

## **‘Thrown back on the cutting floor’: Dylan Thomas and film**

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I.

In ‘Spajma and Salnady or, Who Shot the Emu?’, the ‘one act play never to be presented’ which Dylan Thomas sent to Pamela Hansford Johnson in a letter of January 1934, the two writers appear in anagramatised form as the characters ‘Salnady Moth’ and ‘Spajma Oh-no-el’. The play opens with Spajma engaged in conversation with ‘the Spirit of Poetry’, but the arrival of Salnady and his demand for ‘A quick womb please, two milks, a hangman, a dash of sleep and a pint of wax’ has the Spirit uttering a scream and making for the exit. Left alone, the two talk about their daily doings, and in response to learning that Spajma has recently seen a movie starring John Barrymore, Salnady launches into a denunciation of both Barrymore in particular (‘a bunch of mannerisms and a profile’) and mainstream film more generally (‘atrociously bad’). He then lists a few alternatives: ‘Among the few films I have enjoyed are: *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, *Atalanta*, *Student of Prague*, *Edge of the World*, *Vaudeville*, *Waxworks*, *the Street*, *M*, & *Blue Angel* (all German); *Sur lest Toits de Paris*; *Potemkin* (Russian); *The Gold Rush*, *the Three Little Pigs*, & *the Marx Brothers* (American).’ (CL, 115)

Much has been written about Thomas's relationship to radio, naturally enough; but, as this illustrates, at the crucial moment in the forging of the process style that would inform everything he subsequently wrote, the mass medium he was most concerned with, and influenced by, was film. Thomas would spend over seven years of his working life writing film-scripts, in 1941-48, and as Constantine Fitzgibbon noted, Thomas 'probably put more words on paper in this professional capacity than in any other'.<sup>i</sup> There is something of the 'truculent, a shower-off, all plus-fours and no breakfast' about his list, of course--the young poet from the sticks is trying to impress his London girlfriend, and laying it on a bit thick. Nevertheless, it's an impressive one for a nineteen-year-old, and the informed interest it bespeaks is apparent throughout his early writing. A member of the first generation to grow

up on film, *the* new and most thoroughly Modernist art form of the twentieth century, as a boy he had been a regular attender at ‘the local flea-pit picture houses’ of suburban Swansea, ‘where [I] whooped for the scalping Indians ... and banged for the rustlers’ guns’. All his life he had an abiding love film, not only of European art movies, but its trashier genres too--comedies (Charlie Chaplin and the Marx Brothers make his list), weepies, horror, thrillers and westerns. Revealingly, his taste in them blurred the boundaries between ‘high’ and ‘low’, just as his writing mingled and fused radically different kinds of literary material. For most of the 1940s Thomas actually worked in film, as well as radio, and at one point hoped for a career as a feature film scriptwriter. His script for the then-unmade feature film, *The Doctor and the Devils*, was published in book form in 1952, the year before he died. Film, then, was a lifelong passion, and it should come as no surprise that on his first visit to the USA, in 1950, Thomas seems to have been more enthused by his meeting with Chaplin than any literary figure. On his fatal, final US visit, in October 1953, two of his last public appearances were at symposia on film in New York City, one with Arthur Miller and Maya Deren, the other, titled ‘Poetry and the Film’, with Robert Lowell.

It is important to note that Thomas's love of film was not merely that of a fan, a merely superficial or impressionistic one. His childhood love of the ‘tuppenny crush’, as children's Saturday film matinees were called, turned to deeper appreciation in his teenage years. In July 1930, at the age of fifteen he published an essay, ‘The Films’, in the *Swansea Grammar School Magazine*, in which he displayed a grasp of film history and an appreciation of the technical problems facing the then-new ‘Talkies’, one sufficiently detailed to suggest, as John Ackerman claims, that he had read Paul Rotha's recently-published *The Film Till Now* (1930).<sup>ii</sup> By his late teens, a filmic sensibility was informing his most original poems and fictions in complex and fruitful ways, and to a degree that is still little appreciated. Those looking for allusions to Donne or Blake, say, in ‘I see the boys of summer’ or ‘The force that through the green fuse’ also need to be aware of a debt to film. Thus, the Expressionist films on his list contributed to the Germanic-gothic, noirish, and uncanny atmospheres of early poems and stories, while his experience of the defining Hollywood versions of classic Gothic and horror roles--Bela Lugosi's ‘Dracula’ (1931) and Boris Karloff's ‘Frankenstein’ (1931) and ‘The Mummy’ (1932)--stocked his image-bank of mummies (‘Should lanterns shine’), vampires (‘My world is pyramid’), and mad scientists (‘The Lemon’). Thomas's early taste for worms, graves, ghosts is traceable to Jacobean drama, Beddoes and Arthur Machen, of course; but it also owes much to film. Thomas was immersed in the culture of film, *au fait*

with the spirit of its mass appeal; we know he read film journals, wept as he watched tear-jerkers, yearned (or feigned a yearning) for its heroines, and memorized sequences of dialogue, like favourite poems, by heart. In her recollection of their first meeting, in 1940, for example, Theodora Fitzgibbon recalled how she and Thomas realised that they shared love for James Whales's 'The Old Dark House' (1932), an early landmark horror movie, and that this led to them 're-enacting large parts of it, squabbling for the best bits, which Dylan insisted on doing.'

Film figures both directly and indirectly in Thomas's early poetry. An example of the former is part V of 'Altarwise by owl-light', in which conflicts within the Nonconformist imaginary are played out using the stock figures of the Hollywood Western. The archangel Gabriel, for example, is the 'two-gunned' gunslinger of the poem's opening line, Jesus is a card-sharp who 'trump[s] up the king of spots' from his sleeve ('trump' punning on its card game sense and the Last Trump, or Judgement), while a hellfire preacher of the kind Thomas had often heard in Swansea's 'black bethels' rants 'Black-tongued and tipsy from salvation's bottle'. 'I, in my intricate image' goes further still, alluding to a specific film – the notorious sequence in Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel's 'Un chien andalou' (1928), in which a woman's eye is sliced open with a cut-throat razor in the lines as 'Death instrumental / Splitting the long eye open'. Here, the slicing of the literal 'eye' punningly tells of the metaphorical slicing up of the speaker's 'intricate image', or 'I', which is the poem's subject. Popular gangster movies of the time like 'Scarface' (1932), typically starring James Cagney and Humphrey Bogart, are evoked even more clearly in 'Our eunuch dreams':

In this our age the gunman and his moll,  
Two one-dimensioned ghosts, love on a reel,  
Strange to our solid eye,  
And speak their midnight nothings as the swell:  
When cameras shut they hurry to their hole  
Down in the yard of day. (*CP*, 54)

This poem, above all others by Thomas, goes beyond simply using film as the vehicle of a conceit, delving into its deeper psycho-sexual and social effects. Films themselves are viewed as 'eunuch', offering a glamorized vision of sex, but in a de-sexed mode--that is, as simulacra or 'ghosts' which ultimately dissipate life energies, a claim elaborated and tested in a series of metaphysical conceits and images which punningly contrast 'real life' adolescent fantasies with the 'reel life' substitutes offered for them by the Hollywood 'dream' factory, asking

which are the truest ('Which is the world?'). In 'Our eunuch dreams', we might say, Thomas interrogates his own love of film, demanding to know whether its exemplary ideological potency might outweigh its value as art and entertainment. Yet the 'real / reel' question cannot be an either / or choice in his dialectical vision of the wor(l)d, and the poem ends by linking film to social revolution: 'Of our two sleepings ['real' or 'reel' fantasy], which / Shall fall awake when cures and their itch / Raise up this red-eyed earth?' [the socialist masses]. (CP, 54) For Thomas, in full apocalyptic anarcho-socialistic cry here, film (punningly present as the 'shots' fired against capitalism) must be recruited as a weapon of liberation in the struggle against 'the old dead', used to blast aside the 'one-sided' phantoms of repressive ideology: in this battle of one kind of ghost with another, he may have had in mind the *The Communist Manifesto*, which opens with the 'spectre' of revolution haunting the ghostly reality of the old order, threatening to overthrow it and body forth a new, classless society:

... our shots shall smack  
The image from the plates;  
And we shall be fit fellows for a life,  
And who remain shall flower as they love,  
Praise to our faring hearts. (CP, 55)

If film is ultimately viewed here as potentially revolutionary--and the reference in his list to Eisenstein's 'Battleship Potemkin' shows that Thomas knew how it could be used in this way--a more psycho-genetic and fated appreciation of its ideological dimension can be traced in one of the more curious conceits of Thomas's early poetry; namely, that the unborn see, before birth, the events and chief personae (mother, father, lovers, etc.) 'projected' as a film on the wall of the womb, the embryo being granted foreknowledge of its fate which it loses after birth. In 'Then was my neophyte', for example, God appears as the cosmic director of the film of the neophyte/embryo's life-to-be, displayed on the 'tide-hoisted' womb-wall:

He films my vanity.  
Shot by the wind, by tilted arcs ...  
His reels and mystery  
The winder of the clockwise scene  
Wound like a ball of lakes  
Then threw on that tide-hoisted screen  
Love's image till my heartbone breaks  
By a dramatic sea. (CP, 90)

Still more strange, 'The tombstone told when she died' is in the voice of someone who claims, in his embryonic state, to have witnessed in such a 'life-film' the tragic story of a woman

whose tombstone he has just now, as an adult, encountered. As the inscription on the tomb states, she died in the period between her marriage ceremony and its physical consummation, and the poem makes her the 'heroine' of a film which is a sexualised version of the medieval Dance of Death:

I who saw in a hurried film  
Death and this mad heroine  
Meet once on a mortal wall ... (CP, 105)

The best-known use of this conceit occurs in 'Altarwise by owl-light' IV, which concludes:

Love's a reflection of the mushroom features,  
Stills snapped by night in the bread-sided field,  
Once close-up smiling in the wall of pictures,  
Ark-lamped thrown back upon the cutting flood. (CP, 83)

There is an autograph note in Thomas' hand on these lines in Edith Sitwell's copy of *Twenty-five Poems* which reads: 'Love is a reflection of the features (the features of those you will know and love *after* the womb) which are photographed before birth on the wall of the womb--the womb being surrounded by food; a field being its own field, and the womb being its own food.' Love, that is, is based on the unconscious operation of precognition, a buried and forgotten familiarity with the 'features' of certain 'mushroom' (squashed) faces (punning on 'feature' films) asserting itself when we discover matches for them. 'Love' is 'Ark-lamped' because *arc*-lamps were the light source for film projectors (as in 'Then was my neophyte'), and because the embryo is a kind of 'ark', a vessel containing hope for the future, adrift on the 'flood' of history. 'The cutting flood' conflates the breaking of the amniotic waters which severs (cuts) the child from its mother, and the severing of the amniotic cord, viewing both as part of a process in which the child is edited, as it were, from the maternal body ('the cutting floor' is that of the room where a film is edited, but also of the birth-chamber). Typically fusing the meaty (Darwinian-biological) and metaphysical (Christian-religious), the organic and the mechanical, Thomas forges a poetic language based on film which incorporates but tests the ability of different kinds of determinism to 'explain' the strength of the child-parent bond and our irrational-seeming choice of love-partners.

An appreciation of his immersion in film also allows us to see how it informed the stylistic aspects of Thomas's poetry. These are often a source of confusion to novice readers but make better sense if it is understood at the outset that the paratactical image-leaps by which the poems so often proceed are indebted to filmic narrative techniques. Indeed, it is

arguable that these owe more to filmic montage than the learned, literary-allusive form of montage we usually find in Modernist poetry. *The Waste Land* is the classic example of this of course, but its lapidary, jerky switches of register and source material are very different from Thomas's subsuming of his varied materials within an appearance of a smooth narrative flow. A poem such as 'When, like a running grave' draws on an extremely wide range of allusion, from embalming to lipstick adverts, but it presents these within structures which are nominally grammatically 'correct' (often parodically so; there are thirty-five separate clauses in its opening sentence). It is the tension between impeccable behaviour and the 'revolution of the word' it can barely contain which is the essence of the poetry, of course, and it can be related to the way in which film plays off its strictly time-bound ('grammatical') nature tricks against its unrivalled potential for flashback, montage, dissolve and so on. Not for nothing had Thomas read Eisenstein's *The Film Sense*, in which these matters are explored at length. Film was thus more than a merely thematic issue for Thomas; in its continuous flows and disjunctions, it models his view of the universe as continuous change and simultaneity, or 'process', as he embodied it in his 'process poetic', which may be legitimately described as 'filmic'.

Thomas's habitual self-mockery became more pronounced as he grew older, and one can see the critique of his morbidity found in 'Salnady and Spajma' repeated in later send-ups of his earlier provincial bohemian pretentiousness. One which also uses film as a way of doing this occurs in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* (1940). *A Portrait* in general offers a take-down of Thomas's intense modernist pretensions of just five years before, and it contains a specific, filmic instance in a characteristically sly aside in 'Old Garbo'. This is a story about the young Dylan-narrator, a cub reporter, being taken on a tour of the rough-and-tough pubs of Swansea docks by the seasoned older reporter whose nickname provides the story's title. While the primary meaning of 'Garbo' is the nickname, it is derived, as we are meant to notice from the film star, Greta Garbo, a Thomas favourite. All it means ostensibly is that the senior reporter is a bit of a primadonna. But it gestures towards the encounter with film within the story, when, trying to kill time and get out of the rain ahead of their rendezvous, the young narrator blags his way into the nearest cinema by flashing his Press Card:

I went to the Plaza. 'Press', I said to the girl with the Tyrolean hat and skirt.  
'There's been two reporters this week.'  
'Special notice.'

She showed me to a seat. During the educational film, with the rude seeds hugging and sprouting in front of my eyes and plants like arms and legs, I thought of the bob women and the pansy sailors in the dives. (CS, 215)

The point is that the 'educational film' – a short feature before the main offering - is one of those highly accelerated time-lapse photographic account of the life-cycle of a seedling; of almost instantaneous growth, maturity and decay, like the 'boys of summer', both ripe and rotten, 'seedy' as fecund and wasted. In other words, the spasmodic vegetable 'writhing' it depicts (a word just one letter away from 'writing', after all) serves as a glancing ironic comment on the imagery and urgency of poems such as 'I see the boys of summer', 'The force that through the green fuse', or such stories as 'The Map of Love'.<sup>iii</sup> Presented as a glimpsed, hardly noticed film sequence, it seems casual, but it is a farewell to the earlier form of his process poetic for all that.

## II.

From making film a basis of his poetic, Thomas moved, during the war years, to actually writing scripts for them and helping to make them. It was not, despite his fascination with and love of film, anything like the natural move it later seemed. He had reacted to the outbreak of war in September 1939 with strained insouciance – 'I [shall] declare myself a neutral state, or join as a small tank' – but his objections went beyond this to resistance to being 'told by the State to fight not my enemies', a phrase whose tortuous construction reflects his anguishing, and opposition to the 'fostering of hate against a bewildered, bugged people', the Germans. To his friend Desmond Hawkins, he wrote: 'What have we got to fight for or against? To prevent fascism coming here? It's come ... To protect our incomes, bank balances, property, national reputations? I feel sick. All this flogged hate again.' But whatever its ethical purity his stance had reduced him and his young family to a peripatetic, hand-to-mouth existence, lodging with relatives and friends, relying on loans and handouts to get by, and it could not last. Fearing compulsory munitions work, in September 1941 he accepted a job as scriptwriter with Donald Taylor's company, Strand Films (renamed Gryphon Films after 1943).

Paradoxically, Strand, then the largest documentary-maker in the country, sold all of its output to the Ministry of Information (MoI); still more paradoxically, Thomas happened to be very good at his job of writing propaganda. In 1942, his first full year of work for them,

Strand produced seventy-five films, six of which were scripted by Thomas. Despite the excesses he is associated with, Thomas had a professional approach to writing and usually made a good job of what he undertook to do. He was a valued Strand employee, by all accounts (his salary soon rose to £10 per week, and later to £20, plus expenses), who enjoyed the company of film people, and who had a particular knack for creating realistic and humorous dialogue. Luckily, this matched official requirements. British propaganda in the Second World War differed greatly from the bellicose jingoism of the First World War, which it was understood had fostered disbelief in government claims. The population was felt to be too sophisticated and sceptical to accept outright demonization of the enemy. Recalling the cynicism created by stories of Belgian babies on Prussian bayonets in 1914, the British press were actively discouraged from running atrocity stories, and the BBC refrained from stridency, opting for a tone which achieved the effect of sincerity through restraint.

This allowed scope for Thomas's talents. His first year at Strand saw him script a varied assortment of short information and documentary pieces - *This is Colour* (about the dyeing industry), *New Towns for Old* (urban redevelopment), *Battle for Freedom*, *Balloon Site 568*, *CEMA* (about the forerunner to the Arts Council) and *Young Farmers* - and his contribution gradually extended to other aspects of film-making, such as directing, compiling, producing and supplying voice-over commentary. *Balloon Site 568*, a recruitment film for the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) shows, in its modest way, how effective he could be. The film is almost entirely in dialogue, thereby eliminating a potentially patronizing external commentary; the women speak for themselves. The difficulty and importance of the job is stressed, but the women are distinct individuals and have a social dimension: they go dancing, they want to (but can't) go to the cinema, while at one point Myfanwy Thomas – perhaps a self-reference? – begins a mocking song about 'a great fat, hefty sergeant'. The review of this film in the July 1942 *Documentary Film Newsletter* praised the varied use of character ('A dress shop assistant [blond sex-appeal], a domestic servant [practical-Scottish]'), the visual interest ('The weird flock of balloons going to bed makes a striking picture') and the construction ('The story flows naturally, usually by a dialogue reference to the next stage'). It concluded that 'The film should bring recruits to the Service'.

*Balloon Site 568* was a sign of what was to come, and this may come as a surprise to those who know of Thomas's beliefs. How could he bring himself to write propaganda, and

such effective propaganda at that? The wartime poem 'A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London' (1945), after all, precisely *refuses* to harness the girl's death to State and Church-sanctioned modes of mourning, and denies officialdom the right to use grief for its own ends:

I shall not murder  
The mankind of her going with a grave truth,  
Or blaspheme down the stations of the breath  
With and further  
Elegy of innocence and youth ...

After the first death, there is no other. (*CP* 172-173)

As we have seen, there was compulsion in Thomas's participation in the war effort, and it is possible that a poem like this one was, in part, his reaction against the work he was doing (or, also as some have argued, a qualification of the more exultant tone of his previous elegy, 'Ceremony After a Fire Raid'). Many intellectuals conscripted for propaganda work were disgusted by it; some, like George Orwell, resigned in protest. Thomas's poem does, after all, open with the totemistic Churchillian word 'Never', familiar from his two most celebrated wartime speeches ('We shall fight them on the beaches ... We shall never give in. We shall never surrender', and 'Never in the field of human conflict ...'), wrenching it away from the bombast of public utterance in order to place it in a timeless apocalyptic limbo. But there were other factors at work too. One which would have helped reconcile Thomas to his labours had to do with the feeling, during the early war years, that there must be no return to the terrible social conditions of the 1930s. The Beveridge Report, the blueprint for what became the Welfare State, was an unlikely best-seller in 1942, precisely because most of the British population were unwilling to make the sacrifices necessary for military victory unless the government also promised social justice--an attitude less extreme than, but not totally dissimilar to, Thomas's when he had complained that fascism was 'already here'. To mobilize the masses, the MoI itself articulated the widespread sense that those who had suffered equally in Blitz and battle would be rewarded with job security and decent social provision after the war was over.

Thomas was granted the opportunity to voice one element of this mood, concerning housing, in two films, the shorts *New Towns for Old* (1942) and *A City Re-Born* (1945), as well as contributing to a film on the rebuilding of Coventry called *Building the Future* (1943). Set in the northern city of 'Smokedale', the first of these features a visitor touring the

sites of the city's pre-war slum clearance programme, which has been halted by hostilities. The visitor has an RP accent, and is evidently middle-class and from the South. The film's aim--to persuade its viewers that the halt in building is temporary, and that the government slogan of 'Homes fit for all' will not go the way of 1918's promise of 'Homes fit for heroes'--is achieved by the puncturing of his well-meaning but unconsidered comments ('Well, you can't say the children are unhappy') by the blunt Smokedale councillor, Jack Clem ('But they shouldn't be 'ere!'). Throughout the film, complacent assumptions are undermined; the need for unity of the classes is hinted at, but so too is the idea that for this to happen those at the top learn from those lower down it. At the end of the film it is Clem who turns to address viewers directly, in a democratic invitation to civic reconstruction 'For *your* town. Remember, it's *your* town!'

Another feature of the morale-boosting efforts of government was its promotion of culture. The body responsible for this was the Council for the Encouragement of Music and Art, CEMA, later to become the Arts Council. In *CEMA*, Thomas contributed only dialogue at an exhibition of art and the comment of a soldier at a harp recital. Most of the film, after a leaden introduction by the President of the Board of Education shows, music, drama and the visual arts being taken from their traditional venues to be performed in factory canteens, billets, church halls and the like: what would now be dubbed 'outreach' programmes. Thomas was probably present when the Old Vic rehearsal of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, shown in the film, took place; Bolton was chosen as the location, as a letter of his notes, because the directors 'wanted ... smoking chimneys in the background'. As the comment suggests, *CEMA* was another film promoting Beveridgean principles of the best for all, the juxtaposition of 'culture' and grimy industrial Northerness intended to signal a Britain united in being able to appreciate its artistic heritage. And, as Ackerman notes, it also illustrates the contemporary spirit of 'social idealism, harmony and cultural aspiration', showing how the use of different locations for such events helped promote a 'war-time sense of community'. However brief, Thomas's contributions lighten a film which might easily have been purely didactic.

Given the constraints of his brief, Thomas's contributions could not always be as successful. 'Battle for Freedom', for example, has no humour or dialogue, just a single voice-over, and offers a hortatory, self-interested justification of the British view of history, combined with vague, paternalistic promise of future Indian freedom:

To their colonies and protectorates, as well as their own drugged or chained people, the Axis Powers bring all the advantages of a new civilization. 'Remember Hongkong!' [a reference to British provocation of the Opium Wars] but remember, too, Abyssinia, Guernica, Rotterdam. These men and women have been protected. Forever. And these people of the British Colonies, without the civilizing influence of bayonet and gas-bomb, have been brought new weapons of science to fight against disease and suffering ... They have been given new knowledge, new skill, new careers and professions, hospitals, maternity centres, schools and laboratories, a new sense of social responsibility, and a system of training by which ... they may achieve full independence and self-government.

The war required such an assertion of imperial unity, of course, but even allowing for this the irony at the expense of the Axis powers ('the civilizing influence of bayonet and gas-bombs') backfires; much of the Empire was ruled by 'bayonets', and the RAF had dropped 'gas-bombs' on Iraqi towns and villages in the 1920s. Something of this contradiction surfaces in the reference to the fact that the Congress Party of India had recently refused Foreign Secretary Stafford Cripps' 'proposals' for something less than full independence. The stark contrast implied between Japanese 'slavery' and the Raj is therefore a rather dubious one, since while there were obvious differences, to the average Indian these were not as absolute as the film implies. Even so, the script at one point mentions 'the Commonwealth of New Nations', an indication of the way 'Empire' was being rebranded to give the appearance of a new dignity to its component parts.

By contrast, *These Are the Men* (1943) shows how imaginatively anti-Nazi Thomas could be when he was given more scope. It opens with sequences contrasting men at work and on the battlefield, co-operation in creation juxtaposed with its antithesis. The question of the workers sent to fight is: 'Who sent us to kill, to be killed, to lose what we love? ... Who is to blame ... Shout, shout, shout out their name!' This cues the rest of the film, which uses sequences lifted from Leni Riefenstahl's notorious *Triumph of the Will*, a eulogistic film record of the Nazis' 1934 Nuremberg Rally. English voice-over 'translations', supplied by Thomas, are supplied for the film of speeches by the Nazi leaders Hitler, Goebbels, Streicher, and Hess, so that each supplies his own psychopathology and list of crimes. Hitler's rantings are rendered as

I was born of poor parents.  
I grew into a discontented and neurotic child.  
My lungs were bad, my mother spoilt me and secured my exemption from military service.  
Consider my triumphant path to power:  
I took up art.  
I gave up art because I was incompetent.

I became a bricklayer's labourer,  
A housepainter,  
A paperhanger,  
A peddler of pictures,  
A lance-corporal,  
A spy on socialists and communists,  
A hater of Jews and Trade Unions ...  
Patriotic industrial magnates financed me.  
Röhm and others supported me.  
Later I betrayed Röhm and the others.  
They had fulfilled their purpose.

(The crowd roars) Heil! Heil

I am a normal man.  
I do not like meat, drink, or women.

If the list of Hitler's alleged failings is somewhat dubious by today's standards, the usurping of his voice is nevertheless a powerful deflating device, quasi-Brechtian in the cumulative effect of its laconic put-downs. As a reviewer in *Documentary News* declared, 'Dylan Thomas's verse frequently cuts like a knife into the pompously bestial affectations of this race of supermen.' It is not, in any case, the individual foibles that count most, but the collectivist nature of the condemnation: the film first establishes solidarity with 'the makers the workers ... the farmers the sailors / The tailors the carpenters the colliers the fishermen' ('maker' also being an old Scottish word for 'poet'), before moving powerfully to link failure to fascism, neurosis to violence. In this it matches the collectivism and radical solidarities of other Thomas documentaries, such as *Wales--Green Mountain*, *Black Mountain* (1942), and *Our Country* (1945), the best of his wartime films, and his most celebrated at the time. The first of these shows Thomas beginning to evolve his own version of the poetic style associated with Auden and the New Country poets and found in pre-war documentaries such as *The Night Mail*--richly, at times lushly, descriptive and expansive, and displaying an 'ordinary, commonplace yet heroic lyricism', in Ackerman's words. Thomas had already sounded out elements of this new mode in poems such as 'The hunchback in the park' of mid-1941, and the recently-rediscovered 'A Dream of Winter', dating from early 1942, but he would write no more poetry until 1944. His lyric energies were channelled into the best of the documentaries; the two mentioned allowed freer rein of his talents than usual because they were among the few filmed according to his script, rather than vice versa.

*Wales--Green Mountain, Black Mountain* offers a potted history of Wales, using the visual overcoming of its geographic divisions - through a montage of images of rural Northern, Wales (Snowdon and uplands sheep-rearing) and industrial South Wales (Glamorganshire steel plants and mines) - to suggest that Wales' rebelliously anti-English past has been subsumed by the larger, contemporary struggle against Germany. Images of social harmony and quaint but noble difference from an assumed British norm are conveyed via *eisteddfodau*, hymn-singing Nonconformist congregations, and the like; amusingly, at one point, Thomas, of all people, describes the chapels as 'never grim or grey'. However, the film has a radical social edge that offsets its tourist board clichés and sentimentality. In particular, present harmony is shown to be underwritten by full employment, and to be haunted by recent austerity. At one point, older footage of closing colliery gates, queues, and people grubbing for coal on a slag-heap, derived from Donald Taylor's 1936 film 'Today We Live', is used. These were iconic images of the 1930s socialist documentary movement, and they are accompanied by an indictment of unemployment and the government policies that created it:

Remember the procession of the old-young men  
From dole queue to corner and back again,  
From the pinched, packed streets to the peak of slag  
In the bite of the winters with shovel and bag,  
With drooping fag and a turned-up collar,  
Stamping for the cold at the ill-lit corner  
Dragging through the squalor with their hearts like lead ...  
Remember the procession of the old-young men.  
It shall never happen again.

The point is made so forcefully, in fact, that the script was rejected by the British Council, who had commissioned it, as unsuitable for overseas audiences. The MoI, however, had no such qualms, taking it over and releasing it for domestic consumption.

*Our Country* is focalised rather more coherently via a central figure, a merchant seaman, who is shown travelling through England (London, Dover cliffs, Kent hopfields, a West Country harvest, industrial Sheffield), Wales (Rhondda mines, a choir, a Welsh-speaking village school) and Scotland (forestry camp, fishing port) in search of a new berth aboard a ship. The route of his quest links Britain's several national components, Northern Ireland excluded, and offers examples of collective labour, in what is an obvious metaphor for national solidarity and unity of purpose (although it is not only national; one of the most surprising--and heartening--aspects of the film is an extended passage showing black US

servicemen drinking, dancing and socialising with members of the white British population.). If the most memorable verse passage in *Wales--Green Mountain, Black Mountain* look back to a 1930s social realism which Thomas chose not to use at the time, the more numerous successful lyric flights in *Our Country* closely echo the wartime elegies he did write; thus, the description of streets around St Paul's Cathedral in London recalls 'Among Those Killed in the Dawn Raid was a Man Aged a Hundred' and 'Ceremony After a Fire Raid':

And all the stones remember and sing  
the cathedral of each blitzed dead body that lay or lies  
in the bomber-and-dove-flown-over cemeteries  
of the dumb heroic streets.

Equally, in its pastoral passages, the script anticipates 'Poem in October', 'Fern Hill' and the poems of the *In Country Heaven* project, such as 'In the White Giant's Thigh':

By orchard and cottage cluster  
the drinking trough in the market square  
and the lovers' lanes  
they thundered through a hundred  
all over the country's strangely singing names ...

The journeying man from the sea may find some peace ...  
breathing the smell of cattle and leather and straw  
on the clucking quacking whinnying mooing market day  
and going into the farmers' pubs  
that once were all haggling and cider  
and once a week news of the slow countryside.

Of course, the Blitz elegies differ from such scripts in problematising and resisting co-option within the 'war effort', dramatizing Thomas's dilemmas concerning uncritical public mourning and celebration. While he did, in fact, occasionally attempt to resist incorporation in his film work--one spoof film project, called *Is Your Ernie Really Necessary?* (mocking the government slogan 'Is Your Journey Really Necessary?'), is said to have been made, although neither copy or script survives--his scripts had to conform to MoI requirements, and this meant a degree of simplification which erased finer moral discriminations and scruples.

Traditionally, most of Thomas's critical champions – John Ackerman and Walford Davies chief among them – applaud the fact that he turned to writing film (and radio) scripts during the war, viewing this as work which forced him to turn his back on a Modernist style whose density often makes them uncomfortable. Thomas, in this interpretation, began at last

(one can almost detect the sigh of relief!) to write about what they disarmingly call 'real life'. But this claim, as more recent critics have observed, is another kind of simplification, one which ignores the dialectical interaction in Thomas's work between 'reel' and 'real' identified earlier in this essay. In particular, it runs the risk of patronising Thomas by implying that he came to realise that what he had been doing up to that point had been an error, too 'obscure', however necessary from a developmental point of view. A better way of describing the undeniable change in his style in the 1940s, and the role of film in that change, might then be to say that, if Thomas's use of film in his 1930s poetry was *vertical* in nature--that is, it was of a kind which absorbed film technique in *depth*, at the level of poetic form--then in the 1940s he decided, as part of the populist (yet still Modernist-influenced) temper of the times, to use film *horizontally*, taking it as the model for a poetry which generated its complexities by dwelling on *surfaces* and the patterns which can be played across them.

However we decide to word it, what can be said is that Thomas was fascinated throughout his life by film, and the poetics of film, and that he strove in different ways to realise these in his work. Paradoxically, given the chance to write film scripts full-time during the war, he was limited by the demands of propaganda. After the war ended, however, and attracted by its lucrative prospects, he tried to make a full-time career of script-writing, and was given the chance to write more ambitious scripts than hitherto. Engaged by the producer Sidney Box for J. Arthur Rank's Gainsborough Films, which rode the brief boom in the British film industry between 1945 and 1948, Thomas wrote full three feature-length scripts for Rank, five in all; a version of the Burke and Hare story, *The Doctor and the Devils*, an adaptation of the Irish classic *Twenty Years A-Growing*, the thriller-melodrama *The Three Weird Sisters* (1948), an adaptation of Joan Temple's stage play *No Room at the Inn* (1948), and an adaptation of Robert Louis Stevenson's story *The Beach of Falesà*. He also wrote some shorter scripts and treatments – *Betty London*, *The Shadowless Man* and *Me and My Bike*, and *Rebecca's Daughters*.

None of these films were actually made in Thomas's lifetime; *The Doctor and the Devils* had to wait until 1986, and *Rebecca's Daughters* until 1992. However, *The Doctor and the Devils*, its dialogue interspersed with a description of setting and action, was published as a book in 1953, allegedly the first film-script ever to appear in this form before filming. It was well-received. Indeed, it was felt at the time that Thomas's treatment, like a contemporaneous one of *Tender is the Night* by Malcolm Lowry, was a new genre, blending

drama, the novel and film in some radically new way. Bonamy Dobrée's review of it makes the point explicitly:

His adventure in a new form, that of the published film-script before handling [...] is extraordinarily powerful, actual as only a poet can make it; and this new form makes us wonder whether this may not be a pointer towards the way novels may be written in future [...] It is written, of course, in film language; we 'dissolve to', the camera 'tracks back', we see someone 'in close up; but we soon get used to all this, and adapt our imaginations to the whole movement, or the series of disjointed movements which make up the whole. The question arises: Do we need to see it on the film? Perhaps the answer is: We shall not need to see it only when the script is written so well as this one. That will be a rare occurrence, but a master in the art of the novel might well become a master in this new form.<sup>iv</sup>

The quest for, and belief in, this 'new' genre is a fascinating historical curiosity; one can also view it in the contemporaneous adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night* made by Malcolm Lowry, 'a 500-page filmscript with almost 100 pages of detailed explanation and comprising about six hours of movie time'.<sup>v</sup> Interestingly too, Dobrée's claims are echoed (but tempered in hindsight) by Julian Maclaren-Ross's account of the collaborative projects he and Thomas planned when they were working together at Strand Films:

We [...] shared [an] ambition, which was to write a film script, not a Treatment ... but a complete scenario ready for shooting which would give the ordinary reader an absolute visual impression of the film in words and could be published as a new form of literature. Carl Meyer, the co-author of *Caligari* and creator of many of the great early German silents, who invented the mobile camera ... is said to have written such scripts, but neither Dylan nor I could get hold of [one] [...] the only ones we knew which almost succeeded in doing what we had in mind were those printed in *The Film Sense* by Sergei Eisenstein.

The rules we laid down ... were that the script had to be an original specially written in this form and not any kind of adaptation that actual film production must be possible. Our main obstacle consisted in the camera directions, which if given were apt to look too technical, and if omitted would lose the dramatic impact of, for instance, a sudden large close-up, which Dylan however hoped could be conveyed by one's actual choice of words. In fact we were attempting the well-nigh impossible, as anyone who has read the printed versions of *Marienbad* or *L'Immortelle* by Robbe-Grillet will realise, and perhaps Dylan himself in *The Doctor and the Devils* came as close to it as any writer ever will.

Dobrée makes too much of the novelty of what Thomas was doing; or, to be more charitable, he seems unaware of the extent to which Modernist authors (the Nighttown episode in *Ulysses* springs to mind, for example), had already done such things. Also, as Maclaren-Ross notes, the procedure would become a staple of postmodern fiction not long after Thomas wrote *The Doctor and the Devils*. Nevertheless, this written-through script, to

give it another name, is powerful enough, a kind of knowing reworking of Dickens from a mid-twentieth century point of view. It focuses, that is, on matters which, while they arise from the work's location in early nineteenth century Edinburgh, rendered with Dickensian relish, were of particular importance in post-WWII Britain.<sup>vi</sup> One is the question of means and ends: Doctor Rock, the high-flying Edinburgh anatomist and physician who is the work's central figure, mocks and flouts social convention, and justifies the use of dead bodies for dissection on the grounds of the advance of science. Although his critique of society is tonic, his need for a steady supply of recently-deceased bodies paves the way for his two most unscrupulous suppliers – the Burke and Hare equivalents, Fallon and Broom – to murder. Rock dramatises how a radical positivism, a belief that the ends justify the means, can lead to atrocities which a more 'backward' world-view would not so easily countenance. This was something very much in the mind of a world which had recently witnessed not just the savagery of the Nazis, but also the rise of Stalinism and the Soviet purges, and the destruction of German cities and use of atomic weapons on civilian populations by the liberal democracies. The other pressing issue of the time, the social crisis out of which the war had grown, is also present in Thomas's depiction of the wretchedness of the Edinburgh poor, which is suffused with anger as well as compassion, as Ackerman notes.<sup>vii</sup> This was the anger which fuelled the creation of the Welfare State, which was in the process of being born as Thomas was writing his script.

Other of Thomas's films which were never made included a 1952 documentary for the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (later Shell), intended to help stave off its nationalization by the Iranian government. Cases such as this may tempt us to argue that the most interesting films Thomas ever wrote are those which he never got to make, or was not able to finish writing. What would we not give, for example, to have *The Shadowless Man*, 'a dark and fantastic romance of the German 1830s', as Thomas described it, the story of which came from Student of Prague, one of the films he had mentioned in Salnady and Spajma thirteen years before it was written, in 1947? The most tantalising aspect of this unmade film is contained in the letter Thomas wrote to the film producer Benjamin Arbeid, who had read it: "I did, of course, realise at the time how impracticable a subject it was in the light of Wardour Street's reaction to it. But your suggestion that I should try it out on Cocteau, I shall certainly do something about." (CL, 862) Like the opera libretto he was scheduled to write for Igor Stravinsky on the eve of his death, a Cocteau collaboration might at the very least have silenced the many critics who have claimed that Thomas is not worth taking seriously;

unfortunately, there is no evidence that Thomas even sent it, and it remains one of film (and literature's) great might-have-beens. Nevertheless, the real importance of film to Thomas, as I have argued, is in its influence on his other writing. Film, the Modernist art form par excellence was a crucial catalyst in his embrace of modernist experiment in 1934-4, and in his search for ways in which to recast it in more populist forms in the 1940s and 1950s.

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<sup>i</sup> Constantine Fitzgibbon, *The Life of Dylan Thomas* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1965), p.62.

<sup>ii</sup> See *CL*, 101, and Thomas' description of his heterogeneous everyday reading material: 'I seat myself in front of the fire and commence to read, to read anything that is near, poetry or prose, translations out of the Greek or the Film Pictorial ...'.

<sup>iii</sup> See the letter to Pamela Hansford Johnson of 'about 21 December 1933', in *CL*, 81: 'Nothing I can think of – including the personal delivery of Miss Garbo in a tin box – would please me so much as to spend Christmas with you.'

<sup>iv</sup> Bonamy Dobrée, 'Two Experiments', *Spectator*, CXC (June 12 1953), 764.

<sup>v</sup> Ruth Perlmutter, 'Malcolm Lowry's Unpublished Filmscript of *Tender is the Night*', *American Quarterly* Vol. 28, No. 5 (Winter, 1976), p. 561.

<sup>vi</sup> Another influence, given the Edinburgh location and nature of Dr Rock, is surely Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.

<sup>vii</sup> John Ackerman, *Dylan Thomas: The Filmscripts* (London: J.M. Dent), p. 103.