

**ACCESSING CULTURAL MEMORY – EILEEN ATKINS THE DESIGNATED
PORTRAYER OF VIRGINIA WOOLF**

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*Abstract: Acknowledged as a remarkable writer ever since her lifetime, it seems, as the amount of excessive studies carried out stands as proof, that there are few to none things to say in relation with the life or the work of Virginia Woolf. However, the postmodern culture proves to be resourceful in keeping in focus both the writings and the controversial figure of the writer. Invested with the status of icon, even the textuality of the author becomes a means of exploitation and although there are two renowned actresses who impersonate the complex figure of Virginia Woolf, the portrayer of one seems to be the most recollected: Nicole Kidman (*The Hours*) as the suicidal and tormented version of the writer. The present paper sets forth to investigate what part of cultural memory is accessed by Eileen Atkins in her portrayal of Virginia Woolf (*A Room of One's Own* and *Ten Great Writers of the Modern World: Virginia Woolf's Mrs Dalloway*) keeping in mind that the audience targeted by the representation of the two performers is slightly different.*

Keywords: *intertextuality, postmodernism, Virginia Woolf*

Eileen Atkins and her long-term "relationship" with Virginia Woolf

It is quite difficult to imagine that a text such as *A Room of One's Own*, and by extension its screening, would represent an option for some light reading suitable for a casual relaxing period of time on a Sunday afternoon, for example. The text is serious, hiding profound messages oriented towards enveloping a cultural social background extremely restrictive in what regards the contribution of women both to science and arts. And so is Eileen Atkins' representation as Virginia Woolf delivering the lectures. Dressed in such a manner as to suggest an androgynous nature she portrays a rather activist variant of the writer oriented towards formulating revolutionist ideas. As a result, the assumption that filmic texts such as Patrick Garland's adaptation of Woolf's extended essay (*A Room of One's Own*, 1991) and Kim Evans' documentary *Ten Great Writers of the Modern World: Virginia Woolf's Mrs Dalloway* (1988), both casting Eileen Atkins in the role of Virginia Woolf, are usually consumed by trained viewers with academic purposes is by no means an exaggeration. Out of the two filmic texts just mentioned, Evans' documentary has the most educational charging as it features Hermione Lee, an acknowledged academic authority in what regards both the life and the writing of Virginia Woolf. In what regards the type of targeted viewers, facts are not easily denominated as black and white when it comes to Stephen Daldry's film *The Hours* (2002). A screening of the 1999 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction winning novel with the same name, the filmic text, as well as the novel, is destined to portray Virginia Woolf as a character in a purely fictional story. The two texts function on the assumption of an already existing worldwide common education (see Brenda R. Silver, *Virginia Woolf Icon*, 1999) on Virginia Woolf and her most famous piece of writing, *Mrs Dalloway*. Although *The Hours* has stirred the interest of many academics it is not a text destined mainly to trained viewers. In a simplistic manner the filmic text can also be decoded as the mere story of three women whose lives become a constant contemplation on life and death induced to some extent by one text, representative for literature as both an act of creation and consumption, which acts as the linking element between characters. Within the frames of the film, Nicole Kidman does succeed, quite exquisite since the role brought her the only statuette in her career, to portray

that particular facet of Woolf's persona which throughout the years proved to be the most appealing for the wide public i.e., the tormented, mad suicidal version of the writer. Out of the two portrayals of Virginia Woolf the most recollected and appraised is the one performed by Nicole Kidman; however, Eileen Atkins is characterized in terms of a long-term association with the modernist writer.

In an article entitled *She's not afraid of Virginia Woolf* (*The Telegraph*), a clear allusion to Edward Albee's play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, the author, Jasper Rees, declares that the most productive relationship of Eileen Atkins has been with Virginia Woolf. He makes reference, of course, not only to Atkins' acting skills but also to her active involvement in the (re)writing of both the Woolfian text and the textuality of the author. The article resumes in a few words an entire history which lies behind Atkins' contribution to the re-contextualisation of the writer: she was first casted to portray Woolf in a film that was never produced; she then played her in a TV documentary; she toured the world playing Woolf delivering her lectures (an adaptation of *A Room of One's Own*); she adapted Woolf's Mrs Dalloway into a screenplay for the 1997 film with the same name starring Vanessa Redgrave in the role of old Clarissa; and finally after compiling the letters exchanged between Sackville-West and Woolf into a stage adaptation (*Vita and Virginia*) she got to play the role of the writer once more in the company of Vanessa Redgrave starring as Vita.

Another journalist tries to summarize the long affinity between Atkins and Woolf by stating that casting agents first swoop on the actor to enact the writer over thirty years ago. Atkins replies: "I should be so lucky that I should look like her – but it's nothing to do with bones or eyes. What I think people see in me is someone who might put stones in her pockets" (Brown in *The Independent*, 1993) thus appealing to people's ability to recollect memories; what she actually does is to access cultural memory.

Accessing cultural memory

Cultural memory can be defined as both remembering and remembrance a process sustained and enabled by language. Memory is essential in the survival mechanism of cultures and societies thus being part of their artistic and creative process passed on from generation to generation or in the words of Roland Barthes "there does not exist, and never has existed, a people without narratives" (cited in Rodriguez & Fortier, 2007: 8). The existence of both individuals and groups of individuals is powerfully shaped and marked by the recollection of the past, therefore by memory or histories or past narratives. Therefore, cultural memory is constructed from actual events that are realigned via images, symbols and emotions transmitted through written or oral narratives. Based on the historical basis characterizing them, a certain synonymy can be identified between cultural memory and myth. As a result, cultural memory, as well as myth, functions on the assumption that it is a metalanguage which generates meaning out of already existent meaning; that it has a value of its own; it belongs to a certain history and therefore, it assumes a type of knowledge based on memories or past events which implies an evaluation through comparison of an entire line of facts, ideas and decisions. In what regards the textuality or the narratives created around Virginia Woolf, the collective memory, or the cultural memory (myths in the end), tends to place on secondary planes aspects that form the persona of the modernist writer focusing mostly on two main facets: first of all, strictly from an academic point view, Woolf the feminist, the militant, the modernist and the experimental writer and secondly, in terms of popular public preference,

that acclaimed sexual ambiguous, mad and suicidal writer¹. Therefore when Eileen Atkins states that people gather her as a person who might put stones in her pocket she accesses the cultural memory of the non-trained or better said the less trained audience. Nevertheless, she does not approve of this one angle portrayal of Virginia Woolf. After finishing writing a film version of her play *Vita and Virginia* (which is finally after so many years currently in development under Mirror Productions Ltd and directed by a young Dutch director named Sacha Polak) Atkins was asked to take a small role in Stephen Daldry's *The Hours*. Oddly enough for a person so familiar, close and passionate about Woolf, her cast in a minor role in *The Hours* is almost omitted by the academic endeavor meant to bring under the scope the various relations established by this intertextual manifestation. However, Jasper Rees posited the important question that is, whether it was difficult for her to hand over the baton. She replied:

“It was agonizing for me. It was all so ironic because Michael Cunningham got interested in Virginia Woolf because he came to see me in *A Room of One's Own*. It's not that the portrait of her is wrong, but it's only her depression. It came as a real thrill to me that I made people go back and read it and see how witty she was. When I first got the script, I threw it from one end of my apartment to the other. I thought, right, OK, you've had your temper. It's going to be done anyway, so grit your teeth, take the day's filming, have a day with Meryl Streep and f*** everybody. And that's what I did. It's over and it was a success and that's fine”

(*The Telegraph*, 2007).

The different vision Atkins has on how Virginia Woolf should be portrayed is obvious in the manner in which she plays the writer in her house in Rodmell while writing her first completely successful modernist novel *Mrs Dalloway*. Atkins portrays a calm and rational thinking Virginia Woolf, sitting on an armchair and having a sip of whatever she has in the cup she is holding and saying: “This has been a very animated summer. A summer lived almost too much in public. But down here I feel as if I have entered into a sanctuary, a nunnery.” She then stands up and walks firm and determined towards the tidy desk revealing a very organized mind engaged in the construction of a plan to complete the pending tasks:

“I want to make 300 pounds from my writing this summer. Then I can build a bath and a hot water range here at Rodmell. But first I must strike out some plan. Two lectures to

¹The affirmation is based on opinions emitted by Brenda R. Silver in her book *Virginia Woolf Icon* (1999) where the modernist writer is seen as acquiring a certain type of iconicity within the American space through various instruments of public display, out of which at least one must be mentioned, i.e. Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*: “[t]o some extent we have *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* to thank for that visibility” (9). Silver argues that the fame gained within the American space provides Woolf with a star status independent of her academic standing or literary reputation (see Ifrim, *Representations of Virginia Woolf* in **Philologica Jassyensia**, 2014: 575) a point of view sustained by Hermione Lee's statement that: “Positions have been taken, myths have been made. I have noticed that in the course of any conversation about this book [i.e. Lee's biography *Virginia Woolf*] I would, without fail, be asked one or more of the same questions: Is it true that she was sexually abused as a child? What was her madness and why did she kill herself? Was Leonard a good or a wicked husband? Wasn't she the most terrible snob? It began to seem that everyone who reads books has an opinion of some kind about Virginia Woolf, even if derived only from the title of Albee's play, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*” (1997: 3).

prepare and essays and reviews for the literary supplement. And the novel. I'm blown like an old flag by Mrs Dalloway. I feel I'm rushing towards the end of it and I must stop myself, think what I mean to say"

[00:02:07 – 00:03:01] (*Ten Great Writers of the Modern World: Virginia Woolf's Mrs Dalloway*).

Atkins, as Woolf, returns to her armchair and begins writing in her diary absorbed by thoughts about her work as Hermione Lee remarks that through the novels written before *Mrs Dalloway* and also through her diary Woolf was in fact in a process of finding "the necessary balance between 'design and substance': 'Am I writing *The Hours* [its working title] from deep emotion? [...] Have I the power of conveying the true reality? Or do I write essays about myself? [...] This is going to be the devil of a struggle. The design is so queer and so masterful, I'm always having to wrench my substance to fit it'" (1977: 92).

The Virginia Woolf Atkins enacts displays a focused, serene author who verbalizes the opening line of the novel "Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself" [00:05:21 – 00:05:26] (*Ten Great Writers of the Modern World: Virginia Woolf's Mrs Dalloway*) articulating every word and marking every pause, in complete control of the technique she now masters and puts at work. Although she portrays the exact segment in Woolf's life, Nicole Kidman's performance reveals an anxious writer, smoking and dipping her quill into ink with nervous gestures pronouncing the words with a fix stare as if consumed by that first sentence [00:10:42 – 00:10:52] (*The Hours*). Nevertheless, in what regards Nicole Kidman's performance, it must be taken into account the fact that the opening line of the novel acts as a portal for time travelling linking the three stories in the filmic text, as well as in the novel, in such a manner as to be suggestive of the writer consumed by the creative force, the reader absorbed in the fictional world and the character bound to live the reality of the fictional world.

In *The Hours* the focus is placed on tension and disorder; the chamber in which Woolf writes is depicted as suggestive for a chaotic mind with pages and notebooks lying on the floor while the camera records once more a Virginia Woolf literally absorbed by her very own words and thoughts. This impression is given by the camera angle being moved onto the piece of paper on which Virginia writes magnifying progressively the words until the name Clarissa becomes a full screen image. The method is used to stress the intensity with which the writer decides the faith of the character all the more that at the same time the thoughts behind the writing hand are formulated: "A woman's whole life in a single day. Just one day. And in that day her whole life. [...] It's on this day. This day of all days. Her faith becomes clear to her" [00:16:28 – 00:16:42] [00:26:41 – 00:26:58] (*The Hours*).

Another difference in the representations of both actresses resides in how they display Woolf's preference for taking walks. Stephen Daldry's filmic text presents a Virginia Woolf closely surveilled by her husband forced to ask permission for simple things such as going out for a walk. But the guilt is again to be put on the unstable mind of the writer. Nicole Kidman constantly acts making use of intense eye gazes indicative of hidden thoughts and intentions. She is thusly not to be trusted. As a result, the relation between the writer and her husband is constructed on the screen as governed by suspicion control and concealed purposes. Very suggestive in this regard is the scene in which Virginia informs Leonard that she intends to take a walk, the dialogue between the two being completed by the exchange of suggestive looks:

Virginia: "If it's alright, I thought I might take a short walk"

Leonard: “Not far?”

Virginia: “No. Just over there.”

Leonard: “Go then. If I could walk in mid-morning I’d be a happy man.”

[00:29:52 – 00:30:06] (*The Hours*)

The scene is followed by the image of Virginia Woolf walking down the street, among people, frowning and with her eyes on the ground, with no clear destination in mind but only engaged and tormented by her train of thoughts on the novel and on the character and mostly on the idea of death: “She will die. She is going to die. That’s what’s going to happen [00:30:17 – 00:30:30].

On a completely other pole, Kim’s documentary brings to the fore once more a well-balanced image of the writer. Atkins plays the role relaxed and natural; Woolf as an experienced writer knows exactly the key to engage back in the thrill of the writing therefore, preparing a cocker-spaniel for a walk (an image remembering of the photograph of Vita and Virginia, both lying on the ground and accompanied by two cocker-spaniels) she recommends: “The way to rock oneself back into writing is this: first, gently exercise in the air” and thus she begins her walk [00:43:20 – 00:43:32] (*Ten Great Writers of the Modern World: Virginia Woolf’s Mrs Dalloway*). The fact that Kim’s documentary and Atkins’ portrayal outline a balanced vision of Virginia Woolf does not mean that they choose to omit the madness ingredient in the story of the writer. The madness is a fact of which Woolf’s life cannot be separated. However, in the light of Hermione Lee’s words that Virginia Woolf was writing in her novel about the two sides of her own nature (Clarissa and Septimus) as she had already had two prolonged experiences of mental illnesses and at least one attempt of suicide which allowed her to put into Septimus’ hallucinations her own experiences, the documentary depicts the writer very much in control of her emotions and completely aware of what she wants her novel to be “a study of insanity and suicide. The world seen by the sane and the insane side by side [00: 34:11 – 00:34:19]. Hermione Lee continues by emphasizing on the discipline and self-control which allowed her to master the subject of madness in her novel and contained it inside the shape of the novel although writing about it made her mind squirt so badly that she could hardly bare to go on [00:42:56 – 00:43:07]. Therefore, in the light of the facts listed, Eileen Atkins’ reaction upon reading the script of *The Hours* is now easier to be understood not only as a response towards the baton being handed over but more as the response of a well instructed person able to grasp that the cultural memory created around the history / narrative of the writer distorts the real efforts for balance and control involved up to the moment of her surrender. After years of struggle, work and dedication, Eileen Atkins is closer to seeing her dream come to life as her play *Vita and Virginia* is currently being filmed. The young director in charge with the project declared that she did not appreciate the gloomy image of Nicole Kidman as Woolf in *The Hours* declaring that: “It feels like when you do Botox. I looked at her and thought, ‘there is something wrong with you’” and “I always like it when a great artist gets new life. I really hope we can make this film and show it to a new audience who will be fascinated by her and by the way they [Vita and Virginia] lived” (*The Independent*). The two productions mentioned in the article published in *The Independent*, *Life in Squares* (a BBC production) and *Vita and Virginia*, come to reinforce a general opinion about the magnetism exerted by the complex figure of Virginia Woolf. When one might get the feeling that everything has been said the bountiful postmodern pool surprises through new interpretations, opinions and views.

Final remarks

The reiterations of past narratives / histories in the postmodern culture do not target only the written text, but they are also focused on the textuality surrounding meaningful figures pertaining to various fields of human activity which ultimately implies accessing cultural memory. Such is the case of Virginia Woolf. The last seventy-eight years since the acquiring of her star status within the American space (in 1937, *The Years* became a best-seller which led to Virginia Woolf's appearance on the cover of the prestigious *Time* magazine) have been in fact a continuous process of remembering and remembrance of a side of the story behind the magnetic figure of the modernist writer. The present paper has brought into discussion two representations attempted by Eileen Atkins and Nicole Kidman. The difference between the two performances reside in the audience targeted in the sense that the work of Eileen Atkins is oriented towards trained viewers within academic fields while Nicole Kidman's is oriented towards a more commercial cinema audience. It is a fact that the interpretations intended for a commercial cinema audience are very different from those addressed to viewers or readers with academic purposes as the examples in the paper are destined to suggest. In a nutshell, in making of the commercial variant of Virginia Woolf was accessed that part of the cultural memory best imprinted in the mind of a public exalted by tabloids and therefore inclined towards exaggerated drama while Atkins' performance accesses a more restrictive variant but more appealing to the trained viewer.

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