

«To Snap Us as We Are»

The Implied Camera in Virginia Woolf's *The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection*

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Abstract In the last few decades, considerable critical attention has been devoted to exploring the multiple relationships between Virginia Woolf's life and works on the one hand, and various forms of artistic expression on the other, with particular focus on the most recent ones, such as photography and cinema, which are emblematic of the modern machine age. As several studies have shown, Woolf was thoroughly familiar with, and deeply interested in what she herself – in an introductory essay to the retrospective collection *Victorian Photographs of Famous Men and Fair Women* (1926) by her great-aunt Julia Margaret Cameron described – as the newborn art of photography. While previous research has mainly focused on biographical accounts and/or feminist interpretations of the subject, this essay aims to analyse Woolf's use of photography in terms of narrative technique by showing the implied presence of an invisible camera, whose eye coincides with the fixed point of view or the observing eye of the anonymous narrator, in her short story *The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection* (1929). In this 'visual' piece, Woolf engages in verbal imitations of snapshots, and the stiff artificiality of the photographic image, contrasting with the sheer vitality outside its frame, reminds us of what Walter Benjamin terms the loss of «aura» of the work of art in the age of its mechanical reproduction, a loss which in the case of photography is partially counterbalanced by the revelation of a hidden reality – Benjamin's «optical unconscious» – or, in Woolf's story, of the character's inner truth.

Keywords Virginia Woolf's interest in photography. Photography as narrative technique. Verbal imitations of snapshots. Walter Benjamin.

In the last few decades, considerable critical attention has been devoted to exploring the multiple relationships between Virginia Woolf's life and works on the one hand, and various forms of artistic expression on the other, with particular focus on the most recent ones, such as photography and cinema, which are emblematic of the modern machine age. As several studies have shown,¹ Woolf was thoroughly familiar with, and deeply interested in what she herself described – in an introductory essay to the retrospective collection *Victorian Photographs of Famous Men and Fair*

1 There is an extensive bibliography on the subject. See, for example, Gillespie 1993; Wusow 1994; Caughie 2000; Humm 2002, 2006, 2010, 2012.

Women (1926) by her great-aunt and famous photographer Julia Margaret Cameron – as the newborn art of photography.² Beyond the mere biographical evidence that she frequently dealt with the issue of photography in her diaries, letters and essays, that she exchanged pictures with acquaintances and regularly preserved memories of her family and friends in photo albums, what is far more relevant to the purpose of this essay is that Woolf often used photographic terms and techniques in her fiction; moreover, snapshots as a way of visually approaching reality actually mirror her own aesthetics and compositional process, which she usually described as ‘scene making’. As she wrote in *A Sketch of the Past*,

I find that scene making is my natural way of marking the past. A scene always comes to the top; arranged; representative. This confirms me in my instinctive notion [...] that we are sealed vessels afloat upon what it is convenient to call reality; at some moments, without a reason, without an effort, the sealing matter cracks; in floods reality; that is a scene – for they would not survive entire so many ruinous years unless they were made of something permanent; that is a proof of their ‘reality’. Is this liability of mine to scene receiving the origin of my writing impulse? These are questions about reality, about scenes and their connection with writing to which I have no answer [...]. Obviously I have developed the faculty, because in all the writing I have done (novels, criticism, biography) I almost always have to find a scene; [...] Or is this not quite the same faculty? (Woolf 1989, p. 156)

If, as Gillespie aptly points out, «memoir, album, and Julia Margaret Cameron’s photographs influenced Virginia Stephen’s view of the past, one which continued to impinge upon the present in a variety of ways well into her adult years» (1993, p. 116), it is equally instructive that, in Woolf’s private as well as autobiographical writings, ‘scene making’ is closely related not only to memory (recording spontaneous recollections of the past), but also to the creative process (the sudden emergence and configuration of a scene). In her fiction, in fact, a visual image is frequently more meaningful than a linear narrative and, by carefully composing verbal pictures, she usually reveals single elements as parts of larger patterns. As she notes down in her diary,

2 Cf. Cameron 1926. The tone of the essay is sometimes ironic, especially as regards Cameron’s allegorical and idealised photographic arrangements, showing that Woolf’s interest in photography faded when the new art could be compared to what she termed contemporary ‘materialist’ fiction (Wells, Bennett, Galsworthy) in being merely representational and superficial. However, here Woolf expresses more sympathy than she later does in *Freshwater*, a play based on the life of Cameron that she presented together with her sister Vanessa to their friends in 1935, and in which she mocked her great-aunt’s typically Victorian sentimental vein.

I can make up situations, but I cannot make up plots. That is: if I pass the lame girl, I can without knowing I do it, instantly make up a scene [...]. This is the germ of such fictitious gift as I have. (Olivier Bell, McNeillie 1982, p. 160)

How many little stories come into my head! [...] One might write a book of short significant separate scenes. (Olivier Bell, McNeillie 1982, p. 157)³

Woolf also employs photographic imagery in order to trace her own sensibility. In *A Sketch of the Past*, again, she considers the extent to which she «could snapshot» her early emotional responses to the childhood summers spent at St Ives by thinking of herself as «a porous vessel afloat on sensation; a sensitive plate exposed to invisible rays» (Woolf 1989, p. 146), like the plate or film on which the camera records an image. While previous research has mainly focused on biographical accounts and/or feminist interpretations of the subject,⁴ this essay aims to analyse Woolf's use of photography in terms of narrative technique, particularly by showing the implied presence of an invisible camera, whose eye coincides with the fixed point of view or the observing eye of the anonymous narrator, in her short story *The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection* (1929). In this 'visual' piece, Woolf engages in verbal imitations of snapshots, and the stiff artificiality of the photographic image, contrasting with the sheer vitality outside its frame, reminds us of what Walter Benjamin terms the loss of 'aura' of the work of art in the age of its mechanical reproduction, a loss which in the case of photography is partially counterbalanced by the revelation of the so-called 'optical unconscious'.

In his capital essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936), Benjamin defines as aura the quality possessed by art objects as long as they are unique and authentic, still maintaining their original association with tradition and ritual. In the modern machine age, he remarks, such aura has declined: as the great majority of objects and aesthetic products (movies, photographs, consumer goods) are mechanically reproduced, they acquire meaning and value not from their uniqueness, but from their connection with an audience or consumer. This phenomenon, characterising our modern mass culture, is illustrated at the beginning of the essay, where Benjamin highlights the difference between manual reproduction (which has always existed, and never altered the relationship between original and copy) and mechanical reproduction (that undermines the very notion of authenticity):

³ It is interesting to note that this excerpt is taken from an entry in which Woolf records precisely the origin of *The Lady in the Looking-Glass*. The story was inspired by a scene that Woolf imagined of her friend Ethel Sands – a famous painter, hostess and patron of the arts – coming back from her garden and not looking at her letters.

⁴ See for example Humm 2001, 2005; Lamm 2008.

In principle a work of art has always been reproducible. Man-made artifacts could always be imitated by men. [...] Mechanical reproduction of a work of art, however, represents something new. (Benjamin 1969, p. 218)⁵

The loss of the aura – also defined as «that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction» (Benjamin 1969, p. 221) – is thus a direct consequence of such recent changes. This is due first and foremost to the basic fact that «even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be» (Benjamin 1969, p. 220); secondly, the reason is mainly that the reproduced object becomes detached from the domain of tradition. Not only does the displacement of the work of art from its original historical context through technical means lead to the dissolution of the aura, but mechanical reproduction also succeeds in substituting «a plurality of copies for a unique existence» (Benjamin 1969, p. 221), which the aura itself implies. Since the advent of new technologies like photography, that Benjamin describes here as «the first truly revolutionary means of reproduction» (1969, p. 224), mechanical reproduction has thus radically transformed the very nature and function of art. In spite of such loss of aura, however, photography has allowed us to perceive a hidden reality. Later in the same essay, the revolutionary effect the camera has had on our notions of the subject is explained by analogy with Freudian theory: «the camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses» (Benjamin 1969, p. 237). The argument echoes a previous piece entitled *Little History of Photography* (1931), where Benjamin distinguishes the photographic image from other kinds of pictures in such terms:

It is another nature which speaks to the camera rather than to the eye: 'other' above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious. [...] Photography, with its devices of slow motion and enlargement, reveals the secret. It is through photography that we first discover the existence of this optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis. (Benjamin 1999, pp. 510-512)

According to Benjamin, the 'optical unconscious' refers to the new realm of experience made accessible by photography in an analogous way to the one in which psychoanalysis first gave us access to the psychic unconscious. He perceives, for instance, a methodological similarity between the

5 For more recent theories of photography, also in relation to twentieth-century literature, see Sontag 1977; Barthes 1981; Hansom 2002; Cunningham, Fisher, Mays 2005.

technique of photographic enlargement and the Freudian dream theory, or between the optical manipulation of space that reveals images beyond the grasp of normal human perception and the psychoanalytic practice of discovering meaning in the most secluded recesses of the soul, which remain hidden to the conscious mind. This 'other nature' speaking to the camera separates the visible from the capacities of the eye and brings forth the virtuality of vision. In other words, through the camera eye, the human eye sees more deeply than it can actually do, and thus learns how to perceive the undisclosed nature of things. Photography can thus be said to undermine any notion of natural visibility, as Benjamin shows, for example, in the final part of his 1936 essay – where he mainly discusses the cinema – through the analogy between the cameraman and a surgeon penetrating the surface of the phenomenal world with his instruments, and raising the question of the construction of reality.⁶ Therefore, the function of photography is to capture what is most fleeting and accidental in order to reveal its authentic nature, a concept that in the context of the present essay recalls Woolf's lifelong attempt to seize transient 'moments of being' – that is to grasp an undisclosed reality – through her fiction and particularly through some of her short stories, which could be defined as veritable studies in perception. *The Lady in the Looking-Glass*, for instance, is one of Woolf's prose sketches that «experiment with the features of vision» in order to «radically reframe the visible world» (Humm 2002, p. 5). Here the whole scene is observed from a spatially-limited point of view, and the fixity of the image – that seems to be produced by an implied camera placed on the sofa of the hall –, subsequently reflected in the mirror, has all the typical features of a photograph: it captures and freezes both part of the setting and a view of the protagonist Isabella Tyson, first focusing exclusively on her appearance (the fixed truth the looking glass seems to offer, which proves to be merely superficial), then gradually revealing her genuine identity.

Woolf's constant endeavour to transfix the moment, to snap her own life or that of her characters in order to provide glimpses of emotional experience that transcend words, is particularly evident in her short stories, which may often be read as experiments in presenting a series of

6 «How does the cameraman compare with the painter? To answer this we take recourse to an analogy with a surgical operation. The surgeon represents the polar opposite of the magician. The magician heals a sick person by the laying on of hands; the surgeon cuts into the patient's body. [...] Magician and surgeon compare to painter and cameraman. The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web» (Benjamin 1969, p. 233). Similarly, in *The Lady in the Looking-Glass*, an act of cutting into the surface of things is necessary in order to reveal the protagonist's true identity: «Isabella did not wish to be known – but she should no longer escape. It was absurd, it was monstrous. If she concealed so much and knew so much one must prize her open with the first tool that came to hand – the imagination» (Woolf 1993, p. 78).

snapshots. While she frequently mused over the right way to refer to her prose sketches, she finally came to the conclusion that a better analogy for her stories might probably be found in visual arts such as painting, film, photography, and again used the word 'scene' to describe them:

I'm always conceiving stories now. Short ones - scenes - for instance The Old Man (a character of L.S.) The Professor on Milton - (an attempt at literary criticism) & now The Interruption, women talking alone. (Olivier Bell, McNeillie 1982, p. 3)

Colin Dickey rightly maintains that, by defining her own narrative practice as 'scene making', «Woolf came to see her art as analogous to photography» also from a structural point of view (2010, p. 383). Her main concern as a novelist is to capture the multiplicity and complexity of human existence, to convey the true essence of reality, but also to seek the unifying solidity of a pattern beyond shifting appearances. Significantly enough for the merging of the writerly and the visual, not only is the output of the compositional process generally conceived as an image or scene, which is an equivalent of a state of mind or an act of apprehension of reality, but the author frequently adopts the metaphor of crystallization for the process by which something enduring is made out of momentary impressions. The scene (something visual and spatial) as crystallization of the moment (a temporal entity), described in terms pertaining to the field of luminance and preciousness, recurs in many passages in which Woolf reflects on her own creative method. The moment, a unit of experienced time rooted in the present of the world of existence, is conceived as «the centre and meeting-place of an extraordinary number of perceptions which have not yet been expressed» (Woolf 1966, p. 229). Similar to a picture, it is also a still capturing of life in arrested movement, like one of the moments of vision in which her characters hang suspended; or something temporary that, once fixed in the atemporal world of being, partakes of eternity. Within the single, definite moment of being, which is transitory but also enduring, all is still and suspended and pregnant with meaning. For the same reason, it is regarded as extremely valuable, as a «spark» (Olivier Bell, McNeillie 1981, p. 169), a «diamond» (Olivier Bell, McNeillie 1981, p. 199), or a «nugget of pure gold» (Olivier Bell, McNeillie 1982, p. 141). These extracts show that Woolf conceives of literary creation as the transcription of a visionary moment of inestimable value, as a sudden, intense illumination about the hidden meaning of life, which originates in the dark recesses of the mind and is then released by means of words. The discovery is an abrupt exposure to the real, an eruption of the contingent in the incessant passing and flowing of life, a manifestation of the transcendent into the immanent. Owing to their brief and spontaneous character, such aesthetic conception finds in Woolf's experimental sketches a congenial form and is particularly

pertinent to her own idea of the short story, which is often the outcome of an unexpected revelation, thus providing an interesting parallel between its intrinsic nature and the impermanence of the moment. Furthermore, it is also closely related to the photograph as a momentary, but also enduring, recording of reality by freezing or immobilising it, although in Woolf's oeuvre, as Gillespie has pointed out, «photographs [...] often provide images of the incomplete or superficial» (1993, p. 113). We could thus draw, as the critic does, a comparison between verbal and visual sketches based on their common immediate and fragmentary nature: «the snapshot is like the visual artist's sketch and the writer's short story or memoir, works more spontaneous and unfinished, or at least less ambitious than paintings or novels» (Gillespie 1993, p. 144). Very often conceived as diversion from the burden of more demanding works, as the source of free artistic invention, or as exercises in style and method leading to her most experimental novels, Woolf's short stories also provide a deliberately partial and incomplete view of reality. In a compelling study aptly entitled *Wild Outbursts of Freedom: Reading Virginia Woolf's Short Fiction*, for instance, Nena Skrbic relates *The Lady in the Looking-Glass* to other prose pieces such as *The New Dress* (1927) and *The Fascination of the Pool* (1929), and discusses them together as «looking-glass stories» in which

[t]here is a feeling that we are being denied a full-on experience since the mirror is interesting, not for what it reflects, but for what it cuts out [...]. By excluding the extrinsic, the rigid frame of the mirror serves to abridge and curtail what is recorded, segmenting the story by exclusive and selective cutting. In this way, the author is constricted by what the mirror reflects. The intriguing result is not only that the stories become more interesting for what they choose to eliminate than for what they choose to reveal, but that the potential failings to tell a story constitute the actual content, so that the short story itself functions as an envelope or secret message. (Skrbic 2004, p. xx)⁷

Though acute and penetrating, however, Skrbic's analysis observes in *The Lady in the Looking-Glass* an «engagement with the vocabulary of film» (2004, p. 77) which I see as more appropriate, for instance, to a short story such as *Kew Gardens* (1919), since the mobility of the point of view, the use of close-ups and shifts in perspective in the latter stand in sharp contrast with the fixity of the photographic/mirror image in the former.

Among Woolf's short fiction, *The Lady in the Looking-Glass* is particularly interesting, in terms of her own visual aesthetics and experimental

7 For a recent and comprehensive analysis of the most interesting aspects of Woolf's short fiction, see also Benzel, Hoberman 2004; Reynier 2009.

narrative technique, also for its allusive title. «A Reflection» may refer, at the same time, to the mental processes (thought and imagination) activated in both the anonymous narrator and the reader by the enigmatic figure of Isabella, or to the metafictional device according to which, as the mirror arranges the various scenes by determining what to include in its own frame, it also parallels the delimiting frame of the short story itself, since what the mirror does not capture the narrative excludes. Moreover, it definitely refers to the fact that the scene perceived by the eye of the camera is reflected in the looking glass hanging in the hall, and is also a clear allusion to the common belief that photographs mirror reality as it is. Here the photographic image and the mirror image coincide not only because the picture taken from the sofa is reflected in the looking glass placed in front of it, but also because the peculiarity of both optical instruments is that they provide an exact – though inevitably limited by a frame – copy of reality. It seems particularly illuminating that the same association recurs in *Between the Acts*, and precisely in the last section of Miss La Trobe's pageant entitled *Present Time: Ourselves*. Here snapshot imagery combines with mirror imagery to outrageously reflect a fragmentary, and thus somewhat distorted, image of the audience. The children actors, in lieu of cameras, hold anything that reflects the villagers attending the performance, who react indignantly to the «inquisitive insulting eye» (Woolf 1941, p. 217) of the camera-like mirrors:

Look! Out they come, from the bushes – the riff-raff. Children? Imps – elves – demons. Holding what? Tin cans? Bedroom candlesticks? Old jars? My dear, that's the cheval glass from the Rectory! And the mirror – that I lent her. My mother's. Cracked. What's the notion? Anything that's bright enough to reflect, presumably, ourselves? Ourselves! Ourselves! Out they leapt, jerked, skipped. Flashing, dazzling, dancing, jumping. Now old Bart ... he was caught. Now Manresa. Here a nose ... There a skirt ... Then trousers only ... Now perhaps a face.... Ourselves? But that's cruel. To snap us as we are, before we've had time to assume ... And only, too, in parts.... That's what's so distorting and upsetting and utterly unfair. Mopping, mowing, whisking, frisking, the looking glasses darted, flashed, exposed. (Woolf 1941, pp. 214-215)

This menacing scene, in which the mirrors dismember the bodies they reflect producing a hallucination of massacre, has generally been interpreted as a symbolic representation of the collapse of contemporary society on the verge of the second World War. However, its interest lies not only in suggesting a sinister correspondence between the stylistic fragmentariness of Modernism and the disruptive effects of aerial bombardment; as Maud Ellmann has pointed out, «the word 'snap', in this context, could mean to

break apart as well as to capture, thus evoking the term 'snapshot', which was used of guns before it was extended to cameras» (2013, p. 255).

From the opening of *The Lady in the Looking-Glass*, the reader's view is circumscribed by the solidly constructed view of the mirror. The idea of representing a scene in a truly objective and accurate way, as only cameras and mirrors can do, is reinforced by the reiterated use of the impersonal pronoun «one», although the frame necessarily encloses an incomplete portion of reality:

One could not help looking, that summer afternoon, in the long glass that hung outside in the hall. Chance had so arranged it. From the depths of the sofa in the drawing-room one could see reflected in the Italian glass not only the marble-topped table opposite, but a stretch of the garden beyond. One could see a long grass path leading between banks of tall flowers until, slicing off an angle, the gold rim cut it off. (Woolf 1993, p. 75)

However, not only does the photograph provide a partial view; it also immobilises reality in an unnatural way. The mirror sharply divides the setting of the story into two markedly differentiated spaces: the static, restricted space within its frame (the apparently fixed 'facts') on the one hand, and the animated, open space of the hall and the garden beyond (the realm of the imagination) on the other. While everything outside the disciplined confinement of the frame is swarming with movement, light and colour like an Impressionist canvas, the camera traps reality and deprives it of life. The ability of photography to cut out a segment of continuous time and freeze it both intensely and unnaturally is constantly suggested. In the unfamiliar atmosphere that is typical of this short story, the reader feels the presence of reckless «nocturnal creatures [...] pirouetting across the floor, stepping delicately with high-lifted feet» (Woolf 1993, p. 75). The room, a metaphor for the human mind, is so full of life and passions that it is even personified – «like a human being» (Woolf 1993, p. 75) –, all the more contrasting with the picture offered by the camera through the mirror, which is unreal in its hyper-reality:

Nothing stayed the same for two seconds together. 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. One could not help looking from one to the other. Meanwhile, since all the doors and windows were open in the heat, there was a perpetual sighing and ceasing sound, the voice of the transient and the perishing, it seemed, coming and going like human breath, while in the looking-glass things had ceased to breathe and lay still in the trance of immortality. (Woolf 1993, pp. 75-76)

The mirror is characterised by permanence, solidity and stillness, as contrasted with the transitory and changing events beyond its frame. Photography is thus a mechanical and exact, but also static, means of reproduction of reality, holding it in an instant which is at the same time momentary and enduring, deprived of life and thus eternal. In an interesting reversal, what is transient and perishing is also alive («like human breath»), whereas the lifeless is immortal.

The photographic/mirror image deadens what it reflects making it like a timeless artwork. As Benjamin reminds us, the work of art in the modern machine age has lost its aura, its presence in time and space, its unique connection with the here and now of its creation and fruition; however, by being infinitely reproducible, it overcomes its contingency and partakes of the eternal. Moreover, photography also reveals, in a sudden illumination, that surplus of meaning linked to the act of perception which Benjamin calls the optical unconscious. In *The Lady in the Looking-Glass*, for instance, when movement unexpectedly alters the fixity of the mirror image with the abrupt apparition of a shadowy presence, which is at once interrupting and confusing, the picture is initially out of focus:

A large black form loomed into the looking-glass; blotted out everything, strewed the table with a packet of marble tablets veined with pink and grey, and was gone. But the picture was entirely altered. For the moment it was unrecognisable and irrational and entirely out of focus. (Woolf 1993, p. 77)

Then the object of perception is 'absorbed' by the looking glass and captured by the eye of the camera, and the scene gradually becomes clear, adjusted, perfectly still. After the coloured slabs are subsumed, that is almost unwillingly pulled into the mirror's frame, the disorder of the undistinguished tablets «strewed» across the table gives way to a well-composed arrangement. The unknown objects prove to be merely letters brought by the postman, their image finally made immortal by a snapshot:

One could not relate these tablets to any human purpose. And then by degrees some logical process set to work on them and began ordering and arranging them and bringing them into the fold of common experience. One realised at last that they were merely letters. The man had brought the post. [...] And then it was strange to see how they were drawn in and arranged and composed and made part of the picture and granted that stillness and immortality which the looking-glass conferred. (Woolf 1993, p. 77)

In this short story, life and movement always jolt to a halt as the looking glass asserts its presence by producing a radically different view, that is

a static and permanent picture of reality. Despite its fixity, however, the photographic image allows the reader to grasp an undisclosed truth: as the narrator remarks, once the letters are included within the mirror's frame they become «invested with a new reality and significance and with a greater heaviness, too» (Woolf 1993, p. 77), even transfigured into «tablets graven with eternal truth» (Woolf 1993, p. 78) both about Isabella and life in general, their marble-like solidity «scored thick with meaning» (Woolf 1993, p. 78).

Unfortunately, although «it was her profounder state of being that one wanted to catch and turn to words, the state that is to the mind what breathing is to the body» (Woolf 1993, p. 79), the truth concerning Isabella cannot be so easily grasped. As Gillespie has pointed out about Woolf, «references to photographs in her fiction help her to explore the difficulty of knowing people, as well as to communicate the self-images of some of her characters» (1993, p. 146). Since in this short story epistemological questions are closely related to the act of perception, the enigmatic figure of the protagonist remains largely unknown as long as the photographic/mirror image does not include her. After she has «vanished, sliced off by the gilt rim of the looking-glass» (Woolf 1993, p. 76) and until she is captured again by the eye of the camera, her picture is uncertain – «she had gone presumably into the lower garden to pick flowers; or as it seemed more natural to suppose, to pick something light and fantastic and leafy and trailing» (Woolf 1993, p. 76) – incomplete, superficial. The anonymous narrator must admit that «after knowing her all these years one could not say what the truth about Isabella was» (Woolf 1993, p. 76). Quite the contrary, the only thing one could do is enumerate a series of supposed facts, instead of revealing inner truths. The figure of the lady is mysterious, suggesting countless secrets hidden like her letters and shut in the drawers of her cabinets, but finally the fantasies that have accumulated in her absence collapse. It seems interesting to remark that, after a long speculation about Isabella's presumably fascinating life, her authentic nature is disclosed only when, coming back from the garden, her image is reflected in the mirror and the invisible camera placed on the sofa snaps her. To quote again Benjamin's famous essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, in photography

[p]rocess reproduction can bring out those aspects of the original that are unattainable to the naked eye yet accessible to the lens, which is adjustable and chooses its angle at will. And photographic reproduction, with the aid of certain processes, such as enlargement or slow motion, can capture images which escape natural vision. (1969, p. 220)

In an excerpt from *The Lady in the Looking-Glass* that seems to display precisely such effects, at first we see Isabella slowly approaching:

Here was she in the looking-glass. It made one start. She was so far off at first that one could not see her clearly. [...] 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.

(Woolf 1993, pp. 79-80)

The inward movement of the protagonist – from the garden into the drawing room, then inside the mirror's frame – parallels the narrator's and the reader's act of penetrating her innermost being; it corresponds to an epistemological act of apprehension of reality leading to the sudden disclosure of a hidden meaning. The ability of the mirror, exactly as photography, to freeze an unexpected revelation clearly becomes the embodiment of a moment of being. In the end, one final snapshot arrests Isabella's figure in a mortal trance, erodes her deceiving appearance and reveals the inner void of her true self:

At last there she was, in the hall. She stopped dead. She stood by the table. She stood perfectly still. 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. [...] Here was the woman herself. 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. As for her letters, they were all bills. (Woolf 1993, p. 80)

At the end of this short story, Virginia Woolf lets us understand that the reflection, with its greater heaviness and solidity, has more authenticity and significance than the world outside its frame; thus she reverses the initial opposition between the stiff artificiality of the photographic image and the sheer vitality of the external world by attributing incontrovertible reality and momentousness to the reflection itself. In *Little History of Photography*, Benjamin describes the «destruction of the aura» of an artwork as «the peeling away of the object's shell» (1999, p. 519), but the uncovering of an inner layer of meaning is also the revelation of the 'optical unconscious'. In *The Lady in the Looking-Glass* the photograph, with its sharp exclusions, holds a static world, a world already fixed and finished. However, it also casts a special light that unveils the truth beyond appearances and finally exposes Isabella entirely drained of meaning, thus foregrounding a series of dichotomies – life and art, imagination and reality, the inner and the outer, words and pictures – that inform both this story and Woolf's aesthetic vision.

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