
On the Lower East Side

Regeneration (1915)

REGENERATION IS BASED ON Owen Kildare's *My Mamie Rose, an Autobiography and a Parable of Self-Redemption*. Published in 1903, quickly witnessing lucrative sales, his account found a sympathetic and enthusiastic public.¹ Set in the early twentieth century, the memoir is a somewhat picaresque confession and story of the early life and hard times of a person born on the Bowery, thanks to a woman's care and love, who mends his ways and becomes a noted journalist. Orphaned in infancy, Kildare lives with foster parents who welcome him into their household. A strapping figure in his youth and in his early twenties, a feared pugilist, he makes his living as a bouncer in taverns in his neighborhood. He briefly travels to France and Algeria before returning to the slums where his prestige remains unquestioned. Two-thirds of the way into the memoir, he recalls how, on a street one warm afternoon in the month of June, "'Skinny' McCarthy, one of my intimate pals . . . who belonged to the class of meanest grifters" (200), wanted to display his prowess to his hooligan friends. Catching sight of an attractive female who was passing by, Skinny accosts her to make a show of his gumption. First enthused, then confused, at the sight of Skinny's actions, Owen suddenly sees himself and his cronies being seen by the woman in her desperation. "Before my facial muscles had time to sharpen themselves into a brutish laugh the girl wheeled around, looked at McCarthy, at me, at all of us and, quite distinctly could I read there the sentence: 'And you are MEN!'" (202).

The episode is a turning point in the first-person narrative. Then an illiterate, thuggish wastrel, Owen intuitively *reads* on her face the words we *see* on the printed page—especially the majuscules and exclamation point. His impression of her reaction conveys what he believes is a female’s anger and resentment at being a pawn in a “man’s world.” In a rush of empathy and pity (Kildare’s prose exuding disavowed self-interest and “manliness”), Owen strikes Skinny with a blow to his ear, flattening his ally and friend. “The doors of my old life creakingly began to turn on their rusty hinges and slowly started to close themselves entirely” (204). Thus begins a regeneration. He soon learns that the woman’s name is Marie Deering and that she is a schoolteacher. He submits to her charm, calling her “Mamie” as if she were a maternal object, and eagerly subscribes to her lessons in reading and writing. Through her encouragement he discovers his innate talents as a writer. And through her impetus and his own labors in learning how to write, he and Mamie fall in love and decide to marry. Early in 1900, a month before their nuptials, Mamie catches pneumonia and dies. Acknowledging that she changed his life in helping him discover his innate gifts and to look forward in life, he attributes his success at the *New York Sunday News* to her example. Yet, when all is said and done, when Mamie degenerates, Owen regenerates. The hero’s success comes with the demise of the female who cared for him.

Yet on that day in June, when her facial gesture told Owen that she abhorred how men treated women, Mamie expressed anger and frustration that mark many of the females in Raoul Walsh’s early cinema, in at least three films, *The Lucky Lady* (1926), *Sadie Thompson* (1927), *The Yellow Ticket* (1933), and much later, perhaps tellingly, in the story of another “Mamie,” in *The Revolt of Mamie Stover* (1956). From this perspective *Regeneration* (1915) qualifies as a precocious feature and template for other films under Walsh’s direction. While Kildare’s best-seller of times past is confined to the vaults of university libraries, were it not for cinephiles or a team of archivists and restorers at the Museum of Modern Art, *Regeneration* (1915) might have had a similar fate. Although the feature is initially based on *My Mamie Rose*, we quickly discover that in taking leave of Kildare’s self-aggrandizing autobiography, the feature centers less on the hero’s resurrection than on unresolved conflict and, best of all, on cinema as such: in other words, on what the film is doing as a moving pictorial and graphic medium. First shown on September 15, 1915, *Regeneration* reminds us of the virtues both of the silent style and of the first traits of its director’s signature. Its editing is uniquely

open ended, and its montage is relentlessly fast paced and crosscut. On initial viewing it resembles parts of *The Birth of a Nation* (first shown on March 15, 1915)—notably, the sequence in which Walsh, playing John Wilkes Booth, assassinates Lincoln—while anticipating *Intolerance* that would premiere the following year.

The composition of almost seventy-two minutes draws attention to how the images invite viewers to see the film at once from within and outside of the narrative frame. Its photographic virtue suggests that the film is as much about its ocular and lenticular character as the tale it tells. Shot outdoors, on location in lower Manhattan, and indoors in claustrophobic settings of tenements, gangsters' dens, a dance hall and a settlement house while shifting incessantly from one closed area to another, the film is a study of conflict and social hierarchies at war with one another in ever-confined and confining spaces. In practically every one of its more than nine-hundred shots, a multifaceted visual composition stresses unyielding contradiction. Setting the tempo of what follows, by virtue of rapid-fire crosscutting, the first hundred shots of the film take up 8:12 minutes (each averaging 4.9 seconds). Of oppressive stasis and immobility, the world depicted in this feature—the world of Walsh and his Irish forebears—is riddled with action. Crosscutting is rife. We witness an art that builds visual and psychic tensions on the time-held traditions of fraternal rivalry or enemy brothers; focuses on a copresence of shallow and great depth of field; presents a condition where *war* and violence sustain the economy of life; shows how conflict, a total social fact, is punctuated only intermittently in the breath we take during infrequent but vital moments of peace and calm.

The Narrative

As if inspired not only by Kildare's memoir but also Jacob Riis (*How the Other Half Lives* and *The Battle with the Slum*), Dickens (*Oliver Twist*), Chaplin (*Caught in a Cabaret* [1914], a one-reeler about members of an idle class who go slumming), or Griffith (*The Musketeers of Pig Alley* [1912]), *Regeneration* mixes melodrama and cinema verité. The film tells of labors of social reform and, albeit less obviously, what it means to make a documentary fiction. The feature is composed of four panels: (1) the first depicts Owen (John McCann) age ten, following the death of his mother, orphaned and alone in a squalid apartment. Alone, left

on his own, from the window of a cluttered flat he watches a hearse carry off the casket containing his mother's corpse. Maggie Conway (Maggie Weston), a matronly and robust neighbor living in a flat across the stairway, invites him to move into her household, a pigsty under the rule of husband Jim Conway (James Marcus), an abusive, obese, and drunken husband. Ever at odds with Jim, Owen eventually takes to the streets where he becomes a ragamuffin (1:00–09:31). (2) The second, albeit brief, establishes the world of war in which Owen has grown up. Now, age seventeen, a svelte adolescent and an icebreaker who works on the docks of the New York harbor, Owen (played by H. McCoy), works with a diminutive hunchback, a youth (unnamed and unattributed in the film) who is taunted by a young hooligan (William Sheer) and his friends. Defending the boy, witnessed by local color worthy of caricature (no doubt residents of the Bowery), Owen confronts, tussles, and pummels the thug (who happens to be Skinny—although he is not yet identified by an eyepatch—an attribute that will become one of Walsh's emblems). Coming to the boy's defense, two Irish locals and an old man (afflicted with a grotesquely deformed nose, shown in close-up) witness the scene and applaud the winner of the fight (09:52–11:20).

We discover in next panel (3), seven years later (11:20–1:04:48), that the hunchback has become Owen's faithful friend, and the hooligan, now wearing an eyepatch, is a comrade in crime named "Skinny." Enter Marie Deering (Anna Q. Nilsson), an idle maiden of upper Manhattan and her erstwhile brother, Ames Deering (Carl Harbaugh), a newly elected district attorney vowing to wipe out crime. Marie takes interest in "how the other half lives" while Ames, at the very least to be faithful to his calling, wishes to get a better sense of immigrant life and squalor in the nether regions. They dare to journey to the Bowery where they visit Grogan's, a rough-and-tumble tavern and dance hall (an establishment of the same name that will play a role eighteen years later in *The Bowery*). Indolent, Owen (now played by Rockcliffe Fellowes) happens to be sitting at a table in the company of the gang members. Inexplicably, he begins to contemplate his past and present life when peering into a mug of beer. Looking into the schooner, in a protracted dissolve he sees himself in his childhood licking an ice cream cone.² Raising his eyes, he glimpses Marie, Ames, and their company, whom his brutish friends suddenly rattle and intimidate. Attracted to Marie, he successfully escorts the frightened group to a limousine that awaits them outside to safety near where a boyish, Ivy League-like social worker wearing tortoise shell glasses preaches reform.

Marie is moved by the quality of life she has witnessed. Following her brother's will to reform the city, she establishes a settlement house that as the story unfolds will become the counterpart to the gang's den. There follows a celebrated sequence of the settlement's annual outing on the New York harbor (24:08–32:17): Marie shepherds her flock of indigents to board the *Shamrock Queen*, a pleasure craft hired for an afternoon of sightseeing. She coaxes Owen and his cronies—and even beckons the spectator (25:22)—to come along to enjoy an afternoon of dancing and dining. During the excursion, sitting apart from the community, Skinny flicks a cigarette butt onto a pile of frayed rope. Soon ignited, it sets the boat aflame. In the pandemonium men and women jump from the upper decks into the waters while Owen and Marie, gathering the children in their arms and lifting them into lifeboats, become the heroes of the day.

Marie brings Owen into her orbit. Upon her command, putting his fists to good use, he rescues a baby from an abusive household (32:18–41:58) and, unbeknownst to himself, feels an affection for forlorn infants and children.³ Marie convinces Owen to devote his energies to the settlement house where, along with other homeless ne'er-do-wells, she teaches him how to read and write (44:32–46:13). In Owen's absence, Skinny, now the appointed leader of the gang, confronts and knifes a police inspector who had knocked at the door of the gang's den. Fleeing in panic, Skinny seeks sanctuary in the settlement house where Owen reluctantly offers him a place to hide. A plainclothesman arrives, finds no one, but insists that Owen is in collusion with the gang. Distraught, torn between devotion to Owen and her zealous brother's wish that she be rid of him, Marie despairs. Distraught over losing her sympathy, Owen confesses to a priest. Inspired, now having learned how to write, he scripts a note telling Skinny to get lost. His long-standing pal, the hunchback, delivers it to the gang (46:14–56:47).

The narrative hastens: upon reading the message, crazed, Skinny and his thugs thrash and knock the boy unconscious, kick and shove him under the stairwell leading to the entry. Anguished, Marie runs to the gangster's den in search of Owen. Peering through a hole in the door to the entry, Skinny recognizes her and welcomes her into their lair. The hunchback recovers his senses, glimpses Marie, furtively crawls into a sewer main, emerges from under a manhole cover, and dashes off to inform Owen and the police of the fate awaiting Marie at the hands of Skinny and his gang. Meanwhile, back at the den, Skinny lures Marie into a room where he molests her before she breaks free and locks herself in a closet. Owen enters the lair, confronting and fighting the gang in the

basement while, simultaneously, the hunchback informs the police and leads two carloads of officers who drive to the scene at breakneck speed. In the melee on the lower floor, Owen lays waste to his opponents. The police arrive, club the criminals (and even suffer a loss when one of the gang members shoots an officer clambering into the den). Above, Skinny hacks at the door of the closet in which Marie hides in anguish. Owen arrives, smashes his way into the room, confronts Skinny (wielding a gun), who escapes from a window from where he fires a shot that strikes Marie. Owen opens the closet door then discovers and rescues Marie, touselled, who wilts in his arms. Skinny climbs a fire escape while below, and inside the lair the police put an end to the battle with the gang of thugs. Owen lovingly carries Marie away (56:47–1:04:48).

(4) The final panel, “The Journey Homeward” (1:04:49–1:11:33), sets Marie’s death in counterpoint with Owen’s pursuit of Skinny. While inside, the heroine expires in bed amidst the company of Ames, the hunchback, and Owen (who kisses her goodbye), in another compartment Skinny packs his effects together. Removing his eyepatch (that will be one of the director’s emblems) and changing his clothes, he sets about to escape unnoticed. Owen hustles to the rooftop of the settlement where, finding and looking through a skylight, he witnesses Skinny preparing his getaway. He jumps down, confronts, and tussles with his adversary whom he begins to strangle before a memory-image of Marie (inserted at the upper right corner of the frame) compels him not to commit murder. Skinny escapes Owen’s clutches, exits from a window giving onto a fire escape, and takes hold of a clothesline to inch his way to an adjacent tenement.⁴ Below, the hunchback looks skyward, spots Skinny, pulls a revolver from a pocket of his jacket with his left hand, aims, and fires. Amidst a swirl of trash and debris, Skinny crashes onto the pavement. The film ends at Marie’s grave where Owen and the hunchback gather to grieve. Of a style at a light year’s distance from the text of *My Mamie Rose*, returning to Kildare’s memoir, a long and teary intertitle (lasting thirty-three seconds, 1:11:10–33) reads,

She lies here, this girl o’mine,
but her soul, the noblest and purest
thing I ever knew, lives on in me.
It was she, my Mamie Rose, who
taught me that within was a
mind and a God-given heart. She
made of my life a changed thing
and never can it be the same again!

The Film within the Film

The beginning betrays some initial traits of a signature style. The front credits include five title cards, three of which mention the director and the last leading into the narrative that lays stress on adaptation and alteration of its source: (1) “William Fox presents R. A. Walsh’s Drama *Regeneration*” (00:02–14); (2) “Copyright William Fox” (00:15–18); (3) “Direction by R.A. Walsh” (00:19–26); (4) “Adapted from Owen Kildare’s ‘My Mamie Rose,’ by R. A. Walsh and Carl Harbaugh. Photography by Georges Benoit” (00:26–40). And the lead-in: (5) “Owen’s mother, passing gratefully on to another and, we believe, happier world, leaves ten-year-old Owen to fight his way as best he can in this. Owen—John McCann” (00:42–59). The four credits that follow are decorated with a headpiece composed of a lozenge containing the initials WF that stand in front of a banderole composed of what seems to be a strip of 35 mm filmstock with which the name of the director (the abbreviations suggesting a “raw” and truculent Walsh) is front and center.

The first shot (1:00–04) (1) fades in to an iris portrait of child Owen, solitary, sitting alone adjacent to a table in a cluttered room, his bare legs crossed, staring accusingly at the viewer (fig. 1.1). A pot, an empty coffee cup, and a plate on the edge of a table draw our eyes toward a broken window. A calico cat climbs out of a box and onto an empty and ragged armchair adjacent to a window opening onto a fire escape where a tattered curtain flutters in the breeze. On the wall in the background hangs a cheap print of what seems to be a haloed Virgin Mary (01: 01–05). An abrupt cut—nothing indicates how or why—to the next take (2) (01:06–07) is clearly not from Owen’s point of view. We note an undertaker pushing a wicker coffin into the rear of a horse-drawn hearse, its righthand panel open while in the foreground, seen from behind, a boy’s head (to the left) and those of two girls (to the right), their hair scruffy and tousled, look upon the scene from the viewer’s vantage point (fig. 1.2). Cut (3) to Owen in his apartment above the street, in iris, now in medium close-up, who continues to stare but seems to bemoan—he scratches the back of his head—the condition of the world (01:07–10). The film shifts abruptly (4) back to the hearse (01:10–12). Pressing and sealing the right rear door with his hands, the driver calls attention to the mirrorlike sheen of the side of the vehicle. In the shot of barely two seconds, he passes across the vehicle, exiting right, revealing the diagonal position of the hearse. Reflected on the right panel we discern a person wearing a white shirt, seated, who cranks a camera on a tripod while to his left stands a person wearing a white hat, sporting a necktie, who



Figure 1.1. A beginning: Owen orphaned (1:00).



Figure 1.2. A coffin in a hearse: the filmmakers shown in their film (1:11).

seems to be looking at the action as it unfolds. Could it be the director? Could the man at the camera be Georges Benoit? Whoever they are, the moving reflections count among the crew, shown here and elsewhere on windows or reflective surfaces.

The beginning indicates that *the film is being made*.⁵ The next shot (5) cuts back to a close-up of Owen in iris, who turns his head to the right (00:01:13–15), as if responding to a sound cue off-frame. In the next shot (6), recouping the medium take that established the setting, Owen walks to the window in the background (00:01:15–21). From there, in chiaroscuro, in close-up in three-quarter view (7), perplexed, lost in thought, Owen looks upon what can only be the event just seen (01:21:22). In the loose (and, for viewers in 1915, it can be assumed, weakened) deixis the removal of the coffin, including the brief display of the film as it is being made, could be part of Owen's "indirect subjectivity," in other words, his vision of the coffin being driven off *before* he actually sees the traumatic separation from the upper window.⁶ His can only be a *mental image* before the next shot (8), a cavalier view of the horse drawing the hearse away (01:23–26), locates his point of view overhead: which is confirmed by the following shot (9) that portrays him looking downward (01:26–28) as a tear rolls down his left cheek. After an uncommonly long take of nine seconds, what would qualify as a "affect-image," in a sudden return to the composition (10) of the first shot of the film, turning away from the window in the background, Owen wipes his nose, pivots, and walks back into the space while the cat crawls about the armchair (01:28–37).⁷

Owen's movement brings two objects into view: the back of the empty chair on which he had been sitting is now shown broken in half; in the background an old broom leans against the armchair. The boy's tear in the preceding shot becomes a motif and point of affective reflection, a sign not only of emotion (and motion) but also of the lenticular character of what will follow. Adjacent to Owen, who looks out of the window in the background, in the frame of the iris, the broken chair he has just vacated has the trappings of a still-life that includes, on the left, the edge of the table on which an empty plate and coffee cup are placed; to the right, behind the chair, leaning on the arm of a mangy armchair, a broom; and on the floor, leaning into the shot, an empty shopping basket (fig. 1.3). The broom is destined to become an object of iconic charge when the neighbor, Maggie Conway all of a sudden enters the apartment, grabs the handle, and sweeps Owen into her squalid flat across the hall.⁸ The action is shown soon after the second intertitle (01:38–48), which identifies the Conway family "across the landing." Rotund, robust, in tatters, Maggie is introduced (11) scrubbing laundry (01:49–52) on a



Figure 1.3. Orphaned Owen and the broom that sweeps clean (1:29).

washboard in a basin while her obese husband, Jim, bedraggled, sitting at a table in the foreground and suddenly shown in close-up, gulps (13) beer from a pail, then wipes his mouth with his forearm (01:53–56). Cut (14) to a close-up of Maggie, in turn, who wipes her hands and then her brow (02:00–01). Her gesture is contrary to her husband's: she works and sweats while he drinks and drools. Cut (15) to a half-iris shot of Owen (02:01–04) in his apartment where he puts a harmonica to his mouth and breathes into it, the sound cue prompting Maggie's decision to take the orphan into her custody.

Fifteen shots in less than fifty-one seconds: the average take of three-plus seconds becomes the mean for the film comprising about nine hundred shots over almost seventy-two-plus minutes, whose breakneck rapidity stands in glaring contrast to the social immobility and depravity of the community of tenements. In this sequence and what immediately follows, rapid crosscutting underscores the presence of the apparatus or the technical "condition of possibility" of what we are seeing. In this moment and others, brief as they may be, the film indicates that

it is being made in medias res, going as it goes, and that its process is becoming a strand of the narrative it tells, notably when Owen moves from his family's apartment into the Conway's. In between the stairwell and landing, an antechamber or intermediate area becomes the site of conflict. A window in the background looks onto the face of another tenement, implying that we are within an infinite labyrinth of slum. Playing on the landing, an unsupervised baby and child witness Jim, in a drunken stupor, struggling up the staircase. Losing his footing, almost crushing the infant (3:48:40–4:05), the obese figure makes his way into the flat where he fights with Owen. Using extreme crosscutting from one confining space to another, the sequence is patterned according to the enclosed (and socially immobile) area Riis and Kildare had described in their assessments of the Bowery. Paradoxically elliptical yet executed in terse composition, however much its legacy tells us the feature is born of Griffith in his Biograph years, the montage seems to anticipate much of the action and relentless movement that marks the director's later work.

Inside and Out

Divided into compartments, closets, rooms, dens, and lairs, dark areas *inside* are complemented, in documentary fashion, by infrequent takes of areas of a confined world *outside*, bathed in the light of day. In one of several sequences that could be called cinema vérité (before it indicates that Maggie and young Owen are shopping), the camera records a busy marketplace on the Lower East Side (05:44–47) (fig. 1.4). In the foreground to the right, fussing over her hair and oblivious to the camera, a young girl attracts the viewer's attention before Maggie and Owen emerge from the crowd, turn right, and exit the frame. Implying that the setting is of greater interest than the couple, the shot holds briefly to witness the girl's defensive reaction when a young man approaches her.⁹ The film cuts to a diagonal view of a tavern from whose swinging doors exit the inebriated Jim and his drinking companion (05:47–51). The frame is split in two. On the left the two men make their way into the light, and to the right, the bay window of the saloon displays its wares (the emblem of V. LOEWER'S LAGER and two posters), and on its glass a world at large is registered in reflection. A vehicle passes while, immobile, two blindered horses on another pane, astonishingly and fleetingly, are set between them as they exit (05:50). The camera (its lens directly facing the scene), its tripod, and the operator filming the scene are faintly visible.



Figure 1.4. The Bowery market: Maggie and Owen go shopping (5:46).

Here and elsewhere a mirage of the apparatus *in* the film would be an accident or mishap unless, in strong likelihood, the film establishes a quasi-documentary character that invites us to look at the settings and the actions on which they are staged as an ongoing production of physical and social space.¹⁰ In daylight, and in the passage of less than seven seconds, the crosscutting stresses the female and the child at work in contrast to the “men,” slime of the earth, who waste themselves in drink and disorder.

The film further compartmentalizes its action. From the outside (05:51–06:06), in a long take of fifteen seconds, Maggie and Owen return home. The shot begins in front of the stoop at the entry of the brown-stone whose tawdry interior has been a site of conflict. Bathed in bright light, the stairs and iron balustrade stand in contrast to a dark doorway, a boarded window (left) and its open complement (right) behind which, *inside*, the backside of a seated person in a white shirt indicates that they have no interest in what is happening *outside*. The shot records, first, two barefoot urchins exiting through the door, one with a (ubiquitous) broom

in hand while Maggie and Owen trundle up the stairs and *into* the dark area. She shoos the kids away before pushing two, three, then four and five boys out of the dark space. Cut to the drunkards, in a complementary setting, exiting the tavern, then entering the brownstone (6:06–6:13) without interference, where more domestic violence ensues.¹¹ Jim tosses Owen out of the apartment and into the flight of stairs. He flees *outside* into daylight (08:50–09:02 and 09:06–11) in a sequence crosscut with shots of the wastrels (09:11–14) *inside* the apartment. Barefoot, in full daylight, he finds a place to curl up and sleep on a metal grate under the storefront of a bakery. In the implicit narrative the new life that inaugurates the next panel, also outdoors, could be a dream and a series of caricatures, even a memory-cloud, much like the local color the film discovers and records as the narrative unwinds. In one of the finest shots in the tradition of “realism” or depiction of “local color” on the Bowery, smoking a stogie, a grotesque spectator (whom Walsh or Benoit might have found while filming the sequence) enjoys either the making of the scene we are witnessing or the chaos of the world in which he lives (fig. 1.5).



Figure 1.5. Local color on the Bowery (21:49).

In the first panel, like a child or reflector in a novel of Henry James (as in *What Maisie Knew*—but who could not say), Owen looks on a world he cannot understand or assimilate into language. In the second, in his adolescence (and now better equipped), he observes the milieu in which he is embroiled. Placed outdoors (10:00–11:19), by the dockyards of New York, in another flair for cinema verité the camera stresses the closure of the open space and an unchanging condition of male conflict and violence. Now seventeen, Owen (H. McCoy) confronts but is hard put to discern an order of things other than what the intertitle states: “Where the prizes of existence go to who has the most daring in defying the law” (09:52). Here, in the third panel, the camera is angled to show how Owen, who first saw the world through a glass darkly, has gained perspective on his milieu and condition. What appears to be one of the most carefully staged shots, a virtual flashback *within* a shot (42:21–28, amidst the most damaged parts of the film), we witness Owen looking intently at a window of an apartment on the ground floor of a brownstone tenement building. Behind a pane of glass, cared for by a nurse, peering out from the dark interior, two infants mirror the gaze he casts upon their world. Owen’s sightline follows a diagonal axis, from the lower right corner of the frame to the window, on the upper left. When he raises his arm to offer a gift to the babies who catch sight of him, from our angle his gesture indicates an innate empathy and nascent generosity (fig. 1.6). Emphasizing the angle from which the shot is taken, in tendering a stick of candy to the baby on the other side of the glass, Owen’s affection for children blueprints his rescue of the youngsters from the burning deck of the Shamrock Queen (31:53–32:20) and immediately afterward, of the baby from the crib in the Flaherty household (32:04–37:00). The composition leads us to believe that in his attraction Owen intuits how “the child is the father of man.” In the window before his eyes is he reminded of a former, even preconscious life but also, in accord with his life story, a continuum of conflict and social contradiction in the difference of the three stages—childhood, adolescence, adulthood—in his life that the film is given to depict? What he beholds inside is a past present, a space where, thanks to cinema, chronological time is flattened, while the outside world, rife with conflict, is momentarily bracketed or kept at bay.¹²

The implications of the shot and what it does as *cinema* owe to the air and atmosphere of the best remembered sequence, begun earlier in the same panel with the intertitle announcing, “The treat of the season/The settlement’s annual outing” (24:37), the episode staging the confla-



Figure 1.6. Owen looks at his past and future (16:57).

gration aboard the *Shamrock Queen* during the settlement's annual outing (24:40–32:10). In what begins as theater-in-a-theater, indigents under Marie's wing are led onto the craft, inside, as if entering a movie show or an "attraction." Standing near the gangplank, spotting the hoodlums at the dockside, Marie faces the camera in close-up, beckoning everyone, viewers and thugs alike, to come aboard. Cut to Owen, smoking a cigarette, and his villainous friends; then cut back to the crowd that continues to board the boat and then to Skinny and his four cronies who are playing craps; back to Marie and company where the last of the guests cross the gangplank; cut to Skinny and his cohort. Succumbing to her charm, the members of the gang leave the dock where they have been loitering, revealing in the background a shard of writing, "SH," the first two letters of the *Shamrock Queen*. After the thugs make their way to the gangplank, the camera holds on what for a second (at the most) becomes another still-life of an unremitting milieu. Everyone is aboard while some dockhands tend to the mooring. Holding for an instant, a last shot (26:29) from the pier displays the area of the dock. A stark

wooden frame of two tiers of logs is bolted to the corner of a dock, a chain stretches across a row of planks, and a piece of the dock enters the frame diagonally, set in counterpoint to paper detritus on the ground. On the other side, a sizable cast-iron pylon looms in the foreground, an attribute of the ropes and chains of a stevedore's world, while the upper story of the hull displays a panel now spelling SHAM. The setting displays on the pier in the foreground an imposingly erect mooring pole and in the background the bulkhead of the dock adjacent to the boat, which displays a ventilating stack and over its gunnels a shard of its Irish name. SHAM (fig. 1.7) calls into question the veracity of film as such, much like it had when the apparatus was shown reflected on the hearse in the opening sequence. Now, at dockside, the montage draws attention to how it is socially and spatially constructed.

Better known among historians, the shots recording the pyre and escape from the *Shamrock Queen* also oscillate between staging and verité. Walsh recalls how, after getting background takes of the Bowery and more at Fort Lee, New Jersey,



Figure 1.7. The SHAM of the *Shamrock Queen* (26:38).

[I] wanted to get the river scenes, where the big action would be—an excursion on the Hudson for the mission’s indigent members. The script called for the boat to catch on fire. After renting an excursion boat with an upper deck, I went to Hell’s Kitchen and hunted through the dives until I found a pair of typical hooligans. I managed to get through their heads that I needed a hundred or so men and about fifty women for passengers. (1974, 116)

He could not find enough females, “and time and money and sunlight were wasting. I found the answer: *some men would have to act as women*” (1974, 116; emphasis added). When by megaphone he ordered the extras to jump from the ship, “the women jumped, their skirts ballooned up and I was sure that some of them were not wearing anything underneath” (117). In reviewing the dailies he noted that “[a]t least a dozen of the females were as naked as jaybirds under their long dresses” (119), adding that he had a negative doctor “put pants on twenty of the females in every one of those frames” (120).¹³ In the remastered print (in red tint), those who jump from the craft are in pants and, for all exhaustive purposes, would seem to be male, and those wearing dresses in the director’s recollection are pure fantasy. The mythic memory of the sequence tells more about sexual *indifference* and, perhaps from what is found in the memoir of 1974, a shoot that turned out to be a publicity stunt for *New Yorkers* before it was completed, even if Walsh said that it was “[f]or that era . . . a good picture,” a mix of action and “solid corn” with a tearjerker ending (119). But also, and to its credit, in its mix of record and fiction the episode calls into question suspension of disbelief, implicitly theorizing its force of attraction.

Scenes of Writing

In “Freud et la scène d’écriture” (Freud and the scene of writing), a famous essay on the psychoanalyst’s “Notes on the Mystic Writing Pad,” Jacques Derrida studies how primal events cannot be separated from the psychic and technical machineries of representation—in other words, from the character, movement, and staging of their writing. So also in the writing scenes in *Regeneration*. Given that *My Mamie Rose* is a story about an orphan, later a challenged youth who learns how to manage pencil and paper, Walsh’s film doubles its hero’s sentimental and professional

education through a montage of *visual* writing, calling attention to how it can be both seen and read. Front credits and writing in the montage excepted (newspaper headlines, personal letters, pages from a diary, a scribbled note), the film includes forty-one intertitles over a duration of almost seventy-two minutes. Eight minutes of the film are seen to be read. Where the text is ample, holding for a long duration, the intertitles suggest that viewers—perhaps, like the personages, hardly literate or learning to read through movies—need time to decipher the words. Thus the juncture between the first and second panels: a refugee from his adoptive household, Owen, barefoot, takes to the street (8:51–9:03, crosscut with a fight between Jim and Maggie, 9:03–05), where he stops to look longingly at cakes on display behind the front window of a bakery (9:06–09, crosscut with the fight, 9:10–9:14), where his reflection is visible. He finds a grate beneath the window, curls up and, in an iris that closes, he goes to sleep (9:16–32). An intertitle follows, the text so consuming that the Fox logo and decoration are elided to make space for the writing that mediates dreams of the passage of time:

And then years pass and Owen
still lives in a world where
might is right—and where the prizes
of existence go to the man
who has the most daring in
defying the law, and the quickest
fist in defending his own rights.
Owen, at seventeen——H. McCoy. (9:32–59/27 seconds)

Between the sleeping boy in the first panel and the shot placing the young Owen among a group of ice breakers that begins the second panel, the intertitle of long duration implies that the past could have been a nightmare (in glaring daylight), or that what will become of him (child Owen's dream) is unremittingly real. In the time it requires to be read, the intertitle conveys the burden of Owen's growth into the world.

Only minutes later, a card (with Fox logo and decoration) announces the third panel:

Owen's twenty-fifth year
finds him a leader of the
gang, by virtue of a
complete assortment of the

virtues the gangsters most
admire.

Owen, at twenty-five

—Rockcliffe Fellowes. (11:18–11:40/22 seconds)

The sequence begins in the outdoor setting, ostensibly by the East River, not far from the Bowery, where young Owen (H. McCoy) has pinned the young tough (Skinny in his first appearance, unnamed, *without* an eye patch). In the last shot (11:15–17) one of the spectators, cigar in jowl and wearing a bowler hat—a promotor or boxing agent—congratulates Owen. In concert with the many pugilistic sequences in Walsh's cinema, as if anticipating the fistfights in *The Bowery* (1933) and *Gentleman Jim* (1942), he negotiates with the strapping Owen, arms on hips, who stares at the camera.¹⁴ The scene fades quickly to the intertitle, after which, in conjunction with its words, a widening iris displays a “portrait” of the future hero, wearing a cap, smoking a cigarette, staring suspiciously at whatever might stand before him. We glimpse on a mirror of the tavern behind him—a vague face of a cameraman and the roof of a passing vehicle. Owen draws on a cigarette and exhales a waft of smoke that blows in the atmosphere (11:41–47) before the next intertitle presents “Skinny, one of the gang.—William Sheer” (11:48–55), also in medium close-up, in front of a LION'S BREW logo. He dons a cap (11:56–12:02) before an establishing shot locates the pair sitting with the hunchback and another crony. They enter the tavern (12:02–04)—Skinny is shown mirrored on the swinging door (1:07)—where they accost a client who has put his money on the bar. Owen gesticulates, grabs him by the arm:

“Buy the drinks!” (12:32–35)

In the frenzied alternation of spaces inside and outside, cut to another intertitle announcing and portraying the district attorney, “like all proverbial new brooms . . . [who] resolves to sweep the city clean” (12:40–48): taking up thirty-seven of the first eighty-two seconds of the second panel, the serial disposition of the intertitles goes hand in hand with the frenetic shifts to the world of the gang—the tavern, Grogan's dance hall—and that of the well-healed Deering household. From the beginning, images of writing work on or infuse the visual matter, presaging what will become the “writing lesson” in the narrative. Like other captions in the montage, the signboard by the stoop of the “Settlement House” heralds the space where the sight of alphabetical characters—ABCs, the hunchback tracing

ciphers on a blackboard, Marie seated in front of books, journals on a desk (32:46–50; 32:53–57, 33:03–08; 33:14–16, 44:26–28, etc.)—takes command over the episode that had Owen, bereft of adequate words, using might to bring order to the Flaherty household.

The sequence that portrays Owen learning to write could be a template for a classical *scène d'écriture*, the staging of an act of writing stressing that, insofar as it is an “optical machine,” for literate and illiterate viewers alike, an unspoken aim of the film is to trace graphic marks in moving images.¹⁵ Freud could not have done better: an inkling of the writing lesson is given when Owen, having left the gang’s lair in favor of the settlement house, thinks about purchasing a bouquet from an old lady, outdoors, who sits on a stoop (44:05–11). The shot is crosscut with a scene where, standing and turning around, Deering confronts Marie, at her desk, who is busy writing (44:11–18); cut back to Owen, in medium close-up, who makes his purchase (44:19–24); then to Deering, who closes an open book on the desk when Marie implores him to bear with her (44:25–29). An intertitle (without the Fox logo) supplies the words he had just uttered: “Give up this life, Marie. What is its attraction? Won’t you come back to the world where you belong?” (44:29–43, thirteen seconds being accorded for its reading!) while, his arm extended, she clasps his hand in her palms (44:43–44). Cut to Owen, now in a medium shot in a wide iris, rhyming with the previous shot, who has just extended his arm to pay the old lady who smiles before he exits the frame (left), revealing a crudely written signboard in the background that begs to be read, leaving an effect of coequal heat and frigidity:

“584 Tom Ice Coal Wood.”

A writing table occupies the space Owen evacuates, implying that, given the gift of the bouquet (flowers being the figure of fine speech), his body is about to be ciphered (44:44–50). Back to Deering and Marie where the attorney, turning about and pacing, expresses frustration over his sister’s stubborn commitment to her mission (44:50–57). In a diagonal close-up on the doorway Owen enters, looks around, and is upset (44:58–5:02) when what he sees is the scene being shown: Marie, rustling papers, in intimate dialogue with her brother (45:03–06). A primal scene stirs when he sees himself as an excluded figure at the instant his eyes (it is inferred) fix entirely on Marie. When Deering enters the background of the scene, he is now the excluded other who looks jealously at Marie when Owen, smiling, offers her the bouquet.

In a shot of almost twenty seconds, set in perfect spatial triangulation, Deering fiddles anxiously with his cane (his writing instrument) and exits (left), in what seems to be jealous anger while Owen, offering Marie his bouquet (his writing instrument) before he sits with her, when she will offer him her pen (her writing instrument) (45:10–39). Cut to diagonal take on Deering who approaches a vacant chair and desk adjacent to a blackboard—a hieroglyph—riddled with ciphers. He looks at what follows with unresolved anger: won over, Owen looks in admiration at Marie, in the guise of a schoolteacher (for a child, both a mother and an erotic object) who holds his right hand affectionately while training him to trace characters on a sheet of paper (45:43–50—eighteen seconds). Simultaneously, outside, Skinny encounters and knifes a policeman (with his writing instrument). He runs off and seeks Owen’s protection while Deering, as if reviewing the screenplay, reads Marie’s diary. In an iris, *contrary to the action*, Marie’s words, written in cursive (comprising a hidden intertitle of long duration) and in a shot assuming his point of view, we read words that augur well: “Aug 24. Owen is getting along splendidly. He has left his former associates forever and is heart and soul in his new position” (50.00–50.18). Deering is reading Marie’s private diary at the moment a detective enters another room in the settlement where Owen *pretends* to be reading a magazine. Skinny sneaks off and returns to the thieves’ lair.

After confession and soul searching, scribbling a note to Skinny, Owen enacts a second *scène d’écriture* in what might be a “becoming-space of time.” Eleven minutes pass between Owen’s initial writing lesson and his careful scripting of the note that tells his former ally to get lost. Running off, his hunchback friend on his heels, he passes a woman seated on the stoop of a brownstone. Shrouded in black, she holds a baby—the father of man—in her arms. He approaches a doorway (55:59) to a tenement where, after looking at the woman and child (seen in a cutaway shot in closeup), in an iris-shot, he searches his pockets for a pencil and paper (56:10–14). In extreme close-up, his gigantic hands (and dirty fingernails) filling the frame (56:14–44) in one of the longest shots of the film, he writes, slowly and surely, a note that the hunchback will deliver to Skinny (fig. 1.9):

We are even now
Keep out of my way
Beat it—get me
Owen.



Figure 1.8. Owen and Skinny in a tussle (10:49).

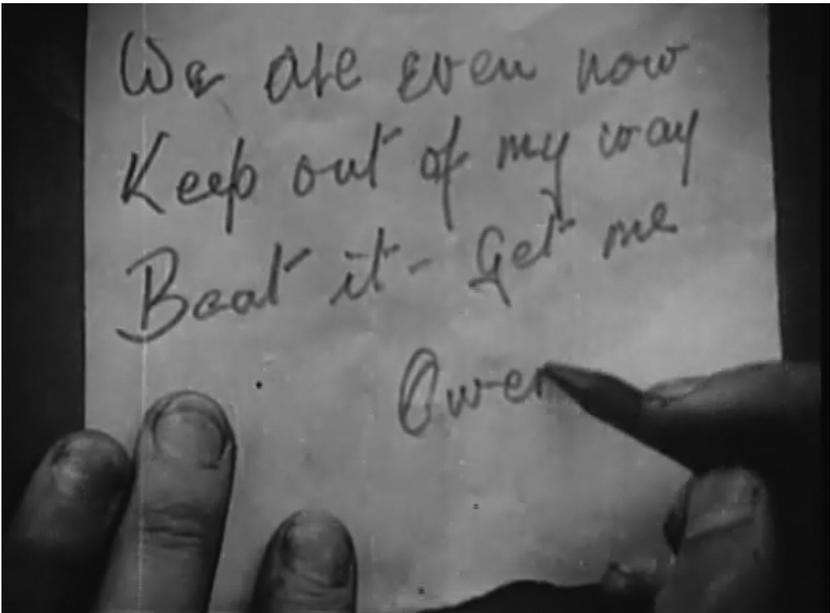


Figure 1.9. Owen writes that he owes nothing to Skinny (56:41).