

The Flirtations among the Arts: Virginia Woolf's Essays on Literature and Visual Culture

Os namoros entre as artes: os ensaios de Virginia Woolf sobre literatura e cultura visual

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Abstract: The aim of this text is to discuss three essays and a short story by Virginia Woolf on the dialogue between literature and the visual arts: “Pictures” (1925), “The Cinema” (1926), “Three Pictures” (1929), and “Walter Sickert” (1934). “Three Pictures” appears classified as an essay in Leonard Woolf’s organized edition *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (1942), and as a short story in *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf* (1989), organized by Susan Dick. This aspect calls one’s attention to how Woolf uses creative strategies in her essays, thus blurring the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction. The discussion will highlight Woolf’s knowledge of visual art and culture so as to show, in the analysis of “Three Pictures”, the visual potential of the short story in dialogue with her critical principles.

Keywords: essay; visual art; cinema; interart studies; Virginia Woolf.

Resumo: O objetivo deste artigo é discutir três ensaios e um conto de Virginia Woolf sobre o diálogo entre a literatura e as artes visuais. São eles: “Pictures” (1925), “The Cinema” (1926), “Three Pictures” (1929) e “Walter Sickert” (1934). “Three Pictures” aparece classificado como ensaio no livro *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (1942), organizado por Leonard Woolf, e como conto na coletânea *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf* (1989), organizada por Susan Dick. Esse aspecto chama a atenção para o modo como Woolf faz uso de estratégias criativas em seus ensaios, de modo a esgarçar as fronteiras entre ficção e não-ficção. A discussão



busca enfatizar o conhecimento de Woolf sobre a arte e cultura visuais, a fim de mostrar, com a análise de “Three Pictures”, o potencial visual do conto em diálogo com os princípios críticos elaborados por ela.

Palavras-chave: ensaio; arte visual; cinema; estudos interartes; Virginia Woolf.

I think a great deal of my future, and settle what book I am to write – how I shall re-form the novel and capture multitudes of things at present fugitive, enclose the whole, and shape infinite strange shapes

(Woolf, 1977, p. 356).

Introduction

Virginia Woolf’s vast and prolific production includes essays that might contribute to a theory of interart studies, as for instance, “Pictures and Portraits” (1920), “Pictures” (1925), “The Cinema” (1926), “Three Pictures” (1929), “Walter Sickert” (1934) and “The Artist and Politics” (1936). As the titles already announce, in these essays Woolf reflects on issues associated with the image, both the image as represented in paintings (such as those by Walter Sickert) and the moving image (the movies). According to Claudia Tobin (2022, p. 9), “read together [these essays] illuminate the preoccupations and innovations of Woolf’s fiction and nonfiction, and stimulate new hybrids of artist, critic, and writer”. Furthermore, reading the essays as a group shows how literature might profit from the interaction of the arts, or what Woolf herself calls “the loves of the arts” or “the flirtations” among them:

Probably some professor has written a book on the subject, but it has not come our way. ‘The Loves of the Arts’ – that is more or less the title it would bear, and it would be concerned with the flirtations between music, letters, sculpture, and architecture, and the effects that the arts have had upon each other throughout the ages (Woolf, 2015b).

This is a passage from “Pictures”, an essay written in 1925, which shows, in a pioneering way, Woolf’s awareness concerning the hybrid nature of aesthetic creation. The essay already opens with a hypothesis, thus characterizing one of the strategies adopted in essay-writing. Here, Woolf ironically assumes the existence of academic material on the subject, but as it has not been available, she goes on arguing about the necessity to elaborate on it.

Although the history of the arts (literature included) has always been characterized by hybridism and dialogue, evincing the inexistence of purity, it is highly relevant to reflect on the aesthetic interaction of different artistic genres and expressions on theoretical and critical terms, so as to understand the rupture with artistic conventions and the erasure of aesthe-

tic boundaries. Woolf plays a significant role in this process – one might even think of it as a literary project –, since her essays, heterogeneous in their topics and style, illustrate what the *essay*, in its origin, meant: self-exercises that deny an authoritarian stance and embrace a critical attitude (Lima, 1946, p. 56). Being a highly creative author, Woolf's essays are also characterized by fictional strategies, an aspect that makes them ambivalent – such is the case with “Three Pictures”, inserted by Leonard Woolf in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*, and by Susan Dick in *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*. Here, we are going to consider “Three Pictures” as a short story, although we also recognize some of its passages as possessing the quality of essays.

Woolf's essays are characterized by such attributes of freedom, ambivalence, experimentation, multiple meanings, critical inquiry, curiosity and imaginative power. Woolf herself also reflected on the writing of essays. In “The Modern Essay”, published in *The Times Literary Supplement* in 1922, she points out the versatility of the essay: “The essay can be short or long, serious or trifling, about God and Spinoza, or about turtles at Cheapside” (Woolf, 1992, p. 40). For her, “a good essay must have [a] permanent quality about it; it must draw its curtain round us, but it must be a curtain that shuts us in, not out” (Woolf, 1992, p. 49).

Rachel Bowlby (1992, p. ix), who edited and introduced Woolf's *A Woman's Essays*, calls one's attention to the fact that “Virginia Woolf the novelist and Virginia Woolf the essayist are two writers who might seem to have very little in common”. The apparent difference would rest on a set of conventions that tends to attribute aesthetic value to the novels and commercial value to the essays, usually published in journalistic contexts, having been commissioned and thus written for money. In “The State of Nonfiction Today”, Philip Lopate (2013, p. 3, 5) also observes the condescending attitude towards nonfiction, as if it were inferior to fiction, the genre that has always held “a higher status in the literary pantheon”. Bowlby's arguments also include the fact that Woolf herself might have been responsible for such assumptions, since “in her diaries Woolf does not refer to her essays in the way that she does her novels, as part of a continuing and conscious project” (Bowlby, 1992, p. ix). As a result, the novels are often perceived as possessing a unity, linked to the experimental and highly modernist project Woolf develops, whereas the essays, varied in issues and style, would be characterized by a scattered and random nature. Actually, it is inherent to the essay's nature to reflect the fragmentation and discontinuity of reality: “the essay must allow totality in a trace” (Adorno, 2003, p. 35). Cynthia Ozick (2018, p. 230), who also wrote about the formal features of the essay, argues that one of the essayist's qualities is exactly his/her power to transform a world which is apparently chaotic and dispersive into a singular and solid imaginative picture.

Bowlby also declares that except for the feminist essays – *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*, which were published as separate books, and Michèle Barrett's edition, *Women and Writing* (1979), having texts that address the relation between women and tradition, women and fiction, women and (lack of) power, women and professions, as well as critical pieces on various women authors –, the other essays are about many different topics, and such a heterogeneous nature might have been responsible for a lack of an accurate appreciation of their relevance. Luckily, Woolf's *Oh, to be a Painter* (2022), organized and introduced by Claudia Tobin, also constitutes a response to the richness of Woolf's essays on visual culture, its impact on literature, and the possibility of studying them in dialogue. The volume gathers “some of [Woolf's] most arresting essays on art, from the early 1920s through the late 1930s, ranging from reviews of contemporary artists and exhibition catalogues to meditations on

the role of the artist in society” (Tobin, 2022, p. 9). In the Brazilian context, Tomaz Tadeu translated some of Woolf’s (2015a) essays and organized them in an edition in which they are named as poetical prose. The essays are framed under the following sections: life and art; the street and the home; the eye and the mind. These different editions of Woolf’s essays reveal singular looks at them and somehow respond to Bowlby’s (1992, p. X) complaint that “The writings on literature have usually been treated not in their own right, but as accessories to understanding what Woolf may have been trying to achieve in her fiction, considered as the true object of interest for her and for the readers”.

Actually, Bowlby’s arguments highlight a vast territory to be explored in Woolf’s production; as Bowlby observes, some of the essays are characterized by ambivalent and ambiguous statements, demanding a careful analysis “in their own right” so as to transcend such an accessory role. Considering the attributes of the essay as a genre, one could affirm that Woolf’s essays are experimental, ambiguous, seductive and highly imaginative and critical. They actually constitute reflections on a multiplicity of subjects, ranging from literature itself (“Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown”, “Modern Fiction”, “Craftsmanship”, “The Art of Fiction”, “Reading”, “The Art of Biography”); the literary tradition and its relation to women; articulations between literature and the other arts; considerations on the nature of essay-writing itself, as “The Decay of Essay-Writing”, “The Modern Essay” and “Montaigne” can attest; to more ordinary topics, as for instance, “Life Itself”, and broader political concerns, as “Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid” and “The Artist and Politics”.

The present paper somehow attempts at responding to Bowlby’s indirect and challenging invitation for one to consider Woolf’s essays “in their own right”. Among Woolf’s many essays, here I will consider “Pictures” (1925), “The Cinema” (1926), “Three Pictures” (1929), and “Walter Sickert” (1934),¹ in order to investigate: 1. the particular tone and style employed in the essays; 2. the issues addressed; 3. articulations among these essays that might contribute to a theory of interart studies. In different ways, these essays deal with the power of the image as represented in paintings, on screen and in literature. As Gillespie (1995, p. 2) argues: “[Woolf] invades the realm of the visual arts to learn and to commune with an outlook she finds not only alien but also compatible”.

“Pictures”

Besides speculating on the existence of a book entitled *The Loves of the Arts*, which would be concerned with the interrelations among the arts and the effects that they have had upon each other throughout time (Woolf, 2022, p. 35), in “Pictures”, Woolf reflects specifically on the influence of painting in literature. She affirms: “Were all modern paintings to be destroyed, a critic of the twenty-fifth century would be able to deduce from the works of Proust alone the existence of Matisse, Cézanne, Derain and Picasso [...]” (Woolf, 2022, p. 35). The argument leads her to reflect further on the visual quality of the literature produced by certain authors, such as (besides Proust), Hardy, Flaubert and Conrad, who use their eyes with accuracy and subtlety, differently from previous writers. Woolf recognizes the difficulty of justifying the

¹ These are the dates of publication. See References for the dates through which the texts will be referenced along the paper.

presence of visual expressiveness in literature. She remarks that “a writer whose writing appeals mainly to the eye is a bad writer” (Woolf, 2022, p. 35-36); in other words, objects should not be described as ends in themselves, but as seen through the eyes of characters, whose emotions should dominate the scene. The fact is, as her argument goes, writers appreciate paintings – in this case, modern paintings – because they might help them with their own art, stimulating and challenging them in their own (literary) medium.

In “Pictures”, differently from what one notices in “Walter Sickert”, Woolf criticizes storytelling pictures and emphasizes the silence and reticences of painting, even including Sickert among what she calls the silent painters: “[...] painters lose their power directly [when] they attempt to speak. They must say what they have to say by shading greens into blues, posing block upon block” (Woolf, 2022, p. 38). Here, there seems to be a more precise boundary between painting and literary writing, a position changed in a period of nine years, separating “Pictures” and “Walter Sickert”. In this latter essay, Sickert is considered, among other attributes, as a literary painter. As we mentioned at the beginning of this text, Woolf’s essays are also characterized by ambivalence and contradictions. That is why considering some of her essays in dialogue is so relevant, because it allows one to perceive not only the resonances among them, but also the writer’s process of revisiting previous ideas.

“Walter Sickert”

A significant essay about the relationship between image and word, painting and literature is Woolf’s “Walter Sickert: A Conversation”, published in *The Captain’s Death Bed and Other Essays*.² The text is constructed as if it were a dialogue (though most of the time in reported speech) among friends, while dining together. The question “But when were picture galleries invented?” (Woolf, 1978, p. 187) serves to foster an interesting conversation about the relevance of the eye for humanity, about Walter Sickert’s paintings, about the relationship between his portraits and biography; his paintings and realist literature, on the one hand; his paintings and poetry, on the other. As the opinions are presented in a dialogue form, ideas are compared and responded, others are questioned, thus giving the impression that the essay is actually an attempt at constructing an argument about Sickert’s art.

Before concentrating on Sickert, the conversation is about colour and about “how different people see colour differently” (Woolf, 1978, p. 188); the argument is that not only painters themselves are affected by their place of birth when they create, but that children also view colour differently from adults, mainly if they are politicians and businessmen, and spend their days “in an office leading to atrophy of the eye” (Woolf, 1978, p. 188). As it is typical with Woolf, in order to point out the relevance of developing a capacity for appreciating colour, she presents a story about insects “found in the primeval forests of South America, in whom the eye is so developed that they are all eye [...] – insects who are born with the flowers and die when the flowers fade” (Woolf, 1978, p. 188-189). Such insects are referred to as “little creatures drinking crimson until they became crimson” (Woolf, 1978, p. 189). This story leads one of the people to question: “Were we once insects like that, too [...], all eye? Do we still preserve the capacity for drinking, eating, indeed becoming colour furled up in us, waiting proper conditions to deve-

² In some editions, the title appears as only “Walter Sickert”, without the subtitle. See references.

lop?” (Woolf, 1978, p. 189). As one might notice, Woolf makes use of hypothetical ideas to discuss, in an experimental mode, the effect of modern conditions upon one’s senses.

This initial dialogue serves as a transition for them to concentrate on Sickert, whose exhibition was shown in London at the time. At first, Sickert is conceived as a biographer: “When he sits a man or woman down in front of him he sees the whole of the life that has been lived to make that face. [...] Not in our time will anyone write a life as Sickert paints it” (Woolf, 1978, p. 191-192). The comparison suggests a parallelism between two different aesthetic representations (as the verbs ‘write’ and ‘paint’ show), and yet, despite the difference, there is the possibility of bringing them together, since both have the potential to reflect “a life”. Another person argues: “Words are an impure medium; better far to have been born into the silent kingdom of paint” (Woolf, 1978, p. 192). To the alleged silence of painting, another interlocutor responds: “But to me Sickert always seems more of a novelist than a biographer [...]. He likes to set his characters in motion, to watch them in action. As I remember it, his show was full of pictures that might be stories [...]” (Woolf, 1978, p. 192).

Clearly, it is the knowledge one has about literature, about narrative, that supports such comparisons. If Sickert’s “characters” are endowed with movement and evoke stories, if his portraits lead one to rescue the whole of the life behind them, painting – at least as Sickert creates it – is not “silent” at all: “The figures are motionless, of course, but each has been seized in a moment of crisis; it is difficult to look at them and not to invent a plot, to hear what they are saying” (Woolf, 1978, p. 192). The terms “action”, “crisis” and “movement” endow the pictures with a subjectivity that transcends the boundaries of the framework, thus allowing for an expansion of the paintings’ supposed meaning.

After characterizing Sickert as a ‘biographer’ and a ‘novelist’, another person makes several observations about the kinds of people that inhabit his paintings, and the fact that “there is an intimacy in [his] pictures between his people and their rooms” (Woolf, 1978, p. 195) – that is, the objects in the rooms are expressive of their owner – so as to conclude that Sickert is a realist, mostly interested in the life of the middle class:

He likes bodies that work, hands that work, faces that have been lined and suppld and seamed by work, because, in working, people take unconscious gestures, and their faces have the expressiveness of unconsciousness – a look that the very rich, the very beautiful and the very sophisticated seldom possess (Woolf, 1978, p. 195).

Other comments on Sickert’s paintings come to the point where they attribute to him the qualities of a poet, making the spectator not imagine plots anymore but behold a vision – visions of beauty and his tangible colours; also the beauty of human nature: “He never goes far from the sound of the human voice, from the mobility and idiosyncrasy of the human figure. As a poet, we must liken him to the poets who haunt taverns and sea beaches, where the fishermen are tumbling their silver catch into wicker baskets” (Woolf, 1978, p. 197). This part of the conversation seductively invites the reader to search for Sickert’s paintings and appreciate their visions of beauty.

By reuniting seven or eight people who talk about painting and literature, and by juxtaposing different opinions and arguments about Sickert’s paintings, Woolf raises relevant observations about the particularities of each art, at the same time that she subverts their supposedly fixed limits. Throughout the text, these different views offer significant reflec-

tions on the nature of aesthetic interactions and hybrid artists: “Let us hold painting by the hand a little longer, for though they must part in the end, painting and writing have much to tell each other: they have much in common. The novelist after all wants to make us see” (Woolf, 1978, p. 198). These arguments inevitably lead the reader to question: how differently from painters do novelists make us see?

In the last part of the text, Woolf brings Sickert’s own words: “I have always been a literary painter, thank goodness, like all the decent painters” (Woolf, 1978, p. 201), thus corroborating the whole conversation on the relationship between his paintings, biography, realist novel and poetry:

Among the many kinds of artists, it may be that there are some who are hybrid. Some, that is to say, bore deeper and deeper into the stuff of their own art; others are always making raids into the lands of others. Sickert it may be is among the hybrids, the raiders (Woolf, 1978, p. 201).

Interestingly, this conclusion on Sickert’s art could well be applied to Woolf herself, whose literature constitutes a substantial evidence of hybridism and raids into the lands of others. Likewise, “[h]er writings continue to stimulate countless painters and sculptors, choreographers, and filmmakers to explore the permeable boundaries between the visual and the verbal” (Tobin, 2022, p. 88).

“The Cinema”

I initially came across “The Cinema”, originally published in 1926, through other critics’ words, second-hand sources, as for instance, Robert Stam (2008) and Linda Hutcheon (2006), in their discussions on film adaptation. In “Introduction: The Theory and Practice of Adaptation”, Stam (2008, p. 4) accuses Woolf of reinscribing “the axiomatic superiority of literature to film”. In *A Theory of Adaptation*, Hutcheon (2006, p. 3) refers to how Woolf viewed the transposition from literature to film as a simplified process.

Although “The Cinema” is not specifically about adaptation, both critics quote Woolf to refer to the conventional prejudice against adaptations, and attribute to her a reductionist and biased view of the issue. Yet, Woolf refers to several other topics in her essay, and what she says about adaptation should be considered in the broader context of the essay. For instance, Hutcheon herself also points out Woolf’s awareness concerning the singularities of verbal and audiovisual semiotic languages: “Yet she [Woolf] also foresaw that film had the potential to develop its own independent idiom: ‘cinema has within its grasp innumerable symbols for emotions that have so far failed to find expression in words’ [Woolf, 1978, p. 183]” (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 3).

Woolf’s recognition of the difference between verbal and cinematic language, and the power of film to represent emotions in a way literature might not accomplish it already shows the need to analyze her speculations in detail.

The reading of the source text, “The Cinema”, in *The Captain’s Death Bed and Other Essays* (1978), revealed a different perspective to me: actually, despite the adoption of an aggressive and ironical tone, I immediately perceived that Woolf was concerned with a variety of sub-

jects: the different roles of the eye and the brain in the apprehension of contents and subjectivity; the effect of photography to differently show real life; the specific capacities of verbal and audiovisual languages, and thus the different ways of conveying emotion, such as fear; the potential to show the passage of time; and the simplified and superficial transposition of literary texts (the example she gives is Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*) to screen.

As a matter of fact, Woolf's negative reaction to the adaptation of literature comes as follows:

All the famous novels of the world, with their well-known characters and their famous scenes, only asked, it seemed, to be put on the films. What could be easier and simpler? The cinema fell upon its prey with immense rapacity, and to the moment largely subsists upon the body of its unfortunate victim (Woolf, 1978, p. 182).

Considering this passage in isolation, one can hardly agree with Woolf: first, if literature and cinema constitute different languages, why would it be simple and easy to transpose novels to screen? After all, it is not a matter of mere transference of characters and scenes from one medium to another, but creative interpretation in a different semiotic language. Brian McFarlane (1996) makes a distinction between *transfer* and *adaptation proper* exactly to argue for the intricate process inherent to semiotic transposition. Furthermore, the metaphors of predatory (for cinema) and prey and victim (for literature) are endowed with relations of power and aggressiveness that do not allow for the different, playful and creative ways texts can be reactivated and responded to when transposed to another medium.

But considering the passage in the context of the adaptation of *Anna Karenina*, it is almost impossible not to agree with Woolf. In fact, her complaint is against superficial adaptations that attempt at recreating characters based, for instance, on appearance, and thus neglecting their psychological density. In *Anna Karenina*'s case: "All the emphasis is laid by the cinema upon her teeth, her pearls, and her velvet" (Woolf, 1978, p. 182). Interestingly, Woolf does not merely criticize this specific adaptation, but by posing a crucial question, she redirects the issue from the notion of faithfulness to creative adaptation:

None of these things has the least connexion with the novel that Tolstoy wrote, and it is only when we give up trying to connect the pictures with the book that we guess from some accidental scene – like the gardener mowing the lawn – what the cinema might do if left to its own devices.
But what, then, are its devices? If it ceased to be a parasite, how would it walk erect? (Woolf, 1978, p. 183).

The repetition of the metaphor related to 'predatory' and barbarous relations, in which cinema would play the role of a 'parasite', getting advantage of literature's energy, raises a very relevant question and vindication: that cinema would 'walk erect', i.e., without the support of literature, without its 'crutches'. Again, let us remember that Woolf wrote this text in 1926. And yet, her claim for specific cinematic devices so as to make cinema free from literature and develop its own language is really surprising and challenging. Actually, both critique

and claim have characterized much of the subsequent debate on adaptation, decades afterwards, when theories on the field started to flourish and eventually develop.

Besides adaptation, Woolf's essay refers to other significant topics. As it is typical in essay-writing, here Woolf also adopts a tone of curiosity and inquiry, asking questions in a vivid process of critical thinking: "Is there, we ask, some secret language which we feel and see, but never speak, and, if so, could this be made visible to the eye? Is there any characteristic which thought possesses that can be rendered visible without the help of words? (Woolf, 1978, p. 183)".

Clearly, Woolf is referring to a kind of non-verbal sensorial language – typically visual – and to different ways of representing thought. Such musings lead her to make further conjectures on the subsequent development of cinema, from the 1920s on, taking *Dr. Caligari* as a relevant reference so as to point out the power of filmic language: "For a moment [the shadow] 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" (Woolf, 1978, p. 183). This expressionist film constitutes material for Woolf to think on the relationship between thought, emotion and symbolic representation.

According to David Trotter (2005, p. 13-26), Woolf's "The Cinema" responds to three kinds of film: documentary, mainstream narrative, and avant-garde. He also observes how the cinema helps her to think about narrative in terms of continuity, movement and action, and how these might affect space. He declares: "Cinema had taught her a crucial lesson about constitutive absence. It gave her a productive shape to her enduring preoccupation with 'the thing that exists when we aren't there'" (Trotter, 2005, p. 21).

Sharon Ouditt (1999) also welcomes Woolf's observations about the new medium. For her, Woolf

recognizes in the cinema just that – immense potential for formal innovation [...]. She is beginning an exploration, in other words, of the relationship between the emotive and formal capacities of the moving image and, very probably, considering them for use in her own work (Ouditt, 1999, p. 147).³

Leslie Kathleen Hankins (1997) is another critic who offers a substantial discussion of "The Cinema", mainly because she inserts the text in a cultural context that includes cinema itself, film forums and also theories on the new medium, also available to Woolf. In her view, "The Cinema" is evidence of Woolf's multidisciplinary aesthetics: "[her] essay challenged her spatial theory, remapped the intersections between literature and the other arts, and expanded the scope of literary art" (Hankins, 1997, p. 148).

Therefore, though writing about cinema at a time when cinematic language was still trying to find its own grammar, and fighting to overcome technical difficulties, Woolf was already alert to topics that would become crucial in the subsequent discussions of film language, film adaptation and intermedial studies. Therefore, far from deploring the art of cinema, Woolf reflects on the differences characterizing the writer's and filmmaker's works, attributing the latter a promising future: "We get intimations only in the chaos of the streets,

³ Ouditt's argument is made evident in "Words Are an Impure Medium: Intermedial Relations in Virginia Woolf's 'Kew Gardens'" (Azerêdo; Nóbrega, 2022).

perhaps, when some momentary assembly of colour, sound, movement, suggests that here is a scene waiting a new art to be transfixed" (Woolf, 1978, p. 186).

"Three Pictures": The Ambivalence of Visual Frames

As previously mentioned, "Three Pictures" was originally published in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (1942), but also appears in *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf* (1989), organized by Susan Dick, thus considered as a short story. The different contexts of publication that classify "Three Pictures" initially as an essay and later on as a short story call one's attention to Woolf's experimentation in terms of genres and her often breaking of literary boundaries. Here I will align with Susan Dick and discuss "Three Pictures" as a short story, and as a substantial example of Woolf's innovating literary project.

As the title already anticipates, "Three Pictures" is composed of three sections/frames, named "The First Picture", "The Second Picture", and "The Third Picture", which at first appear to be disconnected. The text begins with a very strong declaration: "It is impossible that one should not see pictures [...]" (Woolf, 1970, p. 12). The argument is elaborated so as to point out that the naturalness inherent to this inevitable gesture – reading pictures, making pictures out of daily scenes, while one observes life – also contains the risk of misreading them; not only does one frame certain fragments of reality but ends up inventing stories about them. The narrator further reflects on how certain situations actually appear to us as pictures, or what the narrative voice calls "picturesque" (Woolf, 1970, p. 12), as already possessing a visual appeal. This gesture of looking and attempting at interpreting the picture raises issues associated with a metafictional impulse, since the narrator lays bare strategies related to the very production of the narrative, in which inferences are made, blanks are filled in, and information supplied. Actually, "Three Pictures" illustrates Woolf's definition of imagination as "the picture making power" (Woolf, 1982, p. 176 *apud* Gillespie, 1995, p. 18), since the reader grasps the narrative's elements – or at least there is a simulation of that – at the very moment the narrator visualizes and represents them.

The first picture is hypothetically entitled "The sailor's homecoming" and is described as follows: "A fine young sailor carrying a bundle; a girl with her hand on his arm; neighbours gathering round; a cottage garden ablaze with flowers [...]" (Woolf, 1970, p. 12). Let us notice the strategy of enumeration of the picture's elements (sailor, bundle, girl, neighbours, garden), as if they had been apprehended as "takes" of a scene. The narrator continues: "[...] as one passed one read at the bottom of that picture that the sailor was back from China, and there was a fine spread waiting for him in the parlour, and he had a present for his young wife in his bundle; and she was soon going to bear him their first child" (Woolf, 1970, p. 12). In a metafictional gesture, the narrator 'reads' the picture so as to enlarge its frame, so as to make the 'takes' of the scene cohere into a narrative of a happy family sharing their happiness with their neighbours.

As the observer passes the 'picture', she goes on reflecting about other details, such as the colour of the woman's dress, of the sailor's eyes, and a sandy cat round the cottage door, so as "to fill the picture as completely as [she] could" (Woolf, 1970, p. 13). Even after some time, the picture keeps returning to her mind, thus making "the imagination supply other pictures springing from that first one" (Woolf, 1970, p. 13). The subsequent appearance of the picture

in the narrator's mind reveals its impact, thus provoking a necessity or desire to fill in and supply its vision, thus enlarging the initial picture through other actions that interfere in the spatial configurations: the movement from the garden to the cottage door and the parlour; the girl's present, brought in the bundle, now placed on the chimneypiece. The narrator keeps offering other 'takes', other flashes, as that of the girl pregnant and sewing her baby's clothes; and Rogers (only by now he is named) smoking his pipe. The reader feels as if entering their house together with their neighbours and also celebrating with the girl the sailor's return. The picture ends up simulating a design characterized by multiple perspectives, movement and depth, thus resembling a cinematic camera rendition.

These passages exemplify the narrative potentiality of certain pictures, as if their borders (or frames) did not limit their contents or prevent the reader/spectator from musing on a larger context informing the pictures' focus and backing their significance. According to C. Ruth Miller (1988, p. ix):

In Virginia Woolf's writings, the frame is often portrayed as a representative of the ordering powers of art. Framing encourages the selective vision needed to perceive the enclosed scene as a unified work of art, but Virginia Woolf was suspicious of the limitations and distortions that such a process entails.

Miller's argument supports the relationship between framing and the metafictional strategy that has been pointed out earlier; her declaration also suggests an ambivalence in terms of the potentials of framing for enclosing and limiting a scene, on the one hand, and the possibility of enlarging the scene by transcending the frame, on the other. According to Jacques Aumont (2004, p. 114), "to create an image always involves the presentation of an equivalent of a certain field—a visible field and a spectral field, and both together at the same time". In the case of "Three Pictures", the narrator initially represents the image, the picture, the way she views it; but this initial vision is further enlarged by her imagination, through a process of supplying the picture with other elements, thus articulating presence and absence, inclusion and exclusion, visibility and imagination.

The second picture does not have a title, but could have been called "A Hideous Cry": "In the middle of the night a loud cry rang through the village. Then there was a sound of something scuffling; and then dead silence" (Woolf, 1970, p. 13). It is interesting to remark that this second picture is not visual, but auditory, as the expressions "loud cry", "scuffling sound" and "silence" illustrate. As such, it constitutes a rupture when one thinks about the association between picture and visual property. The narrator contrasts the cry—characterized as ominous—with the serenity of the night, with its quiet fields and shining stars. And although she guesses that "it was a woman's voice" [...], and "it was as if human nature had cried out against some iniquity, some inexpressible horror" (Woolf, 1970, p. 14), she fails in her attempt at figuring out what is behind the cry. The reference to dead silence appears three times, and also contrasts with the narrator's expectations that other elements might clarify the mystery: "But no light came. No feet were heard. There was no second cry. The first had been swallowed up, and there was dead silence" (Woolf, 1970, p. 14).

Differently from the first picture, which brims in storytelling potential, here the narrator lacks data to complement the scene in a sensible way, though the effect of the cry keeps reverberating in her mind:

One lay in the dark listening intently. It had been merely a voice. There was nothing to connect it with. No picture of any sort came to interpret it, to make it intelligible to the mind. But as the dark arose at last all one saw was an obscure human form, almost without shape, raising a gigantic arm in vain against some overwhelming iniquity (Woolf, 1970, p. 14).

By affirming that “[t]here was nothing to connect it with” and that “[n]o picture of any sort came to interpret it, to make it intelligible to the mind”, the narrator suggests that listening and looking are different senses when one considers their potential to inform and represent. Could one affirm that listening is more limiting than looking when one reads/interprets life? Does visualizing entail more information than merely hearing? The fact is, the cry is saturated with disruption – it is loud, hideous and ominous – and yet, the narrator fails in her interpretation of it.

The change of setting in time, from day to night, also affects the initial apprehension (both by the narrator and the reader) of the village. The atmosphere of lightness and happiness is now replaced by bad augury and horror, creating fear and suspense; the narrative also keeps suspended – after all, “[t]here was nothing to connect it with. No picture of any sort came to interpret it, to make it intelligible to the mind”. The narrator fails as a storyteller, lacking concrete elements with which to continue the story. Here one feels a lack of narrativity in favour of more pictorial qualities, which enhance a sinister atmosphere, as the terms “obscure human form”, “without shape” and “gigantic arm” might confirm.

In the third picture, that could be entitled “The Churchyard” or “The Picnic by the Grave”, the narrator/spectator takes advantage of the fine weather to walk around the countryside. Everything is serene and peaceful: the valley, the farmhouses, the hills, the sheep, the puppy and the butterflies are referred to as elements of that quietness and stability. The narrator says:

All was as quiet, as safe could be. Yet, one kept thinking, a cry had rent it; all this beauty had been an accomplice that night; had consented; to remain calm, to be still beautiful; at any moment it might be sundered again. This goodness, this safety were only on the surface (Woolf, 1970, p. 15).

The third picture refers back to the cry, thus producing a first connection, a kind of narrative sequence with the second picture. Furthermore, as the narrator says, in order “to cheer oneself out of this apprehensive mood one turned to the picture of the sailor’s homecoming” (Woolf, 1970, p. 15) – which makes another narrative connection, this time, with the first picture. While rescuing various little details of the first picture, the narrator persuades herself that there is nothing treacherous or sinister beneath that surface of serenity:

And so one turned back home, with one’s mind fixed on the sailor and his wife, making up picture after picture of them so that one picture after another of happiness and satisfaction might be laid over that unrest, that hideous cry, until it was crushed and silenced by their pressure out of existence (Woolf, 1970, p. 15-16).

It becomes clear that the narrator experiences a struggle, which might be expressed by the contrast between happiness (the first picture: “the sailor’s homecoming”) and unrest (the second picture: “A Hideous Cry”). The struggle between these dissonant feelings is

resolved at the end through another picture, “the third picture”, now visualized in the churchyard: “A man was digging a grave, and children were picnicking at the side of it while he worked” (Woolf, 1970, p. 16).

This picture of celebration and death (echoing *Mrs. Dalloway*) also reminds the reader of a poem entitled “We Are Seven”, by William Wordsworth, in which a child refuses to accept the death of her two siblings, maintaining, instead, the belief that they somehow go on living – “their graves are green, they may be seen” (Wordsworth, 1979) – and that she can play by their graves. Similarly, here in “Three Pictures”, the children also remain indifferent to the weight of death, and go on picnicking by the graves. But differently from the temporary childish and innocent vision, this time the image of death prevails:

Who was going to be buried, I asked. Had old Mr. Dodson died at last? ‘Oh! no. It’s for young Rogers, the sailor,’ the woman answered, staring at me. ‘He died two nights ago, of some foreign fever. Didn’t you hear his wife?’ She rushed into the road and cried out (Woolf, 1970, p. 16).

The woman’s answer supplies the narrative with the missing elements, by justifying the hideous cry and its effect of a sinister and heavy atmosphere, at the time enigmatic for the narrator. The last picture, in its images of childhood and adulthood, picnic and grave, life and death, summarizes and encompasses the first picture (celebration) and the second (a hideous cry) as a whole. At the end of the short story, whose last sentence is “What a picture it made!” (Woolf, 1970, p. 16), the articulation between the “three pictures” is established, thus further problematizing the vulnerability of happiness and life, on the level of experience, and the relationship between pictorial, auditory and verbal/ narrative qualities, on the level of formal construction. More than that: the pictures may also be viewed in terms of audiovisual (having the cry as soundtrack), moving takes or frames of a narrative, thus composing a large mosaic of audiovisual storytelling.

Concluding Remarks

The discussion of these texts as a group reveals the relevance of audiovisual arts in Woolf’s literary creations. Both “Pictures” and “Walter Sickert” refer to the dialogue between painting and literature, but whereas in the first she comments on the influence of painting upon the writers’ works, in the latter she reflects on how Sickert’s paintings could be viewed as “literary” pieces. In “Walter Sickert”, several interesting points are raised on the relations between literature and painting: how can paintings tell stories? What kind of narratives do paintings tell – realist, biographical, lyrical? How poetical can paintings be? Can portraits tell a life, slices of life? In what ways does this relate to Woolf’s fragmentary and spasmodic characterizations? Such questions make the reader activate not only the knowledge about another aesthetic creation but also the effects and tensions resulting from their interaction in Woolf’s literature. After all, “the novelist is always saying to himself, How can I bring the sun on to my page? How can I show the night and the moon rising?” (Woolf, 1978, p. 198).

“The Cinema” constitutes a pioneering discussion of the peculiar ways the eye and the brain can apprehend materials on screen and on the page. The references to the adapta-

tion of *Anna Karenina* constitute provocations on the issue of (shallow) adaptations, whereas the comments on *Dr. Calligari* acknowledge the power of cinematic language to suggest and represent feelings in a way which seems impossible for literature. And yet, critics have also pointed out how Woolf took advantage of filmic language to endow some of her narrative pieces – “Time Passes” in *To the Lighthouse*,⁴ “Kew Gardens”, “Three Pictures” – with movement and spatial configurations that resemble cinematic strategies, such as takes of scenes, long sequences, transitions from *close* to panoramic shots.

“Three Pictures”, whose first paragraph adopts the tone of essay-writing (let us remember that Leonard Woolf included this text in a book of essays), is a very interesting and original short story dealing with the relations between literature and the making of pictures; using frames for certain ordinary scenes; the possibility of enlarging and expanding the frames so as to endow the pictures with storytelling potential, enabling them “to speak”. Differently from Walter Sickert, whose discussion on the interaction of visual and verbal material departs from paintings in galleries, specifically Sickert’s paintings, constituting already flashes of representation, in “Three Pictures”, the pictures are in daily scenes, in life itself, and in the spectator’s/reader’s capacity to frame, read and appreciate them, so as to compose, in a metafictional fashion, stories of life. In “Three Pictures”, Woolf invites the reader to embark onto a trajectory of picture, auditory and storytelling-making, in which imagination and creativity are the guides. Therefore, not only are the essays under scrutiny here substantial evidences of Woolf’s openness to the other arts – they also show her power in the art of essay-writing, contributing as material for the reader to appreciate her literature in a larger context of creation.

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⁴ Cf. Laura Marcus (2015, p. 244), “Film and Modernist Literature”.

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