

Virginia Woolf, Vanessa Bell, the Maternal and Photography

Maggie Humm

Bracha Ettinger's writings match many modernist women's attempts to capture more fragmentary representations of the feminine in the novel, particularly the maternal, for example, Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. Woolf was also a photographer, compiling photo albums throughout her life. Such composite image/texts both expose and resist a conception of modernist purity with autobiographical traces. I want to suggest in this paper that domestic photography – a visual culture on the margins of modernism – shares something of Ettinger's 'becoming threshold', a space of contradiction and change 'between being and absence, memory and oblivion, I and not-I, a process of transgression and fading away. The metamorphic consciousness has no center, cannot hold a fixed gaze' (Ettinger 1992, p. 201).

Virginia Woolf's obsession with the memory of her mother, 'of living so completely in her atmosphere that one never got far enough away from her to see her as a person', was a shaping power in Woolf's life and art as it was for her sister, the artist Vanessa Bell (Woolf 1985, p. 83). Woolf's close attachment to mother figures in her life, particularly her sister Vanessa and friends Violet Dickinson and Ethel Smyth, recreated this atmosphere for her. Woolf recovers the dead mother in writing and photography by transforming loss into fictional images and photographic frames. Photographs, which Ettinger herself uses as an artistic medium, reveal, Ettinger argues, a special relationship between the I and the Not I, between invisible matrixial intrauterine memories and the external world. 'The emotional and mental conductivity of an artwork may reflect on far away matrixial unconscious events' (Ettinger 1994, p. 59). For both Ettinger and Woolf, the maternal is present as an experienced 'affect' in their photographs.

With the metaphor of the 'matrixial gaze', the title of her important work, Bracha Ettinger makes domestic photography into a palimpsestic source of the maternal. As Griselda Pollock argues in her expert account of Ettinger's work, the maternal haunts our aesthetic subjectivities, not like Lacan's mastering gaze, but as 'a borderline awareness' (Pollock 1994,

p. 78). 'Ettinger's method permits a glimpse of another kind of vanishing point - a matrixial gaze' which is 'distinct' from the usual 'confrontation between art practice and the popular cultures' (Pollock 1994, p. 78). The characteristics of such a method resemble Woolf's modernist experiments: a use of fragmentary images, interruptions of linearity, traces of the Imaginary, and intricately worked surfaces.

Psychoanalytically speaking, all art is often a testimony to our unconscious pasts rather than the pasts we consciously choose to remember. Both Virginia Woolf and her artist sister Vanessa Bell took, developed and mounted in albums over 1,000 photographs each. My argument is that the maternal is present as an affect in these photographs, as well as some professional photographs taken of Woolf, and in many of Bell's paintings.ⁱ

I

Virginia Woolf

Virginia Woolf's sense of belonging and unbelonging and the power of family memory is transparent in her work. The past vividly 'narrates' the present both in her writing and in her photography. For example, she mounts on card, as a framing frontispiece of her major album of the 1930s, a large 6x7 photograph of her mother Julia Stephen taken in 1863-65, before Woolf's birth, immediately followed by a 1892 photograph of Julia, Woolf's father Leslie Stephen and the young Virginia Stephen (10 years old) taken by her sister Vanessa in their favourite holiday home Talland House, St. Ives. The photographs' honoured place suggests a primal scene full of familial referents, which Woolf then repeats in her own photographs of objects and settings resembling her childhood home

It is the visual language of these particular photographs, what we might call trauma fragments, which determine Woolf's own photographic constructions. All photographs are a language and Woolf's language was maternal. 'She has haunted me' Woolf wrote (*L3*, p. 374). In 1918, Woolf reviewed Dorothy Scarborough's *The Supernatural in Modern English Fiction*, which introduced Woolf 'to a discussion of the spirits of dead mothers in the section on ghostly psychology' (Johnson 1997, p. 238). Woolf literally wrote 'through' the maternal; 'Here I am experimenting with the parent of all pens - the black J, the pen, as I used to think it, along with

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other objects, as a child, because mother used it' (D1, p. 208). Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse*, visually recreates her mother and father at St. Ives in the figures of Mrs and Mr Ramsay. In the novel, Woolf was able to translate abstract metaphysical questions about memory, such as 'what is the meaning of memory?', into epistemological processes; *how* to know the meaning of memory by constructing the present time of characters through memories of the past. The publication of *To the Lighthouse* encouraged Woolf's family to remember Julia. 'A voice on the telephone plunged me into the wildest memories – of St. Ives – Gerald [Woolf's half-brother] "I am trying to find Cameron photographs of Mama - Can you lend me any negatives?"' (L3, p. 380).

Woolf realised that this pictorial enthusiasm raised complex epistemological and psychoanalytic questions. Woolf frequently said about her mother 'it is a psychological mystery why she should be: how a child could know about her; except that she has always haunted me' (L3, p. 383). Jane Marcus argues that Woolf's feminism was 'emotionally, part of the project of the daughter's recovery of the mother' (Marcus 1987, p. 9). Julia Stephen's early death meant that, to Woolf, she became the phantasmatic mother, that is, a mother who can exist only as an image, who can be seen or mirrored only in identifications and who might incite the visual imagination (of a photographer) into hallucinatory significations (Jacobus 1995, p. piii). Just as the family, as Hermione Lee suggests, was Woolf's 'political blueprint' so the death of her mother gave Woolf a visual blueprint (Lee 1996, p. 52). In *Moments of Being*, Woolf describes how it was her mother's death, which 'made me suddenly develop perception' (Woolf 1985, p. 93)

In the famous, and very long, *Boeuf en Daube* scene in *To the Lighthouse*, where Mrs. Ramsay harmoniously brings together all the characters around a dinner of what was Woolf's friend Roger Fry's favourite dish, Woolf represents her as a maternal archetype. 'The whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her [against]... the sterility of men' (Woolf 1927, p. 146). The body of the stew is a referent for Mrs. Ramsay's maternal body. 'A soft mass...with its shiny walls...a French recipe of my grandmother's said Mrs. Ramsay' (*ibid*, p. 156). The beauty and sensuality of the moment is in 'female time', as the womb-like quality of the stew pot is matched in its maternal quality by Mrs. Ramsay's intuitive ability to decode the emotional affects of each character's body language. Woolf delighted in frequently

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describing the textual birth of her novels and non-fiction in terms of matrixial creativity in Ettinger's sense. Writing *Three Guineas* in March 1937 was, for Woolf, a hypotyposis of childbirth, 'the mildest childbirth I ever had... no book ever slid from me so secretly & smoothly' (D5, p. 148-9).

However, even some professional photographs of Woolf bear the affective imprint of Woolf's mother. The two photographs of Woolf taken for *Vogue* magazine encapsulate this theme. The first, from May 1924, taken by Maurice Beck and Helen Macgregor the *Vogue* photographers, shows Woolf wearing her mother's dress of many years before. Although in the second photograph, taken in May 1925, Woolf is in contemporary dress, the photograph, is also shot by the Becks in the former studio of Thomas Woolner a sculptor who had proposed marriage and a sitting to Woolf's mother. Woolf's averted female gaze and display of gloves (an unusual item in photographs of Woolf) carry the emotional burden of the matrixial. That evening Woolf wrote in her diary 'I have been sitting to *Vogue*, the Becks that is, in their mews, which Mr Woolner built as his studio, & perhaps it was there he thought of my mother, whom he wished to marry' (D3, p. 12).

Woolf thought her mother to be 'not only the most beautiful of women as her portraits [by Burne-Jones and other artists] will tell you, but also one of the most distinct', and that Julia created unthinkingly 'a certain silence round her by her very beauty' (L2, p. 32). Woolf characterises Julia's beauty as explicitly maternal. Julia's maternal image is foregrounded in Woolf's autobiographical writing *Moments of Being*, with the mother as semiotic origin in a matrix of sounds, smells and colours of pure jouissance in the often quoted opening passage. 'Red and purple flowers on a black ground – my mother's dress; and she was sitting either in a train or in an omnibus and I was on her lap. I therefore saw the flowers she was wearing very close... It is of hearing the waves breaking... it is of lying and hearing this splash and seeing this light, and... feeling the purest ecstasy I can conceive' (Woolf, 1985, p. 64-5). The description exactly matches a photograph of Julia with Virginia on her lap aged three that is Plate 36F in Woolf's father's photo album which Woolf owned at the time of writing (Humm, 2006). The photograph was, of course, black and white and hence in addition to the overall scene Woolf emphasises the 'black ground' of her mother's dress. The photograph is the first photograph taken of Woolf and hence becomes the first memory.

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This tense relationship between a body of writing and her mother's nurturing, maternal and beautiful body, is frequently negotiated by Woolf through the symbolization of a maternal presence; for example, both in the figure of Helen in *The Voyage Out* as well as in the gender fluidities of *Orlando*. Julia Stephen's early death at forty-nine when Woolf was 13 meant that, to Woolf, she became the fantasmatic mother, that is, a mother who can exist only as an image, who can be seen or mirrored only in identifications and who might incite the visual imagination (of a photographer) into significations. In a chapter 'the Dead Mother' (which includes depressed and absent mothers), André Green, Julia Kristeva's analyst and teacher, suggests that the 'mirror identification' with the mother 'is almost obligatory' (Green 1993, p.159).

Green suggestively discusses the history of psychoanalytic concepts in relation to the arts. The mother is always an imago in the child's mind that the child engages in a kind of 'mimicry' (*ibid*, p. 151). The child is always 'recathecting the traces of the trauma' of loss in 'artistic creations' (*ibid*, p. 151). Green argues that 'the fantasy of the primal scene is of capital importance' because 'the subject will be confronted with memory traces in relation to the dead mother' (*ibid*, p. 159). The 1892 photograph of Virginia with her parents at St. Ives is like a primal scene, as if Virginia and Vanessa collude, as Green suggests, in 'erotic and intense destabilization of the primal scene to the advantage of intense intellectual activity' (*ibid*, p. 160). The mother is a 'framing-structure' for the child who projects its feelings back onto the mother through 'revivifying repetitions'. Similarly, her sister's paintings taught Woolf that representations can resist death. In a review of her sister's paintings, Woolf spoke of 'this strange painter's world, in which mortality does not enter, and psychology is held at bay' (Woolf 1975, p. 205).

II

Vanessa Bell

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The significance of Bell's photography derives partly from the significant place which photography occupies in Bell's life, letters and art. In her photographs, family tableaux and window framing are common pictorial devices which show Bell's understanding of artistic codes. But Bell's repetitions and enlargements of these particular photographs suggests the presence of other tensions than simply Bell's facility in translating painting codes into photography. Why did Bell need to represent herself as a Madonna so frequently? Why are window frames so deliberately evident? Bell treasured most of all the photograph of her mother Julia Stephen leaning against a window. In addition, Julia Margaret Cameron, the famous Victorian photographer and Virginia and Vanessa's great aunt, created major portraits of women as Madonnas, as well as frequently photographing her niece Julia Stephen. There is a constant synchronisation of the psychic and the pressure of the autobiographical, together with art conventions throughout Bell's photographs. Frances Spalding also argues that many of Vanessa Bell's paintings similarly revive the maternal. *Studland Beach* and *Nursery* have groups of female figures contained within a circle, creating 'a nostalgic evocation of motherhood' (Spalding 1983, p. 251). Bell evokes the maternal with spatial arrangements of objects, strong verticals and monumental figures of women very like Virginia's photo sequences.

A fresh and powerful engagement with issues of childhood and motherhood in literature, the arts and education marks Bell's moment of modernity. It is after all the time of *Peter Pan*. Bell was herself intensely interested in early childhood development and education and attempted to set up and teach a nursery school at Charleston, her country home. Bell's albums contain over 50 photographs of her children naked, many strongly erotic. Photographing one's own children as a mother necessarily entails the photographer's self-representation and the family's unconscious optics. Bell's children are clearly comfortable in her world. Bell documents the ever-changing days of her children at play: on the beach, in Charleston pond, acting with sticks as swords. She also photographs the children absorbed in their own activities in their own self-absorbed lives. The juxtaposition of sometimes out of focus snapshot with erotic portrait in the albums unsettles the erotic gaze. It was Freud who argued that childhood narcissism is at first an innocent Imaginary. Laurence Rickels suggests that, for Freud, narcissism only becomes 'a logic of inversion' through the interventions of

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'internal institutions or courts... for example, dream censor' (Rickels 1988, p. 361). Bell's photographs of childhood narcissism could as easily be read as reflecting back to the child the narcissism he so earnestly desires and needs to perform. As Jacqueline Rose argues in the context of writing 'it is a way of 'knowing' the child. Loving the child and knowing the child – the idea is one of an innocent attachment' (Rose 1994, p. 20).

Bell photographs reciprocal moments, interconnections between her children and between herself and the children, what anthropologists would call the intersubjective moment. Bell firmly believed in a child's artistic vision. 'If we could see our end clearly at the beginning as children do – and state it, and leave it – our pictures would no doubt be as lovely in technique as are those of the old painters in fresco' (Bell 1997, p. 165). And in Bell's photographs it is children, not adults, who have an active gaze. For example in the photograph of a naked Angelica (Bell's daughter), standing next to the fully clothed Roger Fry (a former lover of Bell). Angelica looks actively at Fry while Fry is carefully *not* observing the naked girl. The photograph does not centre any implied relation between clothed adult male and naked girl, since Fry avoids the gaze. Kaja Silverman describes how, psychoanalytically, the mother/daughter relationship is one of identification and desire and the endless interchangeability of their positions (Silverman, 1988). Reading Bell's photograph from within Silverman's framework, it could be said that the photograph shows the possibility of interchangeable subject/object viewing positions, with Angelica *substituting* for Bell rather than Bell's voyeurism. Vanessa might be describing Angelica as an erotic stand-in for Bell in a letter to Roger Fry in 1923. 'I send you a photograph of myself and Angelica to remind you that any rate that there is *one* very lovely *and* witty *and* brilliant *and* charming creature to be seen in Gordon Square [Bell's house]' (Marler 1993, p. 273).

III

Conclusion

Unlike other representational forms, photography has a unique way of representing objects and people as indices of the inner feelings of a viewer of a subject. Where literary tropes can often seem arbitrary, photographs, and the visual language of photography – its structures of looking

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– are material. That is to say, photography’s techniques of representation can enable writers and painters to figure *material* objects as images of the particular gender and cultural screens which mediate structures of looking. The family photo album is probably the first image/text which most people encounter. Woolf and Bell’s constant attention to such aesthetic versions of familial relations reveals their continual interest in the ways in which visual fields represent absence and presence and unconscious optics, and also in the ways in which photographic images can disrupt a familiar gendered narrative. Their knowledge of photography enabled Woolf and Bell to reveal maternal subjectivities in a continuum of texts including paintings and *To the Lighthouse*, as well as the 'unconscious optics' of Woolf and Bell’s photo albums. It could be argued that both sisters ‘refuse’ their mother’s death by constantly revivifying the maternal in art.

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ⁱ For a full account of Virginia Woolf's knowledge of the arts see Maggie Humm (ed.) *The Edinburgh Companion to Virginia Woolf and the Arts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010).