

Words and silk: Gerald Murnane at the cinema

Article

Accepted Version

Solomon, S. (2015) Words and silk: Gerald Murnane at the cinema. *Antipodes*, 29 (2). pp. 309-320. ISSN 0893-5580 doi: 10.13110/antipodes.29.2.0309 Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/67480/>

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Identification Number/DOI: 10.13110/antipodes.29.2.0309
<<https://doi.org/10.13110/antipodes.29.2.0309>>

Publisher: Wayne State University Press

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WORDS AND SILK: GERALD MURNANE AT THE CINEMA

PART ONE – THE LITERARY AND CINEMATIC WORLD OF GERALD MURNANE

Around halfway through Gerald Murnane's 1974 debut novel, *Tamarisk Row*, the Killeaton family of Bassett in Victoria (a thinly-veiled version of Bendigo), are together at the Miami Theatre, watching Lloyd Bacon's 1944 war film, *The Fighting Sullivans* (or "The Sullivans," as young Clement calls it). As the film begins, we are told of Clement's shock at seeing "for the first time on the screen the inside of a Catholic church," and of his certainty that the audience around him are laughing at the humorous travails of the Catholic Sullivan family, because they are Protestants. When the Sullivan patriarch belts his sons with a strap, and the audience laughs again, Clement follows their cues, and realises something about the difference between life on and off the silver screen: "Mr. Sullivan is only pretending to be angry with the boys," reasons Clement, "and decides that the Killeaton family, whose quarrels last for days, leads a life so different from the true American life that it would be useless to try to learn any lessons from the Sullivans." (104) Just when Clement thinks he has it all figured out, the film pulls out a trick ending of sorts, seeming to bring the five Sullivan boys back to life, even though we have witnessed them dying in the Pacific Theatre.

Clement asks his father -- didn't they die after all Dad? Augustine says -- don't worry about them son -- it was only a story that some Yanks made up. But someone in the seat behind them says angrily -- no it wasn't -- it's all true -- I read where it said this story is based on actual fact. (105)

In spite of its apparent verisimilitude ("actual fact") and claims to indexicality, film in *Tamarisk Row* is diminished twice over as both foreign and fictive, sealing the fate of cinema in the novels that would follow it.

For this is only the first of many instances whereby film features in the narrative content of Murnane's work, the conspicuous and constant presence of the medium suggesting not only the author's ongoing interest in cinematic artefacts, but of his acute awareness of the way in which cinema has had an abiding influence on literature over the last century. Clement Killeaton is only one character – or rather, "image-person" (Murnane, *A History of Books*, 30) – among many to have felt the effects of film in Murnane's writing, with the author figure in his most recent novel, *A Million Windows*, also remarking on the resonance of certain motion pictures in his life. But here, unlike the youthful curiosity about the medium that marked *Tamarisk Row* four decades prior, we read only of the more disappointing or even deleterious effects of a trip to the cinema:

How many years have passed since I last watched a film – since I last walked out of some or other cinema ashamed at having wasted an afternoon or an evening and bothered already by the first of the clusters of false images that would occur to me again and again in coming weeks – false because their source was not my mind but sequences of shapes and colours displayed in the visible world as though objects and surfaces were all? (2)

Although the answer to this question isn't forthcoming, what becomes certain is that the 1960s was "the last decade in which [the narrator] still hoped to learn from films" (3), and where he explicitly names Henry James – who affords the novel its governing metaphor – the author cannot (or, more likely, will not deign to) identify Ingmar Bergman as "the Swede" (2) whose films he viewed all those years ago. On the one hand, then, the narrator has not watched the "false images" projected in the cinema for many decades; on the other, he continues to write about them, paradoxically disavowing the images of the screen with all of the knowledge of a true cinephile. However the narrator manages to recuperate that divide here – his fairly accurate descriptions of Bergman's *Jungfrukällan* (*The Virgin Spring*, 1960) "were mental images, or memories [...] of images projected through film onto a screen fifty years before their recall" (4) – the seeming contradiction for the fictional character becomes a more restless one when we consider that Murnane himself has expressed a similar disavowal of cinema.

As a means of making sense of Murnane's conflicted relationship with the screen, and with "images" more generally, it will be worth analysing the author's actual appearance on film, in Philip Tyndall's 1989 documentary, *Words and Silk: The Imaginary and Real Worlds of Gerald Murnane*. Unlike the lasting images created by "the Swede" in *A Million Windows*, Tyndall's unique work has existed in relative obscurity since its release. It was produced by the Australian Film Institute as part of their series: "Videos on Australian Writers: In Other Words..." After screening at the Experimenta festival in Melbourne in 1990 (with an appearance from Murnane himself), and winning awards for Best Documentary at both the Houston and San Francisco International Film Festivals, *Words and Silk* received some media attention in the early 1990s. Adrian Martin even went so far as to claim it as "one of my all-time favourite Australian films" (Martin), especially so since the traditional author documentary and an avant-garde cinematic sensibility make for strange but accommodating bedfellows.

The film depicts Murnane midway through his career, having by that point already published *Tamarisk Row*, *A Lifetime on Clouds* (1976), *The Plains* (1982), *Landscape with Landscape* (1985) and *Inland* (1988), with all of the stories comprising *Velvet Waters* (1990) already printed outside of that collection. It is structured neatly in two parts: Part One, titled "The Imaginary and Real World of

Gerald Murnane” – concerning itself mostly with the narrative of *Tamarisk Row*, which Murnane reads out over a series of images inspired by the novel – and Part Two, its supposed obverse, “The Real and Imaginary World of Gerald Murnane,” the majority of which is a series of medium or close shots of the author explaining in great detail his process of composition. Owing to its unique structure and aesthetic, *Words and Silk* certainly merits close analysis in its own right. But before examining the way in which the film might help to explain Murnane’s relationship with the medium, it is worth considering how a number of the works listed above are veritably “primed” for the cinema – not in the way that a novel might imagine itself proleptically graduating to the screen as an adaptation, and thus ensuring its afterlife in another medium, but more insofar as Murnane’s is a body of work that constantly thinks itself in terms of images, and cinematic images in particular.

As is evident in the extracts above, there are a number of connected ways in which film announces itself in Murnane’s narratives: as a kind of supplement to Being, affirming or denying what many of his characters understand about the world, or even structuring their very worldview; as a foreign (mostly American) medium, intruding in the works as a clear rival to both the author’s “true fiction” and to Australian culture at mid-century; as a technology that drives the gender dynamics in his writing, and, most obliquely; as a formal stimulus, insinuating its very material basis – a “succession of images” – into Murnane’s hypotactic sentences. Examples of such intermediality abound elsewhere in the author’s oeuvre, and manifest in different ways throughout.

In *A Lifetime on Clouds*, cinema sets the narrative in motion, and also emphasizes one of film’s most notable proclivities – the consolidation of woman at the centre of cinema’s erotic spectacle. The first episode in the novel is a dream conjured up by the young schoolboy, Adrian Sherd, in Form 4 at a Catholic boys’ school in Melbourne, and involves American pin-up models named Marilyn, Jayne, and Susan, in a series of sexual escapades (5-8). Although Adrian has never seen any films featuring these models, he knows enough about them through reading film magazines, and examining celebrity photographs. The allure of the cinema indirectly structures his understanding of women, the real images of which, as in *A Million Windows*, later become the “mental images” that sponsor his nocturnal fantasies.

As with a number of filmic reference points in Murnane’s work, the cinema here seems readily connected to the sexualisation or objectification of women, all-too apparent instances of the visual pleasure conjured by the male gaze (Mulvey). But if such reveries represent the full relegation of woman to cinematic objecthood, later on in the novel, when Adrian and his classmates are treated to a sex-education film, the viewing experience serves to deconstruct that gendered divide. To all intents and purposes a straightforward affair, the movie

seems – to Adrian, at least – to confuse proximity and distance, and flattens the distinction between inside and outside:

An army of little sperm-men was invading the diagram.... Was it just an animated diagram like a cartoon? Or did the film-makers pay some lunatic to shoot his stuff into a hollow tube inside the dressmaker's dummy? Or did they put a tiny camera inside a female organ so that Adrian and his class and even Father Dreyfus and Brother Cyprian were all sitting in the dark inside a woman's body while some huge fellow outside was doing her for all he was worth but none of them knew what was going on? (130)

Woman as cinematic object in Adrian's first dream is here inverted, such that Adrian himself becomes the object: the camera initially captures the image of the female star, but once that camera is ostensibly "inside a female organ," so too are its bewildered viewers.

This trajectory – the potential idealization of woman ultimately breeding a disconcerting encounter with the real materiality of the female body – aligns in a way with what Nicholas Birns has referred to broadly in Murnane's writing as "a stance that deliberately marks out the limits of its applicability," where male fantasy is not permitted to solidify into ideology (58). In this way, Murnane is able to press on the operations of the male gaze until they buckle under their own weight, heightening the types of fantasies that predominate in Hollywood cinema so exaggeratedly that they become simply too illogical to uphold.

In *The Plains*, woman is also at the heart of an unsustainable cinematic fantasy that is ultimately found wanting. The novel's filmmaker, attempting to capture the essence or plenitude of his country, believes that shooting the women of the plains will allow him access to something more real about the region. However, his plan is thwarted just as he carries it out, with the image of the woman not comporting with his expectations: "her face was not quite so untroubled as I had hoped, so that I had to visualise anew some of the compelling close-ups in the final scene of my film" (90).

Elsewhere, the frustrated desire for dominion over the female form generates a realisation that filmic images exceed their initial existence on the screen, and contain lifeworlds inaccessible to those viewing them from the outside. In Murnane's short story "First Love," for instance (a story from which he reads in *Words and Silk*), the narrator picks up a copy of L.P. Hartley's *The Go-Between* (1953), and finds on the front an image of "Julie Christie or Margaret Leighton" from Joseph Losey's 1971 adaptation, considering her relationship to the actor:

Granted, she says, she is in my power to some extent. But I have power only over what I see. And all I can see is the long frock, and the parasol being flicked in anger, and the haughty and unsmiling face; whereas she can see the house behind all these lawns and trees, and she sees the people of the house, who are her equals as I can never be. (153)

As is evident from these examples, the variety of cinematic images, from *A Lifetime on Clouds*, through *The Plains*, and “First Love,” all revolve in one way or another around the depiction of women on screen, and invoke anxieties about scopophilia, questioning the very propriety or value of looking at images *tout court*. This last excerpt also demonstrates the close proximity of the filmic image to literary writing, the former quickly disparaged by Murnane’s narrator in “First Love,” who draws attention to its lack of originality:

The sentence actually comes from the book of fiction that the film-makers got their story from. The past, says the neat little sentence, is a foreign country: they do things differently there.

How poetic, and how promising this must have seemed to people preparing to watch a motion picture. (152)

The film image in Murnane’s work, then, has a close affinity with the written word, even as it is deployed to affirm the superiority of the fiction that remediates it – Hartley’s novel here houses the image from the film of the same name, just as Murnane’s own words contain and demystify film images for his readers.

PART TWO – THE CINEMATIC AND LITERARY WORLD OF GERALD MURNANE

Murnane’s twinned fascination with, and hostility towards, the cinema is most apparent in the film about his life and work. In *Words and Silk*, the author explicitly guards against the influence of real, existing images on his work, displacing the real materiality of the film image on to the “mental image” that exists in the mind alone. A writer for whom the “image” is the source of much of his work, Murnane is also revealed here as something of an iconoclast. And yet, at the same time, he rejects the notion that his is a writing of “ideas.” In the second half of *Words and Silk*, he speaks adamantly of his work as being comprised of “images, and not of ideas,” and so even though Murnane doesn’t want the image to materialise in any obvious way, he also gestures away from the Platonic Idea, which is completely abstract.

Murnane’s image is perhaps more akin to the image that Henri Bergson describes in *Matter and Memory* (1896): “a certain existence which is more than that which the idealist calls a *representation*, but less than that which the realist

calls a *thing*,—an existence placed halfway between the ‘thing’ and the ‘representation’” (vii-viii). For Bergson, the material world is not simply reducible to our perceptions of it, but neither is matter completely foreign to our senses. Instead, it is present to us as an “aggregate” (vii) of images, which our minds stitch together in order to perceive our world in motion. But this habit of perception breaks apart the truly seamless duration of the world, which is a problem for Bergson, and one that is exacerbated by the arrival of the cinema.

In its separation of each second of footage into twenty-four separate frames, film aspires to reproduce movement, but only by first carving it up into a series of fixed moments. Film reconstitutes movement, but does so in an entirely artificial way, perceiving the duration of the material world on our behalf: as Garrett Stewart remarks, film in Bergson’s estimations “has already mechanized the photographic flow before the mind comes to it” (Stewart, 86). In this way, the French philosopher criticizes early cinema, taking it to task in *Creative Evolution* (1907) as the unfortunate fulfilment of the mechanistic illusion that had long plagued human perception. If prior to cinema, perception offered an insufficient understanding of the world in its becoming, then film had only encouraged the illusion all the more. Now, just like projectors, we place ourselves “outside” of the things we see, taking “snapshots” of “the passing reality” and recomposing their movement artificially, as though there is “a kind of cinematograph inside us” (322-323).

Gerald Murnane tantalisingly speaks in a similar way of the images that drive his work, and yet, although he is just as virulently opposed to the cinema as Bergson, he positively valorises the way that the aggregated construction of images sets his novels in motion. As he says, it is precisely a “connection” or “succession” of images that brings his work into being, but importantly, the operation that joins them together takes place entirely in Murnane’s mind, and not outside of it. And so, diverging from Bergson, but of a piece with the narrator’s cinophobia in *A Million Windows*, Murnane in *Words and Silk* demarcates the “true” images of his work from the “false” images of the screen.

Or, I should say, not just screens, but all media, all sources external to the author’s mind. For Murnane disavows the notion that the “images” he thinks of are in any way related to film or video, but also to photography, and even to the visual arts, the seemingly more noble equivalent of the vulgar Hollywood tableau:

I’ve never owned a television set. I haven’t watched a television set for fifteen years. Every two or three years I watch a film, but I’m always sorry afterwards that I’ve watched it. The images in films never seem true to me. I haven’t been more than twice to an art gallery in the last 25 years, and I can’t remember what I saw there.

Film, video, paint – in *Words and Silk*, none are safe from Murnane’s wrath. But there is palpable tension here, between the kind of cinephilia that pervades his novels, and the open disavowal of the cinema that he offers here, and elsewhere in interviews, and it’s ironised, of course, by the fact that Murnane makes these pronouncements in front of Tyndall’s camera. What results is an uneasy relationship between writing and cinema, which is mediated by the author’s own ideas about perception, and helps us to better understand Murnane’s fictional world.

Murnane’s discussion of the “image” in Tyndall’s film is almost ubiquitous, but where he distances himself from visual media, the author is keen to plot the connections between his notion of the image and the written word. Specifically, the “succession of images” is most important for Murnane in forming a homology with his syntax. “The basic unit of all my writing is the sentence,” the author says in *Words and Silk*. “I first write one sentence, and then another sentence. I write sentence after sentence.” *Tamarisk Row*, as Murnane points out, has been most readily identified by its long sentences, and, over the course of his career, Murnane’s sentences have become shorter overall. It was his initial belief that “only a long sentence can explain how everything in the world is connected to many other things.”

This is perhaps true of Murnane’s first novel more than any of those works that followed, and it is to the syntax therein that he pays closest attention in *Words and Silk*: “The point about my long sentences is that each of those sentences is a sound grammatical sentence,” Murnane remarks, with “soundness” requiring a main clause, followed by a long chain of subordinate clauses that relate both to one another, and to the main clause that begins the sentence. This habit, as Imre Salusinszky has pointed out, is “driven by a need to reconstitute [a number of connected] events *as a single grammatical unit*,” and it results in *Tamarisk Row* in “one final reconstituting sentence that is over two pages long” (10).

In further laying bare the apparatus that underpins his work, Murnane turns his succession of images away from the screen and towards the page, following Bergson’s angry march out of the cinema, but at the same time locating something valuable in the kinship between the filmstrip and the sentence. Indeed, Murnane’s resolute negation of film actually raises the possibility of an affinity between the two media, all but resulting in the suggestion that the continuous narrative prose of his early novels – especially when it indulges in bouts of lengthy syntax – is a cinematic illusion, carefully pieced together from letters, words, sentences, and paragraphs. The author tells us that his writing process is comprised of “7 or 8 finished sentences an hour, 100 finished words a day, 36,500 finished words a year,” but that it is also helped along by a peculiar method of empirical visualization:

None of my books has been written in an orderly way from beginning to end. *Tamarisk Row* took four years to write, and it only came together after I'd drawn a grid of 200 squares, and numbered the squares. Each number was meant to correspond to one of the themes of the book, or one of the clusters of images in the book. Each numbered square was meant to give rise to about a page of prose. But as I went on writing, each square gave rise to much more than one page.

This is a quote taken from the second half of *Words and Silk*, in which Murnane reveals the process by which he fashions images in his mind into words on the page – even if those images are drawn from his memory, rather than the screen itself.

It's perhaps no mistake, then, that Murnane recounts his early interest in writing for the screen, one that he later disavows, but which retrospectively explains something of his obsession with the image:

Sometimes, I began to write a film script. I hadn't even learnt to operate a box camera, but there I was trying to write a film script. Yet I see now that what I was trying to do with those film scripts was to work with images, just successions of images.

Although he claims ignorance of film's material basis, the workings of its innermost parts, Murnane at least admits of a vague awareness of the photographic foundations of the film strip, a "succession of images." In his discussions of images, Murnane is interested in the way that images relate to one another, as networks, or successions, connected in interesting ways, and modifying one another like a series of subordinate clauses. Even as images ceaselessly reiterate themselves in his novels (marbles, racing, the plains), Murnane's reference points develop in relation to each other, and gain in their repetition. One is often more aware of their similarities than their differences, but Murnane carefully alters elements at the sentence level, substituting words, and subtly changing perspectives from clause to clause.

Of course, there are obvious irreconcilable differences between film and literature, made all the more apparent in their comparative materialities. The aggregations of words that make up a sentence are substantively different from the aggregation of images that make up a film strip, with individual words combining to make meaning in a way that individual film frames do not. In Murnane's long, hypotactic sentences, the inaugural main clause sets the itinerary for the subsequent subordinate clauses, which then retroactively transform the meaning of the main clause, so that the entire sentence is reconstituted, making sense of the relationship between all of its clauses. A film strip, on the other hand, is not so

hierarchically arranged (where does the film “sentence” start and end?), and, although it too is an art form that proceeds sequentially, is premised on a seamless movement of images that makes the individual frames veritably invisible. Murnane’s words, especially as he discusses them in Tyndall’s film, revel in their materiality, in their constructedness, and in their ability to return the reader to the beginning of the sentence they have just completed, so as to make sense of it all. While teasingly bringing his words into proximity with film, Murnane instead consecrates them apart from the images of the screen.

As though in acknowledgment of this rivalry between writing and image, *Words and Silk* itself opens in darkness, with only the sound of typing, before the sound of the keys becomes the galloping of horses hooves, and then the title card appears. This opening immediately suggests a comparison with Chris Marker’s essay film *Letter from Siberia* (1957), which begins in a similar fashion, and whose peculiar blend of images and commentary André Bazin referred to as “horizontal montage,” a lateral relation between word and image, rather than the obvious succession of images to which we are now accustomed (Stob, 36). In keeping with this initial sequence, the film soon settles into a rhythm, its first part – “The Imaginary and Real World” – featuring the author reading aloud from *Tamarisk Row*, his voice accompanied by images that we might think of as attempts to approximate what happens in that novel.

However, as Adrian Martin points out, “this is far from a standard, ‘objective’ view of an artist and his career – and nor is it one of those awful, ‘mimetic’ exercises with corny, Channel 4-style affectations, or scenes inserted between interview footage to illustrate passages from the books discussed” (Martin). What we get instead, as Martin mentions, is a strange tessellation between sounds and images, between the sound of Murnane’s voice, and an assortment of recurring colours and shapes (especially marbles) that seem to mimic the obsessive repetitions of his prose. The images presented to us do tend to mesh with the words we hear, but they also have a certain abstract quality, and are not wholly essential for us to visualize the narrative of *Tamarisk Row*. There is friction here, brought out by the medium of film especially, between the carefully patterned sentences that we hear on the soundtrack, and the carefully choreographed images that coalesce in various montages; there’s a kind of sound and image continuum, but it’s one with which we shouldn’t feel wholly at ease, something closer to what Michel Chion has called “textual speech” in cinema (172-176).

Chion writes that textual speech – “generally that of voiceover commentaries” (172) – is used sparingly in cinema as a general rule, since an overabundance of narration would take away from film’s “autonomous audiovisual scene” (172). Tyndall seems especially aware of this capacity of textual speech in *Words and Silk*, and actively leverages Murnane’s imposing

voice *against* the images and sounds of his documentary, employing the technique of horizontal montage in a very knowing and purposeful manner. This becomes clear in the first half of Tyndall's film, when Murnane reads from his own work and so seems to command the images and sounds attributed to *Tamarisk Row*. One of the signal achievements of Murnane's first two novels, at least, was to fashion a third-person narrative in such a way that it could be experienced as a narrative told in the first-person. By way of free indirect discourse, it seems as though we are reading the very words of Clement Killeaton or Adrian Sherd, as Murnane is able to deftly suffuse the entirety of his novels with the naivety and insight of both protagonists.

In the film, however, Murnane's act of reading from *Tamarisk Row* dissolves that tension between the third- and first-person voice, by inhabiting the role of Clement, by acting out scenes from the novel, and by injecting stories from his own life in amongst the episodes he recites from his fiction. If the unique experience of reading Murnane's writing seems to have been literalised, or even neutralised, in the film, it's not a weakness of Tyndall's work, but rather an indication of how textual speech – alongside film sound and images – might modify written narratives. For Murnane's characters, film arrives to refurbish their understanding of the world, and for Murnane himself, film radically reworks his novels, and the way in which we might read them. Through the use of voiceover, coupled with the arresting presence of the author himself, the reader is veritably instructed as to how Murnane's novels should be read – the pace at which his sentences should be recited, the way to correctly intone each word, and the images that the featured passages should conjure in the process.

While this approach appears more than a little didactic, Tyndall's direction engages the technique of some of the best essay films (especially Marker's), which attach commentary to images in a seductive manner, such that the words we hear seem naturally wedded to the images we see. Rather than close down the meaning of the words they utter, the kind of authoritative voiceover that we get from such films also gestures towards an uncertainty in their truth – the more insistent the singular voice is about the meaning of a certain image, the more we are encouraged to question that certainty. This is true of a film like Jean-Luc Godard's *Notre Musique (Our Music)*, 2004, in which the director depicts himself adamantly lecturing on the difference between text and the image, but giving his audience reason to distrust his views all the while. And it is true, too, of the second half of *Words and Silk*.

In that portion of Tyndall's work – “The Real and Imaginary World” – Murnane is at pains to reveal the nature of his writing process, as both the result of the singular images that exist in his head – as something that no one else could produce, with Murnane stating explicitly that he never thought of himself as part of any literary tradition – but also a writing process that in no way evolves from

his own life: “My fiction is not the story of my life,” he says in no uncertain terms. “I hate the word ‘autobiographical.’” In this way, the author is both guarantor of the “truth” of his own fiction, but is also personally distanced from that work. While there’s not exactly inconsistency here – Murnane is simply the conduit for images that exist in the world, and he rarefies them as they pass through his mind and on to the page – there is a paradox implicit in the way that Tyndall depicts Murnane saying these things.

And that is, as a face, in medium shot or close-up, staring straight into the camera, reciting in a very formalised manner, and speaking in a setting in which the lighting and colours change as the film progresses. Murnane reads from a script, unprompted by any questions. Here, speaking about his process of composition, Murnane is once more reading from his own writing, a prepared and rehearsed statement, his own autobiography. Parts of this intense and focused soliloquy – which Martin calls “measured, serious as a heart attack, and utterly hypnotic” (Martin) – are spent disavowing both the autobiographical nature of Murnane’s work, and also its connections with cinema. Of course, we are told unambiguously to avoid looking to the author’s life, or to other cultural forms, for answers about his work, through the author’s mouth, and by way of the one cultural form from which he seems to want to distance his work.

But this is not a blind spot by any means. In fact, Tyndall and Murnane both seem quite aware of what they are doing by inserting the author so aggressively into the film, with only the camera there to record what he says. This gesture, of situating Murnane so centrally and insistently at the heart of the film – having him act out scenes from his novels, and having him presiding over our interpretation of those novels – while at the same time distancing Murnane from his fiction, is a calculated move, and accords itself perfectly with Murnane’s fictional project. Given little else in this second part of Tyndall’s film, the audience is being encouraged to identify with Murnane, to view him transparently as the author and owner of his works, qualified to say what he is saying, and presented to us with minimal mediation. And, in a way that carries over from the encouraged identification with his voice-over from the first half of the film, here once again the images of the film appear to surrender to the power of the author’s words.

But of course, Murnane’s precise mode of delivery should encourage us to think otherwise about his narration of the film. Indeed, the way in which he is shot here seems to want to reward astute readers of his work, who will be wary of the power of the close-up, which promises to convey truth unmediated, but which of course does nothing of the sort. Recall the dismay of Adrian Sherd in *A Lifetime on Clouds*, who hopes that the photographic image will reveal to him all that he doesn’t know about the female species. Once he gets hold of a photo of a naked woman in a copy of *Health and Sunshine* magazine, Adrian purchases a

magnifying glass in order to reveal the secret of what is hidden in the shadows between her thighs. However, even though the image seems to promise incontrovertible proof of the woman's private parts, Adrian is left dismayed by its deficiencies: "The trouble was that the glass magnified all the tiny dots in the picture. He was still sure there was something between the woman's legs but the glass only made it more mysterious" (53).

The close-up, which seems to promise closure, only delivers inscrutability. And to return the analysis to the question of the male gaze, there is here a close affinity between the difficulties of mediation: representing the world, and representing woman, are inextricably connected (indeed, woman forms the conspicuous absent presence of *Words and Silk*, since Murnane does not discuss the gender dynamics of his work during the film). The obscurity of the opposite sex for Adrian in *A Lifetime on Clouds* – no matter how close the image will take him – is akin to the obscurity that the viewer senses when watching Murnane offering the "secret" or kernel of meaning in his work. The closer Tyndall's camera zooms, the less convincing the author's monologue about his work, and the more suspect his open disavowal of the cinematic image.

Where film – and especially documentary – might confirm our intuitions about something in the world that may be difficult to otherwise know, Tyndall's *Words and Silk* resolutely flouts these expectations. By offering us first Murnane reading – and re-enacting scenes from – *Tamarisk Row*, and then offering us Murnane speaking frankly about his writing process, we arrive at a sceptical position about the "truth" of the filmic image itself. But on the one hand, if we are intended to be in sympathy with the author here, we might also question the sincerity of Murnane's appearance in Tyndall's film altogether. His continued dismissal of cinema, especially when performed for a film camera, is cause to consider *Words and Silk* in line with *The Fighting Sullivans*, as a film that offer images that are simultaneously "made up" and "based on actual fact."

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