

Virginia Woolf as a Cultural Icon: the Visual Word and the Visual World

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“Ah, but what is ‘herself’? I mean, what is a woman? I assure you I do not know”
(“Professions for Women”, 1931)

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I think most of us will agree that nowadays Virginia Woolf sides with Shakespeare whenever a canonical woman writer is needed. Thus the task of writing on Woolf has become an enterprise of quite awesome proportions, as I quickly realized when I engaged in the writing of this paper. First of all, naturally Woolf has “always been there” for all of us engaged in a feminist practice, particularly within academic scholarship, as a kind of mother-figure or as a subliminal voice, an omnipresence that needs not be questioned, since it belongs with us. Thus, as in a mirror image (mirrors being one of her favorite topoi¹), her own words gain a new meaning here: “for we think back through our mothers if we are women” (Woolf, 1983:72-3). Indeed, the lack of a female tradition of woman writers Woolf refers to in *A Room of One’s Own*, pointing out the “genius and the integrity of character” that was required of 19th century women novelists such as Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot and Jane Austen, could no longer be referred to as a “lack” after Woolf’s engagement in what can be called her feminist vision. Moreover, her power to “hold fast to the thing ... without shrinking” (Ibid. p.71) – refracting her own words on her behalf, her search for “the woman’s sentence” and for a style of writing that should be “adapted to the body” put to the test in her novels and short-stories, signaled the definite transgression of women of the patriarchal “limitations of their sex”, and their entry in a new stage of personal and social responsibility and citizenship: “Lock up your libraries if you like; but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind” (Ibid., p.72).

¹ Mirrors and looking glasses are a recurrent allegory in her writing, in the essays as in the short-fiction as well as in the novels. As a possible synthesis of their wide figuration, we may quote the following passage from *A Room of One’s Own* (1929): “Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man as twice its natural size. (...) Whatever may be their use in civilized societies, mirrors are essential to all violent and heroic action. That is why Napoleon and Mussolini both insist so emphatically upon the inferiority of women, for if they were not inferior, they would cease to enlarge. ...” (Woolf, 1983: 35-6).

Woolf's enthusiasm can be held responsible for the anticipation of a large number of "feminist heresies" which, according to Harold Bloom's bitter (but also ironically prophetic!) words in "A Map of Misreading" would bring about "the first true break with literary continuity ... to dominate the West"². And that menace to the stability of the canon, feared as a "theft" of the word,³ and implicitly of power and hegemonic discourse, which means in the words of Alicia Ostriker, "to seize speech and make it say what we mean" (Ostriker, 1988: 315), equals an anarchic upsurge in the heart of "law, custom and manners" (Woolf's own words, 1988: 45). This fact is all the more extraordinary, since it comes from an upper-middle class liberal intellectual woman, and it comprises, as crucial targets:

1- the concept of a feminist genealogy and gynocritics, as claimed in the essay "Women and Fiction" (1929),

The history of England is the history of the male line, not of the female. Of our fathers we know always some fact, some distinction. ... But of our mothers, our grandmothers, our greatgrandmothers, what remains? Nothing but a tradition. One was beautiful; one was red-haired; one was kissed by a Queen. We know nothing of them except their names and the dates of their marriages and the number of children they bore (Woolf, 1988:44).

2- the "writing of the body" and the concept of "écriture féminine",

...the very form of the sentence does not fit her. It is too loose, too heavy, too pompous, for a woman's use. ... And this a woman must make for herself, altering and adapting the current sentence until she writes onethat takes the natural shape of her thought without crushing or distorting it. ... a woman's book is not written as a man would write it. (Woolf, Ibid., p.48-50)

3- transgenderism and "queer theory", as allegorically illustrated in the writing of *Orlando* (1928):

Orlando had become a woman – there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity. ... His memory – but in the future we must, for convention's sake, say 'her' for 'his', and 'she' for 'he' – her memory then, went back through all the events of her past life without encountering any obstacle (Woolf, 1983: 87).

² Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading*, O.U.P., New York, 1975 (p. 33).

³ Vide Alicia Ostriker, "Thieves of Language", in Elaine Showalter, *The New Feminist Criticism*, Op. Cit., 1986, pp. 315-338.

4- feminism as a utopia of language and the “destabilization of fixed meanings”,⁴ as stated in the essays “Women and Fiction” and “Profession for Women” (1931),

So, if we may prophesy, women in time to come will write fewer novels, but better novels; and not novels only, but poetry and criticism and history ... women will have what has so long been denied to them – leisure, and money, and a room to themselves (Woolf, 1988: 52)

But besides this, it is necessary also to discuss the ends and the aims for which we are fighting, for which we are doing battle with these formidable obstacles. Those aims cannot be taken for granted; they must be perpetually questioned and examined (Ibid., pp. 62-3).

Woolf’s vision did set the pattern for most transgressive performances to come, even for those contemporary feminism is still at odds with, notably, she is aware of her shortcomings, as when she writes of “the two adventures of her professional life”:

The first – killing the Angel in the House – I think I solved. But the second, telling the truth about my own experiences as a body, I do not think I solved. I doubt that any woman has solved it yet. The obstacles against her are immensely powerful – and yet they are very difficult to define (Woolf, 1988: 62). (...) Ah! But what is herself? I mean, but what is a woman? (Ibid., p.60)

Thus, Woolf’s feminist poetics could be called in the true sense of the kristevian expression, a “future anterior of language”⁵, rather than the bitter embryo of a bloomian “school of resentment”.

Besides, it is hard to find a more complex, polymorphous, at times elusive and even contradictory figure of a writer, and one that has inspired more ample and diversified criticism. But of course that comes with being canonized, or rather it is in the nature of canonicity itself. T.S. Eliot, her contemporary and friend, whom she published in The Hogarth Press when only a promising young writer, called her “the center of the literary life of London”, Raymond Williams, an unsuspected intellectual radical, emphasizes her political commitment to the woman’s cause, noting for instance that a branch of the Women’s Cooperative Guild met regularly in her home⁶, which, he adds,

⁴ As formulated by Rosi Braidotti in *Nomadic Subjects*: “Writing in this mode is about disengaging the sedentary nature of words, destabilizing commonsensical meanings, deconstructing established forms of consciousness” (Braidotti, 1994:15).

⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, (trans. Léon Roudiez), Columbia: Columbia U.P., 1980.

⁶ Raymond Williams’s article, “The Bloomsbury Fraction” is a very powerful and challenging one, given Williams’s marxist convictions and his elaboration of a theory of cultural materialism. Very much against the grain, then, in this context, Williams treats Bloomsbury as an “enlightened fraction” within the

accounts for the degree of “social conscience” which is most often not recognized in the Bloomsbury members.

Now, amongst the tantalizing variety of books and critical essays both on Virginia Woolf’s life and work that keep coming out, recent criticism, maybe due to the growing space given to the study of interart poetics, seems to be particularly oriented to the intersection of the visual world in Woolf’s textual production. In parallel to this, a new trend of criticism has developed, along the lines of Postmodernism, considering the impact of the media and the multi “re-fashionings” of Woolf within the contemporary visual culture. Amongst the former it is worth mentioning Jane Goldman’s *The Feminist Aesthetics of Virginia Woolf* (1998), essentially seeing her *oeuvre* under the influence of Post-Impressionism; Emily Dalgarno’s *Virginia Woolf and the Visible World* (2001), a study on the centrality of vision in Woolf’s writing; Bridget Elliott and Jo-Ann Wallace, in *Women Artists and Writers: modernist (im)positionings* (1994), devote a chapter to Virginia Woolf, Vanessa Bell and “The Sister(s) Arts”, where they explore the space women occupied within Bloomsbury and the ambivalence with which their professionalism was regarded; to the latter belongs Brenda R. Silver’s *Virginia Woolf: Icon* (1999), a study about Virginia Woolf as a cultural icon, “the face that sells more postcards than any other at the National Portrait Gallery”, as stated in the back cover of the book.

The whole issue is exhilarating, and, in my view, closely intertwined, however, quoting Woolf, I will begin by admitting it is not my aim “to put the matter in a nutshell” (Woolf, 1981: 5), and, like her, I will leave the conclusion up to you.

I want to start off from the most polemical argument, Woolf’s “re-canonization”. Brenda Silver argues that there are two possible ways of looking at this phenomenon of “re-canonization”, which she describes as follows: “ the fact that so many people today see the film or television versions of Woolf’s works before they experience (if they ever do) the versions she wrote or published” (Silver, 1999: 213). First, she argues, we can read/see these adaptations of Woolf’s texts as “more than an activity of literary criticism”, for they themselves become “originals” in their own right, constructing

individualism of the bourgeois liberal . Contradicting the largely disseminated image of Bloomsbury as “withdrawn and languid aesthetes”(p.155), he calls attention to their “political and organizational involvement” (Ibid.), their “social conscience”, namely in the case of Leonard Woolf, through his work for the League of Nations, the Cooperative movement and for the Labour Party. Thus the Bloomsbury “alternative”, its “new style” of “civilized individualism”, as he calls it, constitutes in his view a “remarkable *disconnection*” within the ideology of liberal individualism: “in its personal instances and in

assertions about Woolf (Ibid.). Adaptations, as Silver argues, are “re-fashionings” or “re-dressings” of *other texts* (the true “originals” or the ones that lie behind the new ones), to be globally understood as “performances” existing in an intertextual relation with the former text, as a product of a particular encoding: historical, geographical, cultural, etc. (Ibid., p.12), much in the same way as a translation exists in relation to the original or source text. However, in a second move, one cannot help seeing that the adaptation itself easily assumes the status of “original”, being read or seen *against* (instead of) their archetypal “versions”.

Personally, I am more inclined towards the second possibility. Sally Potter’s film version of *Orlando*, for example, has become *Orlando* itself. A *post-version* of Woolf’s feminist utopia, necessarily framed by our contemporary vision of the subject (possibly as an extension of the earlier text, or metonymy informed by post-structuralism and post-modernism). I believe however that, like Sharon Ouditt argues in her review of *Orlando* as film adaptation, Woolf and Potter seem to be engaged in identical projects: “They are of different generations and they use different semiotic systems, but they are both interested in prising open the sex-gender duality that has been reinforced by tradition, inheritance and convention, and amounts to a resilient, but certainly flawed gendered ideology” (Ouditt, 1999: 153) ⁷. Moreover, at the formal and structural level, “it is all already there”, one could say, since Woolf’s text is riddled with multiperspectivism, with an exuberant visual imagination and its organizational fragmentation in *tableaux* and dramatic scenes bears already within itself a clear cinematic quality. Maggie Humm, in her essay on “Orlando and Postmodernism” ⁸ views Potter’s version of Woolf’s text also as a positive rendering of its subversive plot and formal structure, through the opening up of the “postmodern possibilities of Woolf’s novel *avant-la-lettre*” (Humm, 1997: 145). In doing this, Humm argues, the film-maker is only validating Woolf’s anti-realist project” (Ibid.).

An identical situation is that of the recent box-office hit, *The Hours* (2002), itself an adaptation of Michael Cunningham’s postmodern, queer *Mrs. Dalloway* (1998). This is, I believe, a curious case of archival legitimization, since, as it is well known, *The Hours* was the originally intended title of Woolf’s book. Thus the performed version

its public interventions Bloomsbury was as serious, as dedicated and as inventive as this position has ever, in the twentieth century, been” (pp.166-7).

⁷ Sharon Ouditt, “Coming Across the Divide”, in Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan (eds.) *Adaptations: From Text to Screen, Screen to Text*, London and New York: Routledge, 1999 (pp.146-156).

⁸ Maggie Humm, *Feminism and Film*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1997 (pp.142-178).

assumes the perfunctory role of “mîse-en-abyme” regarding the source text, using that privilege to further subvert, actualize and explore to the limit the pre-announced transgressions: be it *Orlando*’s sexual politics, transgenderism, power politics, ecology, pacifism, etc.

One could argue that what is at stake in this at times perverse and contradictory process of engendering of replicas, doubles and adaptations, the axis of canonization itself, is not so much the search for the *authenticity* of the original but, more so, its *aura*, (the “complex totality” of the text, in Benjamin’s sense), which does not necessary pertain to the archetext, but often lies “behind or beyond the text”, i.e., the “authentic Woolf”, (as in the “authentic Shakespeare”⁹). Authenticity becomes then the process of “authentication, something bestowed, not inherent” (Silver, apud Orgel, 1999: 212); the nature and quality of this process depends, as Silver remarks, on different politics of adaptation and intended dissemination, targeted audience, etc. In sum, it is a matter of “distinctly historical and political acts” (Ibid.). Each time a novel is adapted as a film or a stage performance, the original is “re-fashioned” or “re-dressed” according to the contemporary language and to fit the tone of the current debates; what has been referred as the audience’s “functional authority”¹⁰. Thus the current versions of the earlier work play, in relation to the latter, a “performative role”, not only in decoding the meanings and significations of the earlier text, but also in actualizing and bringing to the fore the concepts and arguments that construe it, and which establish an awesome resonance with today’s contemporary debates – feminism, sexuality, the politics of the body, the redefinition of identity and otherness ... It is thus not surprising that, as Brenda Silver argues, these current versions or performances of Woolf’s texts have achieved such “mainstream attention and commercial success” (Silver, p.214). What is most exhilarating, I would add, is that they are already the substance of Woolf’s predicament.

On the other hand, one has to contend, Virginia Woolf would soon become fertile ground for “cannibalism”, a target to be easily marketed and made easy for consumption. She has become the unquestionable embodiment of an irreverent ideology (-ies), and thus seemingly appropriated to support the private view enacted by each new version or adaptation. And this, sometimes, to dangerous extremes. As for example, that of a postfeminist Woolf, made to suit the media’s own postfeminist pressures and

⁹ This expression is used by Brenda Silver (Ibid. p.211), in a cross reference to Stephen Orgel, “The authentic Shakespeare”, in *Representations* 21 (Winter 1988), vol. 2, pp.1-26.

¹⁰ Brenda Silver is here referring to Peter L. Schillingsburgh’s theory of “Reception Performance”, as developed in “Text as Matter, Concept, and Action”, *Studies in Bibliography* 44 (1991), p.74.

anxieties “that can be construed to rise above the politics of gender”, as Brenda Silver points out (Silver, p. 221; 233); this new image released in the market as an updated cultural product, has been fashionably tamed and, having transcended feminism and gender difference, dwells on the gentle side of politics¹¹.

But, far from me to be advocating here the purity of the original text. On the opposite pole, I believe in the total validity of the sequel versions and their performative value, their achieved status as “original revisions”, adding a new resonance and polymorphous meaning to the archetext. Rather, my question is: does Virginia Woolf, more so than most writers allow for this sequel writing? Does the reason for it lie in the fluidity, the self-reflexive, fragmentary nature of her own work, of her writing? (Of which an essay like “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” is a perfect example to look into, as a most complex and discursively fragmentary text that is often called for by modernist critics as to justify/exemplify the modernist experimental technique, but that could also easily be used to exemplify a postmodernist practice of writing ...) But then a striking contrast is provided against this complex fluid Woolf, as that is the one asserted in her essays and lectures, “Women and Fiction”, “Professions for Women”, as well as in *A Room of One’s Own* or *Three Guineas*. An *other* Woolf emerges: assertive, pugnacious, adamantly polemical. Is this multifacetism that Michael Cunningham or Sally Potter tried to capture? What about Woolf’s physiognomy, in particular, her face? What was it that each new photographer or painter tried to capture in their different visions and portraits of Woolf? Why is she, “the face that sells more postcards at the National Portrait Gallery?”

“When viewers turn to photographs to discover the authentic V. Woolf and/or her social meanings, then, they reveal themselves in the process”, as claimed by Brenda Silver (p.137), evoking Roland Barthes’s notes on photography in *Camera Lucida* : the viewer’s cultural, historical or political involvement with a photo (which Barthes names *studium*), and that fortuitous, episodic contingency with which the photo itself grasps/attracts/ seduces the viewer (which he names *punctum*)¹². And Barthes adds that photography gives access to a whole series of “under-information” about the person or

¹¹ Brenda Silver also refers to a stage and TV adaptation of *A Room of One’s Own*, by Patrick Garland, (1991) which issued almost simultaneously with Sally Potter’s *Orlando*, bears witness to the same ideological bias. “The acclaim for Garland’s version ... suggests the role of Garland’s text in ratifying a “postfeminist” Virginia Woolf made in the media’s “postfeminist” image (Silver, 221).

¹² Roland Barthes, *La Chambre Claire: notes sur la photographie*, Cahiers du Cinéma, Gallimard, Seuil, Paris: 1980 (pp.42-9).

the thing photographed which give the viewer a special pleasure, since they enhance his private knowledge of (and therefore his rapport with) the photographed object¹³.

The fascination exerted by V. Woolf's face, her popular cult as a modernist icon and feminist icon, hence her becoming a popular "image-sign", started in the 1970's when the first T-shirt with her face was printed (by the "Historical Products Inc. T-shirt", featuring the consecrated Beresford profile), and with postcards and posters widely advertising it.

As Brenda Silver remarks (p.129), it was during the period between the appearance of this first T-shirt in 1973 and after Hermione Lee's biography in 1996 that the responses to and the degrees of identification with her iconicity most proliferated and diverged.

It is this multiplicity of selves as fixed by the photographer's eye and the according responses they ask from the viewer, that we will be looking into briefly.

(Images)

Woolf's visibility grew in the mid 1920s, both as a novelist and as an image in magazines such as *Vogue London* and *Vanity Fair's* Hall of Fame. However, one of her earliest and most mediatically reproduced photos (in mugs, T-shirts, posters), dates from 1902, and was taken by G. C. Beresford, when Woolf was twenty (Fig. 3). It hangs in the National Portrait Gallery in London and is in the cover of Quentin Bell's biography. Hermione Lee's account of this portrait makes clear the origin of the mythification of Virginia Woolf as a fragile, ethereal, aristocratic beauty. In Lee's words:

The sensual, down-curved lips, the large sad gazing eyes, the dark lashes and strong eyebrows, the lovely straight nose and delicate curve of the chin, the long elegant neck, the high cheekbones, the soft, loosely-coiled bun, the pretty ear-lobe, and the aetherial lacy dress were to be crucial items in the making and maintaining of the Virgin Virginia legend (Lee, 1996: 246).

This photo was largely responsible for the conservative wing of the cult that ensued of a "fragile, apolitical, neurasthenic Woolf", (Silver, 146), a frozen icon, which has been reproduced *ad infinitum* to our days, (see for example Nicole Kidman's

¹³ "La photographie a le même rapport à l'Histoire que le biographe à la biographie" (Barthes, Ibid., p.54).

interpretation of Woolf in the film *The Hours*), which, in my opinion, was not as such represented in Cunningham's book.

The Lenare studio photos, taken in 1929 (Fig 4 and 5), are among the most often reproduced for early advertisements and reviews of Woolf's works. The Man Ray's photos, taken in the 30s, the most famous of which appeared in the cover of *Time* in 1937 (Fig. 6,7 and 18), picture an elegant, severe, distant and "ascetic" (a term used by the photographer) Woolf. It is the image of the "authoress", "neither the feminine nor the feministic game, someone we must recognize as a special instance of her sex", as Diana Trilling states in "Virginia Woolf's Special Realm" (p.1), her review of two collections of Woolf's essays, from 1948¹⁴; these photos are in all different from the more sensitive and sympathetic photos taken around the same time by the German expatriate photographer living in France, Gisèle Freund. These photos (Figs. 8, 9, 10, 11), were taken in 1939, in her Woolf's Sussex home, when she was fifty-eight. The image reproduced directly mirrors the photographer's empathy with her model, and her perceptive words regarding Woolf as "frail and luminous, the embodiment of her prose"¹⁵.

Cecil Beaton uses Woolf's face in his 1930 *Book of Beauty*, as an icon of "modern beauty" which is "backed up by intelligence", which became indeed a new concept of beauty to be marketed and mythified¹⁶.

By 1982, the year of Woolf's centenary, she was already a cult figure, in both realms, the academic world and the media culture. It was in 1983 that the *New York Review of Books* printed David Levine's famous caricature of Virginia Woolf and Shakespeare facing each other on even ground, on sound academic terrain, and not as myths issued from antagonistic cultural strata. Woolf saw then her aura as a canonic female writer being reclaimed as "icon for the intellectual class" (Silver, p.143), on a par with her ever growing popularity within the visual culture.

The importance of this re-canonization of Woolf lies in the fact that, if it turns visible her rendering as a multi-layered cult image for an intellectual elite, "that also reads Shakespeare", it also asserts the political history of the feminist rewriting of the canon throughout the crucial 1970s and 80s, that made such image and its circulation

¹⁴ Diana Trilling, "Virginia Woolf's Special Realm" *New York Times Book Review*, 22 March, 1948 (p.1); reprinted as , "Virginia Woolf: A Special Instance", *Claremont Essays*, 87-94.

¹⁵ Gisèle Freund in *The World is My Camera*, trans. June Guicharnaud, New York: Dial, 1974, (pp.129-37).

¹⁶ Cecil Beaton, *The Book of Beauty*, London: Duckworth, 1930, (pp.37-8)

possible. Besides, the fact that this advert was also meant to become the logo of a T-shirt, made the slogan “Review your T-Shirts” sound uncannily familiar, with a parodic resonance of “Rewrite the canon”! And, as far as popular culture, the fact that Woolf has become unremittingly part of the celebrity cult, which has led her face to the T-shirt industry, should not necessarily be read as an abasement, since, as Colin Symes argues, “the T-shirt also functions ... as a political statement, a form of subcultural assertion often described as getting something off your chest, by putting it on your chest”, and, as Brenda Silver adds, it also helps create “a sense of community among its wearers”¹⁷ (Silver, pp.144; 146).

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...on or about December, 1910, human character changed. (...) All human relations have shifted – those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature. Let us agree to place one of these changes about the year 1910. (Woolf, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown”, 1924)

It was not just to the Post-Impressionist “Art-Quake of 1910”¹⁸ that Woolf was referring in the essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” which she read to the “Heretics” in Cambridge, 1924, but also, and crucially so, to the recent Suffragettes upheavals in London. In fact, Roger Fry’s “Manet and the Post-Impressionists” exhibition” had opened at the Grafton Galleries in London on the 5th November 1910 and, on the 18th of the same month, took place what came to be known as the “Black Friday”, when brutal police force was used by the government against the suffragette demonstrators in London. Strikingly, their purple banners on the streets provided an “equally colourful spectacle” to the artists on show usage of “barbaric colours”; and the impact of their rebellion was met with identical feelings of horror and outrage, as the feminist critic Jane Goldman brilliantly argues¹⁹. William C. Wees gives a telling account of the singularity of the period: “Between 1910 and 1914, labour strife, the Parliament Act, screaming suffragettes, and artists’ ‘maltreatment of the human form divine’ seemed, to many people, to be parts of a conspiracy to undermine traditional order and decency” (Wees, 1972: 20). The shock and scandal provoked by the Post-Impressionists assault

¹⁷ Colin Symes, “Keeping Abreast with the times: the Iconography of T-shirts”, in *Studies in Popular Culture*, 12/1 (1989), 87.

¹⁸ Desmond MacCarthy, the “Art-Quake of 1910”, *The Listener*, 1February 1945, p.123.

¹⁹ Jane Goldman, *The Feminist Aesthetics of Virginia Woolf*, Cambridge U. P. : Cambridge, 1998.

on traditional notions of representation, was associated with “notions of racial impurity”, primitivism and barbarism (seen as depicted by Gauguin’s Tahitian women), as with Van Gogh’s insanity, and were felt to be a symptom of “imminent social anarchy” and “cultural degeneration”(Goldman, p.118). Richard Cork in his book on “Vorticism”, reports on the show through the contemporary newspapers, and writes, quoting *The Times*: “It professes to simplify, and to gain simplicity it throws away all that the long developed skill of past artists had acquired and perpetuated (...) it is the rejection of all that civilisation has done, the good and the bad”(Cork, 1976: 17).

Poster pos-impr. e o violento das suffragettes –acetatos

**Notably also, Jane Goldman quotes an article by Ebenezer Cook in the *Daily Post* 19 November 1910, the day after “Black Friday”, where the author, though apparently only reporting on the exhibition, describes the seemingly “decline of civilization” in terms and colourings that could easily be understood as being applied to both riotous events: “in ghastly greys and greens, as if in the last stages of decomposition” (Goldman, p.118).

This parallelism was to be kept in the years that followed the Post-impressionist exhibition and that witnessed the impact of other modernist “-isms”, namely Futurism and Marinetti’s visits and lecture tours in London, followed by the birth of Vorticism. Once again, the daily papers exhibit the same anger and anxiety towards the new “anti-tradition” art movements and the anticipated ruin of law and order signified by the suffragettes’ banners.

Curiously, the magazine *Blast*, edited by Wyndham Lewis in 1914, bears an ambiguous “Word of Advice” to the Suffragettes, which has to be understood in the follow-up of the scandalous case of a famous act of picture slashing by a suffragette, Mary Richardson, who in 1914 attacked “The Rokeby Venus” by Velazquez, exhibited in the National Gallery²⁰. Richardson’s statement on her deed, which she sent to the headquarters of the WSPU (Women’s Social and Political Union), read as follows: “*I have tried to destroy the picture of the most beautiful woman in mythological history as a protest against the Government destroying Mrs. Pankhurst, who is the most beautiful*

²⁰ See as a critical evaluation of this gesture and its social and political significations, Lynda Nead’s “The Damaged Venus”, in *The Female Nude*, Routledge: London and New York, 1992 (34-43). Nead associates this gesture to the suffragettes’ shop-window smashing of famous stores in London: “The female model in the shop window, and the Venus in the painting, both represent an ideal image of femininity (...). The broken windows and the smashed glass of “The Rokeby Venus” powerfully symbolized the suffragist rejection of patriarchal culture both on the street and in the art gallery” (p.39).

character in modern history” (Nead, 1992: 35). No wonder then that the Vorticists wrote in all their cynicism:

In destruction, as in other things, stick to what you understand. We make you a present of our votes. Only leave works of art alone. (...) We admire your energy. You and artists are the only things (you don't mind being called things?) left in England with a little life in them (Blast I, p.151).

**After this little *detour*, we come back to Woolf's reaction to the Post-Impressionist exhibition, both in terms of shock performance, and, moreover, her awareness that a new technique of representation of reality was being disclosed in the visual arts, which had, at all costs, to be imported to writing, together with her enduring fascination with colour:

“Is it not possible that some writer will come along and do in words what these men have done in paint?” (Goldman, p.112)²¹. Woolf herself set out to accomplish that task (or utopia). The “Mark on the Wall” and “Kew Gardens” were written shortly after this text, which is a review of Arnold Bennett's positive review (one of the rare ones!) of the Post-Impressionist Exhibition. Woolf's stories, where she rehearses her experimental writing technique, the evasion from plot and representation and a celebration of fluidity and colour, were in fact strongly akin to the paintings that had fascinated her, and were illustrated by her sister Vanessa Bell. Woolf was deeply engaged in what she later described in her essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown”, that is, to express reality in a new and inquisitive way, by doubting it, rather than by affirming it: “But, I ask myself, what is reality? And who are the judges of reality?” (p.749). (...) “I believe that all novels, that is to say, deal with character, and that it is to express character – not to preach doctrines, sing songs, or celebrate the glories of the British Empire, that the form of the novels, so clumsy, verbose, and undramatic, so rich, elastic, and alive, has been evolved” (p.749). And she adds: “The foundation of good fiction is character-creating and nothing else ... Style counts; plot counts; originality of outlook counts. But none of these counts anything like so much as the convincingness of the characters” (p.745). And at the end of this same text she announces a *dictum* which was to govern the poetics of the century, which, unconsciously she was anticipating: “Tolerate the spasmodic, the obscure, the fragmentary, the failure. Your help is invoked

Linda Nochlin in “Women, Art and Power” also comments on this anti-patriarchal allegorical act. (pp.36-8)

²¹ The quote is from Woolf's Essays, “Books and Persons”, (1917) E III, pp.163-4.

in a good cause. (...) we are trembling on the verge of one of the great ages of English literature” (pp.757-8).

Her prophetic/pamphletarian tone here evokes (consciously or not) that of the avant-garde manifestos, Marinetti’s 1909 manifesto of Futurism:

“Noi siamo sul promontorio estremo dei secoli! ... Perché dovremmo guardarci alle spalle, se vogliamo sfondare le misteriose porte dell’ Impossibile? Il Tempo e lo Spazio morirono ieri.” (Manifesto del Futurismo)

As well as Lewis’s 1914 manifesto of Vorticism: “We stand for the Reality of the Present – not for the sentimental Future, or the sacripant Past. (...) We only want the world to live, and to feel it’s crude energy flowing through us” (“Long Live the Vortex!”)

One should add, at this stage, that the atmosphere of Bloomsbury was intrinsically very different from other modernist, or more so, avant-garde movements regarding their women members. The peculiar social and professional ethics of the Bloomsbury group, its humanistic cult of the “civilized individual”, its sympathy towards feminism and the space of action granted to women makes it stand out in the context of modernism. This point is convincingly argued by Bridget Elliott and Jo-Ann Wallace in the essay “Professionalism, Genre and the Sister(S’) Arts”²² and had already been sustained by Raymond Williams in the study previously referred here. Nevertheless, the degree of professionalism recognized in Woolf and her sister Vanessa Bell by their Bloomsbury partners, though unusual when compared to other contemporary women artists, cannot be separated from their upper-middle class status and their relative financial comfort.

I would like to finish this talk while recalling another facet of Woolf’s rebellion against the conventionality of form in literature, as expressed in the essay “Modern Fiction”, which dates from 1919, and that reveals her commitment to the search for, in her words, “the proper stuff of fiction”, which she strikingly describes in words closer to literature’s “sister art”:

²² Bridget Elliott and Jo-Ann Wallace in the essay “Professionalism, Genre and the Sister(S’) Arts” in *Women Artists and Writers: Modernist (im)positionings*, Routledge: London and New York, 1994 (pp. 56-89). Elliott and Wallace describe Bloomsbury as a “paradoxical sphere of confined freedom”, and they make the controversial point that “while Woolf and Bell’s involvement with non-traditional men facilitated a critique of Victorian gender hierarchies, the relative comfort of that space (a material as well as a psychological comfort) removed the necessity for them to seek alliances with other female avant-garde practitioners”(p.59).

“The mind receives a myriad impressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accents falls differently from of old”(p.150)

Since life, she claims, “is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged”, but rather, “a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end” (Ibid.), she concludes:

“The proper stuff of fiction does not exist; everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought; every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon; no perception comes amiss” (p.154).

Virginia Woolf, icon of modernity, feminist icon, the authoress, the female dandy, the flâneuse, ... multiple and irreducible to the one. Evading definition, like the characters of her novels, a true poststructuralist and postmodern subject for that, and yet not. Virginia Woolf, like her own cracked mirror-image, Mrs. Brown:

...our Mrs. Brown. You should insist that she is an old lady of unlimited capacity and infinite variety; capable of appearing in any place; wearing any dress; saying anything and doing heaven knows what. But the things she says and the things she does and her eyes and her nose and her speech and her silence have an overwhelming fascination, for she is, of course, the spirit we live by, life itself (p.757).

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