Abstract

This article is based on a paper read at the Mind→Body Conference at the University of Reading, UK, in 2007. It was an interdisciplinary conference that looked at the exploration of the body in place of the mind in the contemporary intellectual climate. The papers submitted covered areas as diverse as literature, critical theory, philosophy, film art, performance, and medicine. My paper originally tried to capture an innovative aspect of Virginia Woolf’s writing through the analysis of “vision as a physical sense” in relation to the tradition of ocularcentrism, and later revision has sought to connect the argument more closely to the feminist theory of gaze.

Woolf’s status as an intensely visual novelist has seen a large corpus of work written on her use of the visual. Her style developed under the influence of Post-Impressionist aesthetics derived from her sister Vanessa and other friends such as Roger Fry and Clive Bell. This article aims not at underestimating these important aspects to Woolf’s work, but rather at casting a light on a relatively unexplored issue: in the “moment of being” the eye is not so dominant, rather, its ability to see is diminished or relativized whilst other physical sensations become the focus. The introductory part shows this characteristic amalgamation of sight and other senses in Woolf by examining two essays, “The Moment: Summer’s Night” and “The Sketch of the Past.” Then I go on to briefly summarize the concept of the modern, Cartesian ocularcentrism and the feminist critique of it in the 1970s and 80s—both are intellectual frameworks that in my view Woolf’s aesthetics subverts. A short story and several essays demonstrate that Woolf strategically draws a line between two types of eye—the mind’s eye and the body’s eye—to launch a criticism of the former eye. This is followed by a close reading of two “moments of being” which are representative of her feminist aesthetics: the first is from To the Lighthouse and the second, a short story called “The Moments of Being: ‘Slater’s Pins Have No Points’.” In these moments, Woolf’s conceptualization of vision, not as a part of rational working of mind but as a physical perception, seems to have the effect of giving expressions to the delicate sentiments of female characters that would otherwise slip through the net of masculine language. This paper closes by looking at selected epiphanic moments in Woolf’s contemporary male modernists which confirm the uniqueness of her strategy. Woolf’s aesthetics eventually goes beyond the feminist theorization of gaze as the site of male dominance and presents a more nuanced view of embodiment in relation to the visual experience, as has developed in feminism since the late 1980s onwards.
1. Introduction

Virginia Woolf begins her essay, “The Moment: Summer’s Night” (1929) with an inquiry, “what composes the present moment?,” and the answer given is that it is “largely composed of visual and of sense impressions” (9). Set in twilight, however, the essay is not really concerned with the visual; on the contrary, the reader’s attention is drawn ever more to impressions gathered by other senses. As it gets darker, the narrator says, one becomes more aware of the damp, hot air touching the skin, and also becomes more attentive to the conversation going on and the emotions invested in it. It is as if when the information coming through the eye is more or less shut out, one’s other senses alternatively grow acute. Just before the essay ends, a nameless sensation, an ecstasy arrives:

Then comes the terror, the exultation; the power to rush out unnoticed, alone; to be consumed; to be swept away to become a rider on the random wind; the tossing wind; the trampling and neighing wind; the horse with the blown-back mane; the tumbling, the foraging; he who gallops for ever, nowhither travelling, indifferent; to be part of the eyeless dark, to be rippling and streaming, to feel the glory run molten up the spine, down the limbs, making the eyes glow, burning, bright, and penetrate the buffeting waves of the wind. (13)

What is striking about this Paterian moment of intense sensation is the excessively kinetic image it evokes and the juxtaposition of paradoxical terms: the eyes glowing in the eyeless darkness. This hints at the presence of something which could be seen only when the acuity of normal sight is in some way attenuated.

In the collection of her autobiographical writings, *Moments of Being*, Woolf writes about many of the privileged moments that she experienced in her childhood, which are again marked with the absence of sight’s dominance over other senses. One of the essays in this volume, “Sketch of the Past,” opens with “the purest ecstasy” that the infant Virginia perceived, hearing the waves breaking at the shore. In those days, Woolf looks back, “what was seen would at the same time be heard . . . sounds indistinguishable from sights. Sound and sight seem to make equal parts of these first impressions” (66). Received by, as the editor says, “an ego so unaware of itself that it appears almost impersonal” (16), the memories have the purity that an adult can never expect to experience again. Criticism of Woolf usually pays much attention to the role of the visual in her writings, and it is true that she is an intensely visual novelist having developed her style under the influences of Post-Impressionism, the art theories of Roger Fry and Clive Bell, and the paintings of her sister Vanessa Bell.² It has been also revealed that Woolf was a keen photographer and cinema-goer, and her concept of the visual might have been considerably affected by these emergent media.³ I do not aim to underestimate these aspects in this article, but to cast a light on a relatively unexplored issue: in Woolf’s writing the privileged moment, called “the moment of being,” has the eye as not so dominant, with its ability to see seemingly diminished or relativized. As suggested in “Sketch of the Past,” if the underdevelopment of sight is linked with the underdeveloped ego, can Woolf’s invocation of this eyeless—or sometimes half-eyeless—state work as a sort of release, or at least as a
possible antidote to deterministic or socially constructivist assumptions about the nature of subjectivity and selfhood?

2. Western Ocularcentrism and the Feminist Critique of It

Western culture has a long tradition of privileging sight as the noblest sense since as early as the writing of Plato, but it is particularly with Cartesian dualism that the closest association of sight and the mind emerged. Broadly speaking, Descartes needed to emphasize the mind’s superiority over the body in order to establish a system of objective knowledge, and it is under this impulse that he advanced his peculiar model of the eye under the perfect control of the mind. In Optics (1637) he proposes an experiment to see how vision works, and it lucidly shows his effort to eliminate physical factors from human sight (Descartes 166-67). According to Descartes, first, one takes the eye of a newly dead person, or failing that, of an ox or some other large animal, and replaces the membranes with some white material thin enough to let light pass through such as a piece of paper or an egg-shell. If one puts this eye in the hole of a specially made board facing various objects and looks at the white material, one finds there a picture of those objects. Descartes claims that this is quite the same as what actually happens in the eye of a living person, but it should be admitted, the eye here is “a disembodied cyclopean eye detached from the observer, possibly not even a human eye” (Crary 47).

Furthermore, it is not the physical eye but the mind of the viewer that sees the objects: “it is the soul which sees, and not the eye; and it does not see directly, but only by the means of the brain” (Descartes 172). The brain and the nerves are thought to be impediments thrust between the world and the rational mind. They sometimes deceive the latter with physical disorders, for if there were just the mind and the eye as a lens, we might always arrive at objective knowledge of the world. Jonathan Crary finds an analogy between this Cartesian eye and camera obscura, a major optical device of the period, which is “a precarious figurative resolution” (41) of the problem of the seventeenth century philosophy—how to establish the objective knowledge of the world. The mechanism of a camera obscura, to cut off the subject from the object and to turn visual experience into a disembodied act in control of the mind, fully corresponds with what Descartes tried to do with his optical model (25-66). Elizabeth Ermarth also sees the Cartesian eye as an expression of the age’s impulse to rationalize sight, rather than a unique idea of his own: Renaissance laws of perspective as a cultural consensus finds “its philosophical analogues in Cartesian epistemology” (5).

The last century saw a gradual erosion of the dominance of Cartesian dualism, and feminist critics began to attack the erasure of the body from his philosophy as the sign of a flight from the feminine and towards a masculinized, objectivist system of knowledge. Cartesian ocularcentrism—a mode of seeing in order to offer a rational understanding of the world—was also exposed to criticism in this feminist context. As Laura Mulvey’s classic essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” stands as an exemplary argument, from the mid-1970s to mid-80s feminists defined the act of seeing as an area of male dominance. Mulvey’s view of society is essentially Freudian: it requires a constant renewal of the castrated woman in order to stabilize patriarchal orders and meanings. Hence the “male gaze” is
ubiquitous, turning the female body into an object of gaze to serve the male subject (Amelia Jones 44-53). What is not entirely satisfactory about this theorization of the gaze in this period is that, by emphasizing the power of the masculine gaze and the sacrifice that women pay to sustain it, it carries a danger of strengthening the same gender dichotomy that it attacks.9 In other words, as long as one thinks about the eye as an organ in the service of the mind, one cannot be freed from the almost obsessive notion that the subject is formed by the Other’s gaze. This negative conception of vision is not only a specialty of feminism, but prevalent in the twentieth century philosophy—from Jean-Paul Sartre’s violent disgust for the illusions of sight (which seems to be assimilated by Simone de Beauvoir, too) to Michael Foucault’s theory of panoptic gaze as the locus of power, for example. Rethinking sight as a physical act has a possibility to grow out of this wholesale denigration of vision in the twentieth century.10 In my view, the eyeless sensation in Virginia Woolf can be regarded as one innovative attempt to break through the mind-eye connection whose origin can be traced back to Descartes’s optical model. She describes vision not as a location of the mind’s work but as a physical perception, merging it with other bodily sensations to the extent that they become inseparable from one another, and by doing so, tries to register the knowledge and experience which would slip through the net of a masculinized language.

3. Different Modes of Seeing: The Mind’s Eye and the Physical Eye

Firstly, it should be noticed that Woolf frequently draws a clear line between the mind’s eye and “the other mode of seeing” in her writing. It is in the short story called “Solid Objects” (1918) that Woolf first makes this distinction. Two university students, Charles and John, are on the shore arguing about politics, but when the latter starts groping the sand, his sight goes through a transformation:

As his hand went further and further beyond the wrist, so that he had to hitch his sleeve a little higher, his eyes lost their intensity, or rather the background of thought and experience which gives an inscrutable depth to the eyes of grown people disappeared, leaving only the clear transparent surface, expressing nothing but wonder, which the eyes of young children display. No doubt the act of burrowing in the sand had something to do with it. (102-3)

With the growing sense of touch, the eye usually empowered by the rational work of mind becomes a mere tool of seeing. Then John picks up from the sand a beautiful piece of green glass washed by the sea, and brings it back home. After this incident he becomes more and more preoccupied with the solid objects which give his physical eye purely aesthetic pleasures, which has no connection with the other aspects of his life.

Although this story ends in a negative way, with John as a social outcast, elsewhere this physical eye comes to have positive meanings, particularly for the female.11 Jane Goldman extensively discusses Woolf’s “manifesto” of a new feminist ontology of vision through examination of the essay “The Sun and the Fish” (1928), in which Woolf directly attacks the mind-eye connection. Goldman suggests that Woolf ventures to subvert the male-centered, heliotropic tradition in Western thoughts, based on her own witness
of a total eclipse of the sun in 1927 (13-106). My argument has benefited greatly from this discussion, though I would place more emphasis on how Woolf criticizes the Cartesian model of the eye. This problem is not directly considered as Goldman aims to go beyond the feminist reading of Woolf informed by the Derridian deconstruction of mind/body, or, male/female dichotomies. “The Sun and the Fish” opens with “an amusing game” of the eye: if one says several irrelevant, unconnected words (for example, “Athens; Segesta; Queen Victoria” [178]), the eye always creates a mess with these ridiculously combined images. This is because, Woolf explains, “a sight will only survive in the queer pool in which we deposit our memories if it has the good luck to ally itself with some other emotion by which it is preserved. Sights marry, incongruously, morganatically (like the Queen and the camel), and so keep each other alive” (178). This radically undermines the Cartesian model of sight, bringing in a factor that Descartes does not take into account—memories and emotion. To say that a sight of an object cannot survive without the aid of emotion means that it becomes no longer objective whilst stored in the mind as an image. Furthermore, by introducing the vocabulary of matrimony, Woolf shrewdly merges the issues of sight and gender. The purity of objective sight is exposed to danger by marrying subjective aspects, but it is the only way to maintain its pedigree. Then Woolf launches a final blow to the Cartesian model of the eye:

So, on this dark morning, when the real world has faded, let us see what the eye can do for us. Show me the eclipse, we say to the eye; let us see that strange spectacle again. And what we see at once—but the mind’s eye is only by courtesy an eye; it is a nerve which hears and smells, which transmits heat and cold, which is attached to the brain and rouses the mind to discriminate and speculate—it is only for brevity’s sake that we say that we ‘see’ at once a railway station at night. (178)

What follows is the reminiscence of the eclipse that Woolf actually went to see in the previous year, but the eye, after all, presents a picture of the London Zoological Gardens in summertime—lizards and fish in the artificial environment—for no definite reason. This “game of the eye” succinctly reveals that the Cartesian mind’s eye is a carefully constructed faculty assuring the objectivity of sight, which is by no means identical with how our optical system on the whole actually works. The mind’s eye is “only by courtesy” an eye; the real one is incorporated in the body and does see with the nerve linked to the brain just as we hear and smell because of the nerves in charge of these respective perceptions. The eye is no longer disembodied—its reality as a part of the body is featured and explored as a sort of cognitive margin in rationalism. Much later in Three Guineas (1938), her feminist essay in which Woolf harshly criticizes man’s authoritative way of seeing that ultimately caused the World War, she again overturns the mind-eye connection: “the eye is connected with the brain; the brain with the nervous system. That system sends its messages in a flash through every past memory and present feeling” (14). This demonstrates that refuting the Cartesian eye had been an important visual strategy throughout her career.
4. The Physical Eye in the Moments of Being

In her fiction, it is this physical eye and its whimsical nature that often leads the Woolfian female character into an unexpected, intuitive understanding about herself. There are many such moments, but in this article I would like to draw on two representative examples. The first is from *To the Lighthouse* (1927), in which the problem of vision is most seriously engaged in the form of how the female painter, Lily Briscoe, can transmit to, and put down on, her canvas the essential being of Mrs. Ramsay. Before describing one of Lily’s moments of being, Woolf introduces an epiphanic event as perceived by a male character, which is intended to contrast sharply with Lily’s own. Tansley, the follower of Mr. Ramsay staying at the Ramsays’ summer house, is from a lower-class family and behaves pompously and defensively to conceal his inferiority complex. But Mrs. Ramsay’s feminine impulse to have “the whole of the other sex under her protection” (10) assuages his harshness. Accompanying Mrs. Ramsay on her regular visit to the poor, he is stricken by her virtuous figure: “when, suddenly, in she came, stood for a moment silent . . . stood quite motionless for a moment against a picture of Queen Victoria wearing the blue ribbon of the Garter, and all at once he realized it was this: it was this: — she was the most beautiful person he had ever seen” (18). It is barely masked that Tansley sees her as an embodiment of the Victorian angel in the house (this is mockingly suggested by the overlapping portrait of the Queen). This scene implies that the social life of the intellectual man is based, whether directly or indirectly, on women’s self-sacrifice; Mrs. Ramsay’s motionlessness and silence under his gaze as if she is in a tableau suggests the passivity of feminine positioning, for which there is practically no alternative.

“Mrs. Ramsay like a figure in the painting” is the motif repeated in “The Window.” Most of the time, she is found sitting in the house beside a window, knitting and reading a story to her son James. Male characters—most notably her husband, and, with some reservation, William Bankes—look at her as a Madonna, a symbol of a domestic angel whose figure is infallibly framed in the window pane. However, in contrast to Tansley’s moment, which is marked with the dominance of sight and a static, indoor setting, Lily experiences a much more kinetic moment while walking with Mr. Bankes. His understanding of her stymied creativity and the issues with which she grapples—the problem of how to draw the essence of Mrs. Ramsay in a world where male rationalism is dominant—provokes a new type of sensation:

Suddenly, as if the movement of his hand had released it, the load of her accumulated impressions of him tilted up, and down poured in a ponderous avalanche all she felt about him. That was one sensation. Then up rose in a fume the essence of his being. That was another. She felt herself transfixed by the intensity of her perception; it was his severity; his goodness. (28-29)

Lily sees that Mr. Bankes has a more pliable, independent personality than a Mr. Ramsay or a Tansley type, who are always demanding female sympathy. With a person like him, a union between man and woman based on mutual good will and understanding (which does not necessarily lead to marriage) might be possible. The moment of recognition may be triggered by her seeing an external thing, Mr. Bankes’s arm, but significantly in this scene it is very hard to tell one sense from another. The expressions such as
“a ponderous avalanche” and “a fume” ingenuously produce the impression that it is received by Lily’s whole physical being. Compared with Tansley’s static epiphany in which sight is the only sense operating, the difference is apparent. This is also radically different from the Cartesian vision: here knowledge is brought about not by the static world lying beyond the dead eye, but by the animated movement of the human body, which is out of proportion to the strictly logical relevance of the tremendous emotion it arouses, and the result is also received physically. Lily’s is an anti-ocularcentric epiphany, and it is later fully developed during her creation in the final part: her vision always coincides with the rhythmical movement of her brush as if she is dancing, and the narrative comes to the end when she puts her final stroke down, thinking “I have had my vision” (226). Her thoughts on the true being of Mrs. Ramsay can only be captured through breaking up the mind-eye connection.

Another example is to show that even when the moment of being relies on a static visual perception, Woolf does not forget to go beyond the mere visual. In the short story with the fitting title “The Moments of Being: ‘Slater’s Pins Have No Points’” (1926), Fanny Wilmot receives an unusually strong impression of her piano teacher, Miss Craye, an unworldly spinster. At the beginning, Fanny dropped a pin on the floor and while she is searching for it, she imagines things that might have happened between Miss Craye and her suitors when she was young and beautiful. Miss Craye always seems somehow unsatisfied, seeking beauty without fulfillment; in Fanny’s eyes, that frustration converges on her fingers because she is a pianist. However, when she finds the pin and turns to Miss Craye, she is struck with the sight:

_Fanny Wilmot saw the pin on the carpet; she picked it up._ She looked at Miss Craye. Was Miss Craye so lonely? No, Miss Craye was steadily, blissfully, if only for a moment, a happy woman. Fanny had surprised her in a moment of ecstasy. She sat there, half turned away from the piano, with her hands clased in her lap holding the carnation upright, while behind her was the sharp square of the window, uncurtained, purple in the evening, intensely purple after the brilliant electric lights which burnt unshaded in the bare music room. _Julia Craye sitting hunched and compact holding her flower_ seemed to emerge out of the London night, seemed to fling it like a cloak behind her. It seemed in its bareness and intensity the effluence of her spirit, something she had made which surrounded her, which was her. Fanny stared. (220, emphasis added)

This scene is highly visual, like a painting with a frame in “the sharp square of the window” behind. But the emphasis also falls on the carnation, suggesting that in this moment Julia holds an essence of beauty in her hands. Crucially, the carnation and the pin Fanny has just picked up correspond, implying that something has been transmitted from the elder lady to the younger with so much impact as to be almost physical. Julia comes closer, takes Fanny in her arms and kisses her. Then quite meaningfully, it is said that Julia “possesses her” (220). The story ends with Julia’s words “Slater’s pins have no points” (220) and with the close-up of Fanny’s trembling fingers trying to put the pin back on her dress. The tactile sense on two women’s fingertips has such significance in this story, making the invisible rise to the visible surface. It may be the richness of a solitary life denied to a married woman, and the shock Fanny felt is due to her realization of a life hitherto unknown to her.
5. The Mind-Eye Connection in the Modernist Epiphany

In many of the epiphanic moments in modern writings, sight seems to be connected to the work of the mind, although modernists ostensibly approve seeing as an instantaneous act opposed to conventional modes of thinking. Imagism is a literary movement whose theorization typifies this phenomena. T. E. Hulme, for example, wrote as follows, when he announced the arrival of a new age in poetry: “This new verse appeals to the eye rather than to the ear. It has to mould images, a kind of spiritual clay, into definite shapes. The material . . . is image and not sound” (75). He designates “[t]o paint the thing as I see it” as one of the “ultimate attainments of poesy” (qtd. in Peter Jones 16). The immediacy of vision is thought to have the effect of purifying language and opening new planes in creation. However, even if it is possible to describe an object just as it is seen in the poet’s eye (though this itself is highly problematic), the reader cannot have the actual “plastic image” as a three-dimensional icon like a sculpture. All that the poem can do is to be a stimulus to lead the reader to a certain mental image (Gage 72-73). This explains why the imagists had to write considerable numbers of manifestos to educate the reader’s mind’s eye, and so there was always an imbalance between the manifestos and the poetic practice.

The connection between the mind’s eye and the epiphanic moment is nowhere more obvious than in the scene from James Joyce’s *Stephen Hero*, where Stephen is talking to his friend about epiphанизing an object by gaze:

—Yes, said Stephen. I will pass it time after time, allude to it, refer to it, catch a glimpse of it. It is only an item in the catalogue of Dublin’s street furniture. Then all at once I see it and I know at once what it is: epiphany.
—What?
—Imagine my glimpses at that clock as the gropings of a spiritual eye which seeks to adjust its vision to an exact focus. The moment the focus is reached the object is epiphanised. It is just in this epiphany that I find the third, the supreme quality of beauty. (211)

Struggling to establish his own theory of art, Stephen thinks that once it is set, the world would appear completely different and he can find the hitherto unknown beauty even in mundane, trivial things; the object’s hidden quality will be discovered by his aesthetic genius. This eye is a spiritual eye in the sense that it is a representative of his mind reaching out to external objects to test the validity of its understanding of the world. When the object is successfully arrested under the gaze of the artist’s mind, it brings about an epiphany. At such a moment, it is his mind that sees, not his actual, physical eye; this eye is a clear lens though which the mind looks at the world.

6. Conclusion

If Woolf’s moments of being are put alongside these other epiphanic moments, the novelty becomes fully evident. She cuts off the mind-eye connection, which the modernist writing tries to sever, unsuccessfully
in most of the cases, by emphasizing the simple but nonetheless neglected point that vision is physical. Its mechanism is the same as the way the other sense organs work—she indicates this, merging her characters’ visual perception with the movement of body and the work of the other sense(s) to the extent that they are no longer separable. This can also stand as a way out of the impasse that the feminist anti-ocularcentrism treads into: the dichotomy of the male/female as the gazer/the object of gaze, which is paradoxically strengthened if the dichotomy is simply identified and persecuted. For Woolf, vision is of the body, and to explore the body’s eye is her defiance of the male gaze. This she sees as driven by the mind, with men seeing what is wanted, arresting the woman in its frame and turning her into a static figure reminiscent of a painting. Once one becomes aware of this visual strategy of Woolf, one may be surprised at the consistency with which throughout her writing career she makes a contrast between the male character’s unmoving stare directed toward the female, and the latter’s more kinetic visual experience in the moment of being.12

Towards the late 1980s, feminism put forth more nuanced views about the usefulness of addressing embodiment in relation to visual experience, and these largely grew out of Freudian or Lacanian models of vision. Judith Butler’s performativity theory is particularly fruitful with its view of the body as the means by which gender is made manifest or visualized through social codes and interpretation. Informed by phenomenological understandings, the body as the embodiment of historical situation, Butler argues that gender is an act performed by each individual as a constituent of society and not a predetermined identity.13 This is not a denigrated conceptual opponent to the mind in the Cartesian sense, but is rather the real physical entity that meets and interacts with the world and embeds ideology into its fabric. This positive account of the body also reshapes the meaning of visibility. The newness of Woolf’s attempt to break through the mind-eye connection, a central plank in Western epistemology, has, in its anti-ocularcentric impulse, more closeness to this new ontology of the ocular than to the male modernists’ practice of releasing vision from rational thinking, or the feminist theorization of gaze.

Notes
1 This article is a revised version of a paper originally read at the Mind→Body Conference at University of Reading, UK, in 2007.
2 For these aspects of Woolf’s writing, there is a large amount of literature. See, for the best-known examples, Diane Filby Gillespie’s The Sister’s Art, Jane Goldman, and Marianna Torgovnick.
3 For the influence of the contemporary visual culture on Woolf, see Maggie Humm and Gillespie’s Multiple Muses.
4 For a general view of the Western “ocularcentrism” from Plato to Descartes, see Martin Jay’s discussion (1-82) and Hans Jonas.
5 Crazy’s claim may be further assured by “Fig. 9,” which appears later in the book (Descartes 171). There a man with a dark eye socket is looking at an object through the eye as a lens put between him and the object.
6 For more about Descartes’ ambiguity about the “real” eye in relation to the formation of modern subjectivity, see Jay 69-82.
7 For examples, see studies by Susan Bordo as well as Karen Jacobs 9-18.
8 I have consulted Amelia Jones for the general history of feminists’ theorization of the gendered gaze in relation to the female body (369-71). Another representative work from this period is Luce Irigaray’s *Speculum of the Other Woman*, but it is Simone de Beauvoir who started the feminist argument on gaze as early as in 1940s. From the male side, John Berger talks about the male gaze that the woman has unconsciously internalized through culturally constructed image of the desirable female (36-64).

9 Andrea Dworkin’s polemic against pornography, which argues that seeing the woman’s body in pornography practically has the same effect as having a sexual intercourse with her, may be regarded as one of the most extreme examples of the notion that a representation of the female body is always disadvantageous for women (Amelia Jones 369-70).

10 It is Maurice Merleau-Ponty who tried this first in *Phenomenology of Perception*, and later in unfinished *The Visible and the Invisible*. In this article I hope to insinuate that Woolf’s attempt to foreground the physical nature of visual experience has a newness which can be equated to what Merleau-Ponty did in philosophy (though the limited space does not allow me to go in detail about the similarity between them). The efficacy of reading Woolf alongside Merleau-Ponty’s ideas is partly verified by Laura Doyle’s article. The phenomenological reading of the modernist text with its emphasis on Bergsonian temporal flux and simultaneity as elements of a fluid subjectivity became outdated after the deconstructionist’s critique of the transcendental assumptions in the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, but Doyle claims the necessity of reconsidering another phenomenology, that of Merleau-Ponty, which can powerfully inform the contemporary debate with its focus on the body not as a conceptual opponent to the mind in the Cartesian sense but as the real physical entity which meets and interacts with the world and embeds ideology.

11 The ending of “Solid Objects” itself can be read as an irony against male society, whose rational seeing has strangled the possibility of other modes of vision. We also know that this story was written when Woolf was under the strong influence of Fry’s aesthetics but yet “represents Woolf’s mature assessment of and distancing from formalism, from what Fry termed in ‘The Artist’s Vision’ the ‘blasphemy’ of art. . . . It facetiously shows that mere disinterested contemplation of aesthetic objects is not an effective way or meaningful way to live in this world” (Gillespie *Multiple Muses* 56).

12 An extensive argument on this point is found in my doctoral thesis entitled *Sight and Knowledge Disconnected: The Epistemology of the Visual and the Ideological Gaze in the Novels of E. M. Forster and Virginia Woolf*, which can be read online at Durham e-Theses. See chapter 4 and 5 on Woolf in particular. In these chapters I examine Woolf’s visual aesthetic in relation to the Post-Impressionist theories of Fry and Bell and then attempt a close reading of *To the Lighthouse* with the aid of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of sight, which influences Butler’s concept of the body.

13 Butler, *Bodies That Matter*. See also Butler’s article about the influence of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology on her theory (America Jane 392-402).

**Works Cited**


