

Diana V. Almeida

Photographing in Writing the Enigma of Reality

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In the essay “Place in Fiction” (1956), drawing on photographic vocabulary, Eudora Welty (1909-2001) attributes to space the capacity to “focus” the eye of the writer, granting him the restrictive perspective that allows him to frame a significant moment. If space constitutes the narrative’s “frame”, point of view or focalization is the lens that concentrates “the gigantic, voracious eye of genius” (787) and allows for the imagination to work on memory’s data:

Place, to a writer at work, is seen in a frame. Not an empty frame, a brimming one. Point of view is a sort of burning-glass, a product of personal experience and time; it is burnished with feelings and sensibilities, charged from moment to moment with the sun-points of the imagination. It is an instrument—one of intensification; it acts, it behaves, it is temperamental. (788-789)

The term “place” should be understood as “site”, a concept that implies directionality and permits the representation of the physical level of experience, visible in the sensuous quality of the writer’s prose which is inhabited by (un)ready bodies to receive

the world’s impressions (Ladd 77-78). The spatial component is structured by compositional principles shared by the visual arts, in particular photography, whose practice has greatly contributed to shaping the author’s literary sensibility.

In fact, the photographic process is explicitly represented in Welty’s writing, with particular emphasis in her short story cycle *The Golden Apples* (1949, GA), where the repeated description of “frames” capturing the characters’ gaze acquires self-reflexive connotations, which also evoke the cinematographic universe. The image of the confluence of light and shadow performs an identical function and this emphasis on the symbolic reversibility of dichotomous concepts illustrates the non-duality of the authorial perspective, in a possible allusion to the characteristics of analog photography – the transmutation of light

into darkness (when the photosensitive film is marked by light) and of darkness into light (when the negative is exposed to light in order to make the paper print). One should note that this technical peculiarity subverts an important paradigm of the Jewish-Christian imaginary, and so photography contains in its genesis a fundamental ambivalence that relates it to mystery.¹

Assuming the inheritance of modernist esthetics, Welty confers a revelatory capacity to “photographic vision” capable of piercing the daily surface of situations or objects trivialized by an inattentive gaze.² The author distances herself, however, from the formalist perspective (advocated by Alfred Stieglitz and afterwards by the f.64 group) and develops in her literary and photographic works a humanist vision centered on the individual, molded by social and cosmic forces. Thus, in Welty’s writing, the recurring metaphor of photography problematizes the presuppositions of visual immediacy and accentuates the complexity of the perceptive process. So much so that the moments of epiphany seem at times to evoke a photographic image, introducing a break in the temporal flux that leads us to understand the events as a “static painting”, hinting at a mystery irreducible to the principles of causality.

“June Recital”, GA’s second short story, illustrates these theoretical considerations by thematizing the gaze as a process that installs the limits of perception, in accord with narrative codes that order the visual data and allow for legibility. At the macro-structural level, the four sections of the short story alternate the points of view of two children that observe an almost abandoned house in the front yard and raise a stage where parallel narratives take place – distant among themselves in time but involving the same characters in what seems to be a photographic doubling. In a rebellious exercise against the family’s constraints, the young Loch Morrison takes the posture of a “spy” and relates the events that agitate the MacLain family’s old house in the diegetic present. By contrast, Cassie, the adolescent sister who had been awakened by

¹ Frade reminds us that Talbot was about to “denominate the photogenic process as *skiagraphic* (from the greek *skia*, meaning shadow or darkness). (...) [since] photography really and genetically associates light to the production of shadows. A dangerous process, thus, in virtue of that apparently unexpected association that threatens to nullify, through physics and chemistry, that which seems to be a fundamental opposition of the imaginary” (72-73).

² Let us recall Edward Weston’s comments on the revealing potentialities of the photographic image: “the camera’s innate honesty (...) provides the photographer with a means of looking deeply into the nature of things, and presenting his subjects in terms of their basic reality. It enables him to reveal the essence of what lies before his lens with such clear insight that the beholder may find the recreated image more real and comprehensible than the actual subject.” (174).

the musical notes coming from the neighboring house, frames the motives of the onstage characters in a different way by evoking the recent past of the city of Morgana.

Considering the tension and complementarity between the visions of the two focalizing characters, several critics have highlighted the visual quality of the short story and its relatedness to the photographic process (Appel 210-211; Mortimer 125). Pitavy-Souques in particular argues that the text is structured by a specular game that questions the authenticity of the object in relation to its reflection. Therefore meaning emerges from the combination of Loch's "snapshots" with Cassie's "negatives", which provide a context for the more immediate descriptions of that focalizer (266). Reading results thus from the creative interaction between these two gazes and the reader's vision, which must decipher the riddle beyond the apparently translucent surface of each perspective. We may therefore consider the photographic image, as a metaphor of the exegetic process, to be a visible sign that articulates the object to be photographed and the subject who photographs (both incognizable) with the irreversibility of the photographic act and the infinite potential of the photographic negative, in the tension between singularity and indetermination.³

The simultaneously cultural and idiosyncratic nature of the gaze is heightened by the adoption of a child's perspective, a point of view recurrent in the modernist short story, for instance in the works of such writers as Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield and Katherine Anne Porter.⁴ To further develop these considerations let us concentrate on the first section of "June Recital," filtered by Loch who, despite his protests, is confined to his room due to a fever, and starts to investigate the adjacent house. This voyeuristic exercise is metaphorically presented in cinematographic terms, according to the technique of visual composition by planes. The crossing of semiotic borders becomes more evident with the recourse to narrative codes from westerns and slapstick comedies, and also with the posterior references to a projection room, to

³ I rephrase the definition of photography suggested by Soulages (303-309).

⁴ In the introduction to *The Secret Self: Short Stories by Women*, Hermione Lee defends that this strategy is especially productive in women's short fiction: "The susceptibility and literalness of children, their matter-of-fact but unsocialized behaviour, their imaginative play with what is immediately at hand, seems to be a particularly sympathetic and useful subject for women writers." (x).

scenes from classic silent movies and famous American actors from the twenties (366-367).

In fact, "June Recital" (and some of the author's other stories) makes use of "film editing techniques" (Kaplansky) as cohesive links. Thus, the initial notes from "Für Elise" accentuate the simultaneity of the focalizers' perception between the first and second section; the fade-in shows, at the beginning of the third section, that the text becomes again focalized by the youngster ("After a moment of blackness, upside down, Loch opened his eyes", 382); the fourth section opens with the window's frame. Throughout her life Welty enjoyed the seventh art, and recognized in her writing possible influences of compositional film strategies, such as manipulations of temporality or scene transitions based on the symbolic value of a visual detail (Prenshaw 149, 168-170).

Indeed the beginning of "June Recital" evokes a film composition: the window's frame molds the empty house, a canvas where several narrative fragments will be projected; next comes an overview of the building's exterior and the luxurious garden; afterwards we see several of the rooms; later on Morgana is composed by a series of visual planes, from Loch's observation point. On the other hand, the house is personified, associated to the oniric world of giants and to the sceneries of the cowboy films shown at Bijou, Morgana's cinema. Another detail symbolizes the posture of the voyeur occupied by the filmic spectator – the window in the format of an inviolable keyhole that associates the gaze to transgression, to an unequal relationship between the onlooker and the figure looked at: "In the side of the house were six windows (...) and back of the chimney a small stair window shaped like a keyhole—one made never to open; they had one like it." (333-334).⁵

Curiously enough the abandoned building seems to be a double of the house inhabited by the Morrison family, as the architectural similarities noted by Loch at the end of the cited excerpt illustrate. The reversibility of the voyeur's positioning is also suggested by his observations regarding the organization of the space and the furniture arrangement, in contrast to the model that he is

⁵ Stanley Cavell stresses that the posture of the voyeur assumed by the cinematographic spectator derives from the desire to obtain a complete view of the world, that is, to attain "the condition of viewing as such." (102).

familiar with.⁶ The text therefore parodies the conventions of a bourgeois family by presenting a distorted image of the paradigmatic space of domesticity to the margin of socialization rules that define the parameters of acceptable behavior – the permissible sexuality, in opposition to the adolescent Virgie Rainey's erotic games, whose rebelliousness is associated to musical genius; the dictates of normality, by contrast to the madness of the old piano teacher, Miss Eckhart, the character with whom Welty later identifies with in her autobiography, *One Writer's Beginnings* (1984).

That is the reason why Loch, believing to be a cowboy (the model par excellence of heroism in American culture), inhabits the abandoned house in dreams “day and night”, since this space allows him to escape the adults' authoritarianism over his body as well as his sister's intrusions, trying to impose on him narratives inappropriate for the male gender:

Some whole days at a time, often in his dreams day and night, he would seem to be living next door, wild as a cowboy, absolutely by himself, without his mother and father coming to feel his skin ... And there was where Cassie could never bring him books to read, miserable girls' books and fairy tales. (335)

However, the house also propitiates nightmares which are evoked through the forest – “[the leaky gutter] Splashy as a waterfall in a forest” (335) – the initiation space where the children who inhabit popular short stories must face the terrors of separation and go through the initiation rites which unable them to assume their solitary individuality (Bettelheim 94-98; Zipes 65-69, 79).

In “June Recital”, Loch will be initiated in the mysteries of eroticism, as suggested by the pleasure with which he observes the figs on the bordering garden, described in poetic terms with clear sexual connotations (336). The fig tree is associated to fertilization rites in various cultures (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 440; Frazer 136) and the text recovers that symbolism in order to reconstruct the feminine anatomy in a lyrical tone, suggesting Loch's erotic daydreams through the description of a fig opened to the tongue (337). Like this the posture of the voyeur acquires sexual connotations, especially when Loch

⁶ When describing the divisions of the house, Loch resorts to an adversative structure that elicits his expectations regarding the appearance of an exemplary house: “There were green shades rolled up to various levels, *but no* curtains. A table showed in the dining room, *but no* chairs. (...) *Instead of* a door into the hall there was a curtain” (334, italics mine).

frames in his field of vision, on one of the windows/canvases of the neighboring house, the encounter between Virgie and a young sailor.⁷ However, the focalizer character has an “innocent gaze” and, incapable of deciphering the lovers’ erotic movements, creatively metamorphoses the bodies:

Sometimes they held pickles stuck in their mouths like cigars, and turned to look at each other. Sometimes they lay just alike, their legs in M and their hands joined between them, exactly like the paper dolls his sister used to cut out of a folded newspaper and unfold to let him see. (...)

And then, like the paper dolls sprung back together, they folded close—the real people. Like a big grasshopper lighting, all their legs and arms drew into a small body, deadlike, with protective coloring. (341)

The youngster’s inability to read is surpassed by imagination through parallelisms with his quotidian that associate the lovers’ harmonious tumult with the ludic component of eroticism stressed by the evocation of toys and by the posterior reference to an icon from silent film (“the sailor and Virgie (...) were running in circles (...) They went around and around like the policeman and Charlie Chaplin, both intending to fall down”, *idem*).

Loch has the “double vision” that Welty attributes to the artist, combining the objective observation (hyperbolized by the use of the telescope) with an imaginative transfiguring approach. This character’s “narrative method” points to the above mentioned essay “Place in Fiction”, where the effect of verisimilitude is described as the result of the writer’s capacity to simultaneously consider the surrounding universe and its subjective vision:

We have seen that *the writer* must accurately choose, combine, superimpose upon, blot out, shake up, alter the outside world for one absolute purpose, the good of his story. To do this, he *is always seeing double, two pictures at once in his frame*, his and the world’s; a fact that he constantly comprehends; and he works best in a state of constant and subtle and unfooled reference between the two. (789, italics mine)

⁷ Let us recollect the way in which these characters are introduced: “Loch trained the telescope to the back and *caught* the sailor and the girl” (336, italics mine). Later on, the text emphasizes the voyeur’s power before his “prey”: “When he saw the door prized open (...) and let the people in, Loch felt the old indignation rise up. But at the same time he felt joy. For while the invaders did not see him, he saw them, both with the naked eye and through the telescope; and each day that he kept them to himself, they were his.” (337).

Loch's daydreams thus constitute a *mise-en-abîme* of the writing act for they intersect a factual account (recreating a verisimilar space-time context and detailing some of the elements that cross his visual field) with an approach marked by the imagination (metamorphosing reality to the point that it becomes "unrecognizable"). The space of the abandoned house will therefore represent a blank sheet of paper, a cinematographic screen and a photographic negative, figuring diverse artistic languages – writing, cinema and photography. As the basis for the youngster's fanciful observations, this space opens itself to mystery, hence dramatizing the subversion of chronological sequentiality by both the character's lyrical impulses and his perception of the site's phantasmagoric quality.

Furthermore, this figure possesses the quality of compassion that Welty values in the personality of the artist, being characterized by an "amorous sentiment" that transfigures the images observed through the telescope into a synesthetic explosion that amalgamates vision, touch and scent: "He moved the glass *lovingly* toward the house and touched its roof (...) / With the telescope to his eye he even smelled the house strongly" (335, italics mine). This attitude reminds us of Welty's assertions in the preface to her first photographic album, *One Time, One Place: Mississippi in the Depression. A Snapshot Album* (1971), on the feelings that animated her photography – a mixture of curiosity, amazement and affection allied to the patience in waiting for the revelatory moment, when the surfaces that become familiar through habit acquire enigmatic resonances (11).

It is worth noticing that the abandoned house also emerges at the beginning of the short story as a composition of light and dark, due to the strong summer luminosity of the south that draws objects by contrast. The imagery that characterizes this space emphasizes the tensional quality of reality, since it resorts to dualities – transparency and opacity (descriptions of open or uncurtained windows and of a door which is substituted by a bead curtain); movement and immobility (simile between the house and a boat). Therefore, the semantic field of vision, with its traditional epistemological connotations, problematizes the presuppositions of visibility through the surfaces that reflect

and collect luminosity and darkness: “The parlor window was in the shadow (...), clear and dark as a pool he knew in the river.” (334).

The effects of reflection are ramified in a combination of external and internal, natural and cultural universes, of the “objective” and the oneiric realms, as the following passage exemplifies: “A framed picture could be seen hanging on the wall (...). Sometimes the glass in the picture reflected the light outdoors and the flight of birds between branches of trees, and while it reflected Mr. Holifield was having a dream.” (*idem*). With this blurring of boundaries recurrent throughout her fiction, making the animal movement a sign of oneiric activity, Welty suggests the (I would delete “the” here because of the “the” used with random orders) permeability between the random orders used by human beings in the effort to structure their worldview. Moreover, this excerpt accentuates the complexity of artistic representation in its oblique relationship to reality, here presented as a reflex of an image in a declared distancing from the classic mimetic posture. The semantic amplitude of “picture” reinforces the intersemiotic parallelisms that have been proposed, for this noun can designate: a painting or a drawing, a photograph or a film, a verbal description or a mental image.

By placing emphasis on the optic conditions of perception, Welty highlights that visibility results from the mutable contours of the segments of light and shadow, because the luminous and dark areas, the frontiers between the visible and invisible, are potentially reversible: “Even under his shut eyelids, that light and shade stayed divided from each other, but reversed.” (335). The problematization of intelligibility is therefore represented through several parallelisms with the field of visual arts, namely through the imagery of light/darkness which in infinite shades reminds us of the enigmatic nature of reality, accentuating the provisional character of knowledge in a universe in constant mutation.

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