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Title: Virginia Woolf and Visual Culture

Year of publication: 2010

Citation: Humm, M. (2010) 'Virginia Woolf and Visual Culture' In: Sellars, S (ed.) The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf, 2nd edn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp.214-230.

Link to published version: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521896948>

DOI: 10.1017/CCOL9780521896948

II

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Virginia Woolf and visual culture

People spilt off the pavement. There were women with shopping bags. Children ran out . . . nothing could be seen whole or read from start to finish. What was seen begun – like two friends starting to meet each other across the street – was never seen ended . . . Orlando heaved a sigh of relief, lit a cigarette.¹

Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, like many of her works, is shaped by her knowledge of, and fascination with, visual cultures. *Orlando*, *Flush* and *Three Guineas* all contain photographs and other images. All of Woolf's writings have visual tropes, and many draw on contemporary debates about the arts, and popular visual cultures. Here *Orlando* adopts the optical point of view of a classic Hollywood camera, with medium rather than long shots, and ends on a close-up frame. David Trotter argues in *Cinema and Modernism* that, as well as analogies between literary and cinematic forms in Woolf's writing, what cinema more radically taught her was how to portray 'constitutive absence', for example Mrs Ramsay's absence in *To the Lighthouse*, and the ways in which 'movement (in particular casual movement) defines space'.²

Overview

But cinema was only one of a number of visual cultures that Woolf enjoyed and which impact on her work. In addition, she was an active photographer from childhood, she herself was photographed for *Vogue*, and references to advertising and architecture abound in her writings. Woolf wrote the first British essay on avant-garde cinema.³ Visual artefacts of all kinds, ranging from Omega Workshop crafts to the Hogarth Press book designs, were part of her visual landscape and she had a wide circle of artist friends and family.⁴ Woolf's responses to modern visual cultures are what make her a modernist writer.

While Woolf's diverse visual knowledge might imply an erosion of conventional visual boundaries and the categories of high/low visual cultures, she was very certain about the visual value of particular arts, for example preferring Walter Sickert's paintings over those of G. F. Watts, as well as the value of art in general. 'From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at

any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we – I mean all human beings – are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art' (*MB*, 1985, p. 72). Woolf suggests that she has held this view, her 'intuition . . . ever since I saw the flower in the bed by the front door at St. Ives' and that her view is part of 'the shock-receiving capacity . . . [that] makes me a writer' (*MB*, 1985, p. 72). In other words, 'art' for Woolf encapsulates her whole psychic agency, and this shapes, and is shaped by, her artistic creations.

These issues of visual culture also shape modernity. Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scientists, natural philosophers and artists set about appropriating visible and 'invisible' worlds through new technologies of vision: through photography, stereoscopes, x-rays and cinema. Modernity witnessed a transformation in the production of the visual more profound than the discovery of Renaissance perspective. In turn, twentieth-century modernism is obsessed with issues of visual culture. Virginia Woolf concerns herself both with visible and 'invisible' vision, with what contemporary physics was recognising in Einstein's theories of space-time, as kinesis, that is the flow of differing perspectives. In addition, Einstein believed that logical structures such as language were always preceded in the brain by a kind of 'combinatory play' of signs and images much like the memories experienced by Woolf's narrators.⁵

New representations of cognition, new ways of seeing and knowing the world, became the common project of modernist writers like Woolf, Joyce and Dorothy Richardson, as well as of modernist artists, for example, Picasso and Braque in their Cubist periods. Virginia Woolf continually experiments with features of vision, radically reframing the visible world in her image/texts as well as in her domestic photography.

The pervasive influence on Woolf's visual ideas was from her immediate circle of Bloomsbury painters: her sister Vanessa Bell and friends Duncan Grant and Roger Fry, as well as her visual inheritance from her great-aunt, the Victorian photographer Julia Margaret Cameron. So that, although in *Three Guineas* Woolf deplored the lack of available artistic training, particularly life-modelling, for women, her own family provided a stimulating artistic environment. Throughout her childhood and adolescence there were frequent family visits to the National Gallery, the Royal Academy and exhibitions as well as visits to artistic friends including Philip Burne-Jones. Woolf's first home, 22 Hyde Park Gate, was, Woolf herself noted, painted red and black like a Titian painting and her parents' portraits, by Burne Jones, G. F. Watts and William Rothenstein, hung on the walls. Although the word 'art' appears only three times in the novel, *To the Lighthouse* captures some of this artistic ambience and is generally considered to be

Woolf's most accomplished fictional portrait of an artist in the character of Lily Briscoe.

Born into a world still one of imperial expansion, Woolf also visited exhibitions devoted to European and colonial imaginaries. 'We go once a year to Earls Court . . . without any stretch of the imagination one can think oneself in Venice . . . or Constantinople' (*EJ*, pp. 179–80). From the start, Woolf's diaries and letters contain impressionistic sketches of landscape, weather, architecture and people. 'We bussed to St Pauls, and saw the mosaics . . . and paid a visit to Burlington House – as it is the last day of the Leighton exhibition. They were mostly very ugly' (*EJ*, p. 53). Since the Stephen family did not own a carriage she had to make frequent journeys by omnibus, and thus also acquired a sense of urban visual spaces. So that, while Woolf acknowledged that the arts placed intellectual and artistic demands on audiences, nevertheless her interests in popular culture, for example domestic photography, and her commitment to a common viewer engendered a broader understanding of visual expression.

Photography

Virginia Woolf belonged to the first generation of women to be active photographers and cinema-goers from childhood. The years from her birth in 1882 to the publication of her essay 'The Cinema' in 1928 witnessed a growth in domestic photography, with the development of celluloid roll films and hand-held cameras, encouraging artists and the general public alike into new ideas of 'transitoriness and reproducibility'.⁶ During her formative years, she regularly took and developed photographs, sometimes at the family home Hyde Park Gate but more often, like other amateurs, at holiday locales: St. Ives, Warboys and Fritham. There are over twenty references to photography in the first year (1897) of Woolf's first published journal. Woolf reveals how she enjoyed a wide range of visual experiences – seeing demonstrations of Rontgen Rays (x-rays), as well as visiting the National Gallery, and acquiring and producing photographs. A favourite card game was played with family photographs in which 'the ugliest took the trick',⁷ and visiting the professional photographer Beresford was 'an entertainment' (*L1*, p. 78).

Virginia Woolf wrote about photography in her diaries, letters and essays, and used photographic terms descriptively in her fiction. Before her marriage, and then together with Leonard, she took, developed and preserved photographs in many albums.⁸ The first volume of her collected letters ends appropriately with Virginia sending her photograph to Leonard. 'D'you like this photograph? – rather too noble, I think. Here's another' (*L1*, p. 497).

Photo albums, as visual diaries, are not equivalent to autobiographies but similarly re-present lives in dialogic discursive patterns. So that photography, even if improvised and provisional, was another way of telling her life-story.

Photographs taken by friends were crucial to Woolf's sense of identity. She invited friends to share their lives with her through photographs and liked 'very much' to have baby photographs. Barbara Bagenal's photograph of herself and her son 'exactly like his father' is 'stuck . . . in my book', visually replicating the way Woolf carefully conserved her friendships, although an exchange is impossible because 'mine all got the foggy dew this summer' (*L2*, p. 496). Perhaps for this reason Woolf believed that photographs could help her to survive those identity-destroying moments of her own life – her incoherent illnesses. For example, writing to Margaret Llewelyn Davies in 1915, Woolf 'wanted to say that all through that terrible time [a week's attack of apparent insanity] I thought of you, and wanted to look at a picture of you, but was afraid to ask!' (*L2*, p. 60). Friends' photographs often provide solidly visible autobiographical evidence when feelings of loss of identity become overwhelming.

Mutual image making would also create relationships. Woolf used photographs to entice Vita Sackville-West. Writing to 'Mrs Nicolson' in 1923, she asked Vita to visit in order 'to look at my great aunt's photographs of Tennyson and other people' (*L3*, p. 4). Later Virginia took Vita to London to be photographed for *Orlando*, the novel devoted to Vita, and used the excuse of further illustrations to see her. 'You'll lunch here at *one sharp* on Monday wont you: bringing your curls and clothes. Nessa [Vanessa Bell] wants to photograph you at 2' (*L3*, p. 435). In 1931 Virginia was happy that Leonard had bought in Lewes in July 'a superb Zeiss camera' (probably the Lloyd or Nixe rather than the more expensive model Cocarette of 1929) and pleased that 'my Kodak can be made perfect for 5/- [five shillings]' (*L4*, p. 361). Certainly the Woolfs took photography very seriously. Leonard's diaries record a regular expenditure on photography, whose amounts are as revealing about British class divisions as about technologies. For example, in April 1922 Leonard spent ten shillings on photography but paid their servant Lottie only two shillings.⁹

From the 1920s the Woolfs' preference for paired self-portraits of themselves and their friends constitute a repetitive visual autobiography. The Woolfs assent to each other's camera gaze in paired sequences going beyond the conventions of candid or instant photography.¹⁰ In their use of repetition the photographs are dialogic, encouraging dialogue between the sitters and between husband and wife as camera operators. Similarly, Virginia's use of a dialogic form in her essays 'constitutes Woolf's greatest separation' from conventional academia in the 1920s.¹¹

Art

Woolf also acquired a critical eye from perspicacious viewings of art, and a critical vocabulary from artistic discussions. Following the move to Gordon Square in 1904, she recorded, ‘We have begun our Bohemian dissipation: tonight Thoby is reading a paper to the Friday Club upon the Decadence of Modern Art’ (L1, pp. 224–5). Her letters to Vanessa contain lengthy descriptions of artists and exhibitions. While there are surprisingly few art books in the Woolfs’ personal library, Woolf certainly read many biographies of artists, including the lives of William Morris, Delacroix and Cézanne, and art critiques such as Ezra Pound’s *Gaudier-Brzeska: a Memoir*. Simon Watney suggests that Woolf’s initial choice of a tall writing desk, before she began to write on a board on her knees, enabled her to adopt a stance like those of Walter Sickert’s figures¹² and also to resemble her painter sister. It is also significant that of only eight guests at her wedding to Leonard on 10 August 1912 four were artists (Vanessa, Duncan Grant, Roger Fry and Frederick Etchells).

Throughout her life, Woolf’s relationship with Vanessa provided her with constant aesthetic ideas, and the sisters were excited by many of the same artists.¹³ Woolf consistently praised Vanessa’s art in letters – ‘the picture has just been nailed up – its perfectly lovely – What a great artist you are! Everything complete and entire, firm as marble and ravishing as a rainbow. How I wish I were a painter!’ (L6, pp. 235–6) – and commissioned from Vanessa and Duncan Grant textiles, ceramics, paintings, book jackets and painted furniture. Although Vanessa’s work was a central stimulus throughout Woolf’s life, contemporary art theorists also offered her new aesthetic critiques, as her reviews make clear. For example, she mentions Julius Meier-Graefe’s influential work on modern art in her *Nation and Athenaeum* review of Pierard’s biography of Van Gogh.¹⁴ In brief, there are profound associations between the aesthetic ideas of the early decades of the twentieth century and Woolf’s writings. Woolf inhabited an aesthetic world in which her friends, her milieu, and art historians and philosophers were all focusing in particular on issues of perception and consciousness. The philosopher at the heart of Bloomsbury, G.E. Moore, held that being and perception are distinct categories and that common-sense ‘reality’ should not be favoured over ‘diaphanous’ sensations.¹⁵ These ideas provided Woolf with a vocabulary and creative impetus. In her first novel, *The Voyage Out*, Helen Ambrose is reading G.E. Moore.

Woolf’s long involvement with the arts over many decades is striking in its wide range of subject matter and genres, from ballet to cinema. These share key themes: the importance of a common viewer, of gender differences and

anti-institutionalism all coalescing in a commitment to an artistic ethics. The aestheticisation of everyday life is a constant theme in Woolf's writings, and later in life her artistic ethics took a more strategic focus. Her attempt in *Three Guineas*, and in contemporary essays like 'Art and Politics', to save artistic values in the face of the political exigencies that war demands give her writings a more radical edge. 'The Artist and Politics' argues that the artist is 'forced to take part in politics' for 'his own survival' as well as for 'the survival of his art'.¹⁶ Yet Woolf was also hugely optimistic, in *Three Guineas*, that artistic education could prevent war. *Three Guineas* makes clear her belief in a democratic art, a 'poor college' to teach 'the art of understanding other people's lives' to 'daughters of educated men' with 'directorships of art galleries beyond their reach'.¹⁷

The imbrications and sometimes tense relationship of art and literature is another overriding theme in Woolf's writings and life. She wrote passionately and knowledgeably about issues of perception and representation in all the arts. While Woolf sought often to demarcate literature from art, for example in 'The Cinema' and in 'Pictures', feeling that 'we [writers] are under the domain of painting' and 'extremely doubtful whether he [the writer] learns anything directly from painting' (*E4*, pp. 243–4), yet she learnt a great deal from art and aesthetics. Roger Fry's abandonment of naturalism in favour of 'emotional design' in his art and his 'An Essay in Aesthetics' provided a ground-plan for the two Post-Impressionist exhibitions and for Bloomsbury's aesthetics.¹⁸ *A Voyage Out* explores these ideas in Terence's 'novel about silence' (*VO*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich edition, p. 204), as do Woolf's 'Blue or Green' and 'The Mark on the Wall'.

The Woolfs published Charles Mauron's *The Nature of Beauty in Art and Literature* in 1927, translated by Fry, and Mauron clarified for Woolf how spatial volumes in art might parallel psychological volumes in literature. In *Walter Sickert*, her extended essay about the painter, Woolf touched on that theme and deplored boundaries between the arts: 'nowadays we are all so specialized'.¹⁹ She argued of her favourite writers that 'Dryden, Lamb, Hazlitt were acutely aware of the mixture of elements and wrote of literature with music and painting in their minds'.²⁰ In her novel *The Waves* Bernard's soliloquies are similarly structured by visual patterns.

'Portraits'

Virginia Woolf's short fictions 'Portraits' are a good example of these broader issues of visual cultures, gender and modernism.²¹ Although limited in length to eight miniature stories, each between one and three paragraphs in length, these experimental pieces, as much as her better-known visual

fictions 'Blue and Green' and 'The Mark on the Wall', figure issues of modern visual cultures as a tension between characters' memories and what they observe in fluid, feminine 'snapshots'. Woolf uses a specifically photographic, rather than painterly, vocabulary like a camera negotiating vertical and horizontal frames of portrait and landscape. Although she does not divest 'Portraits' of sounds (trains, markets) and smells (urine, petrol) it is the visual surface that frames unrevealed information. This enables the urban spaces of modernity in these stories to become places of relationships rather than sites of a dominating male gaze.

In 'Portraits' Woolf stages a number of gendered gazes shaped by a photographic syntax. While experimental writing, per se, is not uniquely modernist, at a formal level, 'Portraits' achieve an impact not simply by means of narrative elements alone but through Woolf's striking visual patterns. The two distinguishing features of 'Portraits' are their spatial arrangements of visual associations and a repression of chronological narrative. But the visual associations interact inside each narrator's memory pictures, so that there is a major emphasis on pictorial mediations. This dualistic strategy, which pitches formal arrangements against memory pictures, allows Woolf to explore the aesthetics of modernism and to dramatise gender differences.

Each story has a different focus, takes a different photograph, of what Walter Benjamin calls the unconscious optics of modernity, or the ways in which photographs can register moments outside immediate perception.²² Woolf's own account of 'Portraits' 'generative moment of composition, Friday 19 February 1937, reveals how such image/texts, for her, are a crucial form of new writing. In her diary Woolf records, 'I've written this morning 3 descriptions for Nessa's pictures: they can be printed by us no doubt, & somehow put into circulation. But then theres in my drawer several I think rather good sketches; & a chapter on biography. Clearly I have here in the egg a new method of writing criticism. I rather think so' (*D5*, p. 57). What Woolf was calling her 'new method of writing criticism' in her contemporary diary can be glimpsed in 'Portraits' fresh spatial arrangements of people and objects.

'Portrait 3', a mere eleven lines, has a clearly identified narrator 'sitting in the courtyard of the French Inn' who scopically views a woman 'sitting in the sun' (*CSF*, p. 243). As Richard Morphet points out, Bloomsbury paintings also focused with 'unusual insistence' on the arresting gaze and on eyes.²³ For example, in Vanessa Bell's portrait of Mary Hutchinson 'the look the eyes give is accentuated' as well as the eyes' shape.²⁴ But in 'Portraits' the scene is photographic more than painterly, employing shapes and light within the frame. Woolf suggests a female gaze with a narrator physically

close to the woman but able to stare with non-voyeuristic attention to details of breast and skin. 'Her face was yellow and red; round too; a fruit on a body; another apple, only not on a plate. Breasts had formed apple-hard under the blouse on her body' (*CSF*, p. 243). The portrait lingers on the physiognomy of the woman like a camera and the narrator's reflections touch on those aspects that can only be visible in close-up photography.

The unnamed female of 'Portrait 4' more closely resembles self-reflexive female narrators elsewhere in Woolf's fiction, for example, *Mrs Dalloway*, as the narrator floats between past and present, while enjoying a snatched day with her son before he returns to Rugby school. Woolf utilises a modernist pictorial syntax, elements of which we can see in the penultimate paragraph of 'Portrait 8'. 'When one walks in the garden, what's that on the cabbage? Middle brow. Middle brow infecting the sheep. The moon too is under your sway. Misted. You dull tarnish' (*CSF*, p. 246). In some ways these lines are overtly modernist. The formal simplification is achieved by a repression of narrative in favour of Woolf's focus on images and on differing perspectives, from a close-up on the cabbage to a long shot at the moon. Woolf's visual hyperbole in 'Portraits' and attention to detail in photographic images resembles the contemporary American modernist photographers Paul Strand and Aaron Siskind in the 1920s and 1930s.

Essays

Virginia Woolf was intermittently a novelist but continually a critic. She wrote over 500 critical reviews and essays, which often interweave autobiographical asides together with conjectures about visual culture, literature and life, and betray her knowledge of visual methods. For example, 'The Narrow Bridge of Art' evokes differing perspectives and filmic views. Woolf suggests that the future novel will contain 'the stimulus of sight, the effect on us of the shape of trees or the play of colour', like a series of impressions from an avant-garde film.²⁵ In this essay and in 'Phases of Fiction' Woolf, in a wide-ranging, impressionistic survey of historical examples of the English novel, begins with the 'truth-tellers' Defoe and Swift and ends with James and Proust imagining 'a whole series of thoughts, sensations, ideas, memories which were apparently sleeping on the walls of the mind'.²⁶

Turning her mind into a camera, Woolf pans through the history of literature in one continuous take. Like a photographer intently bent over a developing tray, 'the longer the novelist pores over his analysis, the more he becomes conscious of something that forever escapes. And it is this double vision that makes the work of Proust to us in our generation so spherical.'²⁷ The visual complexities of modernist literature are most explicit, Woolf

argues, in the work of Proust where ‘we come upon a flight of imagery – beautiful, coloured, visual, as if the mind, having carried its powers as far as possible in analysis, suddenly rose in the air and from a station high up gave us a different view of the same object in terms of metaphor’.²⁸ She describes Proust’s use of metaphor like a film which switches to an aerial long-shot to enable spectators to see juxtapositions of characters and events within a frame.

‘The Cinema’

Woolf’s key essay about visual culture is ‘The Cinema’, one of the first British essays to identify cinema’s potential in modernism. The essay was triggered by Woolf’s interest in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, directed by Robert Wiene in Germany in 1919. The film depicts a story told by a madman about a psychopathic murder, and interweaves nightmare and reality. Woolf’s essay is only tangentially about the film itself and focuses more on issues of the psychoanalytic and film spectatorship in general. ‘The Cinema’ addresses her central concerns elsewhere in her work: how ‘common viewers’ experience film and film’s psychic power; the relationship between film and the arts; and film’s status and future.

Woolf’s account of the unconscious optics of film, and of film’s future, is based on a clear and repeated premise that film is a new dynamic, psychic and cognitive process. When the eye and the brain together, Woolf suggests,

look at the King, the boat, the horse, . . . the brain sees at once that they have taken on 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.

(E4, p. 349)

Woolf’s image of the eye and the brain, which appears also in *Walter Sickert, Three Guineas* and elsewhere, matches Freud’s model of the unconscious, that is, the representation of visual thinking as an archaic consciousness.

The essay appeared as ‘The Cinema’ in *Arts* (June 1926), in the *Nation and Athenaeum* (3 July 1926) and as ‘The Movies and Reality’ in *New Republic* (4 August 1926). The *New Republic* essay was published by prior arrangement (but without Woolf’s consent) from *Nation and Athenaeum*’s page proofs. In all the versions Woolf is trying to analyse the power of cinema and film technologies and reveals her swift and ready acquisition of cinematic metaphors, not as a rhetorical gesture, but rather as a detailed, sophisticated response to cinema techniques. In her diaries she describes

many visits to picture palaces and to more avant-garde films by René Clair and Pudovkin.

'The Cinema' reveals a writer fully aware of cinema techniques, analysing British newsreels and the film *Anna Karenina*, as well as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. Although there are eight film versions of *Anna Karenina* predating 1926, it is likely that Woolf is describing the American Fox Film Company's *Anna Karenina* (1915), directed by J. Gordon Edwards. She vividly adopts a cinematic vocabulary of close-ups – 'the very quivers of the lips' – and she understands how the filming of everyday objects such as 'pebbles on the beach' can function as a visual metonymy of character emotions (E4, p. 351).

Woolf wants film to trigger spectators' unconscious optics by moving away from a mimetic representation of emotions. 'We should see these emotions mingling together and affecting each other. We should see violent changes of emotion produced by their collision' (E4, p. 352). Here she envisages film not as mimetic but as offering a kind of dialectical psychic montage. Through the juxtaposition of images, film montage can suggest contradictory realities and asymmetrical emotions within the film's diegesis. As Woolf analyses these processes, she understands that, if memory is figured iconically through a montage of filmic objects representing emotions, then such objects can give a unifying cognitive representation just as convincing as any linear narrative. 'The past could be unrolled . . . We should have the continuity of human life kept before us by the repetition of some object' (E4, p. 352).

Woolf's description of film as a cognitive source of psychic transformations is pioneering. She argues that the power of cinema lies in its anti-mimetic power and that spectators experience a dynamic visual process which releases buried memories and dreams. Significantly, her account of cinema juxtapositions presages Sergei Eisenstein's theory of montage, the way in which filmic collisions can create spectator identifications. Eisenstein's theorisation of his montage practice, 'The Dramaturgy of Film Form', was published in September 1929, three years after Woolf's essay.²⁹ What Woolf is describing very clearly is what Eisenstein later refers to as overtonal montage, which can connect scenes, Woolf suggests, by means of 'something abstract, something moving' (E4, p. 351). She acutely understands that spectators are sutured into film by means of cinematic associations, montage and repetitions. She seems to be aware that cinema has a viable, independent aesthetic and can expose our unconscious memories and our unacknowledged emotions. Woolf's 'The Cinema' is a sophisticated analysis of how cinematic processes, in particular film's use of dialectical montage, interpellate spectators.

The 1930s and *Flush*

By the 1930s a new language of modernism had emerged in response to developments in visual cultures including cinema and photographic technologies. Modernism's new visual vocabularies, shaped by photography's representative strategies of close-ups, unusual viewpoints and sharp tonal contrasts emerge, in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* – where light transforms objects, as much as in Sergei Eisenstein's disruption of a coherent cinema space. Advances in photography techniques, including wide-angle lenses and high-speed shutters, enabled modernist photography to have widespread circulation in journals. The new style was conspicuously urban. Subjects included tall skyscrapers, street scenes and everyday objects often shot with dramatic viewpoints and tonal contrasts. Modernist writing was part of a world in which ubiquitous photographic technologies shaped urban modernity into dramatic and multi-perspective images.

Yet this complex experience of visual technologies seems at odds with one of Virginia Woolf's most popular novels of the 1930s – *Flush*, a novel seemingly all about the sense of smell not sight. *Flush*, with its dog hero traversing the olfactory worlds of London, Florence and Pisa in the company of his mistress Elizabeth Barrett Browning, seems to be the one book of Virginia Woolf's most remote from the impact of modern visual technologies. *Flush* is a spoof biography that Woolf wrote in response to her friend Lytton Strachey's creation of a new mode of psychobiography. But it is through reading a book like *Flush*, one apparently least open to visual interpretations, that the crucial impact of modernity's visual cultures on Woolf can be seen.

The writing of *Flush* did begin and end with visual technologies. On 16 September 1931 Woolf wrote to Vita Sackville-West, 'have you a photograph of Henry? [the Nicolson's cocker spaniel]. I ask for a special reason, connected with a little escapade' [*Flush*] (*L4*, p. 380). It was another dog, Pinka, given to Woolf by Vita, who eventually became Flush. Woolf first conceived of Flush as a visual figure. 'Read the Browning love letters, and the figure of their dog made me laugh so I couldn't resist making him a Life' (*L5*, pp. 161–2). In October 1933, following the huge success of *Flush* in Britain and America, Woolf was again excited by the visual possibilities of Flush. 'It's possible that Flush is to be pictured. Brace [Woolf's American publisher] yesterday talked of a substantial sum' (*D4*, p. 186).

In a signed letter, dated 12 June 1933, to her sister Vanessa, who designed many of Woolf's books, Virginia described in detail the visual appearance she wanted for *Flush*.

We should like if possible to have them [the four illustrations] bound in on separate pages in the large sized edition. The size of the page in the large sized edition works out roughly at 8 ½ inches by 5 ½ inches. I imagine therefore that for this to be possible you would have to redraw the designs, quite apart from the fact that each two as they now are form one whole.³⁰

And she realised further visual possibilities. ‘I shall have to set about getting extra photographs’ (which were not in the end included). Reproducing the National Portrait Gallery’s portraits of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning was not free. D.R. Pond of the NPG Publications Department requested a fee of one shilling and sixpence for each print and ‘a copyright fee of 7/6 [seven shillings and sixpence] is charged for each reproduction’.³¹ The correspondence reveals Woolf’s constant involvement in visual design.

The photograph of Pinka, as Flush, is positioned as a significant frontispiece; and not only are the illustrations an important visual carapace for *Flush* but references to the visual appear throughout the novel. Woolf’s diaries, like the artist’s sketchbooks of her sister Vanessa, show her sustained thinking about visual scenes for *Flush*. She was particularly concerned to accurately portray the visual appearance of Barrett Browning’s home. Luckily a visit with Leonard to his Wimpole Street dermatologist, whose ‘house was almost opposite Flush’s’, enabled her to ‘count the storeys & verify the knockers – its true they have none, but the houses are very well pointed’ (*D4*, p. 144). Woolf was also simultaneously reading Sir James Jeans’s *The Universe Around Us* and was intensely interested in the ways in which the physical sciences depicted light as a ray and as a wave. Additionally, during the writing of *Flush* there are a significant number of contemporary references in the diaries to the Woolfs’ domestic photography, as well as to professional photographs taken of Woolf at this time. For example, Leonard and Virginia took photographs of Tom and Vivienne Eliot who stayed at Monk’s House for the weekend. ‘She wild as Ophelia – alas no Hamlet would love her, with her powdered spots – in white satin, L. said’ (*D4*, p. 123).

It is as if engaging in photography’s representative techniques enables Woolf to figure and finish *Flush* as a series of connected visual objects. ‘I visualise this book now . . . as a series of great balloons . . . I can take liberties with the representational form’ (*D4*, p. 142). In Florence, Flush witnesses street politics from above, the typical point of view of the modernist urban photographer. Under the Barrett Brownings’ balcony ‘a vast crowd was surging underneath . . . the people in the street – grave men, gay young women – were kissing each other and raising their babies to the people in the balconies . . . banner after banner passed’.³² Photography had

maximised panoramic and elevated urban vantage points of view by developing faster shutter exposure times and combination printing to better capture urban scenes. Woolf uses this photographic technique of multiple perspectives in many of her works: for example, the Outsider women in *Three Guineas* spy on men's patriarchal processions from above with a bird's-eye view. In *Flush* Woolf expands the scope of her visual repertoire, moving between aerial and ground levels. Imprisoned among the poor of Whitechapel, Flush perceives people as visual objects. 'Terrible faces passing outside, leering at the window . . . these horrible monsters – some were ragged, others were flaring with paint and feathers – squatted on the floor; hunched themselves over the table' (*F*, p. 56).

Flush theorises as much through his visual imagination as through his sense of smell. There are many explicit references in *Flush* to the visual frozen moment, the instant. Flush experiences the visual as a series of snapshots, as a flat visual series. Scenes are often of static colour contrasts. In one scene Barrett Browning arranges flowers from her lover 'in water in a vase . . . let the red shine by the yellow; and the yellow by the red. And let the green leaf lie here' (*F*, p. 43). The visual motifs here strongly resemble Vanessa Bell's paintings *Flowers in the Studio* (1915) and *Chrysanthemums* (1920) in the way in which both Woolf and Bell structure visual scenes through juxtapositions of colour (although Bell uses different flowers). In addition, Bell's use of formal points of view in her flower paintings, particularly her depiction of objects against the receding perspective of a room, is matched in Woolf's visual arrangements.

Even in the country Flush's perspective is intensely visual. Visiting Farnham there 'were fields of green grass; there were pools of blue water' (*F*, p. 93). In addition, and again like Bell's paintings, Woolf handles faces as surface. Woolf noted in a contemporary letter that Mrs Browning and her dog were much alike, and, in the novel, Woolf draws explicit parallels between Flush's spaniel ears and Barrett Browning's heavy curls by reinforcing verbal descriptions with an inserted illustration. Woolf re-presents faces as surface in a truly modernist way like Vanessa Bell's featureless paintings.

The doubling and questioning of subjectivity in *Flush* is frequently accomplished through visual objects, for example, mirrors. Flush gains his first sense of his individual subjectivity, not through smell, but by witnessing himself in a mirror. 'Suddenly Flush saw staring back at him from a hole in the wall [a mirror] another dog with bright eyes flashing' (*F*, p. 17). Flush quickly learns to establish his identity by means of mirrors. 'No sooner had Flush got home than he examined himself carefully in the looking-glass. Heaven be praised, he was a dog of birth and breeding!' (*F*, p. 23). Woolf's

use of mirrored identities demonstrates her ability to think visually. That is, she creates a visual ontology, the ways in which mirrors and photography represent the world through multiple and mirrored perspectives. Dog and mistress depart from Wimpole Street in a 'cinematic' scene. 'They stood looking round the room. There was the sofa and by it Mr. Browning's armchair. There were the busts and the tables. The sun filtered' (*F*, p. 70). The scene resembles Greta Garbo's famous farewell to her lover in *Queen Christina* with its slow camera tracking from object to object, here enabling Flush and Barrett Browning to retain memories of Wimpole Street.

It is as if Woolf cannot resist the desire to see through a lens. Rooms are often perceived visually by Flush before their olfactory qualities intrude. In Italy 'light poured over him . . . in a vast bare room flooded with sunshine' (*F*, pp. 72–3). Flush's unremitting effort to visualise his surroundings through the photographic enables Woolf to create a humorous distancing. When Flush sees Elizabeth Barrett Browning's new baby 'it was a live animal. Independently of them all, without the street door being opened, out of herself in the room, alone, Mrs. Browning had become two people' (*F*, p. 83). A photographic perception permits the surreal scene. Woolf uses this mode of visual distancing to suggest the essential unknowability of humankind to animals. Flush, as it were, composes a number of visual scenes in his head in the vain hope of capturing and understanding his peopled world. It is precisely because the visual makes such continuous interventions in *Flush* that *Flush*, like her other works, shows the crucial importance of visual culture to Woolf.

Three Guineas

Three Guineas is also a work of Woolf's in the 1930s structured by aspects of visual culture. It contains photographs of lawyers, church leaders, academics and the army, as well as narrative descriptions of photographs of atrocities in the Spanish Civil War not published in the text. The narrator, throughout *Three Guineas*, is thinking about how to end war and giving three guineas to different organisations. The published photographs Woolf counters with her written inner memories of the absent photographs of dead bodies of Spanish women and children. Paradoxically, the public photographs in the text become timeless dead icons of patriarchy, while the narrator's repeated mnemonic of the absent photographs of the Spanish dead becomes a lively attack on patriarchy.

The contrast between the public newspaper photographs, which are a visual history of institutionalised patriarchy, and Woolf's memories of absent photographs is emblematised in two very different narrative modes.

In Woolf's analysis of the public photographs, her own body, or rather that of the narrator, is largely absent. Indeed the narrator frequently comments on the difficulties posed by that absence. Yet the narrative of the absent photographs is close both to the narrator and to the arguments Woolf makes about women's bodies, childbirth mortality and wartime atrocities.

Three Guineas is a dense, composite image/text which exposes and resists dominant histories with Woolf's active, alternative forms of memory. The lack of amplifying or antipodal subtitles for the published photographs diminishes their power, and the narrator positions herself as the representative voice of all dissenting daughters. The verbal language of the text and the pictorial language of the published photographs are deeply antagonistic. Where the photographs are static, the narrator takes differing descriptive vantage points which often resemble the camera angles of the modernist photographers Alexander Rodchenko and Moholy-Nagy in a shared exploration of the visual and political potential of overhead views.³³

Just as the daughters of public men have been forced to be invisible in public life, so too the narrator, their collective voice, is physically remote from each photograph. From her angle 'your world [. . .] undoubtedly looks queer' (*TG*, p. 176). The narrator can only 'enter on tiptoe'; she has a 'bird's-eye view of the outside of things' that 'is not altogether encouraging' (*TG*, pp. 177 and 181). Watching the university procession is no easier. How 'strange' this world appears 'from our vantage point' of inequality since such processions are observed as 'so remote' (p. 183). A contemporary letter to Woolf by a reader, Ernest Huxley, beautifully encapsulates Woolf's points where he argues that women 'always look at life from a different angle than a man does, they are exceedingly childish and intolerant in their views'.³⁴

Woolf discusses in detail both published and 'private' photographs in order to do justice to women's economic and social invisibility. The repeated images in which women are absent in the present public world and masculine military genocide has created an absent, dead world are the constitutive core of *Three Guineas*'s account of history and memory. Woolf's close relation to the absent photographs and her bodily distance from the public photographs indexically constructs the main theme of *Three Guineas*: her attack on the symbolic blindness of patriarchal traditions. The photographs are not simply adjuncts reflecting Woolf's textual feminism. The important feature of *Three Guineas* is the narrator's embodiment, or lack of embodiment, in relation to photographic testimony and what such relationships can suggest about visual memories and history. *Three Guineas* is Woolf's most complex response to modern visual cultures.

Conclusion

But it is the range of Woolf's image/texts that makes her career a very powerful example of modernist women's constant turn to the visual. She evokes memories, connecting past to present, through visual images both in her photo albums as well as in the epistemologically more complex *Three Guineas*. In Woolf's writings visual images play a constitutive role in creating a surface aesthetic while at the same time they are clues to multiple and repressed femininities. In *To The Lighthouse* much of the narrative weight of the novel is sustained in images which act as visual analogues to plot developments. As an adolescent Woolf recorded, in her diary, seeing Lord Leighton's paintings in the National Gallery, by the time of *To the Lighthouse* she was able to capture Mrs Ramsay in a post-impressionist brush-stroke, and by *Three Guineas* Woolf was modernism's most accomplished visual writer.

Notes

- 1 Virginia Woolf, *O* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 292–3. All further references will be to this edition.
- 2 David Trotter, *Cinema and Modernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), p. 160.
- 3 'The Cinema', *E4*, pp. 348–54.
- 4 See Maggie Humm (ed.), *Virginia Woolf and the Arts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming). The Omega Workshop was founded in 1913 by Woolf's friend Roger Fry (with as co-director Woolf's sister Vanessa Bell). Many of Woolf's circle executed Omega designs for textiles, furniture and table-ware, including Bell and Duncan Grant. Leonard and Virginia founded the Hogarth Press in 1917 as a small hand-printing press. The Press published the majority of Woolf's works and grew into a full business with books on economics, poetry, fiction and the arts including Freud's works in translation.
- 5 Gillian Beer, *Virginia Woolf: The Common Ground* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996).
- 6 Walter Benjamin, 'A Short History of Photography', *Screen*, 13:1 (1972), 21.
- 7 George Spater and Ian Parsons, *A Marriage of True Minds: An Intimate Portrait of Leonard and Virginia Woolf* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), p. 3.
- 8 See Maggie Humm, *Modernist Women and Visual Cultures: Virginia Woolf, Vanessa Bell, Photography and Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002).
- 9 Leonard Woolf, *Diaries and Related Notebooks, 1922–1969*. Leonard Woolf Archive, University of Sussex, Brighton.
- 10 See Maggie Humm, *Snapshots of Bloomsbury: The Private Lives of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell* (London: Tate, 2006) for reproductions of these photographs.
- 11 Melba Cuddy-Keane, *Virginia Woolf, the Intellectual and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 79.
- 12 S. Watney, *English Post-Impressionism* (London: Studio Vista, 1980), p. 37.

- 13 See Diane F. Gillespie's expert account in *The Sisters' Arts* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1988).
- 14 'Since the standard life of van Gogh by Meier-Graefe is beyond most pockets, the present translation of M. Pierard's more modest biography is welcome' (E4, p. 249). Meier-Graefe's *Modern Art's* theory of the structural significance of colour influenced Fry's post-impressionism. See Jane Goldman, *The Feminist Aesthetics of Virginia Woolf: Modernism, Post-Impressionism and the Politics of the Visual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
- 15 G. E. Moore, 'A Refutation of Idealism', *Mind*, 12:48 (1903), p. 435.
- 16 Virginia Woolf, 'The Artist and Politics', in *The Moment and Other Essays* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1975), p. 228.
- 17 Virginia Woolf, *TG*, pp. 199–200. *TG* references are to the Harcourt Brace Jovanovich edition.
- 18 Roger Fry, 'An Essay in Aesthetics' (1909), *Vision and Design* (1920).
- 19 Virginia Woolf, *Walter Sickert: A Conversation* (London: Tate, 2005), p. 24.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 *CSF*, pp. 242–6.
- 22 Benjamin, 'A Short History of Photography', 21.
- 23 Richard Morphet, 'Image and Theme in Bloomsbury Art', in *The Art of Bloomsbury*, ed. R. Shone (London: Tate, 1999), p. 29.
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 Virginia Woolf, 'The Narrow Bridge of Art', in *GR: Essays*, ed. Leonard Woolf (London: Hogarth, 1958), p. 23.
- 26 Virginia Woolf, 'Phases of Fiction', in *ibid.*, p. 124.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 139.
- 28 *Ibid.*, pp. 125–6.
- 29 Sergei Eisenstein, 'The Dramaturgy of Film Form', in *S. M. Eisenstein: Selected Writings 1922–34*, trans. and ed. R. Taylor (London: BFI, 1988).
- 30 A one-page letter to Vanessa Bell headed 'WOOLF FLUSH' in the Hogarth Press Archive, University of Reading.
- 31 Letter headed 'National Portrait Gallery, 24th March 1933' to 'the Manager, the Hogarth Press, 52 Tavistock Square, W.C. 1'. Hogarth Press Archive.
- 32 Virginia Woolf, *F* (London: Hogarth, 1933), pp. 79–80. All further references will be to this edition.
- 33 See John Roberts, *The Art of Interruption: Realism, Photography and the Everyday* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998). Modernist photography is usually characterised as involving formal simplicity and patterning, dramatic viewpoints, close-ups, dramatic tonal differences and conspicuous cropping. See Maggie Humm, 'Photography', in *A Companion to Modernist Literature and Culture*, ed. David Bradshaw and Kevin J. H. Dettmar (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 278–83.
- 34 Anna Snaith (ed.), 'Three Guineas Letters', *Woolf Studies Annual*, 6 (2000), 118.