

Reality or Deception: The Differences between Writing about It and Taking Pictures of It: Paul Strand and Virginia Woolf

Abstract: The interesting thing about modernism is that, while the other aesthetic trends were born out of a dire need for opposition – meaning that, once a certain form of artistic manifestation had “oversaturated the market”, a new one would emerge only to take things in the completely opposite direction. From this point of view, modernism becomes an abrupt break with all tradition and reality as it was understood, the result, as far as individual artists are concerned, being a “high degree of self-signature” in the sense that each work was to have “a structure appropriate only to that work”. In other words, it is impossible to speak about a style for the age; instead, discussions can and should be made only about the style of specific works of art. My purpose in this article is to achieve a proper understanding about what can stand more authentically as being real in the fields of Literature and Photography through the works of Paul Strand and Virginia Woolf.

Keywords: Photography, Literature, Paul Strand, Virginia Woolf, Aesthetics

1. The Nature of Modernism

Taking into consideration the fact that both Paul Strand and Virginia Woolf are powerful representatives of modernism, it is essential that, before we are to discuss these two individual artistic figures and the aesthetic relationship that exists between them, we analyze the hallmarks of modernism as a new form of understanding and interpreting both reality and the arts.

In “The Name and Nature of Modernism” (1976, pp. 19-55), Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane speak about the fact that “the twentieth century brought us a new art” and about the fact that modernism was born out of “the historicist feeling that we live in totally novel times, that contemporary history is the source of our significance, that we are derivatives not of the past but of the surrounding and enfolding environment or scenario”.

Indeed, the First World War, Marx’s, Freud’s and Darwin’s theories, as well as capitalism and the constant industrial acceleration have all led to what Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane call “the scenario of our chaos”, the purpose of modernism thus being to respond to all of these changes taking place in reality and in society.

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The interesting thing about modernism is that, while the other aesthetic trends were born out of a dire need for opposition – meaning that, once a certain form of artistic manifestation had “oversaturated the market”, a new one would emerge only to take things in the completely opposite direction – this particular cultural movement, as Herbert Read (1933, pp. 58-59, 67) points out, was “not so much a revolution, which implies a turning over, even a turning back, but rather a break-up, a devolution, some would say a dissolution”.

From this point of view, modernism becomes an abrupt break with all tradition, the result, as far as individual artists are concerned, being a “high degree of self-signature” in the sense that each work was to have “a structure appropriate only to that work”. In other words, it is impossible to speak about a style for the age; instead, discussions can and should be made only about the style of specific works of art.

As Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane point out, “modernism was in most countries an extraordinary compound of the futuristic and the nihilistic, the revolutionary and the conservative, the naturalistic and the symbolistic, the romantic and the classical. It was a celebration of a technological age and a condemnation of it; an excited acceptance of the belief that the old régimes of culture were over, and a deep despairing in the face of that fear; a mixture of convictions that the new forms were escapes from historicism and the pressures of the time with convictions that they were precisely the living expressions of these things”.

According to Roland Barthes, the fact that modernist art is the conflicting space of so many trends, discourses, voices, styles, devices, cultures and so on is the reason why its artistic products, taken as a whole, might seem fragmentary, illogical, inchoate and sometimes unfocused.

The fact that modernism is to set the foundations for a break with tradition by rejecting its authority, norms and conventions, and by turning to experimentalism is also discussed by Liz Wells in “Photography: A Critical Introduction” (2004, p. 19), her view being that modernism wanted to produce “a new kind of world” and “new kinds of human beings to people it”.

Last, but not least, reference must be made to Jürgen Habermas’ opinion, expressed in “Modernity – An Incomplete Project” (1998, p. 5), that “modernity lives on the experience of rebelling against all that is normative” and that the unique trait of modernism consists in its decision “to revolt against the normalizing functions of tradition”.

As far as the relationship between the creator of art and the receiver of art is concerned, it is mandatory to point out that modernism brought about the so-called “death of the author” and “birth of the reader”, meaning that a considerable amount of attention and great importance is given to the process of receiving and understanding art. The creator tends to fade into

the background, while the beholder is left alone to make sense of the world in and beyond the artistic creation he is faced with.

2. Photography as an Art-Form Takes the Stage

If it is to be properly understood, the art of photography must be traced back to its origins and discussed within the general context in which it emerged and grew.

Keeping this in mind, Paul Valéry's essay, "The Centenary of Photography" (1980, pp. 191-198), gains a considerable amount of importance for our discussion. In it, it is said that "when photography first made its appearance, the descriptive genre in Letters was becoming an all-invading fashion" and that, because of this, "the background and outward aspects of life figured almost disproportionately in works of verse and prose alike".

In the same essay, Paul Valéry points out that it was with Daguerre that "the photographic vision was born and it spread by singular leaps and bounds throughout the world".

The status of photography as a form of art has long been questioned, ever since this new type of artistic manifestation emerged: according to Paul Weiss (1961, pp. 216-218) "they [photographers] have little and sometimes even no appreciation of the aesthetic values of experience. And when they do have such appreciation it is rarely relevant to their purposes. One need not be an artist to use a camera with brilliance" and, as far as Charles Baudelaire is concerned (1980, pp. 83-89), "the photographic industry" is nothing more than "the refuge of all failed painters with too little talent, or too lazy to complete their studies".

It was Alfred Stieglitz who introduced photography as a form of art and who tried to free photography from the hallmarks of painting; in order to achieve this, he encouraged photographers to make the most of what the medium of photography had to offer (the ability to create clear contours and well-differentiated textures, something which was impossible to do when painting).

In "Pictorial Photography" (1980, pp. 115-123), Alfred Stieglitz speaks about photography as an art-form and about its ability to convey various ideas and emotions: his claim is that, before being fully understood, photography "was looked upon as the bastard of science and art, hampered and held back by the one, denied and ridiculed by the other" and that it was quite a while before photography "took a definite shape in which it could be pursued as such by those who loved art and sought some medium other than brush or pencil through which to give expression to their ideas".

In his attempt to establish photography as a form of art, Alfred Stieglitz also speaks about three-types of photographers: "the ignorant, the purely

technical and the artistic”. From his point of view, photography as art can only be created by those photographers belonging to the third class, the ones who “devote the best part of their lives to the work”. For them, “lens, camera, plate, developing-baths, printing process, and the like” are “tools for the elaboration of their ideas” and not “tyrants to enslave and dwarf them”.

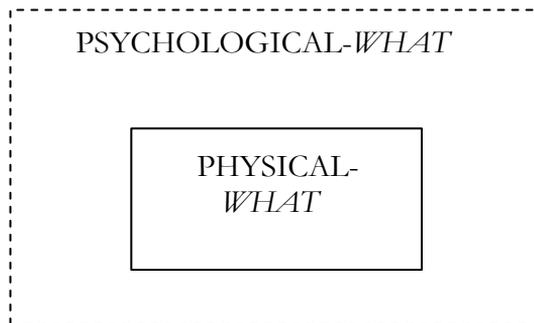
Therefore, we can conclude that, in the course of the process of establishing itself as a righteous self-standing form of art, the greatest threat that photography had to face – but that it eventually surpassed – was its comparison to painting, and that the solution found in order to deal with this issue consisted in making the most of what photography could do and that painting was unable to perform: create clear lines and textures, and focus on shape rather than on color.

3. Reality or Deception: The Differences between Writing about It and Taking Pictures of It

When it comes to discussing the relationship between reality and literature or photography as ways of relating to it, the distinction that Roland Barthes makes between “distributional” and “integrational” narrative functions proves to be a worthy starting-point, even though this classification is mostly used when discussing literary works of art and their on-screen adaptations.

Also called “functions proper”, the distributional functions refer to actions and events, in other words to the physical-*what* that happens to be in the spotlight at a certain moment. In contrast, the integrational functions – also called “indices” – refer to the psychological-*what*, meaning notations of atmosphere and of what is actually going on inside a character’s mind.

For a better understanding of the way in which the functions proper and the indices work, the following scheme is to be considered:



In our opinion, the indices function as a “halo” surrounding the functions proper, their purpose being to add meaning and substance to the physical elements that the artist decides to deal with.

When it comes to literature and photography, and the way in which they deal with reality, it is obvious that the main difference between them comes from the way in which they deal with the integrational functions: a modernism writer deals with the inner workings of the character quite easily (techniques such as that of free indirect speech or that of stream of consciousness are the ones most commonly used), and powerful descriptions can always be introduced as a way to convey the general atmosphere, while the photographer sometimes has to exaggerate certain features, such as character apparel and face expression by means of color, texture or clarity of line in order to reach the same result.

If literature, when recording reality, can choose to focus on specific details and leave out the aspects that it deems irrelevant and unnecessary, photography, as Edward Weston (1980, pp. 169-175) points out, has the benefit of an “amazing precision of definition, especially in the recording of fine detail”, being “entirely made out of tiny particles” that give “a special tension to the image”.

Thus, as Liz Wells (2004, p. 20) states, photography “undermines the structure of conventional narrative” by recording and conveying a multitude of visual details concerting reality all in the same time.

This difference between photographic and literary approaches towards reality is also noted by Susan Sontag (2008, pp. 3-16, 22-24, 54-55), who speaks about the fact that literary descriptions are usually subjective, while photography leans more towards objectivity: “while a painting or a prose description can never be other than a narrowly selective interpretation, a photograph can be treated as a narrowly selective transparency”.

It is Roland Barthes (2000, pp. 3-6, 63-64, 67-70, 73-77) who will introduce the concept of “photographic referent”, as opposed to what it usually understood through the concept of “referent” in the field of linguistics; the “photographic referent” is to be defined as follows: “not the optionally real thing to which an image or a sign refers but the necessarily real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph”.

Last, but not least, reference must be made to Paul Valéry’s opinion (“The Centenary of Photography”) that photography can “prompt us to revive, if not rejuvenate, the ancient and difficult problem of objectivity” and that “the snapshot has rectified our errors both of deficiency and of excess”, showing us “what we would see if we were uniformly sensitive to everything that light imprints upon our retinas”.

4. Paul Strand and Virginia Woolf – Aesthetic Points of Convergence and of Divergence

In discussing the aesthetic relationship existing between Paul Strand and Virginia Woolf as representatives of modernism, one must first analyze what each of them understood through modernism and what each considered that their role was within this new cultural context. Therefore, reference must be made to the way in which Paul Strand and Virginia Woolf viewed the artistic manifestations existing before them (the so-called photographic and literary tradition, respectively) and the art that they themselves were to create, based on the principles that they were to set for themselves.

As we have already discussed in the first part of this paper – “The Nature of Modernism” – the defining hallmarks of modernism as an aesthetic trend consist in the break with tradition and in the increase of individual artistic stand-points, meaning that no well-established aesthetic set of rules and regulations is to be followed in the process of creating art.

Keeping this in mind, let us now analyze the general aesthetic principles that guided Paul Strand and Virginia Woolf in their work, seeking to point out the ways in which they are similar and the ways in which they differ.

In Paul Strand’s case, the issue of breaking with tradition takes an interesting turn, meaning that, since photography is a relatively new form of art, there was no photographic tradition previously established which they could turn from or turn against. As Liz Wells points out in the book we have already mentioned, the photographers in Paul Strand’s circle were but a group of people who “worked with honest and sincere purpose, some instinctively and a few consciously, but without any background of photographic or graphic formulae, much less any cut and dried ideas of what is art and what isn’t”, this “innocence”, as she calls it, being “their real strength”.

However, as Paul Strand points out in two of his essays, “Photography” and “Photography and the New God” (1980, pp. 141-151), there is one well-established tradition, that of painting, from which all true photographers should keep away. Paul Strand’s belief that photography is, and must therefore be treated as, a new artistic manifestation (“photography is only a new road from a different direction, but moving toward the common goal, which is life”), led to his developing of the following artistic principles concerning photography: solidity of forms, differentiation of textures, no use of color and focus on both the individual and his world. According to Paul Strand, “the full potential power of every medium is dependent upon the purity of its use”, and therefore “the introduction of handwork and manipulation is merely the expression of an impotent desire to paint”.

If Paul Strand's aesthetic principles, deriving from his need to make a clear distinction between photography and painting, take him towards clear-cut contours, lines and shapes, with special attention given to texture ("if he [the photographer] includes in his space a strip of grass, it must be felt like the living differentiated thing it is, and so recorded. It must take its proper but no less important place as a shape and a texture, in relationship to the mountain, tree or whatnot, which are included"), Virginia Woolf's views on literature, being faced with the tradition of literary realism – which she wishes to overcome and, even more, deny –, take her towards a manner of writing very much similar to the impressionistic style of painting.

In two of her essays, "Modern Fiction" (1992, p. 289) and "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" (1967, p. 320), Virginia Woolf argues that the realist method of her predecessors is faithful to the perceived, objective world at the expense of the process of perception itself and the perceiver engaged in it. Therefore, her literature is to focus on the "myriads of irrelevant and incongruous ideas" crowding "into one's head" in various moments of the day: "Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms, composing in their sum what we might venture to call life itself".

Since the chief task of the novelist is "to convey this incessantly varying spirit" with "as little admixture of the alien and external as possible", the impressionistic way of capturing reality becomes, from her point of view, the proper method. As a consequence, her literary experiments are to be highly visual, relying on effects of chiaroscuro and blurring contours, suggesting shadows and shifting, melting form to support the uncertainty and relativity of everything, and above all the limitations of knowledge by reason. By breaking the confining frames of shape, clear contour and outline, Virginia Woolf moves towards breaking the frames of reason to pieces.

As James McFarlane points out in "The Mind of Modernism" (1976, p. 68), Virginia Woolf, like many other modernist novelists, is to focus on "secret stirrings that go unnoticed in the remote parts of the mind, the incalculable chaos of impressions, the delicate life of the imagination seen under the magnifying glass; the random progress of these thoughts and feelings; untrodden, trackless journeyings by brain and heart, strange workings of the nerves, the whisper of the blood, the entreaty of the bone, all the unconscious life of the mind".

However different Paul Strand and Virginia Woolf are when it comes to their aesthetic principles and techniques, the first turning towards clear lines which do not "vibrate laterally but back, in a third dimension" (Paul Strand, 1923, p. 613) and the latter deciding that is it to be her goal as a writer to

“record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall” and to “trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness”, it is clear that both of them wish to break with some form or another of artistic tradition, which they disapprove of, and to record Life as genuinely as possible, even though the paths they choose in order to achieve this goal are quite different.

Therefore, we can conclude that Paul Strand and Virginia Woolf share a strong desire to establish and cultivate a new approach towards the inner reality of the individual and towards the reality of the world in which the individual in question is forced to live. For both of them, it is mandatory that this new approach records the above mentioned aspects as genuinely as possible, with outside interference reduced to a minimum.

Conclusions

The representatives of the modernist movement, were faced with the imperative of establishing new aesthetics for the artistic domains in which they were to function, photographs having to separate the art of photography from the art of painting, and writers having to overcome the classical manner of writing novels.

Both categories succeeded in what they set out to do, yet, as different as their domains are, they could not fight the inevitable: having certain points of convergence in their approach towards reality and in the subjects they chose to bring forth to the public.

It is our belief that our study has somewhat managed to demonstrate that, as diverse as modernist works of art are, there is unity amongst them, and that this unity comes from the relationship that modernist artists have with tradition and from the way in which they relate to the world and wish to represent it, with as little interference as possible.

In the end, it all comes down to being faced with a new society and a new essence of the individual, and knowing what to do with them so as to identify the new Life within them and show it to the world.

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