

## Critical Perspectives

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In my position paper for the first Terra Critica workshop, held at Utrecht University in December 2012, I contemplated critique through the lens of Mikhail Bakhtin's notions of dialogism and answerability, which transpose critical distance from a vertical to a horizontal plane and emphasize the critic's essential situatedness as occupying a unique point in time-space. Critique itself is, as it were, "brought down to earth" and emerges as an engaged, embodied mode of interaction rather than a disinterested, judgmental endeavor. Bakhtin's radical individualization of the critical perspective (which is equated to the actual eye of a singular person), however, renders it difficult to see how shared assessments – and, consequently, collective critical action – are to be developed, while his faith in the accuracy and unmediatedness of vision (everyone sees, without distortion, all there is to be seen from their unique vantage point) leaves no room for the idea that even if two people were able to be in the exact same time-space, their perspectives might still differ.

The first of these problems can be related to Félix Guattari's insistence, in his proposal for an *ecosophy*, on a resistive process of "resingularization" that envisions people "becom[ing] both more united and increasingly different" (45). Unity here does not imply equivalence or fusion, while the singular – opposed to the serial as *répétition mortifère* rather than to the multiple or heterogeneous – is not restricted to the individual. Resingularization can be individual or collective, as it is not a question of number but of mode. The aim is to go from the sedative, "unidimensionalizing" mode of looking propagated by global mass media<sup>1</sup> (or the "feeling of pseudo-eternity" characteristic of the subjectivity produced by Integrated World Capitalism<sup>2</sup>) to a more active, variegated mode that "apprehend[s] the world through the interchangeable lenses or points of view of the three ecologies" (21, 34, 28). Interchangeability here indicates the possibility of switching perspectives, not their equivalence. The points of view of the three ecologies, moreover, exceed the look of the single person and, in the case of environmental ecology, the human eye altogether.

The second issue I raised in relation to Bakhtin's work – that a critical perspective cannot restrict itself to what is visible from a particular vantage point – is taken up by Guattari's insistence on the need to go beyond the contemplation of "visible relations of force on a grand scale" to "take into account molecular domains of sensibility, intelligence and desire" (20). Such domains, which counter IWC's quantifiable and hypervisible "criteria of profit and yield," cannot be evaded – according to Guattari, "no one is exempt from playing the game of the ecology of the imaginary" – and should become subject to an "ecology of the phantasm" (38). This ecology would aim to find ways to "abreact" (without necessarily exorcizing) harmful phantasmagorias

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<sup>1</sup> Here, it should be noted that Guattari's view of the global mass media (and television in particular) is itself rather unidimensionalizing, as is his interpretation of the serial as a logic of absolute sameness. For a different reading of serialism, see, for example, Peter Hitchcock's *The Long Space: Transnationalism and Postcolonial Form*.

<sup>2</sup> Guattari's quite rigid validation of a temporality of change and transformation over one of eternity and stasis is questionable, especially where it leads to the now discredited statement that "certain themes promoted by neo-liberalists – such as flexible labour, deregulation, etc. – could perfectly well backfire on them" (35).

through their imaginization (38). What this latter neologism points to is a creative form of critique that amounts to much more than a straightforward seeing-as-recognizing.

Virginia Woolf's epistolary essay "Three Guineas" thematizes the differentiated perspective or focalization of critique – where it sees from and what it perceives – more overtly than Guattari, insisting from the beginning that "though we look at the same things, we see them differently" (111). Visual metaphors abound, written texts such as biographies and histories are described as producing "pictures" (117) and money, too, is linked to visual (and critical) scope:

the educated man's daughter [...] stands on the bridge which lies between the old world and the new, and asks, as she twirls the sacred coin in her hand, 'What shall I do with it? What do I see with it?' Through that light we may guess everything she saw looked different – men and women, cars and churches. (123)

With the possibility of absolute judgment or complete consensus summarily rejected, "Three Guineas" can be seen to represent, in Guattari's terms, a creative experiment of singularization.

Central to this experiment, I want to argue, are the photographs of dead bodies from the Spanish Civil War referenced throughout the text.<sup>3</sup> In her initial description, Woolf notes that "photographs, of course, are not arguments addressed to the reason; they are simply statements of fact addressed to the eye" (117). She continues to detail how, when looking at the photographs, via the physiological trajectory that connects eye to brain to nervous system, "some fusion takes place within us; however different the education, the traditions behind us, our sensations are the same; and they are violent" (118). Three aspects, however, disrupt the facticity of the photographs and their supposedly unitary and unifying interpretation. First, the rhetorical overkill of the interjection "of course," more than confirming the general validity of Woolf's statement, incites the reader to question it. Second, her remark that it is the Spanish Government that sends these photographs invests them with a particular, partial perspective on the Civil War. Third, the speculative description of the photographs themselves – "This morning's collection contains the photograph of *what might be* a man's body, or a woman's; it is so mutilated that *it might*, on the other hand, *be* the body of a pig" (117, emphasis added) – installs doubt as to photography's objective, constative nature. Then there is the formulation of the final sentence of the photographs' first textual appearance – "For now at last we are looking at the same picture; we are seeing with you the same dead bodies, the same ruined houses" (118) – which makes explicit the temporal dimension that inhabits the fusion of perspective that is said to take place; seeing the same thing is not self-evident, but a process involving the echoing of the other's words whose end-point – "at last" – is unstable – "for now."

Further on, another photograph is introduced, only this is not a reference to an actual photographic print, but a "crudely coloured" impression of "your world as it appears to us who see it from the threshold of the private house; through the shadow of the veil that St Paul still lays upon our eyes; from the bridge which connects the private house with the world of public

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<sup>3</sup> Maggie Humm refers to them as "a complex mnemonic dramatically triggering Woolf's feminist epistemological opposition to the logic of capitalism" (652).

life” (126).<sup>4</sup> The photographic metaphor here works, on the one hand, to transfer the quality of factuality originally ascribed to the photographic medium to the gendered, veiled perspective described, while, on the other hand, the reference to its crude coloration detracts from the photograph’s objective status as “a statement of fact addressed to the eye.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, the gendered perspective Woolf wants to see recognized (which, even though situated within the singular time-space of the imaginary bridge, is collective) is validated as the photograph is reinterpreted as a perspectival object that, if looked at from a different angle, shows a different picture.

Woolf proceeds to analyze the specific angle from which the gendered perspective looks at the public, patriarchal realm, noting that the photographic “bird’s-eye view” available from the threshold or bridge allows a skimming of the surface but pre-empts access to “many inner and secret chambers,” literally and metaphorically (130). A look at the educational system – again from a particular gendered angle – follows, in which it is made clear that a critical analysis cannot restrict itself to the visual dimension of observation, but has to include a consideration of other, more elusive senses such as the olfactory, subject to selective notice and differentiated valuation:

it is quite possible that the name “Miss” transmits through the board of division some vibration which is not registered in the examination room. “Miss” transmits sex; and sex may carry with it an aroma. “Miss” may carry with it the swish of petticoats, the savour of scent or other odour perceptible to the nose on the further side of the partition and obnoxious to it. (163)

Returning to visual imagery, Woolf traces a crucial progress from taking a bridge as a vantage point for a “survey” – yielding a surface view and a temptation to remain standing and dreaming – to a consideration of facts, achieved through the observation of “the procession of the sons of educated men” (174). This procession, described as a “solemn sight,” used to be available to women only as seen “sidelong from an upper window,” prompting them to ask themselves certain questions but refusing them an (inter)active critical position.<sup>6</sup> The procession appeared as a photograph or fresco to be appreciated on an aesthetic level of appearances only. This was the case until a transition from verticality to horizontality – and from passive to active looking – took place as women were finally allowed to join the procession, albeit “trapesing along at the tail end” (175).

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<sup>4</sup> My reading diverges from Humm’s, who sees Woolf juxtaposing the photographs of the Spanish Civil War, which she regards as “absent” or “implied” because they are not reprinted in “Three Guineas” to the “present” or “public” photographs of a general, heralds, a university procession, a judge and an archbishop printed with the text (in the first edition and some later ones). Humm argues that Woolf is talking directly about these published photographs at this point of the text, where she writes: “let us then by way of a very elementary beginning lay before you a photograph” (126). However, neither Woolf’s description of this photograph – supposedly taking in “St. Paul’s, the Bank of England, the Mansion House, the massive if funereal battlements of the Law Courts; and on the other side, Westminster Abbey” (126) – nor its number (she talks about “a photograph” rather than five photographs) accord with the supposition that what she is engaging here are the published photographs. Hence, I maintain that her use of “photograph” here is metaphorical and therefore less (rather than more) substantial than in the case of the Spanish Civil War photographs, which can be supposed to have a material reality outside the text. The five printed photographs are not included in the edition of “Three Guineas” used here, but are reproduced in Hsieh.

<sup>5</sup> Color photography at this point in time was not yet able to produce “natural” colors.

<sup>6</sup> Again, although one of the photographs printed in the first edition of *Three Guineas* shows a university procession (cf. Hsieh 35), the perspective of the photograph does not match that of the textual image Woolf creates.

Significantly, Woolf then returns to the bird's-eye view from the bridge to consider the question of whether women want to join this procession directed – capitalized – by educated men. This question, Woolf stresses, is *critical* in both senses of the word: it is

So important that if all the daughters of educated men did nothing, from morning to night, but consider that procession from every angle, if they did nothing but ponder it and analyse it, and think about it and read about it and pool their thinking and reading, and what they see and what they guess their time would be better spent than in any other activity now open to them. (176)

Here, critique consists of pondering, analyzing, thinking, reading, sharing, seeing and guessing.<sup>7</sup> These activities need to take in “every angle” and can therefore be done both from the elevated perspective of the bridge and from the immersive position of being “in the crowd” (177). Only by contemplating multiple perspectives – generating differently colored pictures of the world – is it possible to break the stultifying cycle of repetition, Woolf's version of Guattari's serialization: “Here we go round the mulberry tree, the mulberry tree, the mulberry tree” (180). Crucially, the multiplied perspectives need to be shared, taken up even by those occupying the capital vantage point of the dominant class of educated men. Thus, Woolf exhorts her readers (the explicit addressee of her letter and the larger audience for its published form) to “look from our angle, from our point of view” (203).

The “fusion” that supposedly followed the first contemplation of the Spanish Civil War photographs, which entailed Woolf echoing the perspective of her addressee, is disrupted as alternative connections are “brought out” between the photographs and the “prostituted culture and intellectual slavery” of women (213). The photographs are made to show more than they previously did and become critical tools, no longer statements of fact but openings for discussion. At the same time, the conjured “photograph” of the procession of the sons of educated men is transformed from a picture gazed upon from a distance to a participatory tableau that sees “the daughters and sons of educated men [...] fighting side by side” (222). Side by side but emphatically not merged, as Woolf insists on the necessity and critical fecundity of difference and outsideness – what Bakhtin calls exotopy and Guattari designates as the outside the norm or exceptional (34). Woolf's *Society of Outsiders*, moreover, is “anonymous and secret” (230), espousing experimental methods that are “not merely critical” but also “creative” (234). Woolf's twice-repeated insistence on such critical creativity or creative criticality reinforces not so much the distinction of these modes as their necessary imbrication.

Significantly, Woolf's text, dominated by references to the visual and visible, also draws attention to the dark side of illumination, exemplified by the “glare of advertisement and publicity”:

Consider next time you drive along a country road the attitude of a rabbit caught in the glare of a head-lamp – its glazed eyes, its rigid paws. Is there not good reason to think without going outside our own country, that the “attitudes”, the false and unreal positions taken by the human form in

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<sup>7</sup> A similar validation of guesswork, doubt and even the mistake as essential ingredients for a critical perspective can be found in Gayatri Spivak's introduction to her recent book *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*.

England as well as in Germany, are due to the limelight which paralyses the free action of the human faculties and inhibits the human power to change and create new wholes much as a strong head-lamp paralyses the little creatures who run out of the darkness into its beams? (235)

Woolf proceeds to link the Society of Outsiders to the act of “experimenting in the virtues of obscurity” (237). Critical acts conducted in the dark may be highly effective and the same goes for critical acts of passivity, where being passive is not a sign of paralysis or sedation but an active choice to absent oneself that does not escape notice (evoking Bartleby’s mantra “I’d prefer not to”).<sup>8</sup> Such acts are complicated by (inherited) fear and shame, but nevertheless feasible as practical critical strategies.

The final appearance of the Spanish Civil War photograph reveals it as no longer the same: “as this letter has gone on, adding fact to fact, another picture has imposed itself upon the foreground” (266). The dead bodies and ruined houses have been superimposed by “the figure of a man” or even “Man himself” – “called in German and Italian Führer or Duce; in our own language Tyrant or Dictator” (266). The facts unearthed by looking at the world from the perspective of the daughters of educated men, a perspective that claims difference but can no longer be dismissed as irrelevant, materialize in the photograph, which now “suggests” (a notably non-factual term)

that we are not passive spectators doomed to unresisting obedience but by our thoughts and actions can ourselves change that figure. A common interest unites us; it is one world, one life. How essential it is that we should realize that unity the dead bodies, the ruined houses prove. (267)

There is a common interest, but this interest is not served by the fusion of perspectives or by an insistence on the photograph’s (or any perspectival representation’s) unequivocal factuality: as Woolf notes, “opinions differ” on the man who has invaded the pictorial plane and she only has her addressee’s letter “to prove that *to you* the picture is the picture of evil” (267, emphasis added). Even if they can agree that what the photograph shows is evil and that this evil must be destroyed, their ways of going about this may be – *must be* – different, as they arrive at their critique from a different angle or position. This position is, unlike that invoked by Bakhtin, not purely individual and unique but shared by particular socio-economic groups, as well as being open to cooperation with other perspectives (although both Woolf and Guattari leave unanswered important questions about the precise forms such cooperation can take and what its limits are). Moreover, Woolf’s stirring example of how to lay claim to a critical perspective and incite others to accept it as valid sees critique as taking in, besides the immediately visible, other planes of sensibility, while identifying obscurity as harboring its own critical potential.

What Woolf’s work – considered as a meditation on critical perspective (or, in other words, the perspectival nature of critique) and read in dialogue with Guattari and Bakhtin – suggests to me is that critique, while requiring a certain distance from its object to create room for interaction, cannot be uniquely associated with a particular spatial vector (vertical or horizontal); rather, each vector will open up a specific angle that, depending on the particular context, may be more

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<sup>8</sup> In my forthcoming book *The Spectral Metaphor: Living Ghosts and the Agency of Invisibility*, I discuss the potential of strategized forms of invisibility and self-spectralization or auto-ghosting as resistive modes.

or less revealing or resistive. If we want to develop new modes of critique adequate to our unevenly globalized world, therefore, asking the questions of who is looking and from where, and which perspectives are recognized as factual and/or critical (in both senses of the word), will be essential.

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