

BRYHER AND CLOSE UP, 1927-1933

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One of the many publishing concerns with which Bryher was involved was *Close Up* (1927-1933), the first international magazine devoted to cinema as an art and as an industry.¹ *Close Up* was one aspect of the collaboration between Bryher, H.D., and Kenneth Macpherson occurring in the late 1920s and early 1930s.² During its six years of operation, *Close Up* gained thousands of readers and addressed topics crucial to the development of film. Bryher provided capital for the magazine and wrote numerous reviews and articles; more than that, her work helped make *Close Up* the chief contemporary forum for debate about the social implications as well as the theory and practice of cinema. Bryher's articles for *Close Up* examined not only matters of technique and taste in film, but also a range of cultural and political issues linking *avant garde* aesthetic matters to the practical concerns of Europeans. The art of the "silents," as Bryher puts it, "offered a single language across Europe."³ She provided one very important means for teaching and sharing that language.

In an anecdote about how she became interested in films, Bryher expresses the connections she sees between cinematic art, critical thought, and psychological truth. She had found in them "no link with my particular development," until she saw in *Joyless Street* "the unrelenting portrayal of what war does to life . . ." and thereby realized how the filmmaker G. W. Pabst's "consciousness of Europe" allowed him to "[see] psychologically" the truths behind human actions.⁴ Bryher comments in her autobiography, *The Heart to Artemis*, that during the war "I had had to abstract myself from my surroundings in order to survive at all. To wish to create was a sin against the consciousness of the time. Yet I wanted things to be real" (183). One can thus understand the profound impact of Pabst's realistic film upon Bryher and her subsequent involvement with many aspects of cinema.

Close Up, from its inception, was clearly more than a journal meant simply to review new films and technical advances. It presented pieces by writers whose work reflected new ideas and approaches on a number of fronts—Sergei Eisenstein, Dorothy Richardson, Gertrude Stein, Robert Herring, V. I. Pudovkin, Andor

Krazsna-Krausz, Paul Rotha, and Marianne Moore, among many others. Rachael Low notes that most “serious writers” about film at the time

were connected with *Close Up*. . . . Its historical importance is very great despite its small circulation . . . [It] enabled its readers to keep in touch with . . . important developments taking place in films abroad, especially in Germany, France and Russia . . . [The] magazine undertook an important job which it did without compromise, that of building up a nucleus of cineastes devoted to the development of the art of the film.⁵

Close Up built up a nucleus of persons devoted to the free critical exchange of ideas, for reasons that extended far beyond the aesthetic inquiries of film art into issues of social and international cooperation.

Bryher’s extensive role in producing and editing *Close Up* is not immediately evident from the tables of contents; and it is only hinted in the tidbits about production and industry gossip she includes in *The Heart to Artemis*. Her characteristic modesty has deflected attention from her work; in *The Heart to Artemis* she states simply, “I kept to the business side of the magazine as much as possible and attended to much of the correspondence, but I was pressed into service occasionally to review educational films.” She says at another point, “There were films to see and review because I was the only one of the *Close Up* group to speak much German” (245, 257). Studies of the magazine do not generally focus upon the contributions of individuals. Even Gillian Hanscombe and Virginia Smyers, while mentioning that Bryher financed, organized, and helped to edit *Close Up*, do not specify the matters that Bryher investigated in her articles.⁶ However, even a brief foray into her articles and papers reveals that Bryher’s activities for the magazine are far richer than she confesses.

Bryher wrote reviews and articles, handled correspondence, solicited submissions, paid for submitted work, read proof, and helped plan layout and advertising.⁷ Although Bryher, Macpherson, and H.D. all worked on editorial and production matters for the magazine, many of the details of editing and producing *Close Up* fell to Bryher, especially as Macpherson’s enthusiasm for the magazine waned when he turned to filmmaking. Mention of *Close Up* occupies decreasing portions of Macpherson’s letters to Bryher during and after 1930, which, for the most part, concentrate upon gossip and his detailed plans for *Kenwin*. When Macpherson does mention the magazine, it is often in the context of discussing the use of photos, which he often selected while leaving placement and page design up to Bryher.⁸ Macpherson was not

particularly interested in the detailed preparations necessary to keep a magazine functioning smoothly month after month, allowing Bryher to “make final decisions on numbers, etc. . . .”⁹ Bryher herself, who handled business matters well, remarked wryly in a letter to H.D. that Macpherson “says he doesn’t like cold figures on paper. Idiot.”¹⁰ Nevertheless, while Bryher did handle much of the production work for *Close Up*, she clearly viewed her individual contributions to the magazine as far less important than its investigations into the art and social significance of cinema. Her life as well as her articles in print expressed a belief in cooperative intellectual work that seemed particularly needful at that time and in that place.

Bryher’s casual mention that she was the only member of the editorial group who spoke much German gains in impact when one considers the European context of the magazine. Bryher’s coverage of German cinema for *Close Up* was vital, since Germany was a great consumer of films. The numbers of movie theatres and production companies in that country had increased enormously after World War I, and in addition to importing films “Germany produced more films during the 1920s and early 1930s than all other European countries put together.”¹¹ Most of this activity was commercial rather than artistic, of course, but the sheer volume of such work coupled with the political possibilities of cinema made Germany a very important focal point. Bryher’s awareness of contemporary political activity merges with her interest in psychoanalysis and in *Close Up*: “I went to [Hanns Sachs, the psychoanalyst] for an hour a day, during the rest of the time I saw films, attended to the business side of *Close Up* and shared in the extraordinary ferment abroad” (*Heart to Artemis*, 251). The “extraordinary ferment abroad” during the Weimar republic included an international intellectual community (with whom Bryher had contacts through Sachs and Pabst) who were interested in the democratic possibilities of film and who hoped that technological innovation would help alleviate social problems.¹² Bryher’s sympathies allied her with this purview, and helped her to gain both readers and contributors for *Close Up* to participate in this discourse.

Because of her fluency in languages and her international connections, Bryher was able to solicit work from filmmakers and critics in Germany, Russia, and Czechoslovakia, and she regularly prepared translations. In fact, the roster of contributors to *Close Up* over the years features a series of international “correspondents” which eventually included writers from Paris, London, Berlin, Geneva, Hollywood, New York, Moscow, and Vienna. This wide-ranging conversation, quite obviously uniting the nations formerly involved in the Great War, suggests the success of the magazine in fostering a vital and serious climate of exchange.

Much of Bryher's critical work in the magazine involved the more important issues with which *Close Up* grappled: the problems of political dogma and censorship, the nature of public education and the possible educational applications of film, the effects and disadvantages of using sound, and especially the relationship between film and psychology. As Bryher notes, film "offered occasionally, in an episode or single shot, some framework for our dreams," what she terms "an inquiry into the secrets of the mind" (*Heart to Artemis* 246, 251).

One of the "secrets of the mind" examined in the early numbers of *Close Up* is the problem of mass coercion used to promote war, which Bryher links to the rote nature of current modes of education. Bryher's authorial stance in two articles examining several war films assumes that differences in point of view can, and must, successfully co-exist, in politics as well as in art, although she is also careful to stress that this goal is not necessarily easy to accomplish.

As Bryher discusses the American movie "The Big Parade" in the first issue of *Close Up*, she praises the filmmakers for daring to express "so much scorn of war, so much stripping of what people in general like to regard as heroism . . . the reckless unthinking plunge into an army, the actual dirt and horror and tyranny behind all warfare. . . ." ¹³ She makes clear that the potential of cinema to depict collective action for a mass market establishes that its social importance—for good or ill—is as great as that of the educational system:

[The] greatness of "The Big Parade" was in the early opening scenes, the sweeping of everyone into something that they did not clearly understand, the enlistment through sheer mass hypnotism, the unthinking but definite cruelty of many women seeing war as romance instead of reality—the best lesson to those with eyes to read of the necessity of real education of people, instead of a standard fitting of a few facts and no real thought to hundreds of schoolchildren.¹⁴

Bryher consistently links ignorance and sentimentality to "war fever," while redefining "courage" according to a veracity in art that faces the confusion of war rather than paying lip service to a spurious heroic "romance." "In a time of danger the 'We Want War' crowd psychology may destroy a nation," Bryher writes in another review. "By all means let us have war films. Only let us have war straight and as it is; mainly disease and discomfort, almost always destructive (even in after [sic] civil life) in its effects."¹⁵ This insistence upon cinematic realism reappears in later articles, where

Bryher equates using films as escape with ignoring the facts of actual “life in modern Europe,” which, as *Close Up* neared the end of its run, included clear signals of the “storm” about to break.¹⁶

Bryher, an Englishwoman living in Switzerland, was under no illusions about the Great War having been the one to end war. While she does make extensive specific criticisms about plot and technique, her deeper concerns clearly lie in asserting that cinematic art can transcend as well as depict political difference, thereby playing an extremely important role in the future. She insists upon directoral skill, not nationality, as her standard, calling ironically upon the “English sense of justice” to refute English reluctance to face not only foreign films but the alternative versions of truth they portray:

Perhaps in time we [English] will make a film that combines the suspense of “The Emden” [a German film] with the swiftness and clarity of “The Big Parade,” and without the concession to sentimentality and supposed crowd-desire, that crop up here and there in both these films. But this will not be until we have intelligent directors, camera men trained to use their equipment as the German and American photographer is trained, and until the idea is scrapped as utterly worn-out machinery, that a film, because it is “English” must be praised.¹⁷

It is not simply the blind acceptance of “English films” that Bryher criticizes. Her reviews of war movies make clear the connections she believes cinema enacts between psychology and politics; and they emphasize the persuasive importance of technical accomplishment. “Again no one has greater admiration than I for what the Germans have accomplished,” she writes in October 1927, in a statement guaranteed to direct the attention of her readers towards her point:

They are far ahead of the rest of the world in cinematography. But it is idle to pretend that for some years [Germans] were anything else but enemies. Toleration there must certainly be but it is time that national affairs which involve thousands of lives and a future generation should not be brought down to the level of a football match nor that what was certainly and on both sides, a very bitter enmity, be reduced to the not too serious hostility of a couple of rival teams.¹⁸

Bryher refutes the easy stereotyping of the “enemy” in films by refusing to sentimentalize her call for international understanding. Also, while insisting upon the sociopolitical significance of cinema, she asserts the integrity of the cinema as an art, able to portray certain emotional truths through the particularities of directoral skill. In this sense she reflects the “neutrality” of the “international” language of silent film, and links the vocabulary of aesthetic conversation to the vocabulary of social cooperation.¹⁹

Bryher’s rejection of formulaic approaches to both political persuasion and cinematic art relates to several other concerns she expresses in *Close Up*, for instance the larger social effects of public education. In August 1927, Bryher links public fears about progress, especially mechanical innovation, with the strictures amounting to censorship which she perceives operating in educational systems. Bryher, herself very interested in mechanical progress, deplors the “complex of the machine,” a defensive attitude in which “our parents and our grandparents resent . . . machines that have robbed them of a sense of power . . . and that have placed the young in a state equal with themselves.”²⁰ Bryher uses the example of the typewriter, a means of learning to write which children would find efficient and enjoyable, but which is scorned in favor of the painful old way of learning to write by hand. This “illogical” fear of progress, with its concomitant lack of imagination, Bryher declares, has created a situation in which affinity for “science, geography and history is killed in hundreds of children a year through dull methods of presentation and the failure to capture the interest—and the respect—of the child.”²¹

As an alternative demonstrating both her devotion to educational reform and her alliance with *avant garde* interest in the machine, she suggests that the judicious use of cinema as a teaching tool would not only compensate for any lack of good teachers, but also generate immense creativity and satisfaction on the part of students:

There is for instance no reason why children should not write, direct, photograph and make their own films with very little instruction. There is hardly a subject taught that could not be helped by the cinema provided the film is prepared for first by a lesson and is then followed up by practical work. Where the classes are large it can make up for the lack of individual instruction. Where they are small it can speed up progress and open new possibilities.²²

The extent of Bryher's prescience about the possibilities of mechanical aids to education can be gauged only now, with the recent proliferation of computers and video equipment in the schools. In fact, several of Bryher's articles mention her hope that new filmmaking equipment and materials coupled with lowered costs could allow individuals to own their own prints of important films—another of her projections fulfilled after half a century.

Bryher's determination to "open new possibilities" to the public at large often takes the form of pragmatic suggestions related to her concern over censorship. The issue of censorship informed a number of articles in *Close Up*. English blue laws caused imported films to be banned or mutilated, a practice which not only blocked the struggle to gain recognition for cinema as an art rather than as a mindless diversion, but also implied that censors had to protect an English public unable to face or to understand certain films and ideas. To assist the English readership of *Close Up*, Bryher often included detailed descriptions of European and American films and gave specific information about current restrictions, urging readers to take responsibility for acquiring "the best" films in order properly to develop critical taste, for, she asks, "until we know what cinematography has already achieved how can we hope to evolve standards of comparison and criticism?"²³ Bryher qualifies her insistence upon ready availability by noting that this does not mean that all films are appropriate for children, but she specifies that it is a question of discernment, not of morals. "[There] are a lot of films that one would prefer a child not to see, just as there are bad forms of any art that one prefers they should escape if possible . . ." she writes, "not from any point of view that their morals might be damaged, but because many great films treat of subjects outside their experience and many stupid films might blunt their discrimination."²⁴ It is clear that Bryher respects the rights of individuals to take charge of their reactions to challenging ideas and materials. Her objections to censorship entail a specific rejection of the limitations implied in any legalized "moral guidance" intended to affect what people think.

In a series of articles published during 1928, Bryher gives directions for the creation of small independent film societies, stressing the importance of cooperative action and the necessity of access to proper equipment, including original uncut films.²⁵ Others of her articles urge English cinephiles to apply pressure upon Parliament to alter the heavy restrictions and tariffs then placed upon imported films.²⁶ Bryher's insistence upon having movies from foreign nations readily available, in the versions originally intended by the directors, allies her call for individual technical excellence with her belief in free and open artistic expression.

Bryher's writings repeatedly aver that the individual carries responsibility for the actions of his or her nation, and that the collective action of small groups of informed people applies not just to the reform of film-showing habits but also a nation's entire attitude toward its own problems and toward international cooperation. While Bryher does not foresee that film groups might be able to abolish all censorship in cinema, she suggests that they might be able to change the laws to permit private showings of films that would otherwise be ruined by cutting.²⁷ This action would not only preserve artistic integrity but would honor the democratic nature of film itself, for—as she puts it—“cinema belongs to the many.” The emphasis upon “democratic” action against autocratic censorship also carries significant social implications, which eventually overtake Bryher's other critical concerns as far more pressing issues intervene.

In her last major article for *Close Up*, Bryher abandons the discussion of film in order to confront the deteriorating situation in Europe. During her trip to Berlin in 1932, Bryher writes, “I didn't go to cinemas because I watched the revolution.” The growing ferment of Nazism has wrenched her attention from aesthetic matters.²⁸ The article outlines the bannings, boycotts, exiles, and lies that are the clear signals of oncoming war. Bryher specifically reiterates the importance of collective action based upon attention to what is real rather than to false images:

For the last fifteen years people have used the words peace and war so much that the sound of them means nothing at all . . . very few have ever made a constructive attempt to prevent the months of 1914 from being repeated on a larger and worse scale. I do not think a pacifism of theories and pamphlets is of any use. . . . If we want peace, we must fight for the liberty to think in terms of peace, for all the peoples of Europe.²⁹

“Do not let the lessons of the last war be lost,” Bryher continues. “Make your decision now while you have still time to work for whatever you believe.”³⁰ But the tone of the piece hints that, by 1933, Bryher already knew that the aesthetic investigations of *Close Up* would soon be superseded by war. The magazine itself endured only until December of that year; by that point, Bryher had joined a private group dedicated to helping Jews escape Germany (*Heart to Artemis* 275). Although in *The Heart to Artemis* Bryher suggests that the advent of sound ruined the experiments of *avant garde* filmmakers and led to the demise of *Close Up* (262), it is also apparent that Bryher had decided to put her energy into war resistance. *Close Up* had done its work

in creating an international discussion around the art of film; but Bryher, who had done so much to make this possible, had to take action in another field.

Bryher's work for *Close Up* added explicitly to the quality of debate that made the magazine a vital forum for the *avant garde* during a particularly important historical period in Europe. The seriousness with which *Close Up* treated cinema as an art gained from Bryher's insistence upon technical skill, good equipment, widespread dissemination of ideas, and the importance of film as an educational tool to be used for political and social as well as academic aims. The magazine itself deserves much more critical attention, coming as it did during those crucial years when cinema made the transition into sound—a change which Bryher deplored as compromising the psychological qualities of cinema—concomitant with the escalating changes in Europe during the latter Weimar Republic. Bryher herself had anticipated the importance of the ideas and issues she had examined in the early thirties; in *The Heart to Artemis*, she writes, “We believed that if we stated facts without comment, moral or otherwise, mankind must see its follies and revise its laws. It was a vain and idle dream and yet, looking back at it after forty years, how much that we created in the way of thought is accepted now as valid and desirable” (204).

NOTES

1. In 1927 Bryher, divorced from her first husband Robert McAlmon, married Kenneth Macpherson, with whom she undertook the *Close Up*. She was the financial backer of this venture as she had been for McAlmon's Contact Editions and for some Egoist Press publications, and as she would be for *Life and Letters To-Day*.

2. H.D.'s contributions to *Close Up* include some editorial work as well as a number of articles in which her associative/cinematographic style enacts her aesthetic and technical concerns of the time. The materials examining H.D.'s association with *Close Up* require considerably more study, research begun by Anne Friedberg, “On H.D., Woman, History, Recognition,” *Wide Angle* 5.2 (1982): 26-31; “Approaching *Borderline*,” in King, *HDWP* 369-90; and “The POOL Films,” *HDN* 1.1 (Spring 1987): 10-11; and by Chris Brown in “A Filmography for H.D.,” *HDN* 2.1 (Spring 1988): 19-24.

3. [Winifred] Bryher, *The Heart to Artemis: A Writer's Memoirs* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, AMP World, 1962) 246. Subsequent references to *The Heart to Artemis* will be given parenthetically within the essay.

4. Bryher, "G. W. Pabst: A Survey," *Close Up* 1 (December 1927): 58, 59.

5. *The History of the British Film: 1918-1929* (London: Allen AMP Unwin, 1971) 22.

6. *Writing for Their Lives: The Modernist Women 1910-1940* (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1987) 195-97.

7. It is evident in Bryher's letters to Gertrude Stein that Bryher used critical discernment and diplomacy in garnering work for the magazine. In soliciting the manuscript for Stein's piece "Mrs Emerson," for example, Bryher praises the selection as a "very fine and interesting piece of work" which she feels "very pleased to be able to include" in the magazine (Letter from Bryher to Stein, July 7, 1927). And she later writes that she finds the manuscript to be "one of the finest things you have done, I feel. There is a great feeling of depth and continuity about it, like a short but perfect novel" (Letter from Bryher to Stein, August 8, 1927). Such tact in correspondence paved the way for many of the selections in the magazine and helped to establish *Close Up* as a forum for *avant garde* ideas.

It is interesting to compare Bryher's letters to Stein with Macpherson's when considering the niceties of editorial solicitation. In reference to "Mrs Emerson," for instance, Macpherson at one point writes that his secretary "seems to have gone to bits over it" (Letter from Macpherson to Stein, July 20, 1927); later, he tells Stein how much he likes her article, "though article is hardly the word . . ." (Letter of July 28, 1927). The unfortunate turns of phrase may have been mitigated for Stein by Macpherson's enthusiasm for the "patterns and forms and criss-crossing and all the plastic movement [which] are, to my cinematographic mind, completely linked up with the photographic possibility of light and geometry and persons" (July 28), yet the contrast with Bryher's tact and precise critical praise is notable. I wish to acknowledge thanks for permission to quote from the letters from Bryher to Stein and from Macpherson to Stein, located in the Gertrude Stein papers, Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

8. Letter from Macpherson to Bryher, [January 1931]. This point is significant when one notes the changes in the pictorial design of the magazine over the years, as the interspersed sets of stills which the early issues of *Close Up* contained gave way to a more complex visual design, particularly in the intricate coordination of texts and photographs in volumes eight through ten. While the change in format seems to have been a collaborative decision, Bryher handled the production.

9. Letter from Macpherson to Bryher, [June 1931]. Macpherson also often asked Bryher to do the solicitation for particular materials.

10. Letter from Bryher to H.D., September 15, 1932. I wish to acknowledge thanks for permission to quote from the H.D. papers, Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

11. Walter Laqueur, *Weimar: A Cultural History 1918-1933* (New York: Putnam, 1974) 231.

12. Hugh Ridley, "Tretjakov in Berlin," *Culture and Society in the Weimar Republic*, ed. Keith Bullivant

(Manchester: Manchester UP, 1977) 158. I am indebted to Nancy Romalov of the University of Iowa for first mentioning to me the “pan-European” interests of Weimar intellectuals. I am also indebted to Connie Hale and Melanie Lewis for their patient reading and valuable suggestions about the drafts of this article.

13. “The War from Three Angles,” *Close Up* 1.1 (July 1927): 17.
14. “War from Three Angles,” 17.
15. “The War from More Angles,” *Close Up* 1.4 (Oct. 1927): 45.
16. See, for example, Bryher’s discussions in “Defence of Hollywood,” *Close Up* 2.2 (Feb. 1928): 44-51; “West and East of the Atlantic,” *Close Up* 9.2 (June 1932): 131-33; and “Notes on Some Films,” *Close Up* 9.3 (Sept. 1932): 196-99.
17. “War from Three Angles,” 18, 22.
18. “War from More Angles,” 47.
19. See, for example, discussions of the international appeal and relative political “neutrality” of cinema in Laqueur, chapter 7, and John Willett, *Art and Politics in the Weimar Period: The New Sobriety, 1917-1933* (New York: Pantheon, 1978) 142.
20. “Films in Education: The Complex of the Machine,” *Close Up* 1.2 (Aug. 1927): 49, 51.
21. “Complex of the Machine,” 53-54.
22. “Complex of the Machine,” 54.
23. “How I Would Start a Film Club,” *Close Up* 2.6 (June 1928): 34.
24. “Films for Children,” *Close Up* 3.2 (Aug. 1928): 18-19.
25. “What I Can Do,” *Close Up* 2.3 (Mar. 1928): 21-25; “What Can I Do!” *Close Up* 2.5 (May 1928): 32-37; “How I Would Start a Film Club,” *Close Up* 2.6 (June 1928): 30-36; “How to Rent a Film,” *Close Up* 3.6 (Dec. 1928): 45-51.
26. “How to Rent a Film”; “A New Commission,” *Close Up* 6.3 (Mar. 1930): 223-24.
27. “How to Rent a Film,” 46-48.
28. “What Shall You Do in the War?” *Close Up* 10.2 (June 1933): 188-92.
29. “What Shall You Do . . . ?” 190.
30. “What Shall You Do . . . ?” 191.