

TERESA PRUDENTE

**VIRGINIA WOOLF'S "IMAGEOGRAPHIE"***On New Paths in the Modernist Text-Image Interconnection*

**ABSTRACT:** The complexity of the relationship between Modernism and the visual arts involves consideration of the key theoretical crux of how and to what extent images reproduce reality. The cinema in particular has exerted a strong influence on Modernist writers as the novelty of the medium, and the new possibilities it offered, could not but arise the interest of writers that were at work with new, experimental modalities of writing. Yet in Modernist writers, as it happens in major theoretical reflections on the 'representational' arts, the exploration of the relationship between images and words was a syncretic one, activating a dynamic interchange between words and pictorial, photographic and cinematic images (and narration). The review article starts from these premises to consider a recent work in the field, Adèle Cassigneul's *Voir, observer, penser. Virginia Woolf et la photo-cinématographie* (2018), which fills the gap of the less explored relationship between Modernism and photography while also proposing new aesthetic and poetic interpretative categories, such as Woolf's *photo-cinématographie* and *imageographie*.

**KEYWORDS:** Modernism, Virginia Woolf, Photography, Painting, Cinema, Theory of Art.

**Modernism, Images and the Reality Effect**

The Modernist experimentation indubitably offers key case studies in the inquiry on the relationship between texts and images. Three conceptual cruxes (at least) structure the inextricable connection linking words and "pictures" (widely intended) in Modernist texts: first, as it happens with many other epistemological revolutions, the way the mechanical inventions (the advancement in photography, the cinema) of the turning of the XX century have influenced Modernist writing; second, the way images are essential into the Modernist attempt at rendering consciousness; and third, the way Modernist writing in its employment of images touches upon the paramount issue of the mimetic, quasi or anti-mimetic nature of (recorded) images. These three elements are actually impossible to disentangle as they constantly interact and feed each other: the impact of the new means of mechanical reproduction of reality was so paramount for Modernist writers precisely because it suggested new modes of verbally depicting the processes of the mind, and the stimuli they derived from pictorial, photographic and cinematic images were in line with their focus on the redefinition of reality—and of the reality of consciousness. The dualism that has long dominated the view on Modernist writing, seeing it as an artistic form concentrated on (and possibly obsessed with) "an inward turn" (Kahler 1973) oblivious of "external reality" has

been challenged, in the last decade, by more complex readings of the relationship between the mind and external reality. David Herman, for instance, has labelled the mentioned view as "a critical commonplace" (2011, 249) and underlined how "the upshot of modernist experimentation was not to plumb psychological depths, but to spread the mind abroad—to suggest that human psychology has the profile it does because of the extent to which it is interwoven with worldly circumstances. The mind does not reside within; instead it emerges through humans' dynamic interdependencies with the social and material environments they seek to navigate" (2011, 254). The key of this view, as Van Hulle remarks, is a less dichotomist notion of the cognitive dynamics between the mind and reality: "the image of the mind as an "inside", contrasted with an "outside", is based on a Cartesian model of the mind as an interior space, which is becoming increasingly implausible due to recent developments in cognitive science" (2012, 277).

It is not far fetching to understand the Modernist experimentation as intuitively, creatively, directed towards a notion of the mind, and its processes, that will be scientifically developed only decades later.<sup>1</sup> The Modernist exploration of the mind was not exclusively a psychological one, but it entailed the challenge to find new interchanges between language, perception and mental elaboration, so as to portray "reality" in the way (and in the moment) it becomes processed by the mind:

Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness (Woolf 1993 [1925], 9).

I try to give the unspoken, unacted thoughts of people in the way they occur (Joyce to Budgen, Budgen 1972, 92).

It is no surprise thus that images, and the means for their reproduction, had such a paramount impact on writers attempting at crystallising the manifold, protean content of the mind, and especially, as Ann Banfield (2000) has underlined for Woolf, those pre-verbal cognitive processes where senses and thought meet. Woolf, for instance, was explicit in her interest in images for their ability of rendering thought "visible without the help of words" (Woolf 1993 [1926], 57). Predictably, the new art of cinema was a major influence in light of its proposal of new ways of recording and representing reality: "the most fantastic contrasts could be flashed before us with a speed which the writer can only toil after in vain" (Woolf 1993 [1926], 58). Yet the implications of cinema were not limited to the rising of a technical medium capable of a more faithful reproduction of reality; on

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<sup>1</sup> It is one of the founding premises of the Cognitive Turn in the Humanities, which not only fosters the exploration of literary texts in light of cognitive theories but also sees artistic creation as capable of revealing the processes of the mind in an integrated way: "while many aspects of workaday mentation are primarily tied to either cognition or emotion or volition, the integrative experience exemplified by literary transaction overcomes the disadvantages of this type of mental specialization" (Hernadi 2002: 39).

the contrary, Woolf's reflections on the cinema focused, in a proto-cognitive fashion, on how the moving images, in their hyper-reality, rather displayed a

Quality which does not belong to the simple photograph of real life. They have become not more beautiful, in the sense in which pictures are beautiful, but shall we call it (our vocabulary is miserably insufficient) more real, or real with a different reality from that which we perceive in daily life? (1993 [1926], 55).

By defining moving images as endowed with a "different reality", Woolf discloses her complex meditation on the dynamics between fiction and reality and fosters an interpretation of the concept of "representation" understood as aiming less at "reproducing" reality, but rather at "re-presencing" the different realities of the mind. In Woolf's view, the potentiality of the cinema was not connected to a more faithful adherence to (external) reality but rather to the proposal of new and more complex interchanges between reality and the mind, in the exploration of those creative borders that Deleuze will envisage in the relationship between cinema and thought: "the erasure of the unity between man and the world, in favour of a break which now leaves us only with a belief in this world" (81).

Significantly, such reflections were also present in early theorisations of the cinematic medium. As early as 1911, Ricciotto Canudo emphasized the striking novelty of the new art by underlining how the cinema represented "a new aesthetic function whence, in a most astonishing apotheosis, the *Plastic Art in Motion* will arise" (1988 [1911], 59). Going back to Lessing's classic division between spatial and temporal arts, and in accordance with his futurist view, Canudo theorized cinema's unprecedented ability to make these two categories interact by means of "a superb conciliation of the *Rhythms of Space* (the Plastic Arts) and the *Rhythms of Time* (Music and Poetry)," thus resulting into a "Painting and a Sculpture developing in Time" (1988 [1911], 59). Canudo's theorization, which opened the way to the acknowledgement of the cinema as an art, focused on those same issues which were to remain crucial in film theory and which clarify how the young art could not gain a specific status if not by facing confrontation and/or contrast with the existing arts. Canudo's emphasis on the potentialities of the new medium was not limited to its dynamic quality, but extended to how cinema offered, and was further to develop, "the extraordinary and striking faculty of representing *immateriality*" (1988 [1923], 301). This view emphasized how cinema was to be understood less as a "technical" medium capable of new and more sophisticated means of faithful reproduction of reality, but rather as a wholly new system of signs related more to the oneiric world than to 'reality'. This is also at the origin of that split in film theory which has remained a constant element over the 20th Century. Canudo's aim was to single out the specificities of cinematic language, and resorted, like Woolf, on the comparison between (moving) images and words:

Cinema is reinaugurating the entire experience of writing—it is renewing writing. Essentially, it is a universal language, and not just by virtue of its visual and immediate expression of all human feelings...In its groping infancy, the cinema seeks its voices and words. It is bringing

us with all our acquired psychological complexity back to the great, true, primordial, synthetic language, prior even to confining literalness of sound. The moving image does not replace words, but rather becomes a new and powerful entity of its own. The screen, this single-paged book, as unique and infinite as life itself, permits the world—both internal and external—to be imprinted on its surface. (1988 [1911], 295-296).

The universal language of cinema was thus both a new form of expression and a "synthetic" language, one capable of allowing words, images, and movement to merge. Interestingly, despite the complexity of the evolution of the field of film theory, this early view, which insisted both on the autonomous quality of cinema and on its relationship with the other arts, has remained central. While Structuralism has offered invaluable tools to read the cinematic narrative (Chatman 1990) and Post-structuralism has widened the frame of examination by questioning the founding principle of representation and fruition, the debate emerged in the 1980s and 1990s has offered new views which show similarities to the theorization of early thinkers and directors such as Canudo, Münsterberg, Eisenstein. Perception itself has come into focus, first with Crary's analysis of the subject as an observer (1990 and 1999), and then with cognitively informed examinations, such as David Bordwell's (1989) analysis of how the audience interprets filmic narration and Noël Carroll's (1988) rejection of the notion of the "impression of reality" arisen by the cinema. The ongoing debate has given rise to two directions of theorization: on one side, theories which re-affirm the essential fictionality of the world recreated by the visual arts (Wollheim 1980; Walton 1988) and, on the other, the rejection of such conception of illusion (John Hyman 1989, 2006).

The wide scope of the debate also reminds us how the issue of the mimetic/anti-mimetic qualities and potentialities of images is ultimately to be inquired by considering visual arts as a whole, as the line and dynamics connecting painting, photography and the cinema cannot be disregarded when dealing with the crux of the kind of reality images offer to the viewer. I have so far focused on cinema because it has been a major influence on the Modernist experimentation, as the novelty of the medium, and the new possibilities it offered, could not but arise the interest of, and influence, writers that were at work with new, experimental modalities of writing. Yet the synthetic nature of cinema underlined by Canudo is perfectly represented by how the Modernist reception of cinema encapsulated and allowed the merging not only of writing and moving images, but also of the different visual arts. Painting, photography and the cinema all converged into the way Modernist writing attempted at rendering consciousness visible and at recreating its processes via (often visual) words. Of the three arts, photography has been so far the least explored in its impact on Modernism, possibly because often seen only as a bridge connecting pictorial and cinematic images, a step in the mentioned technical 'refinement' of reproduction of reality. As said, though, the implications and the impact of the visual arts cannot be classified exclusively according to their "faithfulness" of reproduction, and more in-depth work is deserved to explore the role of photography in Modernist writing. A recent monograph (Hornby 2017) has proposed a significant advancement in the

field by analysing the dynamics of stillness and motion in Modernist prose (Proust, Joyce, Woolf) in connection with photography and cinema. More work is indubitably to follow, taking also into account how photography has often showed an interest in Modernist writers, not only, famously, in their iconic figures (the portraits of Woolf and Joyce by Man Ray and Gisèle Freund), but also in their writing, as in the case of Moholy-Nagy's "Vision in Motion" (1946), whose diagram offering a visual rendering of *Finnegans Wake* adds further elements to the transmedial nature of art.

### *Voir, Penser, Observer: On Woolf's Photo-Cinématographie*

The syncretic view on the role of visual arts, and their impact on Modernist experimentation, is at the heart of a recent monograph that offers the original attempt at integrating painting, photography and cinema in a coherent yet dynamic reading of Woolf's writing. Adèle Cassigneul's *Voir, observer, penser, Virginia Woolf et la photo-cinématographie* (2018) proposes a poignant reconsideration of Woolf's writing in light of how images both influence and arise from Woolf's work. One of the most striking elements of the analysis is the proposal of new aesthetic and poetic categories, a theoretical re-thinking that is perfectly in line, and required by, Woolf's incessant creative innovation, but rarely attempted in critical works. The cooperation and interaction of photography and the cinema in Woolf's creative process give thus rise to Cassigneul's notion of *photo-cinématographie*, where the merging of the two arts, as the author explains in the introduction (11), does not imply disregarding their differences but, at the opposite, encapsulating their common ground as well as the dynamic tension between the two. Hybridity and (multiple) intermediality are the guiding concepts of Cassigneul's reading of Woolf's experimentation and, for this reason, the notion of *photo-cinématographie* results a fitting instrument to explore the many tensions active in Woolf's writing, not only those between image and text, but also the above-mentioned interchange between static and dynamic elements, time and space. Such a perspective allows indeed to operate a genuine transdisciplinary analysis, where the visual arts offer essential elements to better understand Woolf's experimentation but also, conversely, the writer's work allows to re-think the specificities and potentialities of the two arts, both separately and in their interaction. The key to this mutual exchange is a second new notion proposed by the book, that of Woolf's *imageographie*, which unifies all the varied iconic material constituting the rich background of the writer's engagement with the visual arts: not only the undeniable influence of Post-impressionism and early cinema, but also pictorial, photographic and cinematic works that have not yet been taken into account in relation to Woolf (14).

The cultural context of the writer's work is exhaustively explored, especially in the first chapter, by proposing a more complex view of Woolf's relationship with the Victorian heritage and, especially, its notion of realism. As anticipated,

the Modernist writers' confrontation with the ideas of the real and realism is not to be read exclusively as a rejection, but rather, as Cassigneul underlines, in terms of dialogue and transformation (26). The Woolfian attempt at re-moulding the matter of art so as to provide it with "the exact shape my brain holds" (Woolf 1977-1984, IV, 53), as she wrote while working at *The Waves*, involves a magmatic convergence of all the different stimuli. It is the solid yet "elastic net" (Woolf 1996 [1927], 41) traversing all her texts, from essays to novels, diaries, scrapbooks, taking the shape of an invisible scaffolding where elements maintain their dynamism while also being firmly connected, similar to the image Lily Briscoe aims at recreating in her painting:

Beautiful and bright it should be on the surface, feathery and evanescent, one colour melting into another like the colours on a butterfly's wing; but beneath the fabric must be clamped together with bolts of iron. It was to be a thing you could ruffle with your breath; and a thing you could not dislodge with a team of horses (Woolf 1996 [1927], 251).

It is a remarkable quality of Cassigneul's work to approach this vertiginous vortex-like, nature of Woolf's thinking and creations—the *Granite & Rainbow* of her poetics—by avoiding the analytical dissection that would disjoin the several interacting patterns of the writer's constant engagement with thought and creation. The first chapter of the book, especially, although articulated into a coherent progression from pictorial to photographic and cinematic influences, offers an extremely rich journey through Woolf's simultaneous reflections on and experience with the three visual arts (including her typographic experience with the Hogarth Press). The elements of Woolf's relationship with photography (50-67) are particularly interesting, as they include not only Julia Cameron's influence on the writer, but consideration of Woolf's own photographic activity and her problematic attitude towards been photographed (and portrayed). Furthermore, the presence of photographs as illustrations for Woolf's work is considered, especially in relation to the significant case of *Orlando*, where, following the categories proposed by Ryan, who interestingly employs as an example Julia Cameron's work (2018, 39), fictional photos are provided for a fictional text. Here especially the complexity of the relationship between writing and images becomes evident, as the fictional photographic documentation of Orlando—staged pictures of the actual inspiration for the novel, Vita Sackville West—activates a kaleidoscopic effect which shows the complexity of Woolf's recombination of categories, not only those of fiction and reality, but also those connected to temporal stratification (298-300).

In this sense, the text offers an unprecedented wealth of documentation on Woolf's relation with images, but is also able to turn this material into an original hermeneutic tool: the writer's *imageographie* is actually, in Cassigneul's view, a double faceted notion which refers not only to Woolf's iconic context and background, but also to her modalities of viewing, observing and (cognitively) re-elaborating images (and/into words). Thus, the *imageographie* comes also to express the image-making quality of Woolf's writing. This is not just evoked by

Cassigneul but retraced via the analysis of passages from Woolf's works where the writing is traversed by images and images arise from the text (see, for instance, 230).

The same method, which moves from a careful retracing of the cultural context and consideration of the theoretical implications of the visual media to their role in the texts is employed in the following chapters. *Photo-cinématographie* is analysed especially in relation to Woolf's portrayal of the city, with focus also on less explored influences such as Vertov and Weine. The third chapter engages with the dense Deleuzian notion of the *image-temps* and Woolf's photo-albums are analysed as emblematic of the dialectics between instant and duration that she explores in her works. Finally, the fourth chapter resumes the previously examined hybrid and dynamic qualities of Woolf's writing and make them converge into consideration of the Woolfian notion of a hybrid, fluid gender identity. Here, the anti-dichotomist perspective that Cassigneul has kept in sight in examining the relation between words and images is applied to the negotiation between individual and society as well as, in Ricoeur's terms, subjectivity and alterity.

As it is evident, Cassigneul's monograph is an engaging reading, which challenges common places as well as simplifications on both Woolf's experimentation and, more in general, the way the visual arts interact with writing. The stimuli and the elements for the analysis are innumerable yet a solid theoretical background makes them coherently converge and allows readers to follow a pattern that keeps providing, in Woolfian fashion, different directions of thought while also remaining cohesively focused on a few guiding notions. Two main concepts, plasticity and complexity, help this cohesive design, as they provide the key aesthetic and philosophic cruxes around which reflection not only on the image-text connection, but also on the relation between the three visual arts can converge.

Recent works on the interchange between Modernist writing and the visual arts seem thus to pave the way to that interrelated exploration that I have mentioned at the beginning, not only by filling the present gap on Modernism and photography, but also by proposing new modalities and tools of investigation. The theoretical background proves essential to add substance to this new line of inquiry as it provides that fundamental meeting-point between cultural, rhetorical and philosophical analyses that Modernist text require in light of the complex background from which they emerged. Deleuze thinking on images, and the cinema, for instance, has remained a constant reference point to understand the experimental interaction of words and images in Modernist texts, as well as the work of Merleau-Ponty, Bachelard, Barthes, Arnheim. Possible new lines of investigation in the field may aim at bridging the gap between this essential, and invaluable, philosophical background, and the cognitive visual theory mentioned in the first part of this article. Significantly, both perspectives share a primary interest in the perceiving subject and his/her modalities of apprehension and mental re-elaboration and, contrary to what is possibly a rather common belief, cognitively informed analyses often refrain from offering definitive, "scientific",

explanation of perception and mental processes: on the contrary, especially if integrated with the quoted philosophical views, they may re-activate that fruitful tension between reality and unreality/imagination, and different modalities of artistic recreation which, as we have seen, stands at the heart of Modernist experimentation.

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