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Resisting the 'tinned products of Hollywood': Bryher's Queer Feminist Film Criticism

Today I'll be talking about the British modernist writer, critic, filmmaker, and historical novelist, Bryher (who was born Annie Winifred Ellerman in 1894). Bryher has been a marginal figure in mainstream stories of modernism, although more recently, with the advent of feminist, lesbian and queer interventions in the field, she has received more critical attention. My own work, which focuses on her contribution to both literary and cinematic modernisms, comes from a queer feminist standpoint.

To provide a bit of context – from 1927 to 1933 Bryher collaborated with her one-time lover and life-long partner, the American Imagist poet H.D. and her second husband, the Scottish artist, Kenneth Macpherson, (who was also H.D.'s lover) to form the experimental film group, POOL. Based in Switzerland, POOL issued the first British critical film journal, *Close Up*, with Bryher funding this project, as well as POOL's other endeavours, through her personal wealth. Alongside shooting three shorts, which only remain to us in fragments, in 1930 POOL also produced the experimental silent film, *Borderline*, which combines Freudian notions of the unconscious, with an aesthetic indebted to Eisenstein's montage theories. The film's anti-racist polemic, in combination with its distinctly queer flavour, has meant that over the last two decades, as well as interesting historians of film, it has also drawn the attention of scholars based in critical race, queer and modernist studies.

POOL embraced European intellectual cinemas, viewed silent film as an *Esperanto*, which had the potential to unite war-torn Europe and considered the medium a novel art form, with Macpherson, for instance, speculating in his first editorial that 'fifty more [years] will probably turn [film] into THE art'. While *Close Up* did certainly promulgate the notion of film as art in its pages, this is rather a crude rendering of both the journal and the group, since, POOL, and particularly Bryher, were also socially-minded and saw film as an important political, as well as aesthetic, medium (indeed, for them, these were interrelated facets). As such, the group waged a long-standing campaign against British censorship practices, which often targeted T.P. O'Connor.

Over the next 15 minutes or so I'll be focusing on two of Bryher's *Close Up* articles – her 1928 'Dope or Stimulus' and the 1931 'The Hollywood Code' – in which she enunciates her concern for English spectators in the face of the English film market's saturation with

what she labelled the 'tinned products of Hollywood'. In these two pieces, Bryher stakes out her place in the emerging debate concerning mass or popular culture and its relationship to avant-garde art, which was beginning to be held by various members of the Frankfurt school as well as critics such as Hermann Broch and Clement Greenberg. In particular, though, I want to resituate Bryher's arguments within the censorious zeitgeist of the interwar period and suggest that we consider her output as a queer feminist critique of what she saw as the increasing heterosexual homogeneity of Hollywood rather than merely expressing elitist anxieties about the 'masses' consumption of cinema. Indeed, here, I want to complicate the familiar narrative that tends to draw a clear distinction between elitist members of the literati and mass cultural forms such as film. I seek to reframe the story by suggesting that alongside class, the differences of sexuality and gender need also to be taken into account. In order to do this I shall now turn to a late twentieth century interpretation of Bryher's film criticism.

In a 1996 chapter considering cinematic viewing habits in Bolton, which were garnered from mass observation studies undertaken in 1937, Jeffrey Richards ends his consideration of regional and national film taste by discussing an extract from Bryher's 1928 article, 'Dope or Stimulus.' Richards deploys it to illustrate his assertion that British intellectuals – represented here by F.R. Leavis, Aldous Huxley and T.S. Eliot – were cultural elitists, who, not only despised commercial cinema but were bent on policing its consumption too. Richards observes that: '[t]he poet 'Bryher' spoke for all such commentators when writing of film audiences in the intellectual film journal *Close-up*.' He quotes the following from Bryher's article – so, this is Richards quoting from Bryher:

They [the audience] hypnotise themselves into an expectation that a given star or theatre or idea will produce a given result. They surrender to this all logical features in abeyance, and achieve complete gratification whatever the material set in front of them provided it is presented in an expected and familiar manner To watch hypnotically something which has become a habit and which is not recorded as it happens by the brain, differs little from the drugtaker's point of view and it is destructive because it is used as a cover to prevent real consideration of problems, artistic or sociological, and the creation of intelligent English films.

It seems evident, at least from the extract above, that Bryher's views were analogous to both these British intellectuals as well as various members of the Frankfurt School, in particular the later work of Adorno and Horkheimer. Richards' quotation presents Bryher as viewing popular cinema as something that pacified audiences through its homogenous and predictable forms and themes. Here, the mass audience is only imagined as a passive entity,

whose multiple differences are not considered. Bryher, then, adopts the paternalistic position of critic – a problematically classed stance which clearly distinguishes her from the apparently unthinking, doped, masses.

But I want to offer a more nuanced – and complicated – story by resituating 'Dope and Stimulus' in its contextual moment of 1928 (rather than linking it to British viewing habits in 1937, as Richards does). I want to connect it to a particular moment of national scandal – and one crucial to the development of a public British lesbian subculture – that is, the British banning of Radclyffe Hall's 1928 novel, *The Well of Loneliness*. Indeed, if we return to 'Dope and Stimulus' and resituate Richards' extract, it becomes evident that Bryher's critique was made in response to a specific, though unnamed, event. These lines take the place of Richards' ellipses:

To particularize', Bryher wrote, 'a thoughtful book happens to be written about a social problem widely discussed across the Continent. It is attached by a cheap Press in a vulgar and stupid manner. Nobody protests. Yet the people who buy these papers go to theatres where the same subject and questions of sex in general are dealt with in songs and dialogues in the most suggestive and nauseating manner.

'Dope and Stimulus' was published in the September 1928 issue of *Close Up*, two months after the publication of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, and just a month after James Douglas' caustic outburst in the *Sunday Express*, which ultimately led to the novel's banning in November 1928.

Hall's novel – dubbed the 'Bible of Lesbianism' – has mostly been read as an apologia for female same-sex desire, or inversion. Like the Wilde trials before it, the obscenity trial that ensued, led not only to greater scrutiny of dissident female sexual subjectivities, but also concretised in the public imaginary a very particular notion of the lesbian. This image was indebted to the well-known figure of Hall herself, a dapper dresser, whose masculinised aesthetic, including the ever present cigarette, saturated the English print media at this time.

It is more than likely, I suggest, that Bryher was alluding to Douglas' vitriolic attack on Hall's plea for different desire, and the corresponding furore that mushroomed from it. Rather than simply exhibiting a snobbish disdain for popular cinema, then, Bryher, admittedly deploying a highly rhetorical and didactic register, is calling for audiences to take responsibility for what they consume. She's also highlighting the hypocrisy of British censorship practices, which allowed topics such as 'lesbianism' or 'inversion' to be treated in 'a vulgar and stupid manner' in the press and theatre but banned Hall's 'thoughtful book'.

Bryher's article ends by calling for English film audiences to behave more like German ones. She recalls an audience in Berlin, where she watched both 'a famous Hollywood picture' and 'a new German super film with a very popular star'. Bryher writes:

The audience waited quietly in each case till the film finished. Then burst an inspiring riot of shrill derisive whistles. They knew that both the films were bad and were alive enough, critical enough to retaliate with their opinions.

Bryher is urging English audiences to realise that spectatorship has the potential to be an active, rather than passive, pastime, that the cinematic experience is – in her words - 'not to forget but to *live*.'

Indeed, in connection with this stance, I want to suggest that Bryher's views, rather contradictorily, bear closer relation to Walter Benjamin's 'cautious optimism' for film, and other technologies of mechanical reproduction, rather than being fully aligned with Adorno and Horkheimer's notion of the culture industry's inescapably oppressive and controlling nature. With his development of the 'unconscious optic' and 'distraction,' Benjamin tentatively set out his hopes for these post-auratic arts. He discerned in them a potential for educating the masses – for providing the means by which the proletariat might become conscious of itself, and its situation – as well as the possibility of democratising art. Such democratisation, however, was constrained by censorship practices, a point which Bryher takes up again in 'The Hollywood Code', to which I now turn.

Once again, the piece is in part a response to cultural censorship. In this instance, however, it was written with American censors in mind. Her title refers both to the uniformity in content and form of Hollywood films, as well as gesturing to the Production Code or Hays Code, which was first adopted by the American moving picture industry in 1930. Bryher's main thesis is that the saturation of the English market with American productions – specifically talkies – is creating unquestioning spectators who mindlessly consume what she refers to as 'the tinned ideas of Hollywood'. The Hollywood Code is at fault since it only permits the production of particular stories and particular subject matter. Bryher argues that it is due to this that Hollywood 'can produce kitsch magnificently but cannot produce art.' She bemoans both the American film industry's failure to press for the new and the English viewing public's indifference to difference, its acceptance of this bland uniformity in the cinematic fodder it consumes.

Laura Mulvey has discussed how the Hays Code forced sexuality, and particularly women's, to be signified otherwise. Mulvey writes: 'the impact of the Code was to produce a cinema in which sexuality became the 'unspoken' [and where] [i]t became difficult, if not

impossible, to represent autonomous female desire on the screen'. Mulvey also highlights how Code era productions were marked by a morality which required a Manichaeian division between good and evil. Unsurprisingly, then, as well as prohibiting autonomous female desire the Hays Code also, as Judith Halberstam has noted, 'banned the representation of 'sex perversion' and insisted that 'no picture shall be produced which will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience shall never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin'. Though she does not argue it explicitly – indeed cannot, for fear of retribution particularly in the aftermath of the trial of *The Well of Loneliness* – Bryher's article is certainly concerned with the Hollywood Code's proscription of certain lives and subjectivities. And, I think it's important to acknowledge that, as a queer subject, this included Bryher, as well as her fellow POOL members.

Bryher opens her article provocatively, observing that: 'During the past year an insidious danger has invaded the cinema, expressed most fitly by the excellent word Germany has found for it, *kitsch*.' She clarifies that 'Kitsch does not mean any bad film, but one that, having apparently artistic pretensions, is as shallow as any commercial film, once the surface technique is stripped away.' In Bryher's definition kitsch is synonymous with ersatz and, moreover, is a guileful masquerader, successfully hoodwinking critics and spectators alike. She writes: 'through an extraordinary combination of events, kitsch and not art, is becoming the pre-occupation of the critics, and its conception of cinema is forcing experiment from the cinema.' Kitsch, she avers, impedes and fetters the progress of cinematic art: 'Hollywood,' Bryher reiterates, 'has no room for the experimental mind'.

The 'danger' of kitsch, however, stems not just from its inhibition of vanguard art, but also, Bryher infers, from its ability to condition its consumers. She notes that 'gradually [the English cinema student's] critical perceptions become blunted through a continuous diet of Hollywood patent foods.' She concedes that Hollywood 'has brains' and has learnt to manipulate the 'fundamental conceptions of human desire and response,' effectively reducing the viewer to '[a]n animal [that] is hungry, sees food and eats it.'

This correlation between consumption and control evokes the work of Russian physiologist, Pavlov, who is now mostly remembered for his experiments on salivating dogs, which led to the description of the 'conditioned reflex'. Bryher makes this connection explicitly in 'Dope or Stimulus,' when she observes:

What has actually happened [to English audiences] is that like the monkey in Prof. Pavlov's experiment who reached always for food at the sight of a blue plate, they are not reacting directly to amusement or to art, but are reacting

instead to a sequence of familiar ideas, that are not unfortunately true to the ideas or progress of to-day.

It is the addiction to 'familiar ideas,' she infers, that inhibits artistic experimentation and the 'progress of to-day' and it is this 'sequence of familiar ideas' which becomes a predominant concern in 'The Hollywood Code.' At the heart of the Hollywood narrative, Bryher observed, sat the nuclear family, to the detriment of any other story. She noted the Code's insistence that the presence of 'an idiot child is better than no child, co-operative feeling between the sexes is forbidden least it should lessen the power of illicit eroticism.'

Bryher then moves on to offer a mocking parody of Hollywood cinema by imagining an American version of Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925). Eisenstein's aesthetically and politically revolutionary film famously propagandised the 1905 mutiny on Battleship Potemkin, which saw its crew rebel against Tsarist officers. Noting that '[m]aggots certainly would not be permitted' and '[i]nstead we should have opened with a sailor's bar, with plenty of females in sex-appeal promoting dresses, and a cheerful song,' Bryher then suggests three routes the narrative might follow: 'simple love', 'romantic drama' or 'a play of gangster life.' Bryher concludes, however, by noting:

But the end of all stories must be the same: a triumphal bridal procession down the Odessa steps, Cossacks in front with bayonets decorated with orange blossom, sailors behind, the folk songs of the world, and on the edges, children with doves. The difference between this story and *Potemkin*, is the difference between *kitsch* and art.

In her American interpretation of *Potemkin*, the murderous Cossacks jostle happily with the once seditious, but now sedate, sailors. Perhaps the most famous sequence in *Potemkin* – the abandoned pram bouncing haphazardly down the Odessa steps – a symbol of the Tsarist regime's lack of any future – is overlain, in Bryher's version, with a vignette of a traditional wedding party. In its zeal for 'happy' endings, Hollywood, Bryher suggests, erases both political and artistic possibility. Hollywood's need for such endings prohibits both political commentary – Eisenstein's allusions are erased by this final saccharine scene – as well as the production of experimental art, as she emphasizes: '[t]he difference between this story and *Potemkin*, is the difference between *kitsch* and art'.

Bryher's critique of English film audiences and Hollywood film is bound up with rejecting the popular or commercial film as ideologically charged, as helping to install particular, circumscribed fantasies in its audiences. In other words, she construes such cinematic products as the (heteronormative) opium of the people, for which there is no

antidote or alternative, no obvious means of weaning them off, since censorship inhibits it. Bryher's *Close Up* articles recognise the importance of the cinema as a mass media which engages, but also potentially controls and conditions, its various audiences. She is not rejecting the popular in and of itself but because Hollywood film tells exclusionary tales. Indeed, it's significant that unlike the critics she was corralled with by Jeffrey Richards, Bryher never calls for the banning of Hollywood film – hers is not an exclusionary logic.

I have suggested, then, that we consider Bryher's output as a queer feminist critique of the increasing heteronormativity of Hollywood, as well as other popular cinematic, productions. In this moment – which comprised both the recent banning of Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* and the advent of the Hays Production Code in the US – it became evident that only particular narratives were permissible or, as Bryher herself observed, that '[t]he end of all the stories must be the same [with] a triumphal bridal procession.' As well as urging English audiences to resist the 'tinned products of Hollywood' in her film criticism, however, Bryher also responded to this cultural uniformity through collaborating, and funding, POOL's own film productions. Indeed, in its anti-racist and queer feature film, *Borderline*, POOL did provide a different story.