

STEFANIE HEINE

VISIBLE WORDS AND  
CHROMATIC PULSE

VIRGINIA WOOLF'S WRITING, IMPRESSIONIST PAINTING,  
MAURICE BLANCHOT'S IMAGE

VERLAG TURIA + KANT  
WIEN-BERLIN

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Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek  
Die Deutsche Bibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der  
Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische  
Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.ddb.de> abrufbar.

Bibliographic Information published by  
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek  
The Deutsche Bibliothek lists this publication in the  
Deutsche Nationalbibliografie;  
detailed bibliographic data are available  
on the Internet at <http://dnb.ddb.de>.

ISBN 978-3-85132-742-7

Publiziert mit Unterstützung des  
Schweizerischen Nationalfonds zur Förderung  
der wissenschaftlichen Forschung



FONDS NATIONAL SUISSE  
SCHWEIZERISCHER NATIONALFONDS  
FONDO NAZIONALE SVIZZERO  
SWISS NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION

© Verlag Turia + Kant, Wien 2014

VERLAG TURIA + KANT  
A-1010 Wien, Schottengasse 3A/5/DG1  
D-10827 Berlin, Crellestraße 14 / Remise  
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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The present book is a revised version of my doctoral dissertation, handed in at the University of Zürich, 2012. I would like to thank a number of people who made the book possible and supported my PhD. My appreciation goes to my supervisors Elisabeth Bronfen and Charles de Roche, who encouraged me from beginning to end and improved the project considerably with his knowledge and criticism. I am most grateful to Sandro Zanetti and the team at the Department of Comparative Literature (University of Zürich), Zoé Bozzolan-Kenworthy, Xenia Goślicka, Monika Kasper and Marianne Nebel, for providing the most fruitful and warm working environment. I want to express my thanks to my friends and colleagues for their significant contributions to this book: Thomas Bieri, Mark Emery, Lara Hacisalihzade, Spencer Hawkins, Gabriel Hürlimann, Daniel Jung, Fabian Schwitter and Marco Toscano. The inspiring discussions, comments on the draft at its various stages and last minute proofreading they offered have been invaluable. The project benefited a lot from the doctoral program of the Department of Comparative Literature (University of Zürich) and I thank the lecturers and participants, above all Marc Caduff, Torsten Jenkel, Martina Läubli and Sergej Rickenbacher. Special thanks is due to Kelly Keegan and Gloria Groom from the Art Institute of Chicago, who shared their expertise of the Berthe Morisot's *Woman at her Toilette* with me, and Danièle Gros from the Swiss Institute for the Science of Art (SIK) for her help with the X-ray. I would like to thank the Art Institute of Chicago, the Joslyn Art Museum (Omaha, Nebraska), the Metropolitan Museum (New York), the Musée Marmottan Monet (Paris), the Musée d'Orsay (Paris) and the National Gallery (London) for their kind permission to reproduce the coloured images. I am deeply indebted to Ingo Vavra from Turia + Kant for his generous and professional support with the publication and to the Swiss National Science Foundation for the publication grant.

## INTRODUCTION

After having read *Mrs Dalloway* for the first time, still overwhelmed by the reading experience and turning the book – the Oxford World's Classics edition of 2000 – in my hands, my eyes met the painting on the cover and it occurred to me that it was a most adequate embodiment of all I had just encountered in the novel. The painting's style is in line with the mood of the novel and the way language works in it: mundane simplicity with an abstract touch, formally composed and removed; fragments assembling to form a harmonious whole and collapsing again in a flow; the fleetingness of moments, strangely petrified; all in all, the painting shares the book's impact: it cannot be fully grasped but strongly affects the beholder. *Portrait of the Artist's Wife*, which in this moment summed up *Mrs Dalloway* for me, was painted by James Bolivar Manson, a contemporary of Virginia Woolf. James Bolivar Manson is mostly known for his unsuccessful and short-lived position as director of the Tate Modern from 1930-1938. His own work as a painter was little renowned and soon faded into obscurity. One of the reasons for this was that he followed a school of painting which at this time was already slightly out-dated: Impressionism. Even though the influence of Impressionist painting was omnipresent and its impact still strong, the straightforward Impressionism Manson advocated was seen to be passé.<sup>1</sup>

To this very day, literary scholars interested in the relations between Virginia Woolf's writing and painting<sup>2</sup> tend to focus on

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<sup>1</sup> Manson's lack of success as director of the Tate could also to some degree be connected with his deep debt to Impressionism and his rejection of more recent schools in modern art such as German Expressionism and Surrealism.

<sup>2</sup> The only two book-length examinations of Woolf's texts and the visual arts published so far rest upon biographical and historical connections: Diane Filby Gillespie's *The Sisters' Art. The Writing and Painting of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell* focuses on the creative exchange between Woolf and her sister Vanessa Bell while using primarily biographical sources such as letters and diaries; Judith Bakos's book *Painting and Writing. Virginia Woolf and Post-Impressionism* offers a broad overview of the mutual influences between painting and writing in a Modernist context (focusing on Post-Impressionism and Bloomsbury aesthetics), the relation between Virginia Woolf's writing and Vanessa Bell's painting and 'painterly' aspects of Woolf's texts.

painters who had their fingers more on the pulse of the time Virginia Woolf lived in than James Bolivar Manson: Post-Impressionists, Cubists, Fauvists, Futurists. These fruitful studies display the direct impact of the paintings Woolf was most immediately confronted with and fascinated by on her writing. In this book, I want to go back to my first reading experience of *Mrs Dalloway*, which came back to me at an exhibition entitled “Woman Impressionists” at Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt. I wish to explore the resonances between Woolf’s writing and the paintings of three Impressionist painters that were the focus of this exhibition as a starting point for a reflection on aesthetic representation in general. I would argue that overall, paintings by Berthe Morisot, Mary Cassatt and Marie Bracquemond and Woolf’s writing deploy similar aesthetic procedures. Rather than concentrating on biographical or historical links, I want to focus on a question concerning aesthetic representation, which is implicitly raised by the artworks themselves. Both the Impressionist paintings and Virginia Woolf’s texts do not only represent, but also reflect their own medium, their materiality, the processuality of their production and their possible reception. My analysis will take into account *how* the different media represent as well as to what extent the artworks touch the boundaries of representation and reflect the conditions of possibility of representation as such.

Virginia Woolf’s texts accentuate formal experiments and the nature of language as a sign system, whereas narrative or thematic aspects are often diminished. Self-reflexivity becomes central to her literary works. Similarly, the seemingly unfinished Impressionist canvases, dissolving in an interplay of shimmering colours and light and visible traces of brushstrokes, seem to be centred on their own flat surfaces, without carrying any message or moral. What they represent fades into the background<sup>3</sup> and the paintings move away from their *sujet* in favour of ‘pure’ colour. Often, they focus on the

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<sup>3</sup> This lack of representation and ‘sense’ caused a great degree of discontent for contemporary art critics, as, for example, Marc de Montifaud’s comment on Pissarro and Cézanne in *L’Artiste* shows: “There is no way to figure out M. Cézanne’s [sic] impressions d’après nature; I took them for palettes that had not been cleaned. But M. Pissarro’s landscapes are no more legible and no less prodigious. Seen close up, they are incomprehensible and awful; seen from afar, they are awful and incomprehensible. They are all rebuses with no solution.” (Montifaud quoted in Clark, 20)

act of painting or seeing itself more than hinting at an exterior referent<sup>4</sup>. By referring to their own aesthetic procedures as well as their materiality and mediality, the paintings and texts to some degree become their own referents. The artworks no longer only point to something else, but also seem to obtain an immediate performative dimension: they do not only say or show something, but they also *do* something; for example, they often trigger physical affects in their recipients. The paintings and texts especially highlight their material bases: colour and words. Impressionist painting was almost obsessively devoted to materiality. Impressionists wanted to evoke the world through colour as substance and on the paintings’ surfaces one can find physical traces, such as the visible texture of brushstrokes or the raw canvas showing through. This emphasis on materiality is precisely what Woolf admires about Impressionism. Even though Woolf considers painting as an ideal that cannot be reached in literature, she attempts to approach the immediacy and physicality of painting in her writing. In doing so, she does not intend to describe pictures, but to incorporate the appreciated qualities of painting into her texts. The characteristics Woolf associates with painting are essential for her poetics in general and thus also play an important role and become apparent in texts that do not explicitly refer to painting. A purely intermedial analysis would thus be restricted with respect to the focus outlined above<sup>5</sup>. Inspired by painting, Woolf wanted to turn words into things: she frequently describes words as things, colours or animals and creates nets of words in her novels, foregrounding the pattern of a text-surface as well as the stuff that literature is made of. In her texts, Woolf also emphasises the material and sensual aspects of words themselves, such as rhythm or sound. It has to be noted that the physicality of words always goes hand in hand with their nature as signs. One could argue that materiality pushes language to its limits, as language always also consists of signs. A pure thing with-

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<sup>4</sup> Charles F. Stuckey, for example, claims that the theme of Morisot’s art as a whole is looking (71) and Linda Nochlin states the following about the same artist’s paintings: “the way in which the paintings reveal the act of working which creates them, are sparkling, invigorating, and totally uneffort-looking registers of the process of painting itself. In the best of them, color and brushstroke are the deliberately revealed point of the picture: they are, so to speak, works about work” (53).

<sup>5</sup> The present book thus cannot be located in the field of intermediality studies, as the focus on literature and painting would suggest.

out any referential function is no longer a thing in language. It must not be forgotten that Woolf never fully turns away from narrating and representing. Her writing thus constantly oscillates between representation and presentation. An analogous claim can be made about Impressionist paintings, which show the process of how forms shape themselves. The human eye assembles the fragmented colour patches to a whole, and what in one moment seems to be a vortex of pure colour, an abstraction purged of a *sujet*, turns into a house, a tree, or a human figure. Impressionist paintings do not totally break with representation. We cannot deny the haystacks, water lilies or Parisian streets depicted on Impressionist canvases. The recipients of Impressionist art are faced with a process of dis- and reappearance: representation dissolves into abstraction<sup>6</sup>, only to turn back to what is represented. In this sense, Impressionist painting is entangled in a constant tension between two opposing poles: representational and non-representational aspects. Both in Woolf's texts and Impressionist paintings, a tension or a dynamic force fluctuating between seemingly incompatible spheres is created by the juxtaposition of presentation and representation.<sup>7</sup> The literary texts and paintings in question thus display a comparable poetic conflict or representational dilemma: how can one exceed representation in the course of representing pictorially or literarily? The common ground for a comparative analysis of Virginia Woolf's writing and Impressionist paintings I am interested in can be found precisely at this point where the contradictory tendencies intersect and the artworks touch the boundary of their own possibilities.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> 'Abstraction' is understood here in the sense of non-representationality, as it is frequently used in the context of modern art. In *Die Wirklichkeit des Bildes. Bildrezeption als Bildproduktion. Rothko, Newman, Rembrandt, Raphael*, Michael Bockemühl points out that advocates of modern painting like Theo van Doesburg or Wassily Kandinsky prefer the designation 'concrete art' to 'abstract art', as there is nothing more concrete than lines, colours and surfaces (13). Commonly, 'abstract' also implies the opposite of 'concrete', e.g. 'conceptional' and 'insubstantial'. In my discussion of painting and literature I will use the term 'abstract' in both senses, because, as Bockemühl rightly claims, in modern art the abstract is also always concrete.

<sup>7</sup> One can also observe a similarity between the paintings and Woolf's writing concerning *what* is represented: seemingly insignificant everyday scenes.

<sup>8</sup> The common ground for the comparison can be found in the style, the choice of *sujets* and the aesthetic questions at stake, be they explicitly stated as sometimes in Woolf's case, or only implicitly hinted at by what is done by the painters. The painters in that sense seem to match Woolf's conception of painters, who are

In order to approach this representational dilemma theoretically, Maurice Blanchot's philosophy, especially his notion of the image, outlined in "The Two Versions of the Imaginary" is helpful.<sup>9</sup> Blanchot's image does not only comprise visual pictures and can thus also be rendered productive for literary texts. Blanchot describes the image in literature as the point where language becomes self-reflexive, that is, when it becomes an image of itself. The image constitutes a limit to the indefinite, combining seemingly incompatible elements and bearing qualities of both things and signs. To illustrate this, the dead body, which Blanchot considers as the image par excellence, is an autonomous physical entity and at the same time stands for the deceased person. For Blanchot, the corpse refers to all stages of life the deceased person passed through without manifesting a single one of them. Thus, the image is a pure condition of possibility and can be considered as an origin. In one of his earlier texts that already anticipates the notion of the image, "Literature and the Right to Death", Blanchot claims that aesthetic representation always veers towards its origin: "The language of literature is a search for this moment which precedes literature."<sup>10</sup> (1995, 237) I would argue that this thesis also applies to visual arts concerned with a similar dilemma of representation, like Impressionist painting: art is a search for this moment which precedes the artwork. According to Blanchot, the origin of a work of art is determined by a constitutive negation<sup>11</sup>, which implies a contradiction. In "this moment" of origin, something has to be left behind that cannot be regained, but triggers a productive striving force in the artwork. The relation of an artwork to its origin can be under-

mute and directly realise in paint what she has to reformulate again and again in words and has to keep reflecting on.

<sup>9</sup> For a more thorough discussion of Blanchot's image, see "Blanchot's Conflicting Image".

<sup>10</sup> "Le langage de la littérature est la recherche de ce moment qui la précède." (1982a, 88)

<sup>11</sup> Constitutive negation, as I read it, does not suggest a sublimation of the negated thing, implying that the thing is raised to a higher, ideal meaning after having been negated through representation. Such a reading is suggested when Blanchot mentions "creative negation" (1995, 308) ["[...] négation créatrice" (1982a, 30)] in "Literature and the Right to Death" and "life-giving negation" (1982b, 260) ["[...] la négation vivifiante" (1955, 354)] as characteristic of one version of the imaginary in "The Two Versions of the Imaginary". What I want to stress is that negation makes something possible while at the same time maintaining its very impossibility – it is a force un/working in the artwork.