star of Faulkner/film studies, and contains essays on topics from filmic space in Faulkner's novels to the significance of the Oprah Book Club to contemporary readers of Faulkner. The fact that this influential conference would choose to revisit the topic after so many years demonstrates not only the sustained critical interest in Faulkner's interactions with film but also the breadth of possibilities for studying the relationship.

My purpose in the remainder of this introduction is twofold. First, I will provide a brief overview of critical approaches to Faulkner/Film scholarship, focusing on the four that I have found to be the most common: biography, genre, adaptation, and form. While these categories are necessarily somewhat arbitrary and many scholars address more than one aspects of

¹ *Faulkner and Film* is also the title of Kawin's 1977 monograph on the relationship between Faulkner's novels and screenwriting. Faulkner critics have a habit of parodying the title, something that I have tried to avoid in my thesis.

Faulkner's novels and films, they are nevertheless useful for summarizing the conversation. Once I have done this, I will expound my own intervention into the discourse, explaining that while I find interesting and useful elements in biographical, genre, and adaptation criticism, I will be using a formal paradigm for the most part. Specifically, I will argue that Faulkner's novelistic imagery reveals not only engagement with film, but specifically a desire to define a literary project *against* the boundaries of what film can accomplish visually.

Biographical Scholarship

In one sense, biographical scholarship seems to be the simplest way to understand Faulkner's relationship to Hollywood, as it establishes such factual details as when he was there, what he did, and with whom he associated. Bruce Kawin's essay "Faulkner's Film Career: The Years with Hawks" fits this description, and Faulkner's Hollywood interludes take up considerable space in all the major biographies of him (Joseph Blotner's being the standard). There are two main facts that surface in all of these accounts. The first is that Faulkner had three major stints in Hollywood, all of which were orchestrated to some degree by Howard Hawks: Faulkner appeared very briefly in 1932 with MGM to adapt his novel *Sanctuary* (1931) to the screen; he signed with 20th Century Fox from 1935 to 1937; and, finally, he went back to MGM from 1942-1945. The second fact that critics note is that Faulkner was not a particularly successful screenwriter, as the only enduring films that he contributed to were Hawks' *To Have and Have Not* (1944) and *The Big Sleep* (1946). Most of Faulkner's screenplays went unproduced, and the ones that were, were either unsuccessful, rewritten beyond recognition by other writers at the studio, or (usually) both.

The fact that such a great novelist as Faulkner was unsuccessful as a screenwriter leads some critics to speculate about the differences between writing in the two media, as I will cover

in a moment. The real question for most biographical critics is how seriously Faulkner took his work in Hollywood and the extent to which his work in the movies affected his fiction. After all, it is possible to speculate that Faulkner's film project was largely a cash grab, a blip that should be ignored in the context of his larger oeuvre. Most critics, however, reject this reading. For instance, Kawin writes, "The work Faulkner did in Hollywood breaks down into two categories: the good work he did for good directors who took him seriously, and the hack work he did for the rest" ("Faulkner's Film Career" 164). Kawin takes an important middle ground here, stating that it would be disingenuous to say that Faulkner wholeheartedly detested or embraced Hollywood (though he loudly claimed to do the former). Another way of approaching the problem of Faulkner's failures is to examine the history of his work in Hollywood and analyze his place in the studio system. After all, the argument goes, his job was to write the scripts, and he had no institutional control over their eventually being produced or shelved. To this end, Robert W. Hamblin writes that Faulkner was "more than equal to the challenge" of composing interesting and ambitious screenplays, especially during his final stint at MGM, when he wrote several prestige films that stalled because of the vagaries of wartime politics and in-house budgetary concerns (10).

While a potential goldmine for interesting scholarship, my project will not focus on Faulkner's screenplay manuscripts. I am intrigued, however, by the question of how analyzing Faulkner's attitudes toward film might be leveraged into meaningful readings of novels. For instance, as I will unpack in detail in my second chapter, Joseph R. Urgo argues in "*Absalom, Absalom! The Movie*" that Faulkner used his experience with the Hollywood screenwriting process as a template for his progression of narrators in that novel. More recently, Sarah Gleeson-White published an article proving that Faulkner was exposed to Eisenstein's films

while working in Hollywood, an important discovery for the many critics who have long linked the two artists. Gleeson-White's article notwithstanding, however, biographical criticism of Faulkner is no longer very much in vogue,² and I will not attempt in my own argument to draw a one-to-one correlation between events in his life and themes in his work.

Genre

The most common generic critical move is to link Faulkner's fiction to film noir in some way. This is unsurprising given the long-standing tendency of critics to link the uncertainty of Faulkner's work and his shadowy, morbid imagery to detective fiction. Indeed, many of Faulkner's screenplays are in the noir genre, most notably *The Big Sleep*. Greg Forter argues that Faulkner's relationship to detective fiction operates on a continuum. At one extreme *Knight's Gambit* and *Intruder in the Dust* operate as "straight" genre fiction; at the other are *Light in August* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, whose genre elements are "practically dissolved" in his experimental project; in the middle is *Sanctuary*, which perfectly balances these two impulses (374). If this reading of how Faulkner relates to detective fiction is more or less standard, however, scholars disagree on the specific effect that film noir may have had on Faulkner's fiction. For instance, Nicole Kenley argues that the detective genre allowed Faulkner to create an idealized version of Southern masculinity in his novels and screenplays based on the principle of erudition, whereas Maggie Gordon asserts that the genre allows Faulkner to interrogate notions of Christian morality in *Sanctuary*. Still other critics turn the question upside down, asking not how noir influenced Faulkner but rather how Faulkner influenced noir. James Naremore writes in

² By which I mean: this is no longer a common way of parsing Faulkner's relationship to film. Still, the past few years have seen the publication of such volumes as *Faulkner and Love: The Women Who Shaped His Art* (Judith L. Sensibar 2009) and *Faulkner and Hemingway: A Biography of a Literary Rivalry* (Joseph Fruscione 2012).

“American Film Noir: The History of an Idea” that noir developed in post-World War II France, inspired in large part by “Southern Gothicism and tough-guy modernism” (22).

It is not within the scope of this project to trace the thread of noir tropes through Faulkner’s novels, as rewarding a task as that might prove. I have brought the question of genre up here partially because it is an important strand of criticism and I would be remiss not to at least mention it. More importantly, Faulkner’s awareness of and participation in generic modes of narration – and specifically filmic modes of narration – is an important component of my own argument. While scholars disagree about the nature of his stance toward these tropes, there is a consensus that he was both aware of and engaged with them, and I will be taking this as a given in my own argument. This will be especially helpful in my chapter on *Sanctuary*, in which I contrast the Faulkner’s language of violence with that of contemporary crime films.

Adaptation

Scholarship that uses adaptation theory as a means of examining Faulkner’s relationship to film primarily write about the problems that arise when his novels are made into movies. The most important work on this subject is Gene D. Phillips’s book *Fiction, Film, and Faulkner: The Art of Adaptation*. After a brief history of Faulkner’s work as a screenwriter, Phillips evaluates each adaptation of Faulkner’s work that had been attempted up to that point (1988), seeking to ascertain whether they “are worthy renditions of the stories from which they are derived” (2). While Phillips is certainly thorough, Kawin actually undertakes an identical project in *Faulkner and Film*. There is an evaluative quality to both scholars’ work, basically asking of each film whether it attempts to take into account the complexity and richness of the novel on which it is based. Both can be scathing in their judgments on this point. This focus on producing a film that is somehow equivalent to the source material is no longer the most popular way to conceptualize

adaptation, but it certainly made its mark on Faulkner criticism as scholars question whether his convoluted prose and plots are inherently un-filmable.

Beyond this tendency to evaluate the films themselves, scholars have used adaptations of Faulkner's novels as lenses to analyze the film industry at the time. Horton Foote theorizes, for instance, that "Hollywood has so often failed with him because they insisted on improving him—for whatever reasons: to make him more palatable, more popular, more commercial" (65). While Foote still seems to be operating under Phillips's assumption that Faulkner's original text is of primary and the film of secondary significance, he also makes the point that the reason for unsatisfactory adaptations is institutional rather than necessary, that Faulkner *could* be adapted, given proper treatment from filmmakers and executives.³ Another example of this stance is Elizabeth Binggeli's interesting article "Worse than Bad: *Sanctuary*, the Hays Office and the Genre of Abjection." Binggeli tells the story of how *Sanctuary* was adapted into *The Story of Temple Drake* (1933), and how the film was in turn censored for being too licentious. While Binggeli's argument is complex and deserves a more thorough treatment (which I will give it in my *Sanctuary* chapter), it is an excellent example of how questions of adaptation can lead to fruitful readings of novels.

Like the question of Faulkner's screenplays, viewing and analyzing film adaptations of Faulkner's novels is ultimately beyond the scope of the current project. Nevertheless, the question of whether his novelistic imagery can be translated to film is a question that at least sparked my interest in the early stages of my thinking about novels and films. I would like to say that I will at no point in this thesis make a definitive statement about what can or ought to be put onto film, as Kawin and Phillips are eager to do. Nevertheless, reading their criticism led me to

³ Time will tell if James Franco is the filmmaker to strike this delicate balance.

question why Faulkner chooses to write in such a visually ambiguous way – as if he did not want his novels to be filmed. Of course, this is not the case. He often wrote (unproduced) screenplays of his own novels, and certainly would have welcomed the financial windfall that such adaptations would have brought him. Nevertheless, that simple fact that I had a difficult time imagining Faulkner’s novels in filmic terms was a starting point for this investigation.

Formal Scholarship

Again, Kawin is at the forefront of critics who examine the ways in which Faulkner’s fiction seems to be in dialogue with film on a formal level. He and R.J. Raper were the first critics to use the principles of Sergei Eisenstein’s montage film theory as a means of conceptualizing Faulkner’s prose. Kawin writes that in Faulkner, as with montage, “When description A fails, and description B fails, one can hope that their juxtaposition will point toward C, the thing itself” (“The Montage Element” 124). Thus, the way that Faulkner organizes his novels on both the plot and prose levels can be conceptualized in terms filmic influence. Granted, Kawin admits that while this is a useful way to understand Faulkner’s imagery, there is no reason to think that he actually had read and was purposely implementing Eisenstein’s film theory. This is a problem that I find with many formalist readings: they draw interesting parallels, but often fail to demonstrate that those parallels are anything other than incidental. Nevertheless, I value the fact that this kind of scholarship puts the emphasis on the novels themselves and remains grounded in close reading of the texts.

While this method of pinpointing specific points at which novels exhibit filmic influence is a common enough critical move, I would like to dedicate a moment to an exemplary, recent work that takes this approach: Peter Lurie’s monograph *Vision's Immanence: Faulkner, Film, and the Popular Imagination*. Lurie writes, “Although direct and indirect references to particular

films or texts occur throughout Faulkner's thirties fiction . . . what I find most compelling as a way of reading Faulkner's modernism is its inflection by what we might call the 'film idea,' the manner of impression and visual activity his novels model from the cinema" (6). Significantly for Lurie, Faulkner's novels do not merely reveal an interest in employing certain filmic tropes, but a fascination with interrogating films as both an artistic medium and as a mode of meaning production. In other words, Faulkner's novels are a place where he can work out his own thoughts about the possibilities and shortcomings of film, and the mere presence of filmic tropes does not necessarily reveal a simple interest in testing what the novel can do. As this thesis is a jumping-off point for my own, I can think of no better way of transitioning into explaining my own argument in this project.

An Outline and a Definition

Lurie provides any number of possibilities for how we might understand Faulkner's attitude toward film in various novels (and I will certainly return to his thoughts when developing readings of individual novels). In my thesis, I would like to suggest, at a basic level, that Lurie is onto something, and that Faulkner does define his novelistic project in terms of film. More specifically, I will argue that Faulkner's novels employ systems of image-making that are incompatible with film. In order to do this, I will provide detailed readings of two novels: *Sanctuary* (1931) and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936). In both chapters I will analyze Faulkner's visual language at the level of plot and of prose. In other words, I consider both how Faulkner constructs images at a sentence level and also how presenting a given image to the reader in a specific narrative context can manipulate the reader's experience of narrative authority. In Chapter 2, this takes the form of analyzing how Faulkner utilizes filmic ellipsis *Sanctuary*. I argue that this technique troubles notions of what can be portrayed in each medium and,

ultimately, how novels can employ a layered and chaotic point of view that is impossible in films. In Chapter 3, I argue that Faulkner systematically undermines the images he presents to the viewer in such a way as to question the epistemological certainty of studio era films. Taken together, these novels imagine novels as having access to a language of imagery that goes beyond what films can accomplish by simultaneously showing and not-showing.

I realize that in order to make the argument that Faulkner's novels undermine the ways that films present images to viewers I must have a working definition for how I am going to define filmic imagery from this period. For that I will turn briefly to David Bordwell, who provides with breathtaking succinctness an overview of the narrative and formal expectations that Hollywood placed upon itself in what he calls the Classical era. It is worth quoting at length. He writes that if we were to take Hollywood's self-image as the standard for the Classical style,

We would find that the Hollywood cinema sees itself as bound by rules that set stringent limits on individual innovation; that telling a story is the basic formal concern, which makes the film studio resemble the monastery's *scriptorium*, the site of the transcription and transmission of countless narratives; that unity is a basic attribute of film form; that the Hollywood film purports to be 'realistic' in both an Aristotelian sense (truth to the probable) and a naturalistic one (truth to historical fact); that the Hollywood film strives to conceal its artifice through techniques of continuity and 'invisible' storytelling; that the film should be comprehensible and unambiguous; and that it possesses a fundamental emotional appeal that transcends class and nation. (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson³)

Bordwell paints a picture of Hollywood as valuing, above all, straightforwardness in narrative. At a basic level this is something that readers of Faulkner would likely agree that he does not provide.

While this is a fascinating list of attributes, and one might make an argument that Faulkner disrupts any number of them in his novel writing, throughout my thesis I will be most concerned with two points in particular: that cinema “conceals its artifice,” and is “comprehensible and unambiguous.” Of course these are not hard, fast rules, and individual films will break them in various ways. Yet there is something important about the idea of “concealing artifice.” Hollywood’s continuity editing encourages the viewer to follow the film’s action without fear of losing one’s place and certainly without fear of being tricked. The entire system is based on the notion that an image presented to the reader represents what it appears to and functions straightforwardly in the world of the story. Thus, when Faulkner disrupts this system of imagery in his novels it is not merely that he forces the reader to participate in image-production, for films certainly require this of viewers as well. Rather, he forces the reader to be acutely aware of her role in image production instead of trying to hide this fact. Even more than this, though, he asks his readers to be skeptical of an epistemological framework that bases itself on such certainty. That, at least, is what I will argue in the remainder of this thesis.

Chapter 2: The Showable and the Shown in *Sanctuary*

Almost since it was first published, critics have understood *Sanctuary* in terms of detective fiction, potboiler novels, and gangster films. There is a standard way for critics to introduce Faulkner's attitude toward the popular aspects of the novel, and indeed the introduction has changed very little since the 1970s. Elizabeth Binggeli, while she notes the tiredness of this critical move, summarizes it succinctly:

Faulkner's origin myth of *Sanctuary* as laid out in his introduction to the 1932 Modern Library edition is well known; it begins with what he describes as a crude and hastily written potboiler, "deliberately conceived to make money." To a friend Faulkner claimed that he had "made a thorough and methodical study of everything on the list of best-sellers. When I thought I knew what the public wanted, I decided to give them a little more than they had been getting; stronger and rawer—more brutal. Guts and genitals." (94)

Faulkner goes on to claim that he cleaned up the novel somewhat between its inception in 1929 and eventual publication in 1931, but he never at any point owned up to believing that either version of the novel was literarily worthwhile. Critics who analyze the novel's relationship to popular culture often feel the need to actively refute these statements; after all, if Faulkner really viewed the novel's purpose solely in monetary terms and was cynical enough to make it gruesome because that was what the reading public wanted, it would hardly be a fertile site for scholarship. Overall, I agree with this trend: I think that Faulkner does something more interesting in the novel than his statements about it would lead one to believe, especially in his appropriation of themes and techniques from contemporary crime films. Indeed, I think that there

is more critical work to be done to understand just why he wrote a novel so indebted to popular literary and filmic forms.

For the most part, filmic readings of *Sanctuary* have fallen into two camps. The first, pioneered by Bruce Kawin and Gene Phillips, analyzes the issues that arose when *Sanctuary* was adapted to film (first as *The Story of Temple Drake* in 1933, then as *Sanctuary* in 1961). Kawin and Phillips both evaluate whether these films are able to faithfully or successfully adapt the novel.⁴ More interestingly, they comment on the kinds of systemic issues in Hollywood that prevented an accurate film from being produced. *The Story of Temple Drake* is of particular interest because it was released after the Hays Code was adopted in 1930 but before Joseph Breen arrived and gave the code teeth in 1934. Kawin writes, “The three things it would not allow, and which are basic to the novel, are impotence, perjury, and failure. Even the rape is presented as somehow appropriate, as Temple’s come-uppance for her career as a sexy tease” (*Faulkner and Film* 33). The plot of the novel presents a world that is inherently unfair: Popeye murders Tommy and rapes Temple, yet Goodwin is punished for these crimes based on Temple’s false testimony. Kawin and Phillips both do well to point out that in a time when films had to present a world in which wickedness is punished and goodness rewarded, there is no way that this plot could be faithfully represented onscreen, much less some of the grislier scenes in which the murders and rapes are depicted.

The second group, which includes Richard Gray and Peter Lurie, pinpoints instances where Faulkner employs tropes from popular sources, such as potboiler fiction and film noir. Gray writes a forward-looking argument, considering the ways in which *Sanctuary* preconfigures tropes that would become prominent in film noir. Somewhat more usefully, Lurie lists

⁴ For what it’s worth, Phillips considers each adaptation to be successful in its own way, whereas Kawin shows some real contempt for the narrative shortcomings of *The Story of Temple Drake*.

similarities between the novel's events, characters, and tropes and those of the crime novels of the day. In particular, he takes up a considerable (possibly excessive) amount of space to describe how various aspects of Popeye's characterization appear to rely on stock characterizations from potboiler novels. Despite this tendency to grow slightly tedious, however, Lurie makes the important overall point that Faulkner constructed *Sanctuary* to be a self-aware novel, writing that "Faulkner exposes rather than maintains divisions between mass culture and high art on which earlier modes of modernism relied" (51). If true, this means that Faulkner's goal in the novel is not only to employ filmic techniques or write a smutty story that movie studios would like to buy. Instead, he writes to consider the ways in which his own high art project should properly interact with film.

The most interesting perspective on *Sanctuary* for my purposes is to be found in Elizabeth Binggeli's excellent article, "Worse than Bad: *Sanctuary*, the Hays Office and the Genre of Abjection." Rather than simply investigate modes of production or list the novel's popular influences, Binggeli uses these facts as a starting point for a unique reading of the novel itself. Binggeli argues that while the ways that the novel sexualizes race (or vice versa) were considered unacceptable by film censors in the early 1930s when *The Story of Temple Drake* was produced, that does not mean that these features of the novel should be acceptable for us today. In other words, the censorship was wrong and wrong-headed, but we as critics must still be allowed to evaluate Faulkner's sexual and racial politics. While I will consider some of the problems with Faulkner's treatment of rape later in this chapter, right now I would like to focus on a point Binggeli makes about the mechanism that Faulkner uses to thematize censorship in *Sanctuary*. She points out that Faulkner uses a filmic technique to avoid depicting the most grisly aspects of his story; at the moment before Popeye rapes Temple, for instance, the narration

“cuts” away from the action. In moments such as this, Binggeli argues, “Faulkner relies on what could be described as cinematographic ellipsis” (97).

When I employ the term “cut” in this essay, I will be following Binggeli’s lead. That is, it will mean that the visual focus of a passage has shifted from one image to another, just as a cut in film refers to a shift from one shot to another. While in novels this often takes place at a paragraph or chapter break, Faulkner’s narrative point of view is flexible enough that cuts will sometimes occur even within a single sentence. The concept of the novelistic cut is necessary for my argument in this chapter, and indeed it provides an important point for my project as a whole. Faulkner is aware that both novels and films inherently require visual movement. Films, however, are limited in this regard by the fact that point of view is necessarily and mechanically limited; a camera can only be in one place at a time. At a basic level, then, cutting in *Sanctuary* draws attention to the fact that novelistic point of view is more fluid than the filmic. Beyond this general function, however, I will argue that Faulkner’s use of cutting in the novel is closely tied to his thematization of censorship.

Critics are right to observe that one of *Sanctuary*’s defining characteristics is its smutty and parboiled subject matter. In this chapter I will argue that while, as Binggeli observes, the narration cuts away from the story’s most gruesome actions, the novel is willing to give the reader such detail in indirect ways and with varying degrees of subtlety. I would like to compare two instructive instances of this phenomenon to introduce my overall argument about the novel: the respective murders of the halfwit bootlegger Tommy and an unnamed black woman. These murders are separated by a chapter break and operate as clear foils for one another. First, a crowd gathers to look at Tommy’s body (he has just been murdered by Popeye; Goodwin will be blamed, setting up one of the most important plot points):

All day long a knot of them stood about the door to the undertaker's parlor, and boys and youths with and without schoolbooks leaned with flattened noses against the glass, and the bolder ones and the younger men of the town entered in twos and threes to look at the man called Tommy. He lay on a wooden table, barefoot, in overalls, the sun-bleached curls on the back of his head matted with dried blood and singed with powder, while the coroner say over him, trying to ascertain his last name. (113)

This image closes the chapter. Immediately at the beginning of the next we learn of another murder:

On the day when the sheriff brought Goodwin to town, there was a negro murderer in the jail, who had killed his wife; slashed her throat with a razor so that, her whole head tossing further and further backward from the bloody regurgitation of her bubbling throat, she ran out the cabin door for six or seven steps up the quiet moonlit lane. He would lean out the window in the evening and sing. (114)

The narrator never provides a visual description of Tommy's murder, one of the novel's central plot points; indeed, the plot is driven specifically by the fact that the reader does not know how this event happened and why. One might think that this is because Faulkner is purposely "cutting away" from such actions, as films at this time would do when insinuating graphic violence or sexual content of any kind, but what interests me about it is the haphazard nature of the cutting away. For instance, though we do not see Tommy's murder, we are shown the wound, "matted with dried blood and singed with powder." Yet immediately after sparing the audience from seeing Tommy be shot, the narrator provides an account of the black woman's

murderer in the most gruesome detail possible. What is the point of sparing us the one grisly crime only to insert artificially an image of an even more horrifying one? This theme of what the narrator elects to show us – or what to show us instead of a major action – is an important feature of the novel.

I would remiss if I did not point out the specifics of what the narrator does and does not show us in this particular case—that is, Faulkner cuts away from the murder of a white man, and instead shows the murder of a black woman. This fact participates in a longstanding and complicated discourse of filmic substitution. Richard Dyer describes a similar dynamic in his reading of the film *Jezebel* (1938), stating that the white protagonist “no longer expresses feeling – she ‘lives’ through Zette [her black slave]” (58). So often in early films, black bodies were substituted for white ones, either acting that were unacceptable for white characters or showing exaggerated emotions that white characters feel.⁵ At this moment, problematizing what can and cannot be shown, it seems that Faulkner is complicit in this tradition. If we are being charitable, we might say that he describes an exaggerated grisly murder of a black woman in order to problematize the concept of violence committed against black bodies. While this reading is possible, this seems to me to be a moment in which the narration participates uncritically in a racist discourse.⁶

Either way, this question of race brings up another essential issue: equally important to the visual fact of what images the narrative presents to the reader is the stance of the narrator toward those images. The first scene takes place in the novel’s present, but signifies a murder

⁵ For a comprehensive summary of this dynamic through the history of film, see Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card*. For an analysis of how films accomplish this kind of substitution on a formal level, see Peter Lehman’s essay “Texas 1868/America 1956: *The Searchers*.”

⁶ This will not be a theme that I have space to develop fully in my essay, but Binggeli argues that the novel is essentially racist, especially with regard to Popeye’s racial ambiguity.

that takes place in the novel's past. As readers, we are in the presence of the already-murdered Tommy and conscious of the fact that we did not witness his killing. The second scene also contains an already-completed murder, but in this case the narrator's field of vision strays into that narrative past and describes what the murder would have looked like to a viewer. In this way the narrator is able to provide the reader with a grisly image without actually having it appear in the action of the novel. Such manipulation of time is a common feature of the novel; even when it seems to have passed over an event, the narrative will somehow fold backward to make sure that the reader can visualize what happened or understand its effect more completely, or the narrative will stall and spend a seemingly unwarranted amount of time on character's reactions to events. The end result is that the narrative proper is relatively tame, whereas the timeline and subtext invite – or in this case, force – the reader to envision atrocities regardless. Thus, even when he does depict anything unsavory it does not happen in the novel's present, but rather uses complex manipulations of time to create a sort of faux distance between narration and narrator.

In this chapter I will argue that these methods of deflecting narrative attention away from violence and sex are central to Faulkner's critique of film in *Sanctuary*. Kristin Thompson writes that in classical Hollywood film, "unexplained ellipses or overlaps in time . . . would tend to call attention to the process of narration" (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 181). This was in a system in which continuity editing was becoming industry standard, and in which "The classical cinema began to dictate that any deviations from chronological order be clearly marked as such" (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 181). Of course, there is no sense in drawing a one-to-one correlation between Faulkner's novel and a film from this time. Complex manipulations of narrative time have been a feature of novels almost since the medium began, so an author could engage in such a project without using it to comment on film as a form. Nevertheless, I would

argue that the ellipses in *Sanctuary* do in fact serve the function that Thomson describes, in that they “call attention to the process of narration.” While on a surface level the narrator refuses to straightforwardly present the reader with sex and violence, the form – and in this case, a specifically filmic form – forces the reader to consider and visualize them all the same. The result is that instead of functioning to distract the reader from such content, Faulkner only increases the interest in and focus on it.

It is important that Faulkner conspicuously omits visual descriptions of actions from *Sanctuary*. As Binggeli observes, the clearest example of this comes in the novel’s central action, the rape of Temple Drake. The scene as written is strangely explicit while providing the reader with as few specific details as possible:

She was saying it to the old man with the yellow clots for eyes. “Something is happening to me!” she screamed at him, sitting in his chair in the sunlight, his hands crossed on the top of the stick. “I told you it was!” She screamed, voiding the words like hot silent bubbles into the bright silence until he turned his head and the two phlegm-clots above her where she lay tossing and thrashing on the rough, sunny boards. “I told you! I told you all the time!” (102)

The phrase “Something is happening to me!” is perhaps the perfect euphemistic cry for Temple here; the reader must come up with his or her interpretation for what that “something” might be. In an almost absurd stretching of the principle of showing rather than telling, the narration refuses to give a name to what has happened to Temple, even as she is seen to be “tossing and thrashing” and calling out. Almost too significantly, the only witness to the crime is a blind and deaf old man – one who is unable to truly witness anything. The fact that her words are “voided . . . like hot bubbles into white silence” indicates her complete isolation at this moment, as her

cries literally fall upon deaf ears. Strangely, there is no mention of Popeye, the perpetrator, in this scene; we have a detached account of Temple's words and actions, but it is as if there is no actual rapist present, and we still have no confirmation from the narrator that a rape has taken place.

The chapter ends here. Binggeli finds this fact significant: "Faulkner places the impending rape at the end of a chapter, drawing a curtain over the violent scene *in medias res* before fading up to a new scene at the beginning of the next chapter" (97). The next thing we see is Popeye and Temple driving away in a car and Mrs. Goodwin telling her husband to call the police. Thus, Temple's kidnapping also takes place during the ellipsis; instead of showing her being grabbed and taken away in explicit detail, the novel cuts away to a scene that shows the aftermath of it. But I find it significant that this ellipsis does not spare the audience from the moral dilemma of having witnessed a traumatic or immoral event, as an ellipsis in a contemporary film would have attempted to do. As I will discuss later in this chapter, the reader is still implicated in the voyeuristic pleasure of experiencing Temple's plight firsthand. The fact that the narration erases Popeye's violent acts and replaces them with a nebulous "something" is thus an empty gesture. Even as the narrator refrains from telling us what has happened, Temple insists, "I told you! I told you all the time!"

If thinking about *Sanctuary* in filmic terms, it would make sense to evaluate its moral elements by the standards set out for films at the time. In a sense, the narration of *Sanctuary* takes on the form of a narrative that is conforming to the moral standards of the day by eliding and cutting away from violence. Stephen Prince explains in *Classical Film Violence* that the film industry developed "normative patterns of imagery that evolved in response to the pressures about what could and could not be shown and to stand in for those dimensions of represented

violence that exceeded the existing screen boundaries” (18). In other words, the industry developed film language for representing various kinds of violence in such a way that it would not technically be subject to censorship. In utilizing ellipsis he does, Faulkner employs exactly this kind of visual language in *Sanctuary*. The difference between the novel and its filmic contemporaries, however, is that it cuts away from the wrong things. For instance, film censors both before and after the implementation of the Hays Code “worked to suppress extended expressions of pain and suffering” (Prince 28).⁷ While Faulkner avoids showing violence firsthand, but the narration of *Sanctuary* never shies away from showing the aftermath, as we see screaming and physically thrashing. Later, there are extended passages of Temple’s traumatized internal monologue, and she is unable or unwilling to tell Horace Benbow what happened to her when he tries to help.⁸

Elsewhere in the novel, Faulkner presents disturbing images to the reader directly, to the point where cutting away from the action at hand seems to be pointless. After fleeing from the barn that served as the setting for the initial rape, Popeye brings Temple to a brothel in Memphis. Here we see another instance of sexual assault: “His hand clapped over her mouth, and gripping his wrist, the saliva drooling between his fingers, her body thrashing furiously from thigh to thigh, she saw him crouching beside the bed, his face wrung above his absent chin. . . making a high whinnying sound like a horse” (159). Here the narrator’s observations are far more detailed than in the case of the initial rape. While the narration is still from Temple’s point of view (the sentence’s main action is “she saw him”), in this case Popeye has his hand over her mouth,

⁷ Prince argues that this trend had far-reaching effects in later film representations of violence, as it led the industry “toward a screen violence that provided pleasant entertainment rather than an honest depiction of the consequences of fights and shootings” (27).

⁸ Eden Wales Freedman argues in her essay “‘Something is happening to me’: Witnessing Trauma in Faulkner’s *Sanctuary*” that Temple exhibits classic symptoms of PTSD.

preventing her from speaking. Perhaps because she is unable to speak herself the narrator is uncomfortably specific here, bringing in not only the visual of Temple “thrashing furiously” and the disturbing sound of Popeye’s “whinnying like a horse,” but also the touch detail of the saliva between his fingers. Yet even after providing this specificity, the narration cuts away to a completely new image: “Beyond the wall Miss Reba filled the hall, the house, with a harsh choking uproar of obscene cursing” (159). The landing point across this cut provides a kind of wry foil for the action that came before it, as the reader is spared from hearing the obscenity of Miss Reba’s language after being forced to witness something far worse.

Yet again the cutting has failed in its job of protecting the audience from seeing what decency standards of the day would dictate that they ought to see. The narration here fails to function as an ellipsis because it does not rely on codified shorthand for representing sexual violence. Take, for instance, if the chapter had ended on this phrase a paragraph earlier: “Temple neither saw nor heard her door when it opened. She just happened to look toward it after how long she did not know, and she saw Popeye standing there, his hat slanted across his face. Still without making any sound he shut the door and shot the bolt and came toward the bed” (158). If the narration had jumped from this statement to the sound of Miss Reba’s obscenities, there would have been ample evidence that Temple is again in danger. In fact, this description reads like a scene from a crime film of the day, with the slanted hat indicating that Popeye is a man of violence and the bolted door showing his designs on Temple. At that point, the mere momentum of his moving toward the bed, followed by a cut, would probably signify rape to the reading public, especially if we see an upset Temple on the other side of the cut. Instead, Faulkner positions his cut *after* showing the violence, relying on the far less subtle shorthand of Popeye

holding Temple down while she struggles to break free. He cuts away before an actual rape occurs, but gives the audience a jarring image before doing so.

In this way Faulkner develops a visual language of violence that is, in a sense, less sophisticated than that of contemporary film. It is common to think of novels as having artistic primacy over films; as I will address later, this is an especially common move in traditional adaptation theory. The backing for this point of view is economic: the studio era system was a for-profit enterprise, a machine in which producers could veto artistic innovation in favor of conventional products that were proven to sell.⁹ The Hays Office was a product of this system, as it was easier for the movie industry to voluntarily self-censor than to attempt to make films that would be accepted by the various state review boards and religious protest groups who were demanding that films be held to a certain moral standard.¹⁰ However, as Prince observes, one effect of systematic censorship is that it led to a nuanced visual language for portraying the unshowable. Films that wanted to address gritty subjects would have to speak this language, walking a fine line that ensured audiences could infer sex and violence that was not overt enough to be censored. Filmmakers would constantly invent new ways to reinvent these conventions, pushing artistic boundaries. And Faulkner, clearly aware of this language, chooses to ignore it in the ways he portrays sex and violence in *Sanctuary*. This is what I mean when I say that he is unsophisticated; instead of operating within an established aesthetic system, he chooses instead to formulate his own methods for portraying these subjects.

To better understand the relationship of Faulkner's techniques to films of the time, I think that it is instructive to compare them to analogous scenes in William A. Wellman's *The Public*

⁹ The most important account of this system of Thomas Schatz's *The Genius of the System*.

¹⁰ For more on filmic censorship at this time see Gerald R. Butters' *Banned in Kansas: Motion Picture Censorship, 1915-1966*.

Enemy (1931). As James Cagney's breakout performance, the film (along with *Little Caesar*) was one of the biggest blockbusters in the genre while Faulkner was working on his revised version of *Sanctuary*. To be clear, I am not suggesting that Faulkner used the film as a source of inspiration for his novel, the major plot points of which were already established well before *The Public Enemy* was released. Any similarities in subject matter – bootlegging, sex, and violent characters whose actions verge on the sociopathic – can be chalked up to generic concerns rather than any kind of direct influence. Instead, I would like to use examples from the film, which was considered by many at the time of its release to be particularly grisly, to demonstrate the limits of sex and violence that would be allowed on screen and the kind of thematic elements that would be at play in crime films. The hope here is that these examples will help to clarify how Faulkner seems to be playing with these ideas in *Sanctuary*, especially in pointing out their inherent hypocrisy by drawing extra attention to them. *The Public Enemy* follows the story of Tom Powers (Cagney), a young man growing up in an unnamed city (apparently Chicago). He is a petty thief as a boy, but as he grows up and becomes involved in a bootlegging business during prohibition he grows more and more cruel, murdering a police officer and engaging in revenge killings, among other sins. Inevitably, at the end of the picture Tom is murdered by a rival gang. While the film is a very rich text in a number of ways, I would like to briefly consider the film language of two scenes in which sex and violence intersect.

The first is a scene between Tom and his girlfriend, Kitty (Mae Clark). The film does not develop their relationship particularly fully. The pair meets in a night club, and the next time we see them they are apparently living together in a bright, airy apartment. By this time, for reasons that are never explained beyond his own orneriness and restlessness, Tom has tired of Kitty. Fed up as he is of her nagging, Tom, in perhaps the film's most famous action, violently pushes a

piece of grapefruit into her face. Kitty is not seen for the rest of the picture, and Tom quickly takes up with a new young lady, Gwen (played by Jean Harlow).

In the second scene, Tom has gone into hiding because violence among rival gangs has escalated. Jane (Mia Marvin), the woman in charge of housing Tom and his fellow gang members, purposely singles Tom out and gets him drunk. When he decides to turn in for the night, she helps to undress him and gives him a goodnight kiss; he objects vaguely. She tells him, "I wanna do things for you, Tommy." This apparently signifies nothing to him. Finally she walks across the room and turns out the lamp. She pauses for a moment, then walks back toward the bed, the camera still focused on the now-dark lamp. We hear Tom say, "Aw, get away from me, you're Patty Myers's girl." Fade to black. Next morning, Jane asks Tom, "You aren't sorry, are you?" Tom does not know what she means, apparently having blacked out the night before. When he finally catches on to her meaning, he slaps her viciously across the face.

These scenes are excellent examples of what a filmmaker could get across to an audience through suggestion. In the first scene it is clear that Kitty is Tom's kept woman, but far from ever seeing them sleep together, the signifier of their cohabitation is a chaste breakfast. Tom's savage use of the grapefruit is therefore the perfect shorthand for domestic violence; the brutality of the action belies the light, airiness of the scene and even the daintiness of the weapon itself. The second scene is a classic example of the principle of ellipsis that Faulkner employs throughout *Sanctuary*; at the point of the fadeout, Tom is still actively rebuffing Jane's advances. If this leaves the viewer in suspense for a moment as to what happens after the fadeout, Jane quickly removes all doubt on the other side of the cut. Despite the codified ways in which they talk around the issue of sex, there can be no doubt in the reader's mind as to what has taken place. In

fact, both scenes were deemed to be too explicitly violent and censored by many states' film reviewing bodies (Viera 30).

I dedicate so much space to these scenes because I think it is important to establish how sex and violence were actually portrayed on screen and the limits of what was allowed at the time. The obvious way to connect these scenes back to *Sanctuary* would be to observe how mild they are in comparison to Faulkner's novel, and there is certainly something to this. Not to trivialize Tom's violent behavior in *The Public Enemy*, but it is clear that if state censors could not stomach the grapefruit and the slap, they would certainly not approve of an image of Popeye holding Temple down and using his hands to prevent her from crying out. More important, however, I would argue that *Sanctuary* criticizes this tendency of films to signify morally questionable content (sex, cohabitation, domestic violence) to the audience without naming it for what it is. The clearest example of this, I think, comes in the case of the two young men, Virgil and Fonzo, who come to Memphis looking for prostitutes. They strike up a deal with Miss Reba to stay in her brothel, not realizing what it is. Deadpan, the narrator relates how the boys find relief in a different house of ill repute: "The barber took them to a brothel. When they came out Fonzo said: 'And to think that I been here two weeks without never knowing about that house'" (196). Besides serving as comic relief in a mercilessly dark and heavy story, this interlude also draws attention to the absurdity of using shorthand to protect the audience from scenes of sex in particular. An audience member or reader would have to be as dull as Virgil and Fonzo to fail to understand what is happening at these moments. The audiences are *looking* for sex, and they will be able to spot it if it is right under their noses.

Despite the various ways in which *Sanctuary* is unafraid to present sex and violence to the reader, we do learn at the end of the book that this style has in fact spared us one detail that is

crucial to the plot: the fact that Popeye is impotent and can only violate Temple indirectly. We learn this from Miss Reba, who gossips to her friends, “Minnie said the two of them would be nekkid as two snakes, and Popeye hanging over the foot of the bed without even his hat took off, making a kind of whinnying sound” (258). The scene, we learn, is that of Red having sex with Temple at Popeye’s behest. The tactic of having a character describe this scene rather than the narrator again provides a kind of distance from it, as the scene is never depicted in the novel’s present. Of course in a novel, this distinction is largely an academic one, as the image is equally vivid to the reader regardless of who describes it. An even more extreme example of this principle, in the courtroom scene no one actually verbally explains how Popeye initially raped Temple in the hay. Instead of having a character recount the scene the narration relies on the visual evidence of the corn cob itself. The corn cob is held up in court, and the reader must discern its significance.

In a film at this time, such a scene could neither be depicted directly nor hinted at indirectly. And in fact it was not; neither film adaptation of *Sanctuary* kept Popeye as an impotent character. Rape could be hinted at, but perversion such as Popeye’s was a bridge too far. As Binggeli puts it, “The controversy over the corn cob for the Hays Office was not that it suggested a rape but that it *didn’t*. Or rather, the problem was that the corn cob suggested rape by what was called ‘unnatural means’” (103). Thus, it is in the portrayal of impotence that Faulkner shows his ultimate disrespect for filmic conventions of acceptable content. In depicting the rape, he relies on the formal device of ellipsis that is meant to suggest the act rather than depicting it outright. In this way, it at had the pretense of respectability, and rape is a topic that was allowed in film if dealt with properly. (Rape was one of the topics of the list of “Don’ts and Be Carefuls,” suggestions of film censorship that preceded and shaped the Hays Code.) In using the same

narrative tools to talk about Popeye's impotence, however, Faulkner oversteps a line into the necessarily profane. Granted, the narrator still never names Popeye's condition for what it is, but this method is not enough to save the novel from moral bankruptcy.

The upshot of this narrative mode is that what happens in the ellipsis, far from being removed from the audience's attention, becomes the reader's main focus. The experience of the novel is necessarily a process of slowly discovering what the narration has left out, avoided, and sidestepped. *Sanctuary* is often called a mystery novel of sorts, and to this extent I think the categorization is apt: we do want to find out what happened. Unlike a more conventional mystery story, however, there is no definite crime to be solved, with the narrative marching inexorably toward its solution. Instead, we already know that Popeye has done something heinous, and the narration reveals through glimpses just how heinous it was. The impulse is not so much to bring him to justice (this never seems particularly likely in the course of the novel), but rather to try to understand him and what he has done more completely. The narration cuts away from his actions, preventing us from having to witness anything immoral or unjust directly, but it is also clear that in order to understand the story a whole we will have to look back at them sooner or later.

To conclude, I would like to consider the implications of this argument in terms of Faulkner's larger fictional project. One reason Faulkner could have had for using his novel to interrogate film in this way could have been to highlight and judge the kind of low pleasure that it provided to audiences. Consider the passage I brought up at the beginning of this chapter, with children gathered around the city morgue as if it were a candy shop: "boys and youths with and without schoolbooks leaned with flattened noses against the glass." If nobody actually saw Tommy being murdered, it is clear that everyone would have liked to have seen it. And

Sanctuary actually delivers this kind of pleasure, as we, the readers, get to experience precisely the sort of details that these school boys crave. In this way the novel not only depicts but also implicates the reader in voyeurism. Lurie has noted the novel's voyeuristic tendencies, writing, "The audience for Goodwin's trial, for instance, resembles the readership for mass-market fiction, particularly in their taste for a certain kind of entertainment or story" (57). The crowd that shows up at Goodwin's trial, desperate to know the truth of Tommy's murder, the children at the morgue: as witnesses, they stand in for us, and establish the important theme of audience response that runs throughout the text. Everyone who reads the novel wants to know what really happened to Temple, who really murdered Tommy, what really makes Popeye so evil. In other words, the novel reveals to us our own voyeuristic tendencies.

Some would argue that this means the novel is contemptuous toward readers of popular fiction and consumers of popular culture. This is an interesting reading given Faulkner's fascination with parboiled fiction and detective novels; perhaps, deep down, he was ashamed of his own lowbrow tastes. While this is possible, I think that at the very least it is an incomplete reading of the situation. It seems to me that by drawing attention to the fact that his readers want lurid details Faulkner is commenting not on the peculiar depravity encouraged by certain reading and viewing practices, but rather on the facts of readership and viewership more generally. Readers, he knows, want "guts and genitals." More to the point, novels ought to interrogate the darkest corners of human behavior. Faulkner often brings up unnamable topics in his fiction, from incest to necrophilia to miscegenation. It is the task of fiction to study such behaviors, not to pretend that they do not exist. And in *Sanctuary* he makes the point that books and films which tiptoe around such subjects are not fooling their audiences, but merely tantalizing them, offering to do this kind of work and then renegeing on the offer.

Chapter 3: Narrative and Visual Uncertainty in *Absalom, Absalom!*

Joseph R. Urgo argues that “*Absalom, Absalom!* is about movie-making” (56). Urgo conceptualizes the novel’s progression of narrators in terms of screenwriting: Rosa’s narration provides the “property” (germ of a story on which a film is based), Mr. Compson’s is a “treatment” (a rough, early screenplay), and Quentin’s is a fully realized film. Overall, there is little support for Urgo’s argument other than the parallels between the collaborative process of screenwriting and the collaboration of the novel’s various narrators to describe the life of Thomas Sutpen. Urgo’s reading of *Absalom, Absalom!* is unique, but his critical move is a common one, as many critics have understood Faulkner’s Hollywood experience as a source for the narrative and visual complexity of his novel. In *Absalom*, Faulkner recounts the story of Thomas Sutpen through a combination of first-, second-, third-, and even fourth-hand narrative accounts, each with varying degrees of reliability. These narrators combine to provide a nonlinear plot—full of the kind of intricate, meandering sentences for which Faulkner is famous—resulting in a difficult narrative style that lends itself to speculation such as Urgo’s.

The most common filmic reading of the novel, pioneered by R.J. Raper and continued by Bruce Kawin, compares Faulkner’s prose to the montage film techniques of Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein. At its most basic, montage is a theory of film that relies on the contrast and juxtaposition of narrative units, usually shots, in order to create and reinforce meaning. Eisenstein’s film language, Raper argues, can provide a template for Faulkner’s manipulation of time, the length and complexity of his sentences, and the multiplicity of narrative perspectives in the novel. Whereas Raper is content to list the similarities between *Absalom* and Eisenstein’s film theory, Kawin argues that montage is helpful for understanding the purpose for the novel’s multiple narrators, writing that “When description A fails, and description B fails, one can hope

that their juxtaposition will point toward C, the thing itself (by which I mean not Sutpen the man but Sutpen the force or concept)” (“The Montage Element” 124). Most recently, Sarah Gleeson-White has revived this argument in her article “Auditory Exposures: Faulkner, Eisenstein, and Film Sound,” writing that Faulkner’s use of sound in *Absalom* is also influenced by Eisenstein’s film theory. While all these arguments rely on close reading of Faulkner’s prose and analysis of the specific elements of film language, they also rely on the same assumption as Urgo’s argument: Faulkner’s prose fiction was shaped by his screenwriting experience, as the techniques of film and the experience of writing in a new medium were incorporated into Faulkner’s work as a fiction artist.

Faulkner himself, however, explicitly and vehemently declared his work in Hollywood to be purely financial rather than artistic. He writes to his wife, for instance, that “I’m doing all this to try to make enough money to get the hell out of this place and come back home and fix Missy’s room and paint the house and do all the other things we need” (*Selected Letters* 194). Granted, this personal correspondence can (and should) be taken with a grain of salt, as sentimental writings to one’s family are a far cry from an artistic statement of purpose. Indeed, Faulkner seems to have found his film collaborations with filmmaker Howard Hawks rewarding, so it would be disingenuous to say that Faulkner’s work in film carried no artistic weight.¹¹ Even so, most of Faulkner’s correspondence from California in the 1930s and 40s indicates distaste for the work and is primarily concerned with conducting favorable contract negotiations with various studios. While he dismisses the importance of these letters, even Urgo admits that “Faulkner...is legendary in his complaints about the film industry” (Urgo 57). Taking Faulkner

¹¹ Kawin’s book *Faulkner and Film* recounts Faulkner’s working relationship with Hawks. See especially Chapters 1 and 4 for the details of their collaboration and Kawin’s theories of how their interactions shaped Faulkner’s fiction.

at his own word, then, it is possible to understand his work in Hollywood in precisely the opposite way of the current critical discourse. In this chapter, instead of reading for the ways in which Faulkner incorporates film techniques into his novels, I will investigate the ways in which he appears self-consciously to reject such influence in *Absalom*. I assert that unlike *Sanctuary*, which interrogates the ways in which novels can incorporate filmic techniques, *Absalom* questions such techniques by developing a visual system which bears little or no resemblance to them.

In this chapter I will argue that *Absalom, Absalom!* is in conflict with film on an epistemological level. Specifically, I will argue that the novel's imagery and narration are characterized by visual uncertainty, a feature that is incompatible with film techniques and can even be understood as a direct rejection of studio era film. One result of this argument is that it complicates the hypothesis that Eisenstein's theories provide a template for the book. *Mise-en-scene* is essential for montage techniques, which rely specifically on the visual contrast and conflict between and within shots. Eisenstein's montage techniques rely on visual precision, and indeed they can be understood as a kind of prescriptive and codified syntax for film.¹² It is precisely this kind of precision that Faulkner rejects in the visual elements of *Absalom*. Thus, if Faulkner is in dialogue with Eisenstein in the novel, it is difficult to understand their relationship as a simple adoption of Eisenstein's techniques. In order to make this argument I will analyze the characteristics of each of the narrators' accounts – beginning with Mr. Compson, then Rosa, and finally Shreve and Quentin – demonstrating that the novel's various sections, while unique, all cast doubt upon the visual images that are presented to the reader even as they are presented.¹³

¹² For instance, he writes that his montage editing in *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) “was already clearly dictated by the compositional demands of the film form” (Eisenstein 120).

¹³ I think that my argument is especially important in light of contemporary formalist Faulkner scholarship. I agree with the way Annette Trefzer describes the goal of such criticism in her introduction to the anthology *Faulkner and*

The only explicit reference to film in *Absalom* portrays the form in terms of narrative and visual uncertainty. It comes during a description of Charles Bon's marriage to his nameless "octaroon" wife, a passage that highlights two themes that will become important for my argument in this chapter. The first is the limit of the narrator's knowledge. Mr. Compson, as the speaker in this passage, emphasizes the fact that Charles Bon's search for a wife is shrouded in mystery: "And none ever to know what incredible tale lay behind that year's absence" (166). The fact that the precise details of the tale are unknowable leads to narrative speculation, which in turn casts doubt on the authority of the story. As we will see, the novel actively invites the reader to question the authority of its narrators. The second theme of the passage is the narrator's inability to convey a precise image to his or her listener. Mr. Compson describes Bon and his wife's journey through "stinking rooms in places—towns and cities—that likewise had no names for her" (167). In this case, the vague imagery of this passage—we know that the rooms smell, but not what they look like or where they are located—is closely tied to Mr. Compson's lack of authority. He imagines what the experience of marriage could have been like for Bon's bride, a narrative process that lends itself to generalizations rather than a clear visual depiction of the events; hence the wife's experience is both nameless and shapeless.

The novel's sole reference to film continues these themes of uncertainty, as we learn that "there followed something like a year composed of a succession of periods of utter immobility like a broken cinema film" (167). An image of broken film supports my argument on a basic level, as film is only portrayed in a state of disrepair, rather than as a functional storytelling

Formalism: Returns of the Text: "Even as scholars included here ask about the place of language, aesthetics, and form in contemporary interpretations of Faulkner, they do not foreclose the study of Faulkner's text to ideological or historical questions" (XX). Like Trefzer, I believe that criticism of form and context can and ought to be a both/and proposition. From my overall project in this thesis I hope it is clear that my issue with previous filmic readings of *Absalom* is not their healthy interest in how the novel interacts with film but rather with their failure to take the form fully into account while doing so.

medium in the world of the novel. More significantly, the way that the narration of this passage manipulates and space time is actually described as being the opposite of filmic. As opposed to film, which proceeds from beginning to end without stopping, the story of Charles Bon's life with his wife is characterized by "periods of utter immobility," as is Mr. Compson's account of it. Peter Lurie notes the significance of this image: "Faulkner's use of a broken cinema as a metaphor . . . 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" (106). While I do not wish to overstate the importance of this one sentence to my reading of *Absalom*, I agree with Lurie that Faulkner invites the reader to compare his own project with filmic storytelling, and in this passage he signals to his reader that he is not operating in a filmic mode. In this way we can understand the novel's manipulations of time that Raper and others have identified with montage filmmaking are actually something else entirely—broken filmmaking, a mode of storytelling that is in direct conflict with film.

Mr. Compson's narration most clearly supports my argument, as he constantly draws attention to the infidelity of his own imagery as he tells Quentin the story of Thomas Sutpen. The simplest way that he does so is through negation, or presenting an image to the reader and then immediately undermining it. For instance, Mr. Compson describes the actions of Goodhue Coldfield in the Civil War: "Not only did he refuse to permit his sister to come back to live while her horse-trader husband was in the army, he would not even allow Miss Rosa to look out the window" (64). In filmic terms, the reader is presented with the opposite of *mise-en-scene* in this case; instead of describing Coldfield's actions as they would appear to a viewer, Faulkner describes what he did not do and how he did not behave. We know that Miss Rosa was not allowed to look out the window, but there is no indication of what she did instead. Similarly, we

paradoxically “see” Coldfield’s sister not arriving to live with him during the War. What does a sister not arriving look like? This might conjure an image of her being turned away from Coldfield’s doors, but any such scene hinges on the imagination of the reader rather than clear description on the part of the narrator.

Much of Mr. Compson’s narration fits into this mold, as the word “not” appears several times on almost every page and undermines many of his images as they occur. For instance, there are several examples to be found in the paragraph that contains the above quotation: “armed not with a musket but with a family Bible”; “He was not a coward”; “he could not have done it save by close trading or dishonesty” (64); “his conscience may have objected...not so much to the idea of pouring out human blood and life, but at the idea of waste” (65). As these examples indicate, Faulkner often employs the tactic of negating one image before affirming another, as in the case of describing Coldfield as being “armed not with a musket but with the family Bible.” Even in these cases, however, the image being affirmed for the reader is defined by the negation of the first, and thus some of the Faulkner’s most vivid imagery is spent describing visual scenes that do not actually occur in his story. In many cases, the narration never reaches this step of presenting a new image out of the negation, as in the simple sentence, “One morning the hand did not come out to draw up the basket,” full stop (65). In this case Mr. Compson is describing Mr. Coldfield’s death, and narrative priority is given to what the viewers do not see, rather than what they do.¹⁴

¹⁴ Seymour Chatman makes a point about the difference between novelistic and filmic imagery that is helpful for clarifying my point. He writes that novels depend on presenting the reader with a limited number of discrete details that evoke an image, whereas “in films the number of details is indeterminate” (Chatman 125). I am arguing that instead of trying to provide his readers with “details” that imitate filmic clarity, Faulkner often goes to the other extreme and withholds all cues for what they ought to visualize.

Separate from this tendency to negate images, Mr. Compson's narration is filled with qualifiers that indicate his uncertainty about his subject. Sometimes these simply result from adding words such as "probably," "doubtless," "maybe," "perhaps," and "evidently" (all found on 63) that indicate the varying degrees of guesswork that enter into his account. Elsewhere he creates a similar effect by varying the verb usage of a passage, as with "He must have said to himself," "He may have known," and "I can imagine him" (72). Some critics consider this element of Mr. Compson's narrative a side effect of a narrative frame. As Dirk Kuyk writes, "The further the narrators stand from the events they seek to comprehend, the more they must rely on inference" (33).¹⁵ This explanation makes sense in the world of the novel. Mr. Compson is recreating a story that his own father told him years before, so it stands to reason that he cannot be certain about every minute detail. His moments of uncertainty often deal specifically with the motives and emotional states of the people he is describing, details that are inherently subjective and beyond the knowledge of any diegetic narrator, especially one at such temporal distance. However, this is part of my point: the narrator is unable to conjure a clear picture of his subject, which points to the futility of narratives that claim to provide this kind of certainty.

At the height of Mr. Compson's eloquence, he describes the scene of Henry Sutpen killing Charles Bon before the gates of the Sutpen mansion. At first glance, this appears to be a moment of vivid clarity, as Mr. Compson's narrative produces a specific image in the mind of his listener, Quentin: "It seemed to Quentin that he could actually see them facing one another at the gate" (105). Even in recounting Quentin's experience here, however, the third person narrator indicates that Quentin is not actually seeing the two young men. Both the verb "seemed" and the modifier "actually" distinguish Quentin's vision of the scene from the events as they occurred.

¹⁵ These qualifiers are a common talking point among scholars. For further reading on the uncertain language of Mr. Compson's section of *Absalom*, see Bassett p. 286 and Brooks p. 255.

This sense is heightened when the third person narrator proceeds to describe the Quentin's visualization of the setting: "Inside the gate what was once a park now spread, unkempt, in shaggy desolation, with an air dreamy remote and aghast like the unshaven face of a man waking up from ether" (105). Despite the fact that Quentin thinks that he can see Henry and Bon clearly, this context in which he envisions them is more dreamlike than realistic. The phrase "unkempt, shaggy desolation" gives the sense that the park's former order has devolved into wilderness without providing the reader with a clear sense of what this new arrangement might look like. The narrator's description of the scene as "dreamy remote and aghast" and his comparing it to a man under the stupefying effects of ether both emphasize this sense of vagueness. Overall, despite Quentin's vivid mental image of the two young men facing one another, he can only envision them in a cloudy, uncertain setting that he develops in his own mind. I consider this scene to be characteristic of Mr. Compson's attempts to provide a clear, ordered, and sensible context for the story of Thomas Sutpen. The best he can do is to provide vivid images to describe past events, yet he constantly undermines them and reminds the reader that they do not correspond to reality or are only able to do so in limited ways. The result is a narrative that rejects the kind of visual certainty that film aspires to and replaces it with an acknowledgment of the limitations of narrative to provide objective and accurate depictions of the past.

Rosa's narrative – of particular interest here because it is the subject of Raper's original article on montage in *Absalom* – is characterized by similar visual uncertainty to Mr. Compson's. Part of this is due to the actual typeface of the chapter; as Chapter 5 is all in italics, usually an indication of internal thoughts in the novel, it is unclear whether Rosa is speaking to herself, Quentin, or neither. The complexity of the sentences themselves—some of which span multiple pages—makes the context and content of the section even more difficult to pin down. The result

of these stylistic choices is that the narrative presents few clear visual images to the reader. As Lurie observes, “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 exactly what she is describing” (104). As I have suggested above, clear visual presentation is essential for film in general and Eisenstein’s montage in particular, so it is important to unpack the relationship of Rosa’s speech to the visual in order to understand its relationship to the filmic.

At times, Faulkner uses the same techniques to produce visual difficulty in Rosa’s narrative as he does in Mr. Compson’s. For instance, Rosa uses negation to describe the Sutpen mansion during the Civil War: “*Rotting portico and scaling walls, it stood, not invaded, marked by no bullet nor soldier’s iron heel but rather as though reserved for something more: some desolation more profound than ruin...*” (108-9). In this case, the organization of the sentence rejects a visual certainty in favor of an abstraction. The house has not been marred in the obvious ways that a war might affect the landscape, through the physical piercing of bullets or the mistreatment of enemy soldiers. Rather, the war’s effect is ineffable. It creates a vague dread of “something more,” “some desolation” that goes beyond the physical effects of battle, yet Rosa’s narrative does not provide the reader with a visual means of conceptualizing these effects. Her sense of foreboding has an experiential quality that seems not to be directly linked to the input of the senses.

While it is not always accomplished through negation in this way, Rosa’s narrative often presents abstractions to the reader without tying them to any visible object. In the continuation of the above passage, she describes Sutpen’s house as having “*the lost irrevocable might-have been which haunts all the houses,*” again gesturing at the sense of loss created by the Civil War (109). Elsewhere, Rosa speaks of the difficulty of coping with her father’s death and deciding to live

with Sutpen: “*I found only a dream-state in which you run without moving from a terror in which you can not [sic] believe, toward a safety in which you have no faith*” (113). Here Faulkner continues the motif of dreamy unreality in describing events in the novel’s past, and the effect is taken to an extreme degree that is not seen in Mr. Compson’s narrative. There is no clear setting or even clear action in this case. Ostensibly the action of the sentence is “to run,” but it is completed “without moving.” This is not an action that Rosa accomplishes but rather an unsettling state of being that she “finds,” and the second person perspective emphasizes that even Rosa’s experience of it is not particular to her but rather a participation in a more generalized experience. Part of the difficulty of Rosa’s narrative is the fact that it transitions seamlessly from this kind of abstraction to describing her past experiences without drawing sharp distinctions between the two.

Raper argues that the tenets of Eisenstein’s montage film theory serve as the simplest framework for making sense of the difficult structure of Rosa’s narrative. While he admits that “certain montage techniques used by Faulkner... can be handled with the categories of traditional literary criticism,” he identifies “metrical montage; the conflict between brightness and dimness; the conflict between a distant perspective and a close perspective; and the conflict between an event and its duration” as elements that montage best describes (Raper 22). I would argue that Raper does not give enough credit to the “categories of traditional literary criticism,” and specifically novelistic techniques, for explaining these phenomena. Lawrence Sterne, for instance, manipulates time in remarkably sophisticated ways in *Tristram Shandy* (1759), producing similar duration-event conflict to that which appears in *Absalom*. The use of light and shadow as sources of contrast can be traced at least to the gothic novels of the eighteenth century, and it seems simpler to say that Faulkner’s use of lighting in *Absalom* participates in the

gothic tradition (a common enough move) rather than the montage tradition. In short, I would argue that while some images could be considered analogous to filmic shots, and the complexity of Faulkner's prose mirrors the complexity of Eisensteinian montage in a number of ways, none of his techniques are radical enough to require the use of film language to describe and analyze them. They have straightforward precedents in the history of the novel in English.

It is simpler to say that Rosa's narration rejects, rather than incorporates, the filmic. To put it another way, Faulkner purposely writes in a way that highlights the differences between filmic and novelistic imagery. In particular, the dreaminess and abstraction of Rosa's imagery would be next to impossible to put to film without significant interpretive work on the part of the filmmaker. Such passages as the "dream-state" passage quoted above defy any attempt to visualize, much less shoot, them. Any given director would like come up with radically differing conceptions of how to portray what "*the lost irrevocable might-have been which haunts all the houses*" would look like on film. Of course, this is not a failure in the novel, and I do not mean to suggest that *Absalom* should not be adapted to film—the results could prove fascinating. I only want point out that while it is interesting to conceptualize Rosa's narration as being filmic in an abstract sense, when one examines its prose the analogy breaks down. Rosa seems to be more interested in providing a tonal account of her experiences than a visual one, and as a result it is often difficult even to understand what is happening in her narration, let alone how it would have looked.

Paradoxically, Quentin and Shreve are the narrators who speak with the greatest degree of visual certainty despite having the least authority to do so. Peter Brooks writes that "these two young men . . . de-authorized the eyewitness account (Rosa's) and the account at one remove (Mr. Compson's) in favor of something with at greater distance (both temporally and spatially)

but which claims greater hermeneutic force” (256-7).¹⁶ The hermeneutic force of Quentin and Shreve’s narrative, as Brooks puts it, stems primarily from the fact that the boys identify Charles Bon as having black blood. This is a narrative invention with incredible explanatory power, as it provides the reason that Sutpen abandoned his first wife (she had black blood and thus was incompatible with his grand designs) and also explains why Henry eventually feels compelled to shoot Bon. Quentin and Shreve imagine the confrontation that leads to Henry shooting Bon in explicitly racial terms:

--*You are my brother*

--*No I’m not. I’m the nigger that’s going to sleep with your sister. Unless you stop me, Henry. (286)*

The problem with this scene is that the reader has no evidence that it actually took place beyond Quentin and Shreve’s own authority. On one level, the scene reflects Quentin’s preoccupation with incest and miscegenation, a character trait that is consistent throughout *The Sound and the Fury* as well as *Absalom*. As Young points out, there are strong parallels between Quentin’s incestuous feelings for Caddy in *The Sound and the Fury* and his characterization of Henry, Bon, and Judith here.¹⁷ This reading is strengthened by the fact that the third person narrator of *Absalom* begins to refer to the boys as “Charles-Shreve and Quentin-Henry” (267), indicating that the boys have come to identify so strongly with their subjects as to be indistinguishable from them. Besides casting doubt on Quentin and Shreve’s overall narrative, the scene between Henry

¹⁶ There is no critical consensus on the accuracy of Quentin and Shreve’s account. Thomas Daniel Young and Ralph Flores agree with Brooks’ premise that this section of the novel is invented by the two boys. Kuyk, meanwhile, insists that Quentin and Shreve’s story is corroborated by the third person narrator and is thus a legitimate account, perhaps the most so in the book: “Analysis...reveals something very like an official Voice, that of the third-person narrator” (61). For a summary of other critics who consider Quentin and Shreve’s story to be valid, see Young pp 96-98.

¹⁷ For an in-depth analysis of the intertextual nature of Quentin’s character, see Young pp 82-88.

and Bon also creates two equally plausible versions of Bon's character; he is either "brother" or "nigger," but he cannot possibly be both. The boys affirm the latter reading, but their characterization here relies on hypothetical alternatives rather than providing a single, authoritative reading of Bon's character.

The third person narrator constantly brings attention to this creative narrative frame, reminding the reader that Quentin and Shreve's account is not authoritative; the images they invent are undermined even as they arrive at the viewer.¹⁸ The narrator refers to the boys' act of narration as "the two of them creating between them, out of the rag-tag and bob-ends of old tales and talking, people who perhaps had never existed at all anywhere, who, shadows, were shadows not of flesh and blood which had lived and died but shadows in turn of what were...shades too" (243). On a basic level, this description of the boys' creative process indicates their tendency to cherry-pick their sources. Far from considering the various narratives of Sutpen's life in their entirety and objectively weighing the likelihood of each, the boys work with "ragtag and bob-ends of old tales and talking," incorporating details that support their own understanding of the events while ignoring all others. Far more subversive, however, is the recurrence of Faulkner's "shadowy" imagery to describe his subject. In this case, this imagery not only indicates the uncertainty of the specific images that the boys are describing, but actually the possibility of any narrative achieving objectivity. Not only do Quentin and Shreve create "people who never existed at all anywhere" rather than describing the events as they actually occurred, but their descriptions are in turn "shadows of what were...shades too." This seems to suggest that not only is Quentin and Shreve's version of Sutpen a shadow, but the firsthand account of Rosa and the

¹⁸ In *Novels into Film* George Bluestone observes a similar effect in modernist fiction generally: "Where words once seemed a rough vehicle for conveying reality directly, they now seem to become weapons that puncture reality the moment they are applied" (12-13). For Bluestone, this feature of novels is diametrically opposed to filmic storytelling.

secondhand account of Mr. Compson are as well. This passage can help one to interpret Faulkner's use of ghostly imagery throughout the novel; it suggests that none of the characters are capable of faithfully capturing, on a visual or a historical level, the events of Sutpen's life.

Despite the fact that Quentin and Shreve's narrative is constantly questioned and undermined, its imagery is often clearer and more confident than any of the other narratives of the novel. Just like listening to Mr. Compson's narrative, the act of narrating provides Quentin with a clear image of the events he is describing: "It seemed to Quentin that he could actually see them: the ragged and starving troops without shoes, the gaunt powder-blackened faces looking backward over tattered shoulders, the glaring eyes in which burned some indomitable desperation of undefeat" (267). Interestingly, this passage is introduced identically to the vision that Quentin constructs out of Mr. Compson's narrative, with the phrase "It seemed to Quentin that he could actually see them." As I indicate above, the imagery used to describe Quentin's vision in that previous case is hazy and dreamlike. In this present passage, where Quentin is himself a narrator instead of a passive listener, the imagery is much more vivid and clear. His imagination of the Confederate troops is precise, down to the state of their clothing, the dirtiness of their faces, and the look in their eyes. The act of storytelling allows Quentin to participate in and understand the events of the Civil War far more vividly than any other experience. Rather than being a reliable means of knowing precisely how and why historical events took place, the novel's various oral histories benefit their creators more than their listeners. The creators experience their tales vividly, whereas listeners receive only the imperfect expression of these experiences.

Even Quentin and Shreve's narrative of Thomas Sutpen's early life, which appears to be corroborated by the novel's third person narrator, is based on Sutpen's own account of the

events. Ostensibly, this firsthand source ought to lend the narrative a level of credence. As Quentin describes it,

He was telling a story. He was not bragging about something he had done; he was just telling a story about something a man named Thomas Sutpen had experienced, which would have been the same story if the man had had no name at all, if it had been told about any man or no man over whiskey at night. (199)

This assertion of the objectivity of Sutpen's story is problematic on at least three levels. First, it flatly contradicts the uncertainty associated with all narrative accounts, even firsthand accounts like Rosa's, that we have seen throughout the novel. Second, it contradicts the evidence of Sutpen's characterization throughout the novel. As Owen Robertson notes, Sutpen is a character obsessed with creating a persona for himself, and "he will not dilute his vision to satiate public taste" (Robertson 64). Sutpen's desire to establish a Southern dynasty is his defining characteristic, and this act of self-creation would be entirely consistent with creating a fictitious back-story for himself. Third, Quentin's version of Sutpen's story is either third-hand (Sutpen-Grandfather-Quentin) or fourth-hand (Sutpen-Grandfather-Mr. Compson-Quentin), and each of these layers of narrative remove introduces interpretation and subjectivity into the account. Even if Sutpen were entirely truthful when he initially related the events of his childhood, there is no way to ascertain whether his version of the events is the one that reaches the reader. In short, regardless of how closely the narrator claims to follow a factual source, the end result is never as straightforward as it appears at first glance, and Quentin and Shreve's visual and hermeneutic certainty belie the tenuous, creative nature of their account.

After having explained in intimate detail why Bon and Henry behaved as they did during the War, Shreve animatedly looks to Quentin to support his reading of the events:

“‘Aint that right? Aint it? By God, aint it?’

“‘Yes,’ Quentin said” (287).

Ultimately, Quentin’s affirmation is the only authorization for the boys’ narrative. The level of visual detail and the certainty of the images in this section are undermined not by the presentation of the images themselves, as in Mr. Compson’s and Rosa’s narratives, but rather by the narrative frame. Even if the boys’ imagery could be lifted from the novel and easily adapted into a studio-era film, concocting a way of adapting this narrative frame to film would prove tremendously complex.¹⁹ Images like the close-up shot of a Confederate soldier’s dirty face would fit neatly into a film in 1936, but how does the filmmaker indicate that the soldier never existed, that he is likely a “shade” of the boys’ combined imaginations? Again, this is not an insurmountable problem for adapting the novel, but I would like to reiterate that even the novel’s most filmic moments are not as simple as they appear on the surface.

To conclude, I would like to suggest three potential applications for my argument in this chapter. First, I would argue that, in addition to film, Faulkner’s rejection of visual certainty can be understood as a modernist rejection of the realist novel. As Eisenstein argues in his essay “Dickens, Griffith, and the Film Today,” many film techniques pioneered by D.W. Griffith and later adopted by the Soviet school of filmmakers were in fact originally derived from the realist novels of Charles Dickens, among others. In particular, Eisenstein identifies visual precision as the essential feature of Dickens’s fiction that led to such basic film techniques as the close-up shot. Eisenstein writes, “This extraordinary optical faculty amounted to genius in Dickens His psychology began with the visual; he gained his insight into character by observation of the exterior—the most delicate and fine minutiae of outward semblance” (212). Like studio-era

¹⁹ Kawin, for one, suggests that the narrative frame of *Absalom, Absalom!* served as a model for the narrative structure of Orson Welles’ *Citizen Kane* (1942) (“The Montage Element” 125).

films, realist novels rely on the premise that authors can use the written word to provide objective, clear, and meaningful information about the world. As we have seen, Faulkner complicates this conception of what the novel can do in *Absalom*, as he rejects the certainty of a single, authoritative narrator in favor of multiple subjective accounts, each marked by the psychological foibles of its narrator. Faulkner exchanges the epistemological certainty of realism for the subjectivity of modernism, a move that is reflected in his uncertain imagery throughout the novel.

Interestingly, contemporary reviewers of *Absalom, Absalom!* who approached the novel with realist expectations unanimously panned the book, whereas those using the standards of modernism hailed it as a work of genius.²⁰ In his expansive, even-handed, and ultimately negative review, Bernard de Voto complains that “When a narrative sentence has to have as many as three parentheses identifying the reference [sic] of pronouns, it signifies mere bad writing and can be justified by no psychological or esthetic principle whatsoever” (Inge 147). David Vern, meanwhile, notes, “Often, you will re-read a sentence or paragraph five or six times before it is clear...The question is whether it is worth so much time to get to the meaning. I would say yes” (Inge 155). Clearly Vern’s expectation and embrace of literary difficulty leads him to a positive review, whereas de Voto’s expectation of clarity is incompatible with the workings of the novel. While of course this fact does not situate the novel into one literary tradition or the other, it does suggest that readers who approach it with modernist expectations—including complex language and narrative difficulty—will find the experience more rewarding.

²⁰ For all matters concerning the reception of this or any of Faulkner’s works, see *William Faulkner: The Contemporary Reviews*, edited by M. Thomas Inge.

Second, given the historical content of the novel, its visual uncertainty can also be understood as a commentary on Southern narratives of the Civil War. Lurie argues that the influential films of D.W. Griffith, including *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), comprise a portrait of the South that is incompatible with Faulkner's own. Lurie writes that this fact provided Faulkner with a purpose for writing, as "He used his novel to critique the reified, commodified relationship to history that he saw early film encourage" (105). It is difficult to link Faulkner's novel directly to the films of Griffith, but *Absalom*'s narrative complexity can easily be read as a statement that it is impossible to construct a satisfactory narrative of the old South. Thomas Sutpen's entire project is to establish himself as a landed plantation owner, and he is thwarted by the advent of the Civil War. The narrators' inability to tell his story clearly, to fully understand and recapitulate his motives for behaving as he did in such a system, speaks to the distance between their situation and his. The use of ghostly imagery throughout the novel is a constant reminder that a former generation of the South is dead, yet it continues to influence the actions of the living. No single narrative will ever bring that society back to life, but neither is any able to kill it off entirely.

Finally, I think that my argument also speaks to a more general problem of attempting to determine literary influence. Montage is a useful template for conceptualizing Faulkner's prose, but in order to employ it one must assume a specific attitude toward film and filmmaking on Faulkner's part. Similarly, while it consists primarily in analyzing imagery throughout the novel, I have framed my own argument here around Faulkner's noted distaste for work in film. Assuming, or attempting to prove, different kinds of authorial intent can produce two readings that are diametrically opposed to one another, and *Absalom, Absalom!* is a complex enough novel to support both readings. This can be problematic, as it is always more interesting to hear a

positive argument than a negative one. It is satisfying to notice and speculate about parallels between Faulkner's imagery and Eisenstein's montage (Raper, Kawin, Gleeson-White), or between narrative collaboration in *Absalom* and the Hollywood screenwriting process (Urigo). However, in making this kind of argument it is easy to ignore a novel's obvious characteristics in the process. A simple litmus test: how many of the novel's visual descriptions could be easily depicted on film? Granted, adaptation theorists would approach this question using vastly differing frameworks, discussing the intricacies of form, style, and the spirit of the novel, and I will address some of these issues in my conclusion.²¹ Even so, I would hazard my own simple answer in this case: very few, especially in Mr. Compson and Rosa's uncertain narratives. Even the visually clear narration of Quentin and Shreve would have to deal with the fact that the boys' version of the events contradicts all the other accounts. This is not an insurmountable problem in its own right, but it does speak to the fact that the novel uses imagery and narrative structures that do not neatly mesh with the visual nature of film. To name montage filmmaking, or any other film technique, as the novel's primary literary feature is to ignore that its prose contradicts this reading at a basic level, always a danger when making claims of influence.

²¹ For an excellent overview of how adaptation theory has evolved over time, see the Introduction to James John Griffith's *Adaptations as Imitations: Films from Novels*.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

To conclude this thesis I would like to take a moment to clarify my argument's significance in the larger field of novel/film studies, then provide some final suggestions for how these ideas might lead to further inquiry for scholars of Faulkner in particular.

This first task requires a brief gloss of theoretical approaches to studying the interactions between novels and films.²² For that, I turn to Kamilla Elliott, author of the helpful book *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*. Elliott draws a distinction between what she terms “analogical” and “categorical” criticism of artistic media. Simply put, analogical criticism looks for “sibling resemblances” between art forms, whereas categorical criticism looks for “categorical differences” (Elliott 9-10). This can be thought of in terms of what the critics are seeking to accomplish; are they most interested in the similarities between media, or the differences? The go-to text for categorical criticism is Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laocoon: An Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1766). Lessing provides not only a description of the differences between poetry and the visual arts but even prescriptive rules for each medium's proper subject matter. Elliott argues that “Lessing's categorical approach won out over the analogical approach in the twentieth century,” as opposed to the nineteenth century, in which analogical criticism was standard (10). In this reading, the critical discourse surrounding interart theory has largely functioned as a pendulum swinging between the categorical and analogical approaches, and the categorical approach was very much in vogue for much of the twentieth century.

²² I recognize that some scholars would disagree with my decision to focus narrowly on novels and films. For instance, Robert B. Ray argues, “Although the cinema has most often been compared with literature, it really has far more in common with architecture. Both forms are public, collaborative, and above all, expensive” (42).

The critic who is commonly credited with popularizing the categorical approach in novel/film studies is George Bluestone, author of the seminal work of adaptation theory *Novels into Film* (1957). That book seeks to answer the question of whether a given novel's stylistic and formal features can be translated onto film. Bluestone does not leave his reader in suspense on this point for very long. They can't. While both novels and films utilize visual elements, causing the audience to "see" the action described, Bluestone is quick to point out that the kinds of seeing are inherently different from one another: "And between the percept of the visual image and the concept of the mental image lies the root difference between the two media" (1). For Bluestone, there is an inherent difference between summoning an image to a reader's mind through words and presenting an image, fully formed, to the viewer's eye. Thus to conflate the visual aspects of the two media is a failure to be precise in one's terms. Throughout his introductory essay Bluestone maps in intimate detail the different ways that novels and films employ time and space, and in turn how these affect viewers and readers differently.

Influential and interesting as such works can be, my goal in this project has been to avoid extreme categorical criticism that highlights the differences between what novels and films can accomplish on a formal level.²³ As James Griffith puts it in the introduction to his own work of adaptation theory, "I cannot argue with the obvious point that we read books and that we see and hear films. The question remains whether the foregoing theorists teach us about the aesthetic possibilities open to both arts or merely elaborate the obvious" (Griffith 30). I think that this is putting it a little bit harshly – there may well be more important work to be done along these lines, especially since, as Elliott observes, theories of interart criticism seem to be cyclical. All of

²³ I do not wish to simply equate adaptation theory with categorical criticism. For instance, Andre Bazin argues for an adaptation theory in which film adaptations are equally legitimate to novels: "The (literary?) critic of 2050 would find not a novel out of which a play and a film had been 'made,' but rather a single work reflected through three art forms, an artistic pyramid with three sides, all equal in the eyes of the critic" (26).

the recent critics of Faulkner and film whom I have referenced seem most interested in drawing analogies between his novels and the Hollywood system, but it is possible that we are due for a shift back to Bluestone's point of view. Nevertheless, in the field of Faulkner studies early critics such as Kawin and Phillips staked claims in the territory of adaptation theory in such a way as to make it difficult for later critics to have much to say. Surely there *is* more to say, but as I pursued this project it became clear that finding space in that particular conversation would not be the best use of my time and mental resources.

I think that it is important to clarify what I have chosen to do instead. First, I have avoided taking my observations about *Sanctuary* and *Absalom, Absalom* and extrapolating them into a big-picture argument about what novels can films can or ought to do. Instead, I have followed Lurie's lead (as well as Binggeli's, Raper's, Uργο's, etc.), in asking the question: what is this particular text's relationship to film? Broadly speaking this is an analogical approach, inasmuch as I seek out and analyze moments of intersection between novels and films. But it is also an approach that assumes that some novels are more filmic than others, in the sense that novels can interact with film in ways that are straightforward or oblique. It can also appear categorical at times because novels and films can intentionally define their formal techniques against those of the other category. The obvious difference between this and what Bluestone does is that novels and films that question their own categorization can experiment in these ideas without necessarily implying that they ought to be applied to all times and all places.

For instance, I argue in Chapter 2 that *Sanctuary* draws attention to the fact that novelistic imagery does not need to have a fixed point of view. In making this observation I am in a sense agreeing with a point that Seymour Chatman makes in his influential essay "What Novels Can Do that Films Can't (and Vice Versa)": "For one thing, the visual point of view is always *there*

[in film]: it is fixed and determinate precisely because the camera needs to be placed *somewhere*. But in verbal fiction, the narrator may or may not give us a visual bearing” (132). As the essay’s title suggests, Chatman is very interested in the categorical project of enumerating just what each medium can and can’t accomplish, and narrative point of view is a place where these differences are stark. We may debate whether these categories for novels and films are as clear-cut as Chatman insists they are, but for argument’s sake let us take his claim at face value. My purpose in this thesis has been to point out that an author may choose to highlight or downplay such differences in her fiction. In other words, just as we can use analogical criticism to analyze and theorize works of art that break down barriers between media, we can also use it to question why a work might choose to question or even reinforce such barriers.

One particular thing that this kind of focus accomplishes for this project, I hope, is that it prevents me from trying to make bold claims about a single, definitive stance that Faulkner took toward film in his novels. This is why I have made the perhaps contradictory move of tracking, in Chapter 2, the incredibly complex ways in which Faulkner employs filmic techniques in *Sanctuary*, while in Chapter 3 I argue that he seems to eschew such influence altogether. In other words, he writes two novels that define their imagery against that of studio era films, one of which employs filmic imagery and the other which seems to be indignant that it exists at all. Both define themselves against film, but in radically different ways, and this makes sense considering Faulkner’s turbulent relationship with the film industry. While it would be stretch to try to decide which failures, blowups, and arguments had with his superiors in the industry led to which stylistic choices, it would stand to reason that Faulkner’s relationship to film was by no means static. Kawin claims that montage is the primary technique of Faulkner’s fiction; I would

not like to make a similarly sweeping claim and say that the best way to define Faulkner's style is to assume that all of his books undermine filmic storytelling in some way or another.

Having said all of this, I also do not want to suggest that the only thing that I have accomplished is to locate two data points that have no real explanatory power. If Faulkner does not maintain a consistent stance toward filmic storytelling throughout his oeuvre, it is certainly worth investigating how it may have changed throughout his career. As I stated at the beginning, I chose two novels that he wrote before and after his first major stint in Hollywood. It is amusing to speculate that when Faulkner wrote *Sanctuary* he was still optimistic about filmic imagery, and by the time he wrote *Absalom* he was sick of the whole system wanted to write a novel that bore no resemblance such storytelling. Of course the truth is more complex; novels in between, before, and after these reveal varying degrees of interest in filmic techniques as well. If I am unable at the moment to provide a coherent, all-inclusive narrative for Faulkner/film studies, I think that I have at least defined an approach that could yield interesting results if applied to various periods of his bibliography or, for that matter, to those of other authors who are generally agreed to be filmic in their approach.

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