

# Lost and Found

RICHARD DEMING ON KENNETH MACPHERSON'S *MONKEYS' MOON*

**KENNETH MACPHERSON (1903–1971)** has long been considered a pioneer of avant-garde film, but his reputation rested largely on hearsay, as the work itself—three short films and a feature—had mostly been lost. Of two of the shorts, *Wing Beat* (1927) and *Foothills* (1928), only fragments remain. Macpherson's single feature-length film, *Borderline* (1930), starring Paul Robeson, hadn't completely vanished, but only a handful of prints ever existed, and for decades, beyond the rare public screening, his work was available chiefly to scholars. In 2006, the British Film Institute sponsored the restoration and eventual DVD release of *Borderline*, revitalizing interest in Macpherson's prodigious talents. These three films were Macpherson's only extant works—until earlier this year, when *Monkeys' Moon*, his third short, photographed and directed in 1929 and long believed to have been destroyed, turned up in a canister included in a small archive of manuscripts and film stills related to *Close Up* magazine that had been acquired by Yale University's Beinecke Library. *Monkeys' Moon* compresses this remarkable filmmaker's thinking about cinematic perspective and the way montage can both represent and elicit affective moods and psychological states.

Macpherson's reputation has much to do with his editorship of *Close Up*, the influential journal devoted to film culture published from 1927 until 1933 by POOL, a partnership and domestic ménage consisting of the Scots-born Macpherson, the English writer Bryher, and the modernist poet H. D., which also produced Macpherson's films. Alongside contributions from such luminaries as Havelock Ellis, Dorothy Richardson, and Marianne Moore, *Close Up* ran articles by Vsevolod Pudovkin and Man Ray, as well as English translations of a number of Sergey Eisenstein's canonical essays, including "The New Language of Cinematography" (1929), which elaborate the Russian filmmaker's foundational conceptions of montage. Because of POOL's investment in Freud's theories, the journal also articulated important links between cinema and psychoanalysis. In looking at the world, at objects, at other people, the editors believed, one is continually observing one's own subjective states, and cinema is a means of making that subjectivity into a legible visual text.

As *Close Up* attests, and Macpherson's films demonstrate, his most important aesthetic models were

Eisenstein and G. W. Pabst—two vastly different filmmakers—and his complex intermingling of the Russian's method of "clatter montage" (a rapid juxtaposition of a few frames to suggest the superimposition of images) with the German's psychological realism makes Macpherson's films especially complex in their cinematic representations of objects and visual perceptions as aesthetic expressions of inner experience.

*Monkeys' Moon* is a nine-minute masterpiece. The film's plot is simple enough: On the night of a full moon, at a Swiss château from whose gate hangs a sign insisting *PASSAGE INTERDIT*, a command the camera immediately ignores (anticipating the opening shot of *Citizen Kane*), two douroucoulis monkeys escape from their owners, both of whom are represented metonymically almost exclusively by hands, feet, and shadows. The monkeys clamber among the trees and through the gardens until they are cornered and recaptured by their owners. Leashes, cages, grasping hands, fences, and the full moon recur throughout the film, and, in true Eisensteinian fashion, these tropes suggest binaries of freedom and imprisonment, nature and domestic space. Despite its employment of Russian montage techniques and the suggestion of some prelapsarian concept of nature as an authentic state, the film is not easily reduced to either a Marxist or a Romantic reading. The monkeys were, in actuality, Bryher and Macpherson's beloved pets, and so it becomes difficult to see the humans as representing, reductively, some oppressive regime. The film offers no easy political allegories: Relationships are fraught wherever they are found.

As in *Borderline*, the viewer is dropped into the action with little sense of a larger narrative context to explain events: Everything is seen from the subjective perspective of the monkeys. This allows for the viewer to identify not only *with* the animals, but *as* them. Macpherson is less concerned with plot than he is with visual sequences that spur viewers to provide affective responses in negotiating the relationships between images. In the director's acute framing, natural objects become poignant abstractions that create formal echoes where interpretive associations might otherwise be



Kenneth Macpherson, *Monkeys' Moon*, 1929, black-and-white film in 16 mm, 9 minutes 10 seconds. Production still.

missed. Macpherson's brilliance lies in his ability to photograph small movements as nuanced, meaning-producing gestures. The transformative sense of abstraction in *Monkeys' Moon* anticipates the work of filmmakers such as Nathaniel Dorsky and Robert Beavers, as when, for example, in *Monkeys' Moon*, the camera cuts from a close-up of the valves of a saxophone, to a watering can sprinkling into a puddle, to a contingent of ants streaming from between stones. Through visual analogies, the images associatively link the stops of the instrument, the holes of the watering can, and the crevice pouring forth the ants. The film's juxtapositions allow for both close attention to specific particulars and the revelation of previously unapprehended relationships among these unlike things, making the images simultaneously separate but interconnected, abstract and concrete.

The rediscovery of a lost master who produced so little—not unlike his near contemporary the painter Gerald Murphy—gives us the opportunity to rediscover modernism and its contents as if for the first time. In *Monkeys' Moon*, concrete objects and behaviors become diverse abstractions to be read, and cinema's flickering light, like the moon that draws the monkeys out into the garden, becomes in Macpherson's vision the possibility of discovering that world of a manifest self, again and again. □

*The rediscovered Monkeys' Moon was screened at Yale University in New Haven, on February 19 as part of the conference "Postwar Queer Underground Cinema, 1950–1968."*

RICHARD DEMING, A LECTURER IN ENGLISH AT YALE UNIVERSITY, IS THE AUTHOR OF *LISTENING ON ALL SIDES: TOWARD AN EMERSONIAN ETHICS OF READING* (STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2008).