

# “WORDS ARE AN IMPURE MEDIUM”: INTERMEDIAL RELATIONS IN VIRGINIA WOOLF’S “KEW GARDENS”

“AS PALAVRAS SÃO UM MEIO IMPURO”: RELAÇÕES INTERMIDIÁTICAS EM “KEW GARDENS”, DE VIRGINIA WOOLF

## ABSTRACT

We aim at discussing Virginia Woolf’s short story “Kew Gardens” from an intermedial perspective, so as to value the articulation between image and word, cinematic and literary structure. In order to achieve this objective, we support the investigation with Woolf’s own reflections on the “flirtations of the arts”, a notion which proves productive in some of her texts; and on theories of intermediality – RAJEWSKY (2012); RIPPL (2015); HALLET (2015), among others –, whose approach connects literary studies with other arts and media. The results show the intense dialogue between Woolf and the visual arts and reveal that the modern nature of her literature is also a substantial response to the interchange between different arts, being a source of aesthetic and cultural learning.

**Keywords:** Intermediality. Modernism. “Kew Gardens”. Virginia Woolf.

## RESUMO

Propomos a discussão do conto “Kew Gardens”, de Virginia Woolf, em uma perspectiva intermidiática, com o intuito de valorizar a articulação entre imagem e palavra, estrutura cinematográfica e literária. Para tanto, fundamentamos a investigação em reflexões da própria Woolf, cuja noção de “namoro entre as artes” faz-se produtiva em alguns dos seus textos; e em teorias da intermedialidade – RAJEWSKY (2012); RIPPL (2015); HALLET (2015), dentre outros –, cuja abordagem relaciona os estudos literários com outras artes e mídias. Os resultados demonstram o intenso diálogo entre Woolf e as artes visuais e revelam que o modernismo de sua literatura é também uma resposta substancial ao intercâmbio entre as diferentes artes, constituindo-se fonte de aprendizagem estética e cultural.

**Palavras-chave:** Intermedialidade. Modernismo. “Kew Gardens”. Virginia Woolf.

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(...) flash after flash, metaphor after metaphor, the eye lights up the cave of darkness and we are shown the hard tangible material shapes of bodiless thoughts hanging like bats in the primeval darkness where light has never visited them before (Virginia Woolf, "Pictures", 1925).

## **"The loves of the arts": Virginia Woolf's critical reflections on visual aesthetics**

Virginia Woolf's "Kew Gardens" is one of her most famous short stories, originally published by The Hogarth Press (the Woolfs' own press) on 12 May 1919. On the very day of its publication, Woolf wrote in her *Diary*:

I read a bound copy of Kew Gardens through; having put off the evil task until it was complete. The result is vague. It seems to me slight & short; I don't see how the reading of it impressed Leonard so much. According to him it is the best short piece I have done yet (...) (WOOLF, 1977, p. 271).

Kew Gardens names the famous Royal Botanic Gardens in London, where both Virginia and Leonard would often go for a walk, to appreciate the beauty of the flower beds, the trees, the plants, the animals and to observe the human flow in mystery. Previous to the literary reference (the short story), there are other allusions in Woolf's *Diary* to Kew Gardens as a geographical location: "We went to Kew, & saw a blazing bush, as red as cherry blossom, but more intense – frostily red – also gulls rising & falling for pieces of meat, their crowd waved aside suddenly by three very elegant light grey cranes" (WOOLF, 1977, p. 82).

Woolf's *Letters* also refer to Kew Gardens – both as the place and the short story. For one thing, the second volume of her *Letters* (1912-1922) contains letters to her sister Vanessa Bell in which Virginia talks about Vanessa's illustrations for the short story "Kew Gardens". For instance, in a letter dated 1 July 1918 (almost a year before "Kew Gardens" was published), Virginia wrote:

I'm sending my story [Kew Gardens]; you will see that it's a case of atmosphere, and I don't think I've got it quite. Don't you think you might design a title page? Tell me what you think of the story. I'm going to write an account of my emotions towards one of your pictures, which gives me infinite pleasure, and has changed my view upon aesthetics (...) (WOOLF, 1976, p. 257).

In saying that the story is "a case of atmosphere", Woolf already prepares Vanessa (the reader, the painter) for a lack of narrative bone, typical of Virginia's experimental

pieces. Despite Virginia Woolf's insecurity about her achievement and the story's reception, after the book's publication in 1919, the *Times Literary Supplement* wrote an enthusiastic review about the short story, and soon the book sold out. Virginia wrote a letter to Vanessa on 4 June 1919, in which she says:

We came back to find ourselves flooded with orders for Kew. It is sold out, and orders are still coming in for more, so we must reprint at once. We think of having an edition of 300 printed for us; but it is rather difficult to know how to do it. Would you like to undertake the whole thing? – not only woodcuts, but title page and text (WOOLF, 1976, p. 364).

The passages from these letters constitute relevant metatextual discourses about “Kew Gardens”, since they reveal a dialogue of art(ist)s between both sisters; in addition, they also indicate the short story's visual quality already announced on the book cover and pages, through Vanessa's aesthetic creations. It is as if the gardens – as a location – were already visually and metonymically introduced through the woodcuts and the illustrations, thus stirring the reader's imagination and calling his/her attention to the story's pictorial potentiality.

In “Sisterly silences: the unveiling of hidden voices in Vanessa Bell's illustrations for Virginia Woolf's ‘Kew Gardens’”, Hana Leaper offers a very interesting account of the interchanges between both sisters while working with different editions of the book, so as to achieve, in 1927, a result that actually responded for the benefit of verbal and visual aesthetics:

[Vanessa] Bell's additions to the 1927 version do not include either of the prints from the 1919 edition, and the page numbering and layout of the type are completely redefined. Instead of illustrating episodes, the woodcuts function to make the scene-by-scene cinematic structure of the story clear (WOOLF, 2014, p. 7).

This observation reveals a sensibility on Vanessa's part to respond visually and in a creative way to her sister's literary experimentation. The reference to the story as possessing a “scene-by-scene cinematic structure” is of fundamental relevance in the discussion we propose of “Kew Gardens” as follows. The hypothesis is that this short story illustrates not only Woolf's intimate relations with the visual arts – having in her sister's work an important reference – but her own ability to create literature out of a dialogue with other arts and media expressions, such as painting and the cinema.

Criticism on Woolf has widely acknowledged the fact that her literature is influenced and informed by her conviviality with visual aesthetics. For instance, according to Diane Filby Gillespie, in *The sisters' Arts*, “much of Woolf's self-conscious exploration of her medium arises from her continual awareness of what her sister and other modern painters [were] doing” (apud LEAPER, p. 1). In a recent text entitled “Film

and modernist literature”, Laura Marcus (2015, p. 240) elaborates on the argument that “the alignments of, and interplays between, cinema and literature around the turn of the century were among the most crucial that shaped what came to be called modernist literature and culture”. Virginia Woolf is among representative writers who not only wrote a literature that foregrounds an intermedial dialogue, but also wrote essays – such as “Pictures”, “The cinema”, “Walter Sicket”, and “Three pictures” – which offer significant insights on the specific nature of visual and verbal arts and how substantially they can interact and interchange.

Another relevant aspect of Woolf’s writing practice is that she prolifically wrote different genres: novel, short story, sketch, historical essay, literary criticism and theory. And some of her pieces actually blur the boundaries, as if belonging to either fiction or non-fiction. “Three pictures” (written in 1929) constitutes a very interesting example of the hybrid nature of Woolf’s writing practice, appearing both in *The death of the moth and other essays* (thus classified as an essay), and in Virginia Woolf’s complete shorter fiction (as a short story). According to Susan Dick, who, while editing the complete volume of Woolf’s short stories, chose to include “Three pictures” in it, “the line separating Virginia Woolf’s fiction from her essays is a very fine one” (1989, p. 2). Likewise, in her “Introduction” to Woolf’s *A woman’s essays*, Rachel Bowby declares that

There are certainly many points in common between Woolf’s essays and her novels. Just as the novels break up the habitual progression of narrative through easily identifiable beginnings, middles and ends, so, in her essays, Woolf tends to write in a way that is consciously exploratory, seeming to move from one point to the next in a tangential fashion rather than to develop logically in the traditional form of an argument (WOOLF, 1992, p. xii).

“Three pictures”, for example, when viewed as an essay (and that’s the perspective of Leonard Woolf, who organized and edited *The death of the moth*) possesses these “tangential” and “exploratory” features referred to above; when viewed as a short story, it is one of those pieces – like “An unwritten novel” and “The mark on the wall” – which mingle the (im)possibility of telling a story with reflections about the very process of writing, that is, in a metafictional fashion, drawing on theoretical and critical material.

When blurring the commonly understood territories of fiction and non-fiction, Woolf’s essays and short stories usually transgress media boundaries, playing with their alleged singularities. Thus, intermedial relations in these texts accentuate even further their self-reflexive or metafictional character, since intermediality – as the object between media – involves notions of materialities, formats, genres and meanings (MÜLLER, 2010, p. 237). According to Christina Ljungberg (2010, p. 90), the hybrid quality of intermedial texts not only enhances the reflexive potential of a media product, such as a literary text that poses reflections on literature and on the media to which it relates, but it also demands a more active audience: “switching between

or among various media not only forces its viewing or, rather, participating, audience to make comparisons among them but also exposes the particularities of the various semiotic systems that each medium embodies". In literature, intermedial interactions result in more reflexive texts: especially in the case of intermedial references, these interactions highlight the affordances of the media involved, namely, their possibilities and restrictions to communicate and to express meanings.

"Three pictures" is a significant text by Woolf in which intermedial strategies play a very important role in the process of meaning making. 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's first paragraph is a reflection about how certain situations initially appear to us as pictures, or what the narrative voice calls "picturesque" (WOOLF, 1970, p. 12), as already possessing a visual appeal. 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; 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).

Let us notice the strategy of enumeration of the picture's elements (sailor, girl, neighbours, garden), as if they had been apprehended as "takes" of a scene. 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). These passages exemplify the narrative potentiality of certain pictures, as if their borders (or frames) did not limit the picture or prevent the spectator from musing on a larger context informing its focus and backing its significance.

At the end of the essay/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 relationship between painting and stories, pictorial and verbal, narrative qualities. Also, the cry in the second picture, as representative of sound, institutes an intermedial relation that, when considered alongside the verbal and the imagetic context, develops into an audiovisual or cinematic form of storytelling. We might also infer that, in "Three pictures", the intermedial reference to sound (especially the very eloquent cry) is related to this medium's (more) assemantic character (SCHWEIGHAUSER, 2015): in a modernist fashion, there is an attempt to represent the wife's shattered subjectivity, her indescribable sorrow.

In “Pictures”, an essay written in 1925<sup>1</sup>, Woolf elaborates on what critics name nowadays Intermedial or Interarts Studies. She herself is aware of the novelty inherent to such an investigation, as she declares at the very beginning:

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. (paragraph 1)

Interestingly, “Three pictures”, written four years after “Pictures”, illustrates this love between image and word, the “silence” of painting and the “eloquence” of storytelling; as we tried to show, its hybrid nature begins in a discourse that mingles essay and fictional devices, and gets developed in the author’s exploration of the “flirtations” between pictures, words and sounds.

Another significant essay about the relationship between image and word, painting and literature is Woolf’s “Walter Sickert”<sup>2</sup>, published in *The captain’s death bed and other essays*. The text is constructed as if it were a dialogue (though in reported speech) among friends, while dining together. The question “But when were picture galleries invented?” 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 biographies: 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 (though, as we said, in reported speech), ideas are compared and responded to, others are questioned, thus giving the impression that the essay is actually an attempt at constructing an argument about Sickert’s art.

To give an idea of how the discussion flows, somebody says at a certain point: “Not in our time will anyone write a life as Sickert paints it. 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). These fragments reveal not only a dialogue about Sickert and his art, but about the interaction between painting and literature – the latter, referred to above as an impure medium. Together with “Three pictures” and “Pictures”, “Walter Sickert” constitutes a relevant contribution by Woolf for a theory of intermediality. To highlight her concern with “the loves of the

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is available at: [gutemberg.net.au](http://gutemberg.net.au) / quotations are followed by an indication of the paragraph in which they appear.

<sup>2</sup> At the end of the essay, Woolf refers to Walter Sickert as “the best painter now living in England” (1978, p. 202), but no date is given for the essay’s original publication. In the “Editorial note”, Leonard Woolf explains: “Where ascertainable, I have noted the year in which the essay was written” (1978, p. viii).

arts”, her fiction also abounds in examples of intermedial interchanges, as the short story “Kew Gardens” might prove.

## On medial and artistic flirtations

The flirtations or loves of the arts, as named by Virginia Woolf in “Pictures”, have been the foci of numerous pieces of research conducted under the perspective of Interarts and (more recently) Intermedial Studies. In this paper, we deal with flirtations between media that are also art forms, as is the case with literature, painting and the cinema. For methodological and analytical reasons, our discussion is aligned with theoretical contributions that come from the field of Intermedial Studies. In comparison with Interarts Studies, intermediality has provided new methods and has adopted new objects of study, as, for instance, digital and non-artistic media; and has provided critics with new research questions (GLASER, 2009). Regarding “Kew Gardens”, the intermedial “analytical toolkit” allows for a more detailed interpretation of the intermedial relations between literature, painting and cinema, both in terms of these media’s materialities and of their multimodal constitution.

As defined by Gabriele Rippl (2015, p. 1), “‘intermediality’ refers to the relationships between media and is hence used to describe a huge range of cultural phenomena which involve more than one medium”. Intermedial Studies recognize that a medium does not exist in isolation; on the contrary, scholars in the field agree that a medium greatly influences and is influenced by the other media of its time. In the case of literature, for example, one may perceive numerous traces of digital and social media in the novels published in the last decades. As for “Kew Gardens” and some other short stories by Woolf, one may perceive persuasive flirtations between the literary texts and other media such as painting and the cinema.

Painting and the cinema, when referenced in a short story, inscribe a network of meanings that are articulated with a picturesque, photogenic or imagetic quality. This does not mean, however, that an intermedial reference is necessary so that a verbal literary text can be connected with a visual element: “despite the fact that we tend to forget it [...] all literary texts have a highly specific visual element attached to them, simply by the selections of particular typefaces and page layouts” (BRUHN, 2016, p. 21). As we shall see in the analysis of “Kew Gardens”, the disposition of words on a page, in a smaller typeface, has been an intermedial strategy used by Woolf to convey meaning.

Regarding the interactions between literature and images, Rippl (2012, p. 321-322) indicates three categories of intermedial text-picture relationships. They are: 1. typographical experiments; 2. the simultaneous presence of verbal text and images – and here Rippl mentions “Kew Gardens” and its different editions, printed with illustrations and woodcuts by Vanessa Bell; and 3. verbal descriptions, through a process of intermedial reference, which may be achieved by the imitation or evocation

of a visual medium. In our analysis of “Kew Gardens” as follows, the interest relies mainly on the third intermedial text-picture relationship. This means that we are interested in how the literary text, through its verbal medium, references visual media to create meanings.

In this sense, the intermedial references to visual media constitute a cornerstone that will guide our analysis of “Kew Gardens”, supported by Irina Rajewsky’s literary theorizing of intermediality, in which intermedial reference appears as Rajewsky’s third sub-category of intermedial relations. Rajewsky (2005, p. 52) offers as examples of intermedial references “the evocation or imitation of certain filmic techniques such as zoom shots, fades, dissolves, and montage editing” in a literary text. In her definition of this type of medial flirtation, Rajewsky (2005, p. 52, original emphasis) delineates the following parameters:

Intermedial references are thus to be understood as meaning-constitutional strategies that contribute to the media product’s overall signification: the media product uses its own media-specific means, either to refer to a specific, individual work produced in another medium [...], or to refer to a specific medial subsystem (such as a certain film genre) or to another medium system [...]. The given product thus constitutes itself partly or wholly *in relation* to the work, system, or subsystem to which it refers. [...] Rather than combining different medial forms of articulation, the given media-product thematizes, evokes, or imitates elements or structures of another, conventionally distinct medium through the use of its own media-specific means.

Considering “Kew Gardens”, the intermedial references to painting and the cinema are achieved through the manipulation of the short story’s verbal medium: through verbal language, Woolf’s narrative is able to evoke, imitate and thematize imagetic media and borrow their pictorial potential to cause effects and communicate experiences.

There are many different paths a literary text may take when referencing another medium. In his proposal of a methodology to the intermedial analysis of literary texts, Wolfgang Hallet (2015) indicates, for instance, many significant aspects that the literary critic should consider when examining intermedial references. First, it should be noted whether the intermedial references to other media are transparent to or concealed from the reader. Second, the critic must consider what media are referenced in a literary text: cinematic references are very different from, say, a newspaper article, which is composed mainly of verbal language. In this sense, since there is a great variety of media that can be represented in literary texts, one must investigate the representation of their medial affordances, namely their communicative or expressive potential, as well as why they aroused the interest of the literary texts in which they are referenced.



In his methodological proposal, Hallet (2015) also accounts for the systemic levels in which the references may take place. According to the scholar, in a literary text, other media may be addressed as a single artifact (a specific painting, for instance), as a genre (impressionism) and as a medium itself (painting as a semiotic system). Regarding the representation of other media as semiotic systems through intermedial references, Hallet argues that these references may refer to different qualities of a medium, such as its semiotic, technical and institutional aspects or its processes of production, reception and distribution.

The systematic approach to intermedial references in literary texts, as proposed by Hallet (2015), presents two different types of functions, intra- and extratextual. Intratextually, the intermedial references affect the constituent components of a literary text, such as its plot and the actions portrayed, characters and processes of characterization, themes and narrative discourse. Extratextually, intermedial references in literary texts involve the meta-fictional, the meta-aesthetic or meta-medial and the meta-cultural functions. As we rely upon Hallet's arguments on intra- and extratextual functions to analyze the intermedial references in "Kew Gardens", a closer look into these functions is warranted, especially regarding the meta-aesthetic or meta-medial and meta-cultural functions. In accordance with Hallet (2015, p. 616), "[m]eta-aesthetic and meta-medial (self-)reflections refer to the specific features, qualities or affordances of the medium that is referenced or explicitly addressed, often in comparison to or across other media". This may concern ways "a particular sign system is able to engage in acts of signification or the ability to create works of art" (HALLET, 2015, p. 616). The meta-cultural function, in turn, relates to "a more general reflection and critique of general cultural developments, processes and practices [...] [, the] establishment of cultural values" (HALLET, 2015, p. 616). Meta-cultural reflections, in literary texts, have the potential to operate as an "advanced form of cultural critique" (HALLET, 2015, p. 616). Hallet's intra- and extratextual functions of intermediality might help us to reveal significant effects resulting from the dialogue between painting, cinema and literature in "Kew Gardens".

As the two intermedial references to be analyzed in "Kew Gardens" relate to the universe of images, through references to the cinema and painting, we also rely on Liliane Louvel's (2012) "Nuances of the pictorial"<sup>3</sup>. In her text, Louvel elaborates on a typology of the pictorial and tries to establish the degree of visual saturation in a narrative text, considering different examples in which metaphors connected to the visual arts appear: pictorial description, picturesque view, the picture-effect, tableau vivant, aesthetic arrangement and ekphrasis (verbal representation of visual representation). For Louvel, "the pictorial would be the appearance of a reference to visual arts in a literary text, by means of rather explicit forms, bearing the value of a quotation, and producing an effect of textual meta-pictorial quality" (2012, p. 47). The hypothesis posed here is that the depiction of the flower-bed, in "Kew Gardens",

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<sup>3</sup> Our translation for "Nuanças do pictorial" (see References). The translation of passages from this text to English is also ours.

possesses this 'meta-pictorial' quality, resembling both a painting and a cinematic narrative.

Louvel (2012, p. 49) points out the relevance of considering the various markers of pictorial description, such as: technical vocabulary (colours, nuances, perspective, forms, layers, lines); reference to pictorial genres (portrait, landscapes, naïf, realist); devices aiming at framing effects; focalizers and markers of vision; textual framings, like iconic or embedded devices on the page; explicit comparisons – “as if” it were a painting. Louvel’s theoretical principles, mainly as they relate to ekphrasis and the ‘as-if’ effect, dialogue with Irina Rajewsky’s sub-category concerned with intermedial references.

More specially on the filmic medium, in “The cinema”, originally published in 1926, when the cinema was beginning to explore and develop its techniques, Virginia Woolf calls attention to the specificities and peculiarities of filmic language. Woolf criticizes, as film critics would do in subsequent years, adaptations of novels that rely too much on the literary material, forgetting the inherent powers of filmic language: “[...] and it is only when we give up trying to connect the pictures with the book that we guess from some accidental scene [...] what the cinema might do if left to its own devices” (WOOLF, 1978, p. 183). The discussion shows her awareness about the potential strength of both literature and the cinema: “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. 184). The answer seems to be “yes”, since she praises *Dr. Caligari* and its effects of photography to express fear: “For a moment it seemed as if thought could be conveyed by shape more effectively than by words” (WOOLF, 1978, p. 183).

Such questions on the relationship among the arts permeate Woolf’s essays, and reveal her pioneering concern with issues that literary and filmic theories would only approach many years later. Furthermore, her fictional production develops in parallel with these theoretical problems, offering instigating and innovating examples of “the loves of the arts”.

## **Flashes of colour: “Kew Gardens” between the pictorial, the cinematic, and the verbal**

When considering Woolf’s fictional production, “Kew Gardens” is among what critics have labeled her experimental short pieces, together with “The mark on the wall”, “An unwritten novel”, “Monday or Tuesday”, “Blue & green” and “A haunted house”, published between 1917 and 1921. These short stories constitute attempts at breaking away from convention, characterized by different approaches to character and point of view, having fragmentation and lyricism as relevant devices (AZERÊDO,

1990). Woolf's concern with the articulation between life, reality and literary language is also registered in her *Diary*:

I keep thinking of different ways to manage my scenes; conceiving endless possibilities; seeing life, as I walk about the streets, an immense opaque block of material to be conveyed by me into its equivalent of language (WOOLF, 1977, p. 214).

It is interesting to point out her use of the word “scenes” and its visual quality, and her further reference to life through a metaphor – “an immense opaque block of material” – which also calls one's attention in terms of (lack of) visibility. In “Kew Gardens”, for one thing, it is the interplay between verbal language and colour, words and images, as well as the adoption of singular points of view resembling pictorial and cinematic strategies which set the tone and trigger the depiction of life in the gardens.

In her “Notes” to “Kew Gardens” in Virginia Woolf's *Selected short stories*, Sandra Kemp observes that “Woolf must have been working on a version of this story as early as August 1917” (1993, p. 114). The evidence for that is a fragment of a letter written by Katherine Mansfield to Woolf in 1917, in which Mansfield says: “Yes, your Flower Bed is very good. There's a still quivering changing light over it and a sense of these couples dissolving in the bright air which fascinates me” (apud KEMP, 1993, p. 114). Mansfield's perception of the narrative in terms of two principal images – the flower-bed and the couples dissolving in the air – somehow summarizes the configuration of the short story. In fact, in “Kew Gardens”, the formulation of painterly and cinematic effects is a very important intermedial strategy used to convey meanings.

In “Haptic routes: view painting and garden narratives”, Giuliana Bruno (2007, p. 193) argues for the possibility of approaching the garden as possessing a design that favours an aesthetic appreciation, thus emphasizing its attributes of spectacle and cultural artifact: “Nature was to be experienced in the form and shape of a view, and, like a picture, was to be viewed as an unfolding visual narration”. As such, readers of “Kew Gardens” who are familiar with the geographical location are able to exercise a juxtaposition of visual perceptions. Likewise, in her creation of the short story, Woolf must have borrowed from her own appreciation of the Gardens as a “picture”, as “an unfolding visual narration” in order to construct her own.

Bruno (2007, p. 194) also highlights the dynamic quality of the picturesque garden in its articulation with “the modern travelling spectator”:

(...) as in film, the visitor who moved into the picture was asked to travel through its different spaces. The scenery, made of floating images, changed constantly as the spectator's movement remade the garden's own shifting perspectives. Sequences of events unfolded as the visitor passed through. Discoveries were made at every turn. The garden was an affair for spatial wanderers (BRUNO, 2007, p. 195).

Such arguments prove to be very effective in our consideration of Woolf's short story as follows. As a matter of fact, that is exactly how she configured her "Kew Gardens": as visually-saturated with floating images, inhabited by spectators and passers-by, and characterized by movement and shifting perspectives that both accentuate details, tiny natural elements of the Gardens as well as more openly panoramic views.

Let us start with references to a vocabulary inherent to the visual: the story's opening paragraph refers sixteen times to colours (red, blue, yellow, grey, brown, green, silver, gold) and the word *colour* itself is repeated three times. In addition to that, there are also multiple expressions – oval shaped, heart shaped, tongue shaped –, and words like surface, dome, circular, expanded, fibre, spaces, spots, flashed, light, illumination, which contribute to producing an isotopy of *form and vision*, connected with the pictorial. From the short story's very beginning, one reads:

From the oval-shaped flower-bed there rose perhaps a hundred stalks spreading into heart-shaped or tongue-shaped leaves half way up and unfurling at the tip red or blue or yellow petals marked with spots of colour raised upon the surface; and from the red, blue or yellow gloom of the throat emerged a straight bar, rough with gold dust and slightly clubbed at the end. The petals were voluminous enough to be stirred by the summer breeze, and when they moved, the red, blue and yellow lights passed one over the other, staining an inch of the brown earth beneath with a spot of the most intricate colour (WOOLF, 1993, p. 46).

The first lines of the short story are rather representative of the intermedial movement towards imagetic media. More specifically, the extensive and detailed verbal description of the flower-bed and its components acts 'as if' it were creating a picture – or, to be more precise, a painting. The disposition of colours, lights, stains, spots, represented as if somewhat mixed and blurred, indicates the influence of Impressionism (a 19<sup>th</sup>- century art movement) in the painterly constructions in "Kew Gardens" (ARMSTRONG-TWIGG, 2017). The quoted passage, for instance, articulates with the impressionist painters' refusal to realistically portray their subjects; instead, these artists (the painters and Woolf herself) chose to represent the changing qualities of light and colours, usually through the adoption of unusual angles, which endowed their works with an effect of movement – in "Kew Gardens", this effect already indicates the short story's cinematic quality.

The presentation of the flower-bed in its exuberance of colourful stalks, leaves, petals and raindrops, in the very first paragraph, is attuned with the perspective of a snail, which keeps moving very slightly among the leaves and pebbles. The adoption of the snail's vantage point forces the reader to see the minute elements of the flower-bed, all of its details, and also to feel the effort the snail has to make to keep moving, facing obstacles along the way. In other words, Kew Gardens is initially apprehended

from the ground, from the flower bed, from a perspective that resembles what we call in cinematic language as a detail-shot or close up. Only after this detailed depiction of the flower-bed, the narrator says: “Then the breeze stirred rather more briskly overhead and the colour was flashed into the air above, into the eyes of the men and women who walk in Kew Gardens in July” (WOOLF, 1993, p. 46). The sensation is that of a camera that at first chooses to show the flower-bed from its minute components and gradually opens to show people – initially through their feet – strolling along the Gardens.

This example can be categorized, following Rajewsky (2005), as an “intermedial reference”, connected with the appearance in literary texts of references to other arts, either explicitly or through formal narrative strategies that imitate and evoke other artistic expressions; for instance, the use of devices resembling filmic techniques such as dissolves, zoom shots, montage editing etc.; descriptive modes in literature which evoke visual effects or refer to specific visual works of art (‘ekphrasis’). When Mansfield, for instance, emphasizes “the quivering changing light” over the flower-bed and points out “a sense of these couples dissolving in the bright air”, she is also highlighting strategies and visual effects borrowed from the pictorial and imagetic, cinematic expressions.

The narrator alternates narration between the snail’s point of view – aligned with the tiny components of the flower-bed –, and another one that shows the couples passing and talking. It is interesting to notice that the natural material of the garden (stalks, petals, leaves, raindrops, pebbles) is always perceived in articulation with the human material, as the following comparison illustrates: “The figures of these men and women straggled past the flower-bed with a curiously *irregular movement* not unlike that of the white and blue butterflies who crossed the turf in zig-zag flights from bed to bed” (WOOLF, 1993, p. 46; emphasis added). As the narrative develops, however, the couples’ irregular movements are contrasted with the snail’s crawling, persistent in its goal: “The snail had now considered every possible method of reaching his goal without going round the dead leaf or climbing over it” (WOOLF, 1993, p. 50). In other words, whereas humans move irregularly, as if lost, the snail has a method and a purpose, which shows a difference – an ironical one – between humans and animals.

The changes in point of view demonstrate a distinction in the way these two universes are depicted: whereas the flower-bed is described in its tiny details, visualized from a very close position, the characters passing (significantly apprehended as ‘figures’) are captured from a distance, either through singular and eccentric gestures, or through fragments of discourses one can overhear. This difference seems to say that whereas one can *see* a flower-bed, one cannot see people, except in what they allow one to see: their appearance (silhouettes) and fragmented words.

Regarding the representation of fragmented subjectivities, the intermedial references to visual media play an important role, serving as an example of an intermedial reflection that reverberates on an intratextual level. In Woolf’s short story, when a couple is walking by the flower-bed, we hear the wife speaking with her husband: “For me, a kiss. Imagine six little girls sitting before their easels twenty

years ago, down by the side of a lake, painting the water-lilies, the first red water-lilies I'd ever seen. And suddenly a kiss, there on the back of my neck. And my hand shook all the afternoon so that I couldn't paint (WOOLF, 1993, p. 47).

In this moment, the couple is discussing what it means to think and to talk about the past: the wife, Eleanor, for instance, shares with her husband one of her most treasured memories, saturated with imagetic qualities: as if painting in Kew Gardens once again, Eleanor recreates verbally the image of an unexpected kiss, a kiss that may have affected substantially her subjectivity. Through this intermedial (because pictorial) reference, we may only infer about the effects the kiss had on Eleanor, for the couple walks on and other characters are introduced in Woolf's narrative.

Another example associated with the iconic devices in the short story is perceived in the fragmented and unintelligible dialogue of the two elderly women, in which the letter fonts are diminished, exactly to give this sense of listening from a distance, thus hearing less: 'Sugar, flour, kippers, greens, Sugar, sugar, sugar' (WOOLF, 1993, p. 50).

Despite the precarious nature of these characters' portrayal (but is not that exactly what Woolf wanted to explore, the difficulty of capturing inner experience?), the narrator refers to significant and recurrent themes in Woolf's fiction, through the observation of how the characters walk and what they say: memory, the choices one makes along life, rescuing the past, happiness, youth, love, desire, old age, psychological effects of the war, madness. Along with the presentation of discourse fragments, the narrator reflects on certain subjects, offering insights typical of what Woolf would later develop in other short stories and novels:

(..) but who *knows* (so they thought as they pressed the parasol into the earth) what *precipices aren't concealed* in them, or what slopes of ice don't shine in the sun on the other side? Who *knows*? Who has ever seen this before? Even when she wondered what sort of tea they gave you at Kew, he felt that something *loomed up behind her words*, and stood *vast and solid behind them*; and the *mist* very slowly rose and uncovered – O Heavens, what were those *shapes*?" (WOOLF, 1993, p. 51; emphasis added).

The whole passage – having four questions, in which the verb *know* is repeated – constitutes a significant example of Woolf's experiments in characterization, to be theorized in her essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown", originally published in 1924. The characters are presented in their mystery, in their obscurity, in their attempt at knowing and understanding. The narrator even creates a convergence between natural setting – in which 'mist' plays a part – and the mystery associated with 'precipices' and 'looming', in the dissonance between words and meanings.

In terms of general construction, as mentioned before, "Kew Gardens" actually resembles a verbal text with a cinematic structure, in which scenes of the flower-bed and couples walking along the gardens are alternated. But the flower-bed's vantage point controls the larger point of view, thus creating different perspectives and pictorial

nuances: “They walked on past the flower-bed, now walking four abreast, as soon diminished in size among the trees and looked half transparent as the sunlight and shade swam over their backs in large trembling irregular patches” (WOOLF, 1993, p. 47-48). The effect resembles that of a camera opening its range of vision so as to get distanced from the characters, showing them as they walk and disappear, affected by changes in light and shade that produce a sense of “trembling patches”. Again, one cannot help articulating this passage with Mansfield’s perceptive remark on “the still quivering changing light over [the flower-bed] and a sense of [those] couples dissolving in the bright air” (apud KEMP, 1993, p. 114), mentioned above.

The cinematic quality of “Kew Gardens” is also made visible by the representation of the snail’s journey through the flower-bed:

The snail had now considered every possible method of reaching his goal without going round the dead leaf or climbing over it. Let alone the effort needed for climbing a leaf, he was doubtful whether the thin texture which vibrated with such an alarming crackle when touched even by the tip of his horns would bear his weight [...]. He had just inserted his head in the opening and was taking stock of the high brown roof and was getting used to the cool brown light when two other people came past outside on the turf (WOOLF, 1993, p. 50).

The verbal narrative, through a process of intermedial reference, emulates the cinematic strategies of zooming in and zooming out. Depending on the amount of detail to be represented, the narrator acts as if it were a camera, being able to capture very specific and minuscule components of the flower-bed and to quickly distance itself to apprehend fragments from the conversations of the passers-by. The fact that the snail is represented as having a method, choosing his path, and taking action also contributes to the cinematic effect generated in this excerpt, since it creates the impression of an imagetic and sequential narrative taking place.

The way “Kew Gardens” ends is also impressive in terms of pictorial and cinematic devices. In the last paragraph, the narrator employs the similar abundance of vocabulary associated with colour and minuteness we have in the first paragraph, thus producing an effect of framework for the story, as if framing the Gardens into a picture. But there is more:

Voices. Yes, voices. Wordless voices, breaking the silence suddenly with such a depth of contentment, such passion of desire, or, in the voices of children, such freshness of surprise; breaking the silence? But there was no silence; all the time the motor omnibuses were turning their wheels and changing their gear; like a vast nest of Chinese boxes all of wrought steel turning ceaselessly one within another the city murmured; on the top of which the voices cried

aloud and the petals of myriads of flowers flashed their colours into the air (WOOLF, 1993, p. 52).

At the end of the short story, the narrator simulates another cinematic device, when the Gardens are inserted within the city and juxtaposed to the urban noises of the buses and the general city's 'murmuring'. The sensation is that of a camera whose movement changes from a more concentrated and limited range of vision to a panoramic shot, so as to eventually go back to the Gardens again, thus closing full circle with the short story's beginning – the Gardens offered as a framed picture.

### **“Like a vast nest of Chinese boxes”: concluding notes**

The metaphorical comparison “like a vast nest of Chinese boxes”, in the previous quotation, is appropriate for one to grasp the general construction of “Kew Gardens”. Actually, it is a simile that contributes with an understanding of how Woolf employs point of view to produce different effects of perspective, at times positioning the reader near the object, at others allowing the reader to see the object only from a distance, and affected by colour and changes of light.

Kew Gardens is initially revealed through the flower-bed, but eventually other parts of the gardens are referred to, as in: “Doesn't one always think of the past, in a garden with men and women lying under the trees?” (WOOLF, 1993, p. 47). The narrator also refers to the place where people can have tea at Kew. In other words, the metonymic processes of depicting the different places of the gardens attest that the flower-bed is situated in Kew Gardens, which, in their turn, are situated in the city. Like a vast nest of Chinese boxes, one containing the other, the narrator also shows the flower-bed and its minute components. We are actually transposed from the minutest observation to a wider glimpse of the city.

The intermedial relations between painting, cinema and literature in “Kew Gardens” have a fundamental impact on the experiments Woolf was trying to make in terms of character, narration and point of view – which relate to the intratextual functions of intermedial references, as previously discussed. In this sense, intermediality proved itself as a productive theory and methodology for the analysis and interpretation of “Kew Gardens”. In our analysis, we were able to highlight Woolf's modernist experiments by discussing the intermedial references made to two visual media.

In terms of what we might perceive as the extratextual functions of the intermedial references, the evocation of painting and cinematic devices in “Kew Gardens” produces a general meta-aesthetic/meta-medial framework, but, as the first part of this discussion shows, this is not an isolated concern in Woolf's production. Far from that, her essays on painting, pictures and the cinema, as well as her dialogues with her sister (and we infer, with other artists), offer substantial evidence of how open she was to other artistic expressions, and how avid she was for creating a



literature that would reflect the ‘impurity’ of words as a medium. Furthermore, by referencing and contemplating the communicative potential of cinema and painting, Woolf developed a substantial metafictional reflection on the expressive affordances of literature itself – on how a verbal text may draw on imagetic devices in different and productive manners to convey meanings.

“Kew Gardens”, finally, serves as undeniable proof that Virginia Woolf was aware of the fact that media do influence one another: in our analysis of the short story, we were able to discuss how this modernist narrative developed intricate and dynamic relations with other medial forms of expressions, such as impressionist painting and the cinema. This, when considered in Woolf’s broad literary context, illustrates the fact that modernism in literature resulted from a productive dialogue with other arts. By being representative of this modernist and intermedial practice, “Kew Gardens” may also be inserted within a wider landscape of medial and cultural production, reception and circulation of signs and texts, thus also illuminating aspects developed by Virginia Woolf’s narrative on a meta-cultural level.

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