Reflections on a Cinematic Story

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1 Woolf’s fictional sketch “The Lady in the Looking Glass: A Reflection” was first published in Harper’s Magazine in December 1929. Following a second publication in Harper’s Bazaar the following month, it was collected in the posthumous A Haunted House and Other Short Stories in 1944. As Julia Briggs has noted, the story is likely to have been written in May 1929, the date recorded in one of its typescripts, and to have been inspired by a visit to the home of painter and society hostess Ethel Sands (Briggs 173). The sketch form was used repeatedly by Woolf at this difficult stage in her writing life, as she prepared herself for the exhausting experimentation of The Waves. Sketches allowed the author to put off the greater writing challenge of her new novel, while additionally operating as a kind of literary limbering up process, enabling the exercise of her skills of observation and expression. However, while less intimidating a task than the novel project, the sketch form as undertaken by Woolf has particular aims, and brings with it particular challenges.

2 In the plastic arts, the sketch is drawn in haste, often as a preliminary or preparatory measure, offering only an outline account of what is observed, and postponing the details of pictorial description in the interest of capturing the moment. Such an understanding of the sketch form as preparatory or provisional is pertinent to Woolf’s literary sketching at this time, given her need to prepare for the approaching task of The Waves. Further, the purpose of the pictorial sketch as an attempt to capture the moment is crucial to the literary sketch in Woolf’s hands. “The Lady in the Looking Glass” expands from a moment’s thought on the part of the narrative voice, a moment of reflection, in which it is observed that “People should not leave looking-glasses hanging in their rooms any more than they should open cheque books or letters confessing some hideous crime” (Woolf 2003: 215). The fact that the story expands from this moment is emphasised by a return to the same line at the close of the sketch, in which the reader is reminded that “People should not leave looking-glasses hanging in their rooms” (Woolf 2003: 219). With this book-ending of the sketch by a single moment of reflection, indicated by a repeated phrase, Woolf allows her story to blossom out from a point in time. A similar task is undertaken in the well-known sketch “Moments of Being: ‘Slater’s Pins Have No Points’”,

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where again the strategy of a repeated phrase in the first and last line is used. We begin
with “‘Slater’s pins have no points – don’t you always find that?’ said Miss Craye, turning
round” (Woolf 2003: 209), and end with “‘Slater’s pins have no points,’ Miss Craye said”
(Woolf 2003: 214). Again, the story blossoms from a moment of observation (here, the
narrative voice remarking upon Miss Craye’s own observation regarding Slater’s pins),
and returns to that moment to complete the sketch. The “Moments of Being” of the title
of this sketch of course reinforces the connection between the literary sketch form and
the capture of a moment.

The subtitle of “The Lady in the Looking Glass: A Reflection” draws attention to the
pondering moment which initiates the piece, with an obvious, punning secondary
meaning which places the reflecting mirror centre-stage. Again, the aim of the capture of
the moment is evident: “One must fix one’s mind upon her at that very moment. One
must fasten her down there” (Woolf 2003: 217). For Briggs, the reflection at the centre of
this story is a musing upon the respective capacities of art and literature to describe,
illuminate and immortalise a moment of being. The sketch, she claims, “plays with the
cliché of art as the mirror of life, bringing out both the mastery and the loss involved
in the act of recording” (Briggs 173). The fastening down of Woolf’s own phrase implies loss
in its description of an artificial tethering. In Briggs’ reading, the mirror, representing
plastic art, offers a static picture which fails to capture the flux of life. The dark room, in
which sits Woolf / the observer of the mirror, represents the darting imagination which
can better be captured in words. The reader is told that “there were obscure flushes and
darkenings too [. . . ] and the room had its passions and rages and envies and sorrows
coming over it and clouding it, like a human being. Nothing stayed the same for two
seconds together” (Woolf 2003: 215). Thus, for Briggs, “The still world of the mirror is
opposed to the constant motion of living thoughts as they flush and darken in rhythm
with the fluctuating feelings within the room” (Briggs 173). It is the literary form which is
best equipped to express such fluctuations: “the looking glass had evoked the stillness of
the plastic arts in contrast with the flux of words” (Briggs 174). Briggs therefore suggests
that words may be adequate to the task of describing, or reflecting, the imagination, but
plastic art makes static, reifies, chops and slices, just as the mirror’s frame slices the
image of the lady herself, Isabella Tyson, as the observer notes her passage down the
garden: “Half an hour ago the mistress of the house [. . . ] had gone down the grass path in
her thin summer dress, carrying a basket, and had vanished, sliced off by the gilt rim of
the looking-glass” (Woolf 2003: 216). Briggs’ reading is perceptive, persuasive and
engaging. However, through her use of the sketch medium and its capture of the moment,
Woolf in fact seems to be drawing her writing closer to the work undertaken by plastic
art. This may hint to the reader that more complex claims are being made than the
construction of a clear binary opposition between painting and writing.

Stephen Howard, in a further development of Briggs’ observations, sees “The Lady in the
Looking Glass” as primarily concerned not with writing’s capacities when contrasted with
those of plastic art, but with the possibilities of different forms of life writing. Noting
that the mirror appears repeatedly in Woolf’s oeuvre, Howard remarks that it “functions
variously as a surface upon which the self – or alternative selves – might be reflected or
envisioned, and as a metaphor for the processes of autobiographical writing” (Howard
44). When the observer of “The Lady in the Looking Glass” finds inadequate her own
comparison between Isabella and a plant of the convolvulus genus, support is found for
Howard’s claim that Woolf is concerned to explore the problems inherent in any attempt to grasp a human life in writing:

The comparison showed how very little, after all these years, one knew about her; for it is impossible that any woman of flesh and blood of fifty-five or sixty should really be a wreath or a tendril. Such comparisons [. . .] come like the convolvulus itself trembling between one’s eyes and the truth. There must be truth; there must be a wall (Woolf 2003: 216).

5 The convolvulus comparison, a likeness, simile or mirror, trembles before the observer and prevents their access to the truth, just as any mirror blocks an observer’s view of the truthful wall, by interposing an image of similitude, a reflection. However, as Howard makes clear, the mirror symbol operates most effectively as a denotation of the moment of self-reflection, and therefore specifically represents autobiography. While in this sketch Woolf is concerned with the problems of accurately capturing Isabella through artistic means, the origins of the story in Woolf’s own experience, and her appearance as an observer figure, mean that she is simultaneously concerned with a form of autobiographical expression. The sketch can be read as the imaginative expansion of a diary entry, and the eye of the observer aids the recording of a moment that is Woolf’s as much as it is Isabella’s. Further, if we follow the critical deduction that Isabella is the cipher of the painter Ethel Sands, then the image in which she is finally framed within her hall mirror could be read as a kind of self-portrait, the plastic arts’ equivalent of the autobiography.

6 While the readings of Briggs and Howard usefully draw attention to the importance of “The Lady in the Looking Glass” within Woolf’s thinking on the nature and purpose of literature and its ability to capture a life, whether one’s own or another’s, it is possible to construct an alternative reading which suggests that there is a third contender, beyond art and literature, which offers a further representational possibility. Not reifying art, not faltering literature, but cinema is crucial to this sketch. “The Lady in the Looking Glass” makes use of a complex system of views. Through the eyes of the observer figure, the reader is able to see the darkened room in which she sits, the hall with its large mirror, and the images captured by that mirror, be they within the hall itself, or in the garden behind the house. From a single point of view, therefore, a number of scenes are available to the observer, and thence to the reader. As the gilt frame of the mirror helps to indicate, framing devices are crucial to the form of this sketch, with a view of the life of Isabella framed by the mirror, captured by the retina of the observer and, via Woolf, conveyed to the reader through the medium of text. The observer begins with remarks that clearly support Briggs’ reading of the artistic questions raised by the sketch: “But, outside, the looking-glass reflected the hall table, the sunflowers, the garden path so accurately and so fixedly that they seemed held there in their reality unescapably. It was a strange contrast – all changing here, all stillness there” (Woolf 2003: 215). This stillness of the mirror, i.e. of painting as a form, is deathly, since life’s movement is lost in the transition from reality to representation, from life to art. The deathliness of life’s capture in the work of art is emphasised when the observer notes that “in the looking-glass things had ceased to breathe and lay still in the trance of immortality” (Woolf 2003: 216). Painting and lifelessness are equated, and writing and its potential to represent flux and change provide a solution.

7 Yet, while these early stages of the sketch reinforce Briggs’ claims about the opposition between deathly art and life-capturing literature, there is a crucial point at which the sketch clouds the clarity of the distinction, and enters into a more nuanced debate about
forms of artistic expression and their representational capacities. This point comes when Woolf tries, as she so often does, to reach the truth of her subject, in this case of Isabella, in writing. Isabella remains a mystery. The room in which Woolf sits, which had previously swirled with life, becomes a kind of biographical museum. The ineffectual nature of the museum as an attempt to express a life is noted elsewhere in Woolf’s oeuvre. The museum is equated with conventional biography which, however exhaustive, fails to capture the essence of the person catalogued or described. In *Night and Day*, the velvet-curtained side room of the Hilbery residence haunts the family, but makes a feeble attempt to account for the lives of their ancestors, just as the never-ending biography of their great forebear Richard Acland will always miss its mark, and his life escape. This museum metaphor had originated in one of Woolf’s early short fictional works, “Memoirs of a Novelist”, in which we are told, of the inept biographer Miss Linsett, that “to read her therefore is to leave the world in daylight, and to enter a closed room, hung with claret coloured plush, and illustrated with texts” (Woolf 2003: 68). It seems that darkened, museum-like rooms may be associated both with death, and with an inability to capture life.

At the moment when the darkened room in which the observer sits becomes a museum which fails to express the passions and particularities of Isabella, the mirror springs into life: “A large black form loomed into the looking-glass; blotted out everything [. . .] and was gone. But the picture was entirely altered. For the moment it was unrecognisable and irrational and entirely out of focus” (Woolf 2003: 217). In perhaps the most well known passage of Woolf’s 1926 essay “The Cinema”, a looming form is described which bears a striking resemblance to that seen in Isabella’s mirror:

> at a performance of [The Cabinet of] Dr. Caligari the other day a shadow shaped like a tadpole suddenly appeared at one corner of the screen. It swelled to an immense size, quivered, bulged, and sank back again into nonentity. For a moment it seemed to embody some monstrous diseased imagination of the lunatic’s brain. For a moment it seemed as if thought could be conveyed by shape more effectively than by words. The monstrous quivering tadpole seemed to be fear itself, and not the statement ‘I am afraid’. In fact, the shadow was accidental and the effect unintentional. (Woolf 1950: 169)

In the latter case, the looming shape is a fault on the film, or within the projecting equipment, which creates a surprising shadow. In the case of “The Lady in the Looking Glass”, it is discovered to be merely a man delivering post. In both passages, however, the revelation of a prosaic explanation for the startling image does not assuage the impression of the episode on Woolf or the observer, who go on to develop their thinking about representational possibilities in response to the episode. In “The Cinema”, Woolf muses on the potential of the cinema, as yet untapped. In “The Lady in the Looking Glass” cinematic modes of writing / viewing are worked out within the narrative itself. Reading the looming shape episode within the sketch in relation to Woolf’s essay, written just three years earlier, foregrounds the author’s interest in cinema as a third potential mode of artistic expression.

The structure of “The Lady in the Looking Glass” is intricately designed and its particular shape draws attention to the greatly significant moment of the delivery of the post. The repetition of the first phrase of the story within the last line, noted above, suggests a symmetrical structure. This is further reinforced by the repetition of animal imagery in the description of the drawing room / consciousness of Isabella. At first it is noted that “The quiet old country room [. . .] was full of such nocturnal creatures. They came
pirouetting across the floor, stepping delicately with high-lifted feet and spread tails” (Woolf 2003: 215). Later, the observer remarks that “Her mind was like her room, in which lights advanced and retreated, came pirouetting and stepping delicately, spread their tails” (Woolf 2003: 219). Isabella moves away down the garden (Woolf 2003: 216), and returns (Woolf 2003: 219). In this way, the very structure of the sketch resembles a reflection, with a central mirror allowing the opening out of two worlds on either side of its plane. The mirror-point or centre-point must therefore be read as of considerable significance, particularly given that it makes striking use of the mirror, in facilitating the appearance of the looming shape.

11 Susan Dick has commented that “the line separating Virginia Woolf’s fiction from her essays is a fine one” (Dick 2). Indeed, “The Lady in the Looking Glass” seems to demand comparison with the essay “The Cinema”, given their common language, imagery and concerns. The sketch’s spectatorial structure itself recalls the cinema; an observer sits in a darkened room looking out at a screen, on which images are flung which are drawn from a source beyond that darkened room. The looming shape of “The Cinema” and “The Lady...” startle the observer “For a moment” (Woolf 1926: 169), and “For the moment” (Woolf 2003: 217) respectively. The interest in the capture of the moment attributable to the sketch is also present throughout “The Cinema”, in which Woolf refers to the “momentary assembly of colour, sound, movement” (Woolf 1926: 171), and concludes “But it is for a moment only” (Woolf 1926: 171). The description of Isabella’s drawing room / consciousness is recalled in Woolf’s summary of film-viewing experiences: “it was thus that we danced and pirouetted [. . .] thus that the sun shone and the clouds scudded” (Woolf 1926: 167). Having established this sketch-to-essay connection, a reading of Isabella’s return from the garden to the hall can be reconsidered, and seen as a cinematic episode:

She was so far off at first that one could not see her clearly. She came lingering and pausing, here straightening a rose, there lifting a pink to smell it, but she never stopped; and all the time she became larger and larger in the looking-glass, more and more completely the person into whose mind one had been trying to penetrate. [. . .] There were her grey-green dress, and her long shoes, her basket, and something sparkling at her throat. (Woolf 1926: 219).

12 Isabella can be seen moving into frame – here the mirror’s own frame echoes the frame of camera view rather than the physical frame of a work of art. The filmic representation of the mirror records her ceaseless movement (“she never stopped”), and eventually presents the observer with a close-up (“she became larger and larger”). The mirror, previously representing the habit of painting to chop and slice, here provides a moving image akin to that of the cinema, which presents “more and more completely” the person whom painting, life writing and the museum have failed to express.

13 Outlining the potential of the cinema in her essay, Woolf notes that filmic images:

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? We behold them as they are when we are not there. We see life as it is when we have no part in it. (Woolf 1926: 167)

14 Exceeding the capacities of beautiful painting and insufficient language, film presents a “different reality”, which can be compared to the second world presented by a mirror. The cinematic observer gains privileged access to life as it occurs without them, just as
the observer figure of “The Lady in the Looking Glass” gains access to the life of Isabella from her seat in the darkened drawing room. The observer’s cinematic position, watching a screen from the darkness, unseen by the actors whose images are flung upon it, is in the latter part of the sketch rewarded with a cinematic image of Isabella’s return. Woolf’s hopes for the cinema, outlined in her essay, are that it will move beyond a parasitic relationship with literature, and cease to represent only surface detail, registering instead “emotions that have so far failed to find expression” (Woolf 1926: 169). The cinema’s attempt to represent the emotional turmoil of Anna Karenina, Woolf claims, focuses superficially and misleadingly “upon her teeth, her pearls, and her velvet” (Woolf 1926: 168). A cinema which capitalises on its great potential for the representation of emotion will do away with such surface detail, mere mirrored likeness, and express the complexity of the inner life of its characters. In “The Lady in the Looking Glass”, with its use of a cinematic system of views, and its common phraseology with “The Cinema”, some of the questions of cinema’s potential are worked out alongside more long-established concerns of Woolf’s, such as the power of literature versus art, and the difficulties of life writing.

Isabella’s appearance on the cinematic screen of her hall mirror at first appears to have fallen into just the kind of misleading habits of surface detail about which Woolf is so concerned in “The Cinema”. Instead of Anna Karenina’s teeth, pearls and velvet, we are shown Isabella’s dress, shoes, basket and jewellery. However, these details are stripped away as she stands fully in frame, or rather in close-up: “Everything dropped from her – clouds, dress, basket, diamond – all that one had called the creeper and convolvulus” (Woolf 2003: 219). Continuing with Briggs’ reading, this final appearance of Isabella within the frame would seem to represent her incorporation into a painting, a work of art which divests her of the particularities of her existence, and denies those facts that the observer has told us to be true: “She stood naked in that pitiless light. And there was nothing. Isabella was perfectly empty. She had no thoughts. She had no friends. She cared for nobody” (Woolf 2003: 219). While it is possible to read this final image of Isabella as her petrification or absorption into a static work of art, it is also possible to suggest that the cinematic representation of her return to the garden has provided an access to the truth of her life – a truth which has escaped the observer’s other attempts to describe her existence by means of looking at the contents of her drawing room. When the observer notes that “At once the looking-glass began to pour over her a light that seemed to fix her; that seemed like some acid to bite off the unessential and superficial and to leave only the truth. It was an enthralling spectacle” (Woolf 2003: 219), it seems that a connection has been made between the third expressive possibility of the cinematic spectacle and access to truth, the wall behind the mirror / screen.

Woolf’s dreams for the cinema were that it would provide just such access to the truth of the inner life of its characters, a direct emotional connection to the viewer without an interposing or obscuring representation of surface detail. Such dreams can be seen in relation to her experiments with stream of consciousness narrative methods, with which she attempted to explore the mental landscape of her fictional characters. Following Joseph Frank’s oft-quoted essay “Spatial Form in Modern Literature”, writers making use of the stream of consciousness technique have been referred to in critical readings as “cinematographic”, a designation intended to emphasise the breaking free of the temporality of literary form in the work of such authors. For Frank, these cinematographic authors included James Joyce, Marcel Proust, Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot.
In the case of Woolf, it can be argued that the connection between her literary work and cinematography was deeper than one of mere analogy. Rather than attempting to reflect in a literary context the swift forward flow of the cinema's moving image, and its capacity for spatial rather than linear representation, Woolf was aiming to make use of the cinematic model in order to access what we may call the wall behind the screen, the truth of the lives she aimed to present. The claim that Woolf writes cinematographically, and with particular expressive aims in mind, can usefully be begun by analysing the literary moment when her only extended attempt to address the cinema in writing comes to have the greatest direct influence on her fictional work, in this carefully crafted literary sketch of 1929.

BIBLIOGRAPHIE


NOTES

1. I use the term “observer” rather than the “narrator” term customarily used in critical readings of this text, in order to underscore the cinematic or spectatorial relationship between this figure and the unfolding narrative.

2. I here presume the female gender of the observer, given the roots of the story in the author’s autobiographical experience.

3. It should also be noted that the Hilbery museum contains several oval mirrors, their shapes perhaps recalling portraits or miniatures. See (Woolf 1992: 8).
RÉSUMÉS

La nouvelle de Virginia Woolf, “The Lady in the Looking Glass: A Reflection”, qui fut publiée en décembre 1929, est souvent analysée comme une esquisse que lui aurait inspirée l’artiste Ethel Sands à qui Woolf avait rendu visite peu de temps auparavant. Plutôt que de considérer cette nouvelle comme une esquisse, cet article propose de la lire à la lumière de l’essai que Woolf écrivit en 1926, “The Cinema”. Il apparaît que par sa forme et son contenu, son cadrage et son sujet, cette nouvelle rencontre les préoccupations de cet essai qui, bien que connu, est souvent considéré comme marginal par rapport au reste de l’œuvre de l’auteur. L’étude des éléments filmiques dans “The Lady” et du dialogue fructueux que la nouvelle entretient avec l’essai sur le cinéma montre que, par bien des côtés, cette nouvelle s’intègre pleinement à la recherche que mène Woolf d’une forme “cinématographique”, selon les termes qu’emploiera Joseph Frank. En outre, loin de se contenter de simples analogies entre texte littéraire et film, Woolf forge dans cette nouvelle un style littéraire nouveau qui mobilise des éléments filmiques à même de saisir la complexité d'une vie. Il apparaît alors évident que dans “The Lady”, le statut de Woolf est celui d’un pionnier du mode cinématographique.

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