



## ESSE-8: LONDON 2006

29 August – 2 September 2006

### S12. Visuality in Modernist Aesthetics and Literature

Wednesday 30 August: 9.30-11.30am

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Recent critics have challenged the traditionally held idea of the purity of the visual in modernism by revealing that within modernism there is an explicitly antvisual impulse. What Rosalind Krauss has called “the modernist fetishization of sight” has been questioned along the lines of a critique of ocularcentrism and the primacy of the eye in Western thought. The visual has always involved a critique of appearance. How does modernist aesthetics, literature and art engage with the visual and/or resist visualization? Issues papers might engage with include: scopophilia and scopophobia, visual pleasure, anxiety about vision, blindness, haunting images, and vision and desire among others.

#### **“Resting on Beauty Only”: Aestheticism and Visuality in Virginia Woolf’s ‘Solid Objects’**

Laura Lojo-Rodríguez (University of Santiago de Compostela)

Virginia Woolf’s life and work seems to be haunted by unsolvable contradictions. The aim of this paper is to explore the literary and conceptual implications of British aestheticism and art’s autonomy, perceived of by Woolf as possessing a fascinating ambivalence as implicitly posed by Woolf in “Solid Objects” (1920), a short story which looks into what the writer saw as the dangers of barren aestheticism. Furthermore, the association of the art for art sake predicament and the jewel imagery as developed by Walter Pater in *The Renaissance* (1873) works against the perceived devaluation of other values within the context of capitalist institutionalisation of exchange. Yet the jewel is itself an unstable, contradictory object, a figure for the material commodity which lies at the heart of aestheticism, as well as for the immaterial fire which the aesthete desires, a persistent paradox embodied in the main character of Woolf’s short story.

#### ***Seeing Visions: Allegory as Ocular Prosthetic in T. S. Eliot’s Modernist Appreciation of Literary Aesthetics in History.***

Fabio L. Vericat (Complutensian University, Madrid)

T. S. Eliot’s PhD thesis on the idealist philosopher F. H. Bradley discusses in one of its chapters the degree of reality of unreal objects; the unsettling implication is that objects which do not exist may yet be *seen*. Modernist ambivalence towards visual experience is apparent in the very critical language Eliot uses to express its literary history:

“Hawthorne and James have a kind of sense, a receptive medium, which is not of sight,” or Milton shows “an auditory imagination abnormally sharpened at the expense of the visual.” Eliot’s critical language may be either literal or metaphorical, as one wonders whether he is *literally* talking about seeing (or not) with one’s eyes. The degree of critical and semantic success of these words may be judged in terms of Dante’s allegorical method, which Eliot himself proposes as a literary model, but which is cognitively dependent on “an age in which men still saw visions.” Yet, Eliot tells us, after the ‘dissociation of sensibility’ the individual turns short-sighted. Allegory is thus offered as an ocular prosthetic capable of correcting sight to afford the vision, but which we may still be in fear to contemplate.

### **Invisible Ink: Graphic Poetry in the Age of Criticism**

Lennart Nyberg (University of Lund)

Whereas graphic poetry (poetry where meaning resides in the iconographic properties of print) had been a central field of exploration in early avant-garde and modernist writing and criticism, the twenties and especially the thirties show a distinct drop in the critical attention paid to what continued to be a concern for writers, creating the historiographic fiction that graphic poetry disappeared in the inter-war years only to return as the ghettoized form of “concrete poetry” in the 1950s. It is the contention of this paper that the lack of critical attention (and resulting historiographic fiction) was caused by the polarized and politicised context of the inter-war years where both sides in the culture war (Anglo-American new criticism with its forbears in Richards and Eliot on the one hand, and marxist and social realist criticism on the other) outlawed (or made invisible) graphic poetry as superficial and formalist, thus indicating the ideological dimensions of visuality in writing.

### **Visibility and Opacity in Modernist Literature: Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford**

Catherine Delmas (Stendhal University, Grenoble)

The relation between visuality and the visible world is at the core of Conrad’s and Ford Madox Ford’s reflection on fiction and modes of representation such as multiple and shifting focalisation, mirror effects, diffraction and refraction. Vision, tinged with subjectivity, illustrated in their novels by the interplay between the characters’ gazes, perception and fantasy, is decomposed into fragments, blurred by spectral effects or questioned by blindness, and serves a thematic and dramatic interest – self-delusion and its consequences. Vision is discontinuous, uncertain, and can only grasp impressions. However the truth, which for Conrad underlies the surface of the visible universe, is to be found at the surface of the text, in the misty halo of recurrent signifiers and tropes which create resonant imagery and snatch the reader’s gaze (G. Didi Huberman). Tropes, which are both looked through and looked at (P. Ricœur), turn textual transparency into opacity (L. Marin) and paradoxically question and displace the very notion of visuality.

### **A Modernist Discourse of Idolatry: Bruno Schulz’s *The Idolatrous Book***

Kris Van Heuckenholm (Catholic University, Leuven)

The current paper seeks to reassess the artistic output of Polish Modernism by introducing and applying some concepts and ideas from the field of visual studies. More specifically, it focuses on a detailed discussion of Bruno Schulz's well-known book of engravings *Xiega Balwochwalcza* (*The Idolatrous Book*, ca. 1920). Most often, it has been claimed that Schulz's *Idolatrous Book* is devoted to man-woman relations, and more specifically to the dominating position of the female sex. The present paper will argue that Schulz's book may be seen as an autoreferential artefact which not only addresses the problem of intersexual relations, but also contains a *sui generis* artistic program defining the relation between the verbal and the visual. "The Booke" as the age-old medium of the sacred Word is pulled away by the artist from the domain of the textual and redirected to the sphere of the image. In this sense, the Schulzian concept of the "idolatrous book" might be seen as a literal incarnation of the idea of artistic crossover.

### **An Aesthetic of Rupture: From Vision to Delusion in Mina Loy's Works**

Esther Sánchez-Pardo (Complutensian University, Madrid)

From early on in her career, American artist and writer Mina Loy formulated an aesthetic that dramatically departed from nineteenth-century views of the artist and the art object, opening up avenues for further developments in her creative work. Loy's early poems exhibited structural and technical experiments that showed constant interaction with European artists and writers in movements as varied as Dadaism, Futurism and Surrealism. In this paper, we will examine different concepts from the field of vision crucial in her artistic trajectory, from Loy's version of the futurist vision –empowering of the individuals who should be able to influence the changes to come by asserting their own artistic will – and the necessity of the visionary perspective, to her closeness to the idea of the image in Surrealism. At this point, delusions and hallucinations are conveyed to her readers in terms of the visual ambiguities and irrationalities characteristic of Surrealism.