

The Aesthetics of Escapade: Virginia Woolf, Dora
Carrington and Asta Nielsen Contesting Gender in
Life and Art

Cheunsumon Dhamanitayakul

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on the life and work of three Modernist women artists: an English literary icon Virginia Woolf; an English painter, Dora Carrington; and a German film star of the Weimar years, Asta Nielsen. In particular, it looks at their approach to presenting, performing and publicising gender, taking each artist in turn as representative of the mobility and independence afforded to women at the beginning of the twentieth century. Each woman “performs” and “publicises” the construction of a convention-defying gender identity in their own way but they share a similar tendency towards the theme of escapade. This thesis explores modes of life and distinct artistic preferences that animate each life and bring together notions of objectifying and objectification. It examines how these three women deploy the available cultural resources, or technologies of publicity as a means of playfully claiming their personal emancipation and/or to define and represent female subjectivity in way different from what was conventionally understood and practised at the time. In discussing how Woolf, Carrington and Nielsen both register the influence of the dominant social forces by which they are surrounded *and* disrupt the usual practices of female self-inscription of their moment, this thesis is informed by Michel Foucault’s theoretical focus on the process of subjectivation: the technologies of the self. As a backdrop to my analysis, I situate Woolf, Carrington and Nielsen in the historical conjunctures of interwar England and Germany (from the 1910s to 1930s). In a social and political climate of uncertainty and complexity the blurring of traditional gendered roles in the public sphere offered many women, particularly the women of my selection, a hitherto unimaginable latitude and independence. However, I take these artistic figures not as directly symptomatic of their moment, but rather as conspicuous and hyperbolised expressions of a broader cultural impulse that did have a larger currency in this period.

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References. No portion of the work contained within this thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification at this or any other institution

Introduction

When Virginia Woolf asserts, in her critical polemic *A Room of One's Own* (1929), that ‘a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction’, she brings to the fore two material conditions— a secure financial situation and personal space— crucial to women writers negotiating their own career passage through a conspicuously patriarchal world.¹ Long before proclaiming this Woolf had established her own publishing house, the Hogarth Press, in 1917. The Hogarth Press, which perhaps itself directly evidences her premise, not only afforded Woolf a working space of her own and economic self-reliance, but it also licensed her creative freedoms by providing a means of expression for her intellectual energy. Apart from a space of her own, Woolf’s family inheritance provided her with the financial security that allowed her to follow her writing ambitions.

Dissenting from Woolf, the painter Dora Carrington –a more peripheral member of the Bloomsbury circle— wrote in a letter to Lytton Strachey of 6 November 1929, ‘Virginia is fascinating. But I still don’t agree that poverty and a room of one’s own is the explanation why women don’t write poetry. If the Brontës could write in their rectory, with cooking and housework, why not other clergyman’s daughters?’² Known to be juggling her role as Strachey’s head housekeeper and as artist, Carrington seems to be speaking from her own situation. Upon closer scrutiny, however, Carrington was decisively liberated from many of the constraints of family and domesticity. In fact, after moving into the Tidmarsh Mill House in 1917, she had a studio of her own, not to mention a small annual legacy of £130 from her father, which enabled her to pursue a career of her

¹ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Grafton, 1977), 7.

² Dora Carrington to Lytton Strachey, 6 November 1929, *Carrington: Letters and Extracts from her Diaries*, ed. David Garnett (London: Jonathan Cape, 1975), 434. Regarding Carrington’s comments on Woolf, see Maria Tamboukou’s critical observation in *In the Fold between Power and Desire: Women Artists’ Narrative* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 141-142.

own choosing.³ Further, in a letter to her lover Gerald Brenan, written in October 1930 (only a year after her comment on *A Room*), Carrington reveals that she finds household chores a tiresome distraction from serious painting. She writes, ‘I shall now devote my remaining days to really painting seriously. I have two servants, no lovers, No [*sic*] household duties, so actually for the first time in my life I am without an excuse for being idle’.⁴

Meanwhile in Germany, the pioneering silent film star Asta Nielsen (a highly successful import from the Danish film industry) set up her own production company, Art Film (1920-1925). She had a state-of-the-art studio in Tempelhof built for her. There she could access a wide range of excellent filming facilities and highly elaborate wardrobes. Her near-absolute power over the production process at Art Film allowed her to impose her own choices regarding the production slate. This included, for example, the decision to reinterpret on film the most famous play of the Early Modern English stage in her a highly acclaimed *Hamlet* (1920).⁵

Opening this thesis with the exemplary stories of these three outstanding artistic women of the early twentieth century invites question about what commonality they might share. They are bound together neither by their country of origin nor by the forms of art they produced, but rather, first by their access to—at last for some of their career— material resources and to a ‘room’ of their own, and second by the public platform in which they both practised their art, and lived their lives, in defiance of the dominant gender conventions of their moment. This thesis, however, seeks to do more than provide a collage of stories of financially and socially privileged female artists of the modern era who dared to desire and ‘had a mind and wish of [their] own’.⁶ Of particular interest to this study are the ways they deploy the available cultural resources, or technologies of publicity, to define and represent female subjectivity, both within their art

³ Vanessa Curtis, *Virginia Woolf's Women* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing Limited, 2003), 131.

⁴ (HRC/ B.14/ F.5/ Brenan collection, letters from Carrington, Cited in Maria Tamboukou, *In the Fold between Power and Desire* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2010), 135.

⁵ Nevertheless, there are several accounts of Nielsen’s assertion that her maverick *Hamlet* was not based on Shakespeare’s oeuvre. This I will discuss in Chapter 3.

⁶ Virginia Woolf, “Professions for Women,” (1931) in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (London: Readers Union/Hogarth Press, 1943). 151.

and through their lives, in ways different from what was conventionally understood and practiced at the time. In this respect, my study is informed by Michel Foucault's conception of four types of 'technology': a concept which explains the way an individual chooses from the models available in his or her environment and acts to provide public definitions of him/herself.⁷ He illustrates:

As a context, we must understand that there are four major types of these 'technologies,' each a matrix of practical reason: (1) technologies of production, which permit us to produce, transform, or manipulate things; (2) technologies of sign systems, which permit us to use signs, meanings, symbols, or signification; (3) technologies of power, which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject; (4) technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.⁸

Within this paradigm Foucault believes that while the subject is relatively free to choose how he or she acts upon him or herself, the procedure is shaped by sets of rules and patterns that 'determine the conduct of individuals'.⁹ Foucault's emphasis on the relationship between the self and the social order resonates closely with the notions of objectifying and objectification –creating and being the art object—brought together by Woolf, Carrington and Nielsen's acts of breaking through generic and medial classifications. Accordingly, this line of thinking points to the

⁷ Patrick H. Hutton, "Foucault, Freud, and the Technologies of the Self," in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* Michel Foucault, Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 127.

⁸ Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 18.

⁹ Foucault, *Technologies of the Self*, 17.

underpinning question of this thesis: how Woolf, Carrington and Nielsen both register the influence of the dominant social forces by which they are surrounded *and* disrupt the usual practices of female self-inscription of their moment, as they embark on a search for new ways of constructing identity in both their lives and their work. Put differently, this study examines how the women of my selection, within such power relations that each is both subject to and object of, use the technologies of the self in their practice of freedom ‘to attain a certain state of happiness’ or at least of satisfaction. In an active and individual process, each employs her own methods but commonly goes across traditional boundaries and traverses the unexplored terrain of a self which is multifarious, if not endless. Woolf finds in the formal opportunities of escapade a door to ceaseless experiments with new forms of expression. In her art Carrington allows a state of liminality concocting a curious mix of the sensibilities of traditional English art and the burgeoning modernist movement of the French school. Alongside this, in her lifestyle Carrington sets up a *ménage à trois* consisting of herself, Lytton Strachey (known for his homosexuality) and Ralph Partridge (who loved her dotingly and for whom Strachey developed an unrequited passion). Nielsen, by keeping in play both the role as owner and object of the look, eschews any typecasting and constitutes herself through a testing of boundaries of gender, culture and even national identity.

By looking at intersections between the lives they led and the art they produced this study takes on a vast array of forms (fiction, drama, photography, film, painting) and themes (war, class, race, gender, sexuality). Foucault’s far-reaching concept of technologies of the self thus figures prominently throughout. While Judith Butler’s theory of performativity informs some aspects of the discussion of gender in this study, my investigation of Woolf, Carrington and Nielsen’s contestation of social norms is not limited narrowly to the configurations and expressions of gender. This study looks at their existence in a broader sense and hence discards certain familiar modes of feminist analysis—from Julia Kristeva to Toril Moi. Where existing approaches to gender fails to do justice to the ways these explain to a substantial depth and in different aspects how these

three women understand and act upon themselves, Foucault's theoretical concept of the process of subjectivation serves as a vehicle for an alternative reading of the complexities associated with these women's discursive practice of the self.

Of course there were many other women with creative impulses who expressed in their own artistic media a desire to be outside the norms governing the lives and artistic practices of others. For example, Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, Vita Sackville West, Radclyffe Hall, Anita Loos, Katherine Mansfield could have taken the place of the women on which this study focuses. They all interrogate heteronormativity and gender roles as traditionally coded with a particular degree of visibility and in no less assertive ways than Woolf, Carrington and Nielsen. This thesis takes into account the plethora of scholarship since the feminist historical re-readings of the 1980s that has been devoted to women artists of the first half of the twentieth century both in Europe and America. In *Writing for Their Lives: The Modernist Women, 1910-1940* (1987) Gillian Hanscombe and Virginia L. Smyers, for instance, call attention to the individual contribution to the Modernist movement of a 'less known' group of women writers. They bring into focus the lives and work of those they call 'the other Bloomsbury', among them Gertrude Stein, Alice B. Toklas, H.D., Bryher, Amy Lowell and Dorothy Richardson. Hanscombe and Smyers highlight the inextricable relationship between unconventional life choices of these women, as well as their rejection of heterosexual modes of gender and sexuality, and their experiments with form.¹⁰ The more recent critic Maren Tova Linett draws attention to the contemporary American novelist Charlotte Perkins Gilman's (1860-1935) vigorous attempt to 'reach beyond [...] masculine portrayals of women', juxtaposing her concept of androgyny with that of Woolf.¹¹ In the world of visual art, Sue Roe and Mary Ann Caws address the concerns of women painters who were trapped in an art scene dominated by institutionalised patriarchy and felt the lack of a language of their own. For

¹⁰ Gillian Hanscombe and Virginia L. Smyers, *Writing for Their Lives: The Modernist Women, 1910-1940* (London: The Women's Press, 1987).

¹¹ Maren Tova Linett, "Modernist Women's Literature: An Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Women Writers*, ed., Maren Tova Linett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 2.

instance, Gwen John (1876-1939) and Vanessa Bell (1897-1961), despite their clear talent, sustained extensive self-denigration and often felt overshadowed by male colleagues (John seeming eclipsed by her brother Augustus John and Bell by Duncan Grant).¹² Already in 1930 Woolf herself shrewdly observed that social obligations and sexual expectations always placed a heavy burden on women painters. She wrote in a 'Foreword' to her sister Vanessa's exhibition catalogue:

[...]and while for many ages it has been admitted that women are naked and bring nakedness to birth, it was held, until sixty years ago that for a woman to look upon nakedness with the eye of an artist, and not simply with the eye of mother, wife or mistress was corruptive of her innocence and destructive of her domesticity.¹³

Woolf's account is cognisant of the ways in which historically women had been largely excluded from the privileged position of the artistic observer, although she is suggesting that a change was underway at the time she was writing.

While some women painters in the early twentieth century posed a challenge to the distinction between the status of artistic object and that of creative artist, some of Hollywood's female stars of the pre-sound era were making a similar move by assuming 'actor-producer' status. Jane Gaines and Radha Vatsal chart several cases of film actresses who benefited from their financial status and personal circumstances and '[took] control of their images by legal and economic means'.¹⁴ For instance, Marion Leonard (1881-1956) and Cleo Madison (1883-1964) left the film companies that

¹² See Sue Roe, *Gwen John: A Life* (London: Vintage, 2010) and Mary Ann Caws, *Women of Bloomsbury: Virginia, Vanessa and Carrington* (London: Routledge, 1990).

¹³ London Artists' Association, *Recent paintings by Vanessa Bell with a foreword by Virginia Woolf. February 4th to March 8th 1930* (London: London Artists' Association, 1930), (no page number).

¹⁴ Jane Gaines and Radha Vatsal, "How Women Worked in the US Silent Film Industry," in *Women Film Pioneers Project*, ed., Jane Gaines, Radha Vatsal, and Monica Dall'Asta (New York: Center for Digital Research and Scholarship, Columbia University Libraries, 2013). Web. November 18, 2011, accessed July 12, 2018, <https://wfpp.cdrs.columbia.edu/essay/how-women-worked-in-the-us-silent-film-industry>.

brought them fame to produce and even direct their own features.¹⁵ Helen Gardner, besides starring in and producing her own films, exerted her creativity for costume designing and editing.¹⁶ In Germany, Henny Porten (like Nielsen) made use of her star status to establish her own production company.¹⁷

To a significant degree, these women, and others besides, positioned themselves in dialogue with the models imposed on them by the patriarchal social formations. In a sense, Woolf, Carrington and Nielsen were by no means anomalies. I would argue, however, that as individual artists playing the dual role of the subject and the object of power relations, and hence as directly challenging apparently fixed hierarchies, they are worthy of particular attention. Moreover, what distinguish them from those artists this thesis has omitted are their approaches to presenting, performing and publicising gender which are frequently ludic and high-spirited. For example, gender representation in Woolf's *Dreadnought* prank and in her mock-biography *Orlando*, Carrington's quirky androgynous fashion and her performing as a naked statue, and Nielsen's *Hosenrolle* comedies - all of these embrace a sense of escapade in tones completely different from Hall's overtly lesbian novel *The Well of Loneliness* (1928).¹⁸ In *The Well* Hall presents her subject Stephen as trapped in a female body (of which attributes such as 'muscular shoulders, small compact breasts, and [the] slender flanks of an athlete' are readily read as masculine).¹⁹ Most critics and social commentators (especially after the obscenity trial in 1928) take Stephen's cross-dressing as more of an appeal for 'social acceptance of sexual inversion' than a whim of fashion or a role-playing masquerade.²⁰ By excluding Hall's praxis from the category of gender 'escapade' I do not

¹⁵ Jane M. Gaines, *Pink-Slipped: What Happened to Women in the Silent Film Industries?* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 31.

¹⁶ Richard Abel, *Encyclopedia of Early Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2005), 264.

¹⁷ Henny Porten Films GmbH was founded in 1921 through which Porten produced what would be a predecessor of the highly artistic *Kammerspielfilm* (chamber play film) *Hintertreppe* (*Backstairs*, 1921). See Hans-Michael Bock, ed., *The Concise Cinegraph: Encyclopaedia of German Cinema* (New York; Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2009), 372.

¹⁸ *The Well of Loneliness* (first published in 1928) tells a story of Stephen Gordon, a young English woman who longs to be a man. Her "inversion" has shown since her early childhood. Hall portrays Stephen as a distressed cross-dresser who feels lost in finding a meaning for her sexual identity. The book was prosecuted and banned in Britain in 1928.

¹⁹ Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness* (London: Virago, 1982), 187.

²⁰ Laura Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism: The Origins of a Modern English Lesbian Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 122.

intend to reduce the women of my selection's means of performing gender to something merely playful, even erotically pleasurable. Such variation is undoubtedly a reflection of the complications embedded in the modernist mode of identity construction that seeks freedom from the solidity of heteronormative domination. My aim is to sketch the outline of this mode. As the chapters proceed, this thesis shows that gender representation among modernist women artist was far more complex than facile generalisation and ideological polarisation can account for.

Elsewhere I have mentioned that what binds Woolf, Carrington and Nielsen together in this thesis is not just the social and financial licence (the autonomous space and independent income) that subtends their manifestations of a modern concept of subjectivity. So what is it, precisely, that links these women together? The answer is the way they disseminate such libertarianism and non-conformism through an array of outlets. Their vigorous experiment with self-expression covers a range of technologies of publicity from the fancy-dress parties one organised, the roles one assumed, the characters one created, the debates one joined, the letters and diaries one wrote, and even to the public scandals in which one featured—as well, of course, as their art which moves fluidly between genres and media.

In ways indicative of their fluidity of thought and cultural aspiration, verbal (fiction, biography, diary/letter writing) and visual art (painting, cinema, photography) play an important part in how these artistic women choreographed and executed their staged public images. That is to say, they did occasionally traverse into the field of the others' expertise in one way or another, although there is no evidence to suggest that they artistically influenced each other. Woolf's essay, 'The Cinema' was informed by her interest in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), a film by German director Robert Wiene.²¹ Contemporaneous as they were, there is a high possibility that Woolf, who attended the screening at the Film Society in London—an institution founded by *Times* journalist and German-cinema-enthusiast Ivor Montagu—may have seen some of Nielsen's films that are known to have

²¹ "The Cinema" was originally published in the *New York Journal Arts*, and in the *National Athenaeum* in 1926.

had UK distribution.²² Further, a long tradition of criticism—from Winifred Holtby to Laura Marcus—has foregrounded cinematic devices (e.g. montage, flashbacks, dissolves and close-ups) as features of Woolf’s works, underscoring how the writer exploited the relatively new language of film.²³

As well as being an actress of outstanding talent, Nielsen also expressed herself in other artistic forms. She wrote short stories and novellas for several Danish magazines.²⁴ In her free time she painted and made collages using materials from her old costumes.²⁵ Meanwhile, Carrington’s aesthetics are constructed not only through her visual art, but also through her life as lived and her life as written. Her epistolary styles, as critic Mary Ann Caws notes, ‘are deeply literary in the best sense of the term’.²⁶ A biographical anecdote reveals that Carrington was also interested in filmmaking. She was part of the crew in the film production of a playlet entitled *Dr Turner’s Mental Home* (1929) which was later shown at Woolf’s house at 41 Gordon Square. Bernard ‘Beakus’ Penrose, one of Carrington’s lovers, had just bought a new film camera and they decided to make a short film with some friends. Carrington prepared masks and props and also acted in the film.²⁷ These artistic women’s enthusiasm for exploring the possibilities of different artistic media is indicative of their refusal to be confined within prescriptive boundaries of thought or form and provides a basis for transgressive aspects of the work produced which, in turn, illuminates the modernist impetus for aesthetic change.

These three artistic women are therefore chosen for the highly visible way in which they frame a challenge to gender-determined ways of creating and of being in the world. They are not unique in this, but they are

²² David Trotter, “Virginia Woolf and Cinema,” *Film Studies* 6 (2005): 19.

²³ Some of the often-discussed examples are short story *Kew Gardens* (1919) and novels *Jacob’s Room* (1922), and *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) see Winifred Holtby, *Virginia Woolf: A Critical Memoir* (London: Continuum, 2007), 111 and Laura Marcus, *The Tenth Muse: Writing about Cinema in the Modernist Period* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 210.

²⁴ For example, Nielsen was a contributor to some of her articles were reprinted in Renate Seydel and Allan Hagedorff, ed., *Asta Nielsen—ihr Leben in Fotodokumenten: Selbstzeugnissen und zeitgenössischen Betrachtungen* (Munich: Universitas Verlag, 1981).

²⁵ Julie K. Allen, *Icons of Danish Modernity: Georg Brandes and Asta Nielsen* (Seattle, London: University of Washington Press, 2012), 225.

²⁶ Mary Ann Caws, *Women of Bloomsbury: Virginia, Vanessa, and Carrington* (London: Routledge, 1990), 143.

²⁷ Jane Brown, *Spirits of Place: Five Famous Lives in their English Landscape* (London: Penguin, 2002), 194-195. The film is also available on YouTube, <https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-dr-turners-mental-home-1929-online>.

chosen for their power to be illustrative figures, with sufficient security in their lives to pursue their interests and preferences in defiance of the mainstream.

Before drawing out the particularity of the lives and work on which this thesis concentrates, however, I wish to give an overview of the historical context within which these three artistic figures brought their stories of desire, transgression and excess into a world suffused with apprehension about changes in the relationship between the sexes and in gender roles. The following section thus briefly outlines some of the prominent facets of the gendered moment in which these three women lived. More precisely, I will be dealing with England and Germany from the 1910s to the 1930s, a period when the redistribution of power and equality wrought by the changing social and political conditions offered an unprecedented freedom for women of certain social strata.

While my central concern is not with tracing the lived experience of those women, this thesis looks back to the nineteenth century, the time when a new air of sexual freedom materialised in the form of the ‘New Woman’. This already much-theorised sexual and cultural persona has a long historiography which can be traced back to the year of 1894. An Irish feminist writer Sarah Grand disparaged the ignorance of man and promoted the moral transcendence of the new type of woman in “The New Aspect of the Woman Question”.²⁸ The term ‘New Woman’, which was later taken up by Ouida (Maria Louise de la Ramee), became common currency and found its way into popular media and discourse.²⁹ For feminist historian Patricia Marks, the New Woman was seen as “‘new’ not necessarily because she was liberated but because she adopted shock tactics to differentiate herself from her predecessors”.³⁰ Such ‘shock tactics’ provoked a hostile reaction in a variety of media. One example of attack on the New Woman is a piece of

²⁸ Sarah Grand, (1894, Mar 01). “The New Aspect of the Woman Question,” *The North American Review*, 158, 271. accessed June 16, 2018, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1296766588?accountid=15181>.

²⁹ Later in the same year Ouida with a view to refuting Grand singled out the phrase ‘The New Woman’, capitalised letters to invest the term with extra bite, and made it the title of her own article, which generally criticises the perceived tendency of women to abandon their roles as wives and mothers in favour of a ‘new’ enthusiasm for education and sport. See Ellen Jordan, “The Christening of the New Woman: May 1894,” *Victorian Newsletter* 63 (Spring 1983): 20.

³⁰ Patricia Marks, *Bicycle, Bangs, and Bloomers: The New Woman in the Popular Press* (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky) 1990, 204.

satirical verse in the periodical *Pick-Me-Up* issue of 17 April 1897. It is particularly savage about ‘her’ desire to emulate men:

Last act of all, a woman *new* but old—
Old in that all the grace of youth has gone,
A thing that wears the outer garb of men,
Yet owneth but man’s worst qualities,
That preaches doctrines, needless and unclean,
The which herself but half doth understand;
She apes all manly sport, disgusting men,
Wears cigarette in the mouth, eyeglasses in eye,
Prepares herself a sad unloved old age,
Sans womanhood, sans taste, sans everything.
[17 Apr. 1897: 38, quoted in Marks, 13]³¹

The verse reflects public concerns and anxieties over the fashions of the New Woman, as well as her unseemly manners and attitudes. That it inveighs against her in a parody of ‘The Seven Ages of Man’ speech from Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* made the satire about the attempted displacement of ‘Man’ with ‘Woman’ yet more biting. Despite pejorative and satirical attempts of in the contemporary press act against this new threat to male supremacy, the presence of the distinctively ‘new’ sexual persona showed no signs of abandoning either ‘the outer garb of men’ or the more socially challenging mindset that accompanied it.

The figure of the New Woman of the *fin-de-siècle* afforded a precedent for the independent modern woman—the so-called flapper of the early twentieth century. In this regard, Katherine Mullin convincingly argues for the “Working Girl”, who was ‘ambiguously economically emancipated, liberated—in relative, contingent ways—from the constraints of family and domesticity’, as an alternative vernacular to the New Woman.³² Mullin notes that while these two figures ‘were contingent, even overlapping’, the Working Girl represents ‘a more palatable, accessible, and

³¹ *Pick-Me-Up*, April 17, 1897, 38, quoted in Marks, *Bicycle, Bangs, and Bloomers*, 13.

³² Katherine Mullin, *Working Girls* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 3.

compelling vision of emancipation'.³³ My point here, however, is not to debate the terminology. What is at stake is a complex or nuanced understanding of the individual experience of women when the press and other commentators tried to attach the label 'New Woman' or the 'Working Girl' to a collective of women or to constitute a modernist allegory for the emergence of modern women into the public sphere. Similarly, such typification of the 'Modern Miss' or the 'flapper' can be read as symptomatic of the simplification of a history of women in which she is regularly reduced to a singular creature of her epoch. Within 'her' story this culturally significant type of young woman is usually narrated as if she were a generic unit. That she is deployed in this singularised way is perhaps part of an attempt to unnerve the women's pursuit of liberation in history and to obfuscate the issue. This is not how men's history is written. For the purposes of this section, my discussion of the life and art of Woolf, Carrington and Nielsen takes into account the everyday lived experience of these modern women who negotiated assertively for themselves in the social and historical context of early-twentieth-century England and Germany. In the following section I attempt to sketch out a broader picture of the limits and possibilities intrinsic to this time and space within which some of the most rigid assumptions about separate behaviours, wage-earning potential and in some circumstances dress codes were compromised. I explore how this setting provided individual women, as well as my three subjects in particular, with space for experimentation and unprecedented forms of latitude to break free from the shackles of traditional conventions. This I see as inextricably bound up with the exceptional circumstances of the economic, political and social changes to which the rapid industrialisation and the First World War acted as a catalyst.

While in England women were seen as simultaneously a heroine of the war effort and as a 'dangerously autonomous' figure, in Germany public fear of the *Neue Frau*'s threat to the status quo was tremendous.³⁴ The upheaval caused by the defeat of war triggered a public perception of

³³ Mullin, *Working Girls*, 8.

³⁴ Sheila Rowbotham, *A Century of Women: the History of Women in Britain and the United States* (London: Viking, 1997), 85.

women's new sexual autonomy as a menace to many men returning home physically and spiritually damaged. As social historian Birthe Kundrus observes, there was a public fear that German women were 'the true victors of the war'.³⁵ Perhaps one incident may account for the fear mentioned by Kundrus. The conferral of suffrage to women on 12 November 1918 offered German women (over the age of twenty) for the first time in history the promise of complete legal equality, although the first women's enfranchisement did not officially take place until 1919.³⁶ In England, the Representation of the People Act became law on 6 February 1918, with the vote given to women of thirty years old (as opposed to twenty-one for English men, and twenty for German women).³⁷ Despite the unprecedented social mobility and political autonomy, the question of whether or to what extent the political ramifications of 'the war to end all wars' endorsed the progress women made has prompted a proliferation of divergent opinion.³⁸

So who was this controversially liberated woman? Typically she was a young, single workingwoman. According to historian Mary Turner, she could be one of the munitions factory workers who formed their own football teams, or a typist or shop-girl who frequented music halls and cinemas without chaperones.³⁹ In a more systematic approach Mullin traces stories of this 'new' sexual persona through their occupations: telegraphists, typists, shop girls and barmaids. Different though they may be, these young working women of different classes 'troubling[ly]' shared a common desire

³⁵ Birthe Kundrus, "Gender Wars: The First World War and the Construction of Gender Relations in the Weimar Republic," in *Home/Front: The Military, War and Gender in Twentieth-Century Germany*, ed. Karen Hagemann and Stefanie Schüler-Springorum (Oxford, UK; New York: Berg, 2002), 159.

³⁶ Kathleen Canning, "Claiming Citizenship: Suffrage and Subjectivity in Germany after the First World War," in *Weimar Publics/Weimar Subjects: Rethinking the Political Culture of Germany in the 1920s*, ed. Kathleen Canning, Kerstin Barndt and Kristin McGuire (Oxford, New York: Berghahn Books, 2013), 120, Kathleen Canning, "Women and the Politics of Gender," in *Weimar Germany*, ed. Anthony McElligott (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 151.

³⁷ Sue Bruley, *Women in Britain since 1900* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 1999), 51.

³⁸ For further discussion see for example: Kathleen Canning, "Claiming Citizenship: Suffrage and Subjectivity in Germany after the First World War," in *Gender History in Practice: Historical Perspectives on Bodies, Class and Citizenship*, ed. Kathleen Canning (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006): 212–237, and Susan R. Grayzel, *Women's Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood, and Politics in Britain and France during the First World War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

³⁹ See Mary Turner, *The Women's Century: A Celebration of Changing Roles, 1900-2000* (Kew: National Archives, 2003), and June Purvis ed., *Women's History: Britain, 1830-1945* (Bristol: UCL Press, 1995).

for ‘economic independence, social mobility and erotic autonomy’.⁴⁰ Aspiring to ‘escape the domestic treadmill of [her] mother’s [life]’, to borrow from gender historian Sally Alexander, they echoed the ‘shock tactics’ of the New Woman of the late nineteenth century to a significantly provoking degree.⁴¹ While some modern girls ‘horrified their elders and dazzled young men by wearing shockingly short and often backless dresses’, some chose to reject previous modes of being female in ways that were legible at a glance, and deliberately so.⁴² These contradictory modes of self-fashioning, whereby the previously cherished voluptuous hips and bust were either excessively promoted or obscured, served to underline women’s reclamation of a body previously subjected to restrictive crinoline hoop skirts and corsets. These modern girls adopted trousers, or dresses with lower waistlines to suppress the physical markers of femininity. Perhaps the most startling of all was that they rejected the ‘crowning glory’ of their femininity, chopping their long hair to a mere bob. Some even went further to a boyish Eton crop.⁴³ Either with a strong desire to defy convention in all manner of visible ways or with an intention to pass as a woman of fashion, young women who reveled in their liberation to express themselves through new fashion styles were both admired and at the same time suspected for their freewheeling spirit.⁴⁴

In England the so-called ‘modern misses’, who personified modernity, new opportunities and a renunciation of Victorian values, were, as Liz Conor puts it, suspected of ‘[making] themselves visually appealing for their own satisfaction, and beautification was just one of the growing number of activities women engaged in with no intention of pleasing men’.⁴⁵ In this regard, Lucy Bland sheds light on historiographical debates about depictions of the modern women in popular media such as magazines, novels and newspaper. As Bland points out, a body of scholarship, such as

⁴⁰ Mullin, *Working Girls*, 6.

⁴¹ Sally Alexander, *Becoming a Woman and other Essays in 19th and 20th Century Feminist History* (London: Virago, 1994), 223.

⁴² Turner, *The Women’s Century*, 50.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Mary Turner, *The Women’s Century: A Celebration of Changing Roles, 1900-2000* (Kew: National Archives, 2003), 50.

⁴⁵ Liz Conor, *The Spectacular Modern Woman: Feminine Visibility in the 1920s* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 48.

Deirdre Beddoe's *Back to Home and Duty* (1989), underplays positive portrayals of the new sexual figure, claiming them to have been largely negative. On the other hand, Bland cites Adrian Bingham's *Gender, Modernity and the Popular Press in Interwar Britain* [2004], bringing into focus media reactions that exalted workingwomen and sportswomen.⁴⁶ While these young women triggered a complex constellation of varied and sometimes contradictory reactions from the public, from their side they too were struggling to negotiate the new freedoms to reconceptualise and exhibit their femininity.

In Germany the figure of the *Neue Frau* similarly provoked social discourses on the impact of new sexual ideologies. A sudden enlistment of male workers precipitated the entry of women into men's jobs.⁴⁷ German women's newly gained political and social freedom exacerbated social commentators' fears and anxieties about the changes in the relationship between the sexes which had already cast a shadow on the country. Historian Katharina von Ankum observes that while men returning from war felt a sense of 'societal displacement and cultural "castration"', women, on the other hand, had a growing trust in their own abilities and opportunities.⁴⁸ Economically independent and sexually emancipated, the modern women of Germany enjoyed a wide range of opportunities and more relaxed social mores. Those indulging in unchaperoned courtships and all-night dancing began to make their presence felt in Berlin's nightlife scene.⁴⁹ In line with this developments came less restricted access to contraception, a range of recreational activities like sports and cinema-going, and the possibility of platonic friendships with members of the opposite sex.

⁴⁶ Lucy Bland, *Modern Women on Trial: Sexual Transgression in the Age of the Flapper* (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 2013), 7.

⁴⁷ This act of substitution was also the case in England, where women had performed tasks that had once been restricted to men, from chimney sweeping to war service. See Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850-1920* (London: Virago, 1985), 281.

⁴⁸ Katharina von Ankum, ed., *Women in the Metropolis: Gender and Modernity in Weimar Culture* (London: University of California Press, 1997), Introduction.

⁴⁹ Dorothy Row, "Desiring Berlin: Gender and Modernity in Weimar Germany," in *Visions of the 'Neue Frau'*, ed. Marsha Meskimmon and Shearer West (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995), 153.

Like the British modern miss, the *Neue Frau* often made herself stylistically identifiable on sight. As in Britain, some women adopted the vogueish pageboy haircut known in German as a *Bubikopf*.⁵⁰ For several commentators the *Bubikopf* was not just a whim of fashion, but rather testimony to a new cultural era that meant something beyond mere modishness. Katie Sutton, for instance, regards the style as an element of a ‘virile erotic aesthetic’ (as manifested in, for example, the screen image of Asta Nielsen) and at the same time as ‘a powerful code of visual recognition and identification’ within an emerging lesbian subculture.⁵¹ Again, as in Britain, along with the anxiety-provoking pageboy *Bubikopf*, the *Neue Frau* adopted a daring sartorial practice that appropriated specific male garments. The shortened hemline which revealed legs up to calf joined forces with a ‘simplicity and uniformity’. The resulting style, obviously borrowed from ‘men’s tailoring’ caused public concern about the visual masculinisation of women.⁵²

Some German women’s outward appearance, which was becoming more provocative both sartorially and politically, became a regular topic for discussion within numerous discourses. For instance, an image from a 1925 front page of the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*, ‘Die Wandlung der Frauenmode. Die modische Frau - von heute und aus der Großväterzeit’ (The transformation of women’s fashion: the fashionable woman of today and of her grandfather’s time) juxtaposes two women of different fashion styles (Fig. 1). As distinct from the woman in traditional dress, the modern girl, with a conspicuously shorter hemline and bobbed hair, serves as a symbol of the decadent aspects of urban modernity. Within this discourse, the disappearance of long hair and long skirts was taken to connote cultural decline and was thought to be inextricably associated with transgressive sexual behaviour. Further, her overt obsession with her appearance makes her a convenient target for those concerned about challenge to the pre-war gender order that this figure of unfettered female sexuality was thought to

⁵⁰ Helen Boak, *Women in the Weimar Republic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 3.

⁵¹ Katie Sutton, *The Masculine Woman in the Weimar Germany* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013), 32-34.

⁵² Boak, *Women in the Weimar Republic*, 269.

represent. The portrayal of the modern girl in *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*, as in other popular media, objectifies her purely in terms of her sexuality. That the press present this type of woman as a possible threat to moral standards and traditional values can be seen as part of an effort to curb the challenge to male cultural authority.



Figure 1 ‘Die Wandlung der Frauenmode. Die modische Frau - von heute und aus der Großväterzeit.’ *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*, 6 September 1925.

On closer scrutiny, historians wonder how far English and German women stood to benefit from seemingly unprecedented mobility and independence. Martin Pugh, for example, has pointed out that while England in the 1920s saw a shift in conventional power relations and feminine intrusion into the seemingly impenetrable male-dominated sphere, ‘women did enjoy equal pay but in a limited number of professions including the law, medicine, the press, the stage and parliament’.⁵³ Put this

⁵³ Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women’s Movement in Britain, 1914-1959* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1992), 96.

way, modernity was a sign of hope that warranted little optimism for women who were struggling against sexual discrimination. Women's job opportunities and political participation continued to be restricted in both nations. Not for many would a job beyond the home mean replacing one sort of vocation with another. In Germany despite formal political advancements and their expanding social and economic identities, women's progress was, as Renate Bridenthal puts it, 'hardly a great leap forward'.⁵⁴ That is, not all women acquired a new freedom and lifestyle in equal measure. The limited job opportunity, poor education and family ties bound most women, especially those from the working class, to the domestic space. Even when women managed to secure a job they still needed to devote their time and energy to their families. Rather for most, it was more likely to mean adding additional work to the domestic burden which was unlikely to go away.

Nevertheless, there were those who found in these restrictions to home and hearth security and protection from the vicissitudes of life, and for many girls work was simply the interim on the path to marriage. In this respect, German historian Ute Frevert provides a vivid example of a young woman clerk who cherished, from the movies she saw, the fantasy of being one of the 'elegant customers crowd[ing] around the counter' before 'whisk[ing] her off to a marriage of happiness and luxury'.⁵⁵ In this sense, modernity, as noted by American feminist scholar Patrice Petro, is 'merely intensifying traditionally defined gender roles and responsibilities'.⁵⁶ It is against this backdrop of both conservatism and experimentation in the history of women's social placement and work that I would like to set the life stories of my three subjects. In each story the concepts of gender, genre, medium and national boundedness were contested at different points.

Given their transcending of the confines of domesticity and gender norms to invade the spaces of male culture, Woolf, Carrington and Nielsen

⁵⁴ Renate Bridenthal, "Beyond Kinder, Küche, Kirche: Weimar Women at Work," *Central European History* 6, no. 2 (1973): 149, accessed March 28, 2015, <http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.york.ac.uk/10.1017/S0008938900015934>.

⁵⁵ Ute Frevert, *Women in German History: from Bourgeois Emancipation to Sexual Liberation*, trans. Stuart McKinnon-Evans (Oxford; Munich: Berg, 1990), 181.

⁵⁶ Patrice Petro, *Joyless Street: Women and Melodramatic Representation in Weimar Germany* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), 75.

can be viewed as representatives of the New Woman of their time. By no means, however, are they reducible to a singular identity in this respect. These women push the limit of any formulaic pattern and complicate conventional identification with any trite version of femininity. Woolf, famously, ‘did not commit herself as a Sapphist’,⁵⁷ Carrington dubbed herself ‘a hybrid monster’⁵⁸, and Nielsen could be almost all things but ‘a procreative, sexually satisfied *hausfrau*’.⁵⁹ Each, therefore, offers an interesting filter through which the construction of gender and gendered and de-gendered possibilities of the moment may be read.

Before allowing each woman her own chapter so that her individual story of challenge and the expression of challenge may be told, I first draw attention to some unifying factors that justify their joint treatment in this thesis: androgyny; masquerade; their utilisation of ‘otherised’ cultures; and finally their traversal into other art forms and genres. The following section thus identifies some key features that will become relevant to the chapters that follow in narrating their lives and work, extraordinary as these were.

A trope of androgyny

It was not until 1929 that Woolf, who had been using the trope of androgyny liberally in her fiction, theorised it in the critical polemic *A Room of One’s Own*. The trope which reaches a sort of crescendo in *Orlando* (1928)—the story of an eponymous poet who manages to embrace and yet distance her/himself from both sexes and succeeds in maintaining his/her artistic autonomy—in turn illuminates Woolf’s own experience as a would-be androgynous writer in a male-dominated literary culture. Woolf’s fiction usually portrays a sexually emancipated, androgynous woman trapped within a set of patriarchal circumscriptions. Carrington, similarly, challenged the prescribed societal limits of acceptable clothing for female bodies. Since her years at the Slade School of Fine Art, she had achieved liberation in a form of androgynous fashion: the unencumbered/unencumbering clothes and shapeless dresses made by

⁵⁷ Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Vintage, 1997), 485.

⁵⁸ Dora Carrington to Lytton Strachey, 21 May 1919, *Carrington: Letters and Extracts from Her Diaries*, 136.

⁵⁹ Lawrence Danson, “Gazing at Hamlet, or the Danish Cabaret,” *Shakespeare Survey* 45 (1992): 46.

herself. She occasionally wore trousers and jodhpurs in which she discovered freedom of movement and of self-expression.⁶⁰ Proceeding progressively to define and restyle herself, Carrington chopped '[her] mother's glory short enough to show the furrow in the nape of her neck' and became known to the Bloomsbury group and others as the 'crophead'.⁶¹ While Carrington pioneered a short bob, Nielsen was extremely effective in launching new worldwide fashions throughout her prolific career. Aside from her *Bubikopf* which typifies the emancipated city woman, known as a flapper or jazz baby, Nielsen's androgyny relies on unisex fashion—the shawl and tunic—which culminates in the costume design of *Hamlet*.⁶² It was, therefore, partly through the relatively superficial gestures of androgynous fashion these three figures found a channel through which to signal their deeper challenge to constraining social and sexual values rooted so firmly, as these were, in gender binaries.

Masquerade

In any discussion of sartorial daring of the period, the Bloomsbury group must necessarily feature prominently. The group as a whole was an avant-garde set known for the masquerade and cross-dressing of some of its members. In the most audacious adventure of this, the famous *Dreadnought* Hoax discussed in Chapter 1, gendered, racial and cultural aspects were all taken on in one transgressive performance. Woolf, at the age of twenty-eight, took part as 'Prince Mendax'. She was blacked up, furnished with a fake moustache and beard, and draped in supposedly 'Oriental' garb.⁶³ This episode, as Randi Koppen notes, 'combined together all possible forms of subversion'.⁶⁴ In the case of Carrington, however, masquerade takes place at

⁶⁰ She considered 'unfeminine' attire more suitable to her lifestyle and more accurate in terms of self-representation. In response to Mark Gertler's (with whom she had a tormented on-off relationship for twelve years) disapproval of her linking for trousers, she wrote, 'I don't want to look like a boy as I know I'm female and I would be useless to be anything else. But I like definitely wearing them much better'. See Carrington to Mark Gertler, May 1917, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre, University of Texas, Austin. No date, quoted in Gretchen Gerzina, *A Life of Dora Carrington 1893-1932* (London: Pimlico, 1995), 110.

⁶¹ Gretchen Gerzina, *A Life of Dora Carrington 1893-1932* (London: Pimlico, 1995), 11.

⁶² Sabine Hake, "In the Mirror of Fashion," in *Women in the Metropolis: Gender and Modernity in Weimar Culture*, ed. Katharina von Ankum (London: University of California Press, 1997), 187.

⁶³ Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, 283.

⁶⁴ Randi Koppen, *Virginia Woolf, Fashion and Literary Modernity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 24.

a deeper level than a sartorial practice (although she attended the Bloomsbury group's fancy dress parties from time to time). To the outside world Carrington seemed to promote her role as 'perfect head housekeeper'.⁶⁵ According to critic Genevieve Sanchis Morgan, she opted to represent herself as a female servant who, 'like the female artist and a woman's body, was something to be seen but not heard'.⁶⁶ This characterisation is contrast with the overtly bold lifestyle she adopted, making her an even more enigmatic but no less fascinating subject than the other two figures. Nielsen deployed a trope of masquerade throughout her filmic career. For example, she played the part of a rebellious seventeen-year-old girl pretending to be twelve (she was thirty-two years old at that time) in *Engelien (The Angel)*, 1914) a leading actress who masquerades as the head of an Italian robber band in *Zapatas Bande (Zapata's Gang)*, 1914), and a princess who passes as a prince in order to secure the Danish throne in *Hamlet* (1920). Indeed, she played so many different roles from different ages, nationalities and even ethnicities that masquerade became her common routine. While for Woolf masquerade may be taken as a sideline prank, for Nielsen it is what she centrally did.

The 'otherised' culture

This thesis seeks to show that in their experimental performance of gender, these three women assume different culture in order to play with different versions of femininity, desire and agency. On a number of occasions, Woolf, Carrington and Nielsen explore the possibilities of other cultures, as they allowed themselves not only the pleasure of escapism from the confines of traditional norms but also provided them a subject for their creative art. Woolf, in challenging the supposed naturalness of one's gender, had recourse either being African as her two real-world masquerades testified) or to Oriental culture (as is illustrated in *Orlando's*, the eponymous hero's sex change when in Turkey). Carrington, on the other hand, sought temporary asylum in a Bohemian lifestyle at Garsington Manor, a place

⁶⁵ Genevieve Sanchis Morgan, "Forms of Masquerade: The Art of Dora Carrington," *Mosaic* 31 no. 4 (1998): 1-19.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

most talked about for the gracious living it offered to conscientious objectors seen during the wartime as outcasts.⁶⁷ Carrington alienated herself from the business of war and immersed herself in the atmosphere of carnival and theatre cultivated at this Tudor manor, where she and the others flouted sexual conventions. Her interests in other cultures and ways of being continued long after the war. Her acclaimed surrealist landscape *Mountain Ranges from Yegen, Andalusia* (1924), for example, is inspired by her excursion into isolated mountain ranges in Spain. As for Nielsen, her tenacity and individualism seem to assert themselves best when she steps out of her familiar realm into the a foreign culture. As a Danish star of German-produced films Nielsen self-knowingly exploited this perception of exoticism to its fullest extent. Onscreen she exploits socially marginalised cultures to speak about the underprivileged, the oppressed and minority ethnic groups (ranging from a gypsy to an Inuit woman) who are determined to fight for their own interests.

Traversal into other art forms and genres

The women of my study are notable for their exploration of the intersection between two or more genres and/or media. My aim in what follows is to illustrate how each moves fluidly between different modes and genres. Woolf's probably most adventurous writerly challenge to conventional literary categories coalesces in the mock biography *Orlando*. While the book resists being defined by one literary genre, it complicates the common criteria of what should be a novel and a biography. Woolf's commitment to textual freedom can be compared to Carrington's non-compliance non-compliance with regulatory frameworks is evident both in her landscape painting and portraiture. For example, her portrait of Lytton Strachey (1916), as an anonymous critic notes, exhibits a curious mix of Pre-Raphaelite and early Renaissance painting, whilst 'the soft light and loose brushwork also suggests some influence of the Post-Impressionist movement'.⁶⁸ Her landscapes equally resist a facile label or classification.

⁶⁷ Ottoline Morrell, *Ottoline at Garsington: Memoirs of Lady Ottoline Morrell 1915-1918*, ed. Robert Gathorne-Hardy (London: Faber, 1974), 35.

⁶⁸ "Dora Carrington Artist Overview and Analysis," *The Art Story: Modern Art Insight*, accessed May

Her work, as Christopher Neve puts it, is ‘painted in a deceptively lyrical English version of French post-Impressionism’.⁶⁹ This is also the case with Nielsen’s aesthetics. In this regard, Lotte H. Eisner notes that ‘[i]t was impossible to put a label on this great actress: she was neither “modernist” nor “Expressionist”’.⁷⁰ Nielsen’s virtuosity lies in her innovative acting style that consistently combines cinematic acting with theatrical naturalism. Her mastery of multiple genres (tragedy, comedy and drama for instance) permits a constant switch to different roles without submitting to any one in particular. As critic John H. Winge remarks, ‘she was masterful in tragedy as she was in comedy, and never was she conventional’.⁷¹ By looking at each woman’s transcendence of fixed categories, each chapter seeks to explore the extent to which the dismantlement of barriers of different art forms both augments and aligns with their unconventional treatment of gender. These were not minds apt to accept pre-determined categories either of artistic production or of ways of being.

Woolf, Carrington and Nielsen eked out whatever resources were available to them the possibility of undoing the dialectics of gender difference and of challenging ideals about how one should live and work. This they achieved in rather different ways. My analysis of these women artists’ experimentation with new modes of living and new art forms focuses on how identity, either sexual or national, is ‘performed’. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the meanings of terms such as ‘perform’, ‘performance’, ‘performative’ or ‘performativity’ as pursued here are slightly different from what Butler has premised in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* (1993). I have avoided simply adopting Butler’s theory of performativity essentially because it puts an emphasis on the effect of regulatory norms, of what must be instituted again and again rather than through any one act of performance.⁷² In contradistinction to

28, 2018, <http://www.theartstory.org/artist-carrington-dora.htm>.

⁶⁹ Christopher Neve, “The Passionate Landscape,” *Country Life* March 9, 1978. 610.

⁷⁰ Lotte H. Eisner, *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt* 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 261.

⁷¹ John H. Winge, “The Front Page: Asta Nielsen,” *Monthly Film Bulletin* 19, No. 2 (1950): 55, accessed Nov 27, 2018, <https://search-proquest.com.libproxy.york.ac.uk/docview/740636351?accountid=15181>.

⁷² Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” in *Inside/Out Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991) 24.

Butler, where this thesis explores each subject's 'performing' of gender, the meaning of 'perform' is pursued in a theatrical sense. What it seeks to show is a dynamic of alternation between different identities—masculine and feminine, white and non-white, creator and created, or German and non-German—of putting off and taking on different masks at will.

The following chapters analyse three women's expansive and transgressive thinking that seeks to break through generic classifications in gendered, cultural and even national terms. The thesis is divided into two parts. **Part A**, with its focus on England from the 1910s to the 1930s, consists of two chapters: one on Virginia Woolf and the other on Dora Carrington. **Chapter One** argues that the *Dreadnought* hoax acts as the catalyst for Woolf's impulse for the parodic subversion of patriarchal values. This is attested by her reiteration and reinterpretation of the incident in different forms of works, such as the short story 'A society', the play *Freshwater: A Comedy* and, most vividly of all (as I will argue) her mock-biography *Orlando*. Juxtaposing the *Dreadnought* hoax (as an experience and as a media event) and *Orlando* (as a narrative) her penchant for the trope of escapade comes into view. The trope, as I pursue it in these episodes and texts, fosters a temporary excursion into an unfamiliar realm, be it of genre or gender or race, or even different media. This chapter seeks to illustrate that the idea of escapade acts as a driving force of Woolf's challenge to the established order in the mutually constitutive domains of literature and gender. Tracing how the trope of escapade has progressed from the practical joke on the *Dreadnought* to something more serious and intimate, yet playful in its gesture it also examines the act of boundary-crossing in two main respects: a mode of writing that diverts (in the sense of *divertissement*) from established traditions of biographical writing, and a configuration of gender identity, not only of the protagonist but also of the narrator and vicariously of Woolf. In the former case, I assert that the trope of escapade forges Orlando's sexual oscillation, of which the incident of sex change against the Turkish setting is an obvious example. Taking such resistance to binary thinking about a gendered identity as a point of departure, the final section reads *Orlando* in the light of Woolf's short-lived

affair with Vita Sackville-West. The chapter, hence, argues that the trope of escapade emboldens Woolf to experiment with the unfamiliar realm of homoerotic desire. In this symbiotic unity, the writer's sexual escapade is more than an ingredient for *Orlando*'s sexual hijinks both on a narrative and symbolic level. It is, as I will elaborate, experience as show, and vice versa.

Chapter Two looks at the life and art of Dora Carrington, drawing on a broad range of primary materials, including photos, letters, diary entries and paintings. Opening with the snapshots of her performance as a living sculpture taken in 1917 at Garsington Manor, the chapter traces a precursor or a pretext for her interrogation of the elements of gender, sexuality and sexual embodiment in the world of her time. While prevailing accounts of Carrington tend to circle around her apparent willingness to veil her identity as an artist, this thesis departs from current scholarship and offers new perspectives on the modes of identification she was trying to pursue. In doing so, I provide three examples of her visual and verbal rhetoric, apart from the images of her as a living statue. The first example is an excerpt from her correspondence with her lover Gerald Brenan, the second and the third examples give way to Carrington's artistic attempts: her most frequently cited landscapes and her last painting, a *trompe-l'oeil* window. In each example I examine the ways in which her artistic practice and her self-construction are informed by her unique punning aesthetics and her propensity for variable rather than hegemonic patterns.

While Part A discusses a case of gender transgression in the domain of literature and art in England, **Part B** deals with the situation in Germany within the milieu of the German film industry. It will give a brief overview of German cinema from the Wilhelmine to the Weimar years. **Chapter Three** explores prevailing accounts of Asta Nielsen's significance in German silent cinema in the terrain of gender. The first section brings early scholarship on Nielsen's star persona and cinematic performance into dialogue with later feminist readings. By doing so, I seek to identify how much they rely on either-or dichotomies and fail to get us far in understanding Nielsen's multivalent challenge to dualistic modes of being and becoming. As a case study I discuss her screen debut in *Afgrunden*

(1910) of which the notorious gaucho dance sequence sees Nielsen crossing the threshold in many respects. In the second section my analysis pursues Nielsen's consistent navigation of, and oscillation between, enactment of female empowerment and her own objectification. Here, I focus predominantly on her early *Hosenrolle* (trousers role) comedies, released between 1913 and 1918 in the German film industry, which have thus far attracted limited critical attention (at least in the English-language literature). As an outlet for her creativity and her modernist discourse on gendered relations of power and on women's liberation, the films examined in this section register various degrees of mediation on the concept of gender. In particular, my analysis addresses the motif of the *Doppelgänger* (the double) which is understood to indicate German cinema's dominant approach to the issue of identity crisis widely explored in visual arts during the ramshackle progression to the Weimar era. This chapter aims to demonstrate how Nielsen's cross-dressing characters ring the change on the celebrated theme of human duality.

With a close reading of stills from selected films and a thorough examination of 'transformation' sequences from *Das Liebes-ABC* (1916), I situate the theme of the double in relation to the political and social instability that loomed large in the period. In addition, I argue that Nielsen's breeches roles distinguish themselves from Shakespearean cross-dressing in ways that promote the idea of two simultaneous selves, rather than a fusion of one sex and another. The final section offers an analysis of Nielsen's aspiration to reach beyond national boundaries. As we shall see, she consistently defies narrowly national or nationalist identity, and fosters instead a trans- or post-national construction of identity. Through a discussion of a wartime comedy *Das Eskimobaby* (*The Eskimo Baby*, 1916), this section aims to illustrate Nielsen's strategy to escape into the fantasy of the other for a freer and more dynamic performance.

Part A

Part A comprises two chapters. The chapters look at Woolf and Carrington in turn in relation to their register of self-presentation. My analyses focus on the particular years between 1910s and 1930s. Situated against the backdrop of the twentieth-century England, where the ‘new freedom’ for women intermingled with the vestige of staunchly Victorian sexual hierarchies, the chapters employ the lens of Foucault’s notion of the ‘technologies of the self’ to discuss each woman’s strenuous negotiation between her acknowledged self and the one the world expected of her. In their early years of exploring the margins of transgression, each came across her own way to work upon herself: Woolf blacked up her face, dressed up as an Ethiopian prince and strolled on the deck of the flagship of the Royal Navy; Carrington stripped naked and performed a living statue at a private refuge for the conscientious objectors in the penultimate year of the Great War. Their choices of self-representation, which demonstrate the most emancipated precepts of their time, reflect underlying sensibilities of women – especially women artists – struggling to find a place in the predominantly male-defined cultural domain.

My readings of Woolf and Carrington’s articulation of the self are informed by the biographical and contextual analyses. While the similarity of their personal situations and their connection through Bloomsbury induce an alignment between these artistic women in part A, it is their engagement in exploring the possibility of outré choice of self-moulding and, in particular, their experimentation with the reciprocity between different art forms that feature prominently in this study. For this reason Part A forms the necessary analytical frame for my reading of Asta Nielsen in Part B, notwithstanding the disparities between the geographical context which are, in fact, connected historically.

Several critics have noted a number of odd resemblances between Woolf and Carrington both in personal and professional terms.⁷³ For instance, in her study of the prominent female figures of Bloomsbury—Virginia, Vanessa and Carrington—Caws aptly summarises that these women were ‘so very good at seeing, self and others, had—as who does not? but so lucidly—their difficulties with being’.⁷⁴ In cases of Woolf and Carrington, “their difficulties” encompass many aspects of self-denigration, including a struggle to come to terms with the body they had always found difficult to live in: Woolf sustained a life-long predicament of “looking glass shame” and Carrington a “virginity complex” that stemmed primarily from her deep repugnance for her female body. Like Woolf, Carrington was a rebellious daughter of the regimented Victorian household who sought to model herself against the figure of repressive power in her family: her mother Charlotte Houghton (in Woolf’s case it was her father Sir Leslie Stephen). The final outcome was, however, ‘the grotesque mixture’ of personalities which is, as described by her biographer Gretchen Gerzina, ‘sexually ambivalent; loving but difficult; unconventional but afraid to rock the boat’.⁷⁵ Woolf, while aspiring to follow in her father’s footsteps, was driven by ‘contrary instincts and divided loyalties’.⁷⁶ She felt grateful for a privilege to read and write in private in her father’s library, but was also fazed by his tendency ‘to thrust her back into the feminine seclusion of a tea-party world, pointing the path to achievement, then shutting the door in her face’.⁷⁷ In the most poignant case, both Woolf and Carrington decided to take their lives, despairing at losing the ability to produce their art—one as a result of the recurrent madness, the other of the loss of the man she loved.⁷⁸

Throughout their lifetime Woolf and Carrington were outspoken guardians of their unconventional life choices. Woolf demonstrated this

⁷³ See also Vanessa Curtis, *Virginia Woolf’s Women*, 122.

⁷⁴ Caws, *Women of Bloomsbury*, 157.

⁷⁵ Gerzina, *A Life of Dora Carrington*, 13.

⁷⁶ Susan M. Squier, *Virginia Woolf and London: the Sexual Politics of the City* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 49.

⁷⁷ Phyllis Rose, *Woman of Letters: A Life of Virginia Woolf* (London: Pandora, 1986), 37.

⁷⁸ Virginia and Leonard Woolf were the last people to see her alive. Woolf had gathered Carrington into her arms the day preceding Carrington’s suicide. Although Woolf has made several attempts on her own life, her diary entry dated March 1932 reveals her ambivalence towards Carrington’s ending. Nine years later Woolf decided to end her own life. Virginia Woolf, *Diary of Virginia Woolf, Vol. IV, 1931-1935*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (London: Hogarth Press 1977-1984), 83. See also Mary Ann Caws, *Women of Bloomsbury: Virginia, Vanessa, and Carrington* (London: Routledge, 1990), 10.

through her active involvement with the Bloomsbury group, whose legacy lies in its sexual nonconformity, phenomenal sartorial practice and liberalism. Carrington's self-determination to find a more congenial way of life asserted itself in her extraordinary fashion—her distinctive bobbed hair, her breeches and unencumbered dresses— which was more than a convenience and comfort to her active life; it was 'a symbol of revolt' against the strait-laced Victorian path that she no longer could follow.⁷⁹ Carrington's refusal to comply with social conventions extends to a dropping of her feminine baptismal name, Dora. In her long odyssey in adoring a man who is physically, if not spiritually, unattainable, Carrington decided to marry another man whilst developing close and intimate relationships with other men and women. She recounts an excitement of a journey into the new terrain of a same-sex relationship, insofar as the surviving evidences allow us to say that she did, in a form of an exotic and surrealist landscape (See 2.4). If Carrington uses her art as a platform for mediating on her late-flowering lesbianism, Woolf through a fantasy biography *Orlando* reflects on her own homoerotic romp.

Notwithstanding their audacity and disregard for conventions these women were constantly plagued by self-doubt. Carrington's hypersensitivity to the judgments of others in regard to her work resembles that of Woolf, to whom it brought occasional breakdowns. Toiling to win her position in the cloistered world of the literary lions, Woolf was in a life-long battle with conflicting identifications as a woman writer. Her essays, as Susan M. Squier notes, manifest an oscillation between the ironic tone of women and outsiders and the serene or objective tone of male writers.⁸⁰ Although Woolf eventually managed to establish the prominence and acclaim of a professional writer, her work still bears the marks of such struggles against a conventional chauvinism that thwarted and frustrated other women artists of her day. Quite naturally, her fiction (as Chapter 1 will demonstrate) broaches fundamental questions of female subjectivity—where and how women are placed in society, or whether women are intellectually inferior to men. In some sense, Woolf's protagonists—usually modern, androgynous

⁷⁹ Gerzina, *A Life of Dora Carrington*, 28.

⁸⁰ Susan M. Squier, *Virginia Woolf and London*, 36.

artistic women— have a general affinity to Carrington and the other ‘cropheads’ (as Woolf dubbed them) who, according to Noel Carrington, ‘were entirely serious about their art and their intention to be equal to men’.⁸¹ Noel’s reflection on his sister and her art student friends brings to mind public perception of the New Woman often described as anomalous and aberrant, a by-product of concomitant demands for sexual equality.

Carrington, despite her relentless ambition to be an artist, forged by achievement as a very skilled student at the Slade School of Fine Art, was inclined to see herself as devoid of talent for painting and thus failed to actualise her imagination on canvas. On one occasion she wrote to her friend Rosamond Lehmann, ‘For really I used every excuse not to do any proper painting [...] I can’t bear going on with pictures when I can see they are amateurish and dull’.⁸² Stricken by a sense of impotence, Carrington chose to mould the public’s perception of herself as a female servant and put her artistic efforts chiefly to decorative art, which was rarely taken very seriously or considered worthy of critical attention by critics and art historians of her time. She cultivated multiple identities and incorporated many layers into her complex personality, just as she habitually painted over her canvases.

Chapter 1 examines how Woolf deploys a trope of escapade to keep the repressive gender norms in abeyance and to set the stage for her experiment with a new mode of writing. The concept of escapade thus will be discussed both as an actual experience and as a literary motif. Chapter 2 considers Carrington’s choice to rely on two separate modes in proclaiming herself to the outside world. It explores how the seemingly unbridgeable gaps between her role as a home-maker and as an artist parallel the artist’s tendency to alternate between conflicting modes of disclosure and hiding, advances and retreats. In other words, it looks at how Carrington calculatedly creates a space of ambivalence to foster the different possible meanings.

⁸¹ Noel Carrington, *Carrington: Paintings, Drawings and Decorations* (Oxford: Oxford Polytechnic Press, 1978), 21.

⁸² Dora Carrington to Rosamond Lehmann, June 1931, *Carrington’s Letters: Her Art, Her Loves, Her Friendships*, ed. Anne Chisholm (New York: Vintage Publishing, 2017), 380.

CHAPTER 1

Virginia Woolf and the Art of Escapade: from the *Dreadnought* Hoax to *Orlando*

‘Have you a photograph of Henry? I ask for a special reason, connected with a little escapade [*Flush*] by means of wh. I hope to stem the ruin we shall suffer from the failure of *The Waves*.’⁸³ What is striking about Virginia Woolf’s lines to Vita Sackville-West, in which she asks for a photograph of Henry (Harold Nicholson’s cocker spaniel) for the purpose of publication in the mock-biography *Flush* (1933), is the way she takes pleasure in an act of debunking the established traditions of life-writing. To her, it is ‘a little escapade’, a break from the anticipated unpleasant feelings caused by the potential flop of a more intellectually and emotionally demanding novel, *The Waves* (1931). A biographical anecdote reveals that *Flush* is not the only case of Woolf’s writing as escapade. Back in 1927 she had envisaged her project of a mock-biography *Orlando* as an escapade’, ‘a small book, & written by Christmas’, although the book once it came out was never purely such.⁸⁴ In fact, the genealogy of her deployment of the term ‘escapade’ can be traced even further back to 1910, the year Woolf takes as a point of pivotal juncture in her famous lecture-essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” (1924): ‘on or about December 1910 human character changed’.⁸⁵ The year saw Woolf audaciously take part in the two escapades: the *Dreadnought* hoax and the impersonation of Paul Gauguin’s *Tahitian Girls* at the Post-Impressionist Ball.⁸⁶

As we shall see, ‘escapade’, in Woolf’s sense, is always bound up with an act of transgression (especially of the bourgeois patriarchal order)

⁸³ Virginia Woolf to Vita Sackville-West 16 September 1931, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf Vol IV: 1929-1931*, ed. Nigel Nicolson (London: The Hogarth Press, 1978), 380.

⁸⁴ Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Vol III, 1925-1930* ed. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth Press, 1977-1894), 161, 168.

⁸⁵ Virginia Woolf, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” accessed October 30, 2016, <http://www.columbia.edu/~em36/MrBennettAndMrsBrown.pdf>.

⁸⁶ It is also noteworthy that the year of 1910 marks Woolf’s involvement with a body called the People’s Suffrage Organization, although her period of suffrage activism was short-lived. See Laura Marcus, “Woolf’s Feminism and Feminism’s Woolf,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, ed. Susan Sellers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 221.

from which she derives satisfaction. Excitement connotes fun, while adventure envisions a temporary excursion into the unfamiliar realm, as opposed to a permanent escape. Daring involves risk-taking and unflinching confrontation with unpredictable outcomes. Now I would like to draw attention to the lexical component of the term. The suffix, ‘ade’ – according to the *OED*, which denotes ‘an action or activity (esp. a protracted one), and frequently by extension a body concerned with this’ illuminates the gist of escapade as actual doing rather than pretending to do or performing.⁸⁷ In this light, Woolf’s engagement in ‘escapade’ embraces both empirical and literary aspects. Put differently, her trope of escapade functions as an experience and as a narrative genre.

What this chapter aims to achieve is to shed light on Woolf’s penchant for escapade: a trope often neglected by existing literature on this modernist writer. In doing so it argues that the *Dreadnought* hoax acts as a catalyst for Woolf’s iconoclastic impulse for the parodic subversion of patriarchal values, which culminates in her mock-biography *Orlando*. Juxtaposing the *Dreadnought* hoax (as an experience and as a media event) and *Orlando* (as a narrative), it hopes to provide a nuanced reading of aspects of her work up to that point. Before proceeding with my argument, it is worthwhile to give a full account of the incident and a close analysis of a selected photograph of the hoaxers still in masquerade. The aim is to understand Woolf’s role in this practical joke and her further reflection on it. By looking closely at the photographic record I seek to engage with one of the remarkable features of this escapade: the incongruities of the costume and prop, in spite of which the hoaxers successfully gulled the Navy.

1.1 The *Dreadnought* Hoax

On 7 February 1910, the British Navy flew into a brouhaha after being given short notice of the arrival in Weymouth of a group of Abyssinian dignitaries expecting to visit the HMS *Dreadnought*, ‘the most

⁸⁷ “-ade, suffix”. *OED Online*. July 2018. Oxford University Press.
<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/2238?isAdvanced=false&result=2&rskey=At9RUR&> (accessed September 10, 2018).

formidable, the most modern and the most secret man o' war then afloat'.⁸⁸ Despite the last-minute (forged) telegram warning the Admiral about the royal visit, the "Emperor" and the Abyssinian contingent were received with a great pomp and due ceremony: 'a red carpet was laid down' at Weymouth station, where awaited 'The Admiral and his staff [...] all in their gold-laced uniforms'.⁸⁹ Upon their arrival, an inspection tour of the flagship took place. A twenty-one gun salute was offered but was declined by the delegates.

It was not until the story was leaked to the *Daily Mirror* (presumably by Horace Cole, the ringleader of the group) that the incident was revealed to be a deliberate hoax. A week later the newspaper ran a photograph of a group of the pranksters in costume and makeup, who passed themselves off as an Abyssinian Prince and his entourage to gain access to the royal flagship. The tale of the "*Dreadnought* hoax", as it has come to be known, then circulated widely and rapidly in the press, even beyond the United Kingdom. Some of the contemporary newspaper headlines—'Dreadnought amused at hoax. Captain of ship and sham attache [sic] meet in street. Lady Prince's story' (*Daily Mirror* Feb 15, 1910, 5), 'Girl Hoaxes British Navy: 'Prince and Suite' Entertained by Dreadnought's Officers; Young Men and Woman of High Family, Made up as Visitors from Abyssinia, Are Received with Honors.' (*Washington Post* Feb 13, 1910, 15)—suggest what seems to have been the most notorious aspect of the ruse: a young lady was identified among the perpetrators.⁹⁰ The lady prince was Virginia Stephen, later better known as Virginia Woolf.

Virginia, at that time 28 years old, took part in the escapade at the last minute at the behest of her brother Adrian Stephen, after other conspirators had backed out. 'I'm quote [sic] ready to come...I should like nothing better', she said.⁹¹ In fact, her taste for iconoclasm had long antedated this subversive event. Biographer Panthea Reid, who delves into

⁸⁸ Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography* (London: Hogarth Press, 1982), 157.

⁸⁹ Adrian Stephen, *The 'Dreadnought' Hoax* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1983), 35-37.

⁹⁰ The *Daily Mirror* (Feb 15, 1910) DREADNOUGHT AMUSED AT HOAX. Retrieved from https://ukpressonlinecouk.libproxy.york.ac.uk/ukpressonline/getDocument/DMir_1910_02_15_005?fileType=PDF and *The Washington Post*. (Feb 13, 1910) GIRL HOAXES BRITISH NAVY. *The Washington Post (1877-1922)* Retrieved from <https://search-proquest.com.libproxy.york.ac.uk/docview/145021460?accountid=15181>.

⁹¹ Georgia Johnston, "Virginia Woolf's talk on the Dreadnought Hoax," in *Woolf Studies Annual 15* (2009): 13.

evidence from the Stephens' childhood, notes that it was this already-established iconoclastic impulse that emboldened Virginia to participate in the prank without hesitation.⁹² Expanding from Reid, I maintain that for a girl who grew up amid domestic tyranny and under the rule of 'The Law of the Father' which summoned her to 'sit passive and applaud the Victorian males when they went through the intellectual hoops' nothing could be more fun than dressing up as a man and ridiculing masculine authority.⁹³

The iconoclastic impulse may have already been present in a younger Virginia, whose diary entries reveal her protestations against the strident Victorian conduct observed at her childhood home at Hyde Park Gate. The *Dreadnought* hoax, I argue, is the catalyst for her later challenges to the established order in the mutually constitutive domains of literature and gender.⁹⁴ A week after the incident, the lady prince revealed to the *Daily Mirror*, 'I entered into it because I thought I would like the fun'.⁹⁵ To critic Peter Stansky the interview gives an impression of Woolf as 'a rather empty-headed society lady'.⁹⁶ But to Quentin Bell, her first biographer and nephew, the hoax proved to be more than a charade to the young Virginia. He remarks, 'she had entered the Abyssinian adventure for the fun of the thing; but she came out of it with a new sense of the brutality and silliness of men'.⁹⁷ Bell here touches upon some of the central ideas we have seen in Foucault's analysis of technologies of the self: Virginia undergoes a 'transformation of the self' initially to attain happiness i.e. 'fun', but in the end acquires something closer to 'wisdom', echoing the fourth type of technology identified by Foucault (see page 9). The 'wisdom' that Virginia achieves is seemingly the insight that transgressing perceived boundaries (including those of gender, race, nationality, class, etc.) yields a method for

⁹² Panthea Reid, "Stephens, Fishers, and the Court of the 'Sultan of Zanzibar': New Evidence from Virginia Stephen Woolf's Childhood," *Biography* 21 No. 3 (1998): 328.

⁹³ Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being: Autographical Writings*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind (London: Pimlico, 2002), 156.

⁹⁴ For example, in *Moments of Being* Woolf in an ambivalent tone reflected upon of her past at 22 Hyde Park Gate house. 'When I look back upon that house it seems to me so crowded with scenes of family life, grotesque, comic and tragic; with the violent emotions of youth, revolt, despair, intoxicating happiness, immense boredom, with parties of the famous and the dull [...] with passionate affection for my father alternating with passionate hatred of him[...]'. See Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being* (London: Pimlico, 2002). 45.

⁹⁵ The *Daily Mirror* 15 February 1910: 5.

⁹⁶ Peter Stansky, *On or About December 1910: Early Bloomsbury and Its Intimate World* (London: Harvard University Press, 1996), 32.

⁹⁷ Bell, *Virginia Woolf*, 157.

subverting and parodying patriarchal values such as the belief in male supremacy and sexual difference, a tactic she would redeploy in her later works.

In addition to exploring technologies of the self, Virginia simultaneously encounters the technologies of power and of sign systems via the *Dreadnought* hoax. The battleship itself is a means of domination, literally a technology of power, as well as being a signifier of British imperial power. Being light-hearted in delivery, yet profound in its effect, the practical joke, in the words of Stansky, ‘suggests some degree of subversive thought about the concept of Empire, particularly as Britain had tacitly supported, through various agreements, the Italian attempt to subdue Ethiopia’.⁹⁸ To adapt Foucault’s premise, the *Dreadnought* experience allows Virginia a direct encounter with the technologies of power and of sign systems deployed by the British Navy. The *Dreadnought*, as the flagship of the British imperial naval forces, represents the focal point of the nation’s ability to dominate others, and is its primary signifier of this power. At the same time, the perpetrators, by presenting themselves as Abyssinian dignitaries, notwithstanding their ethnographically inaccurate costumes (Fig. 1), proffer another set of signs which undercut the intended meaning signified by the *Dreadnought*. Their disruption of sign systems not only allowed them to successfully perpetrate the hoax, but to do so despite being quite poor imposters. Given that England’s leading position in the West was at that time being challenged by Germany, the success of the hoax would have been all the more embarrassing to the Navy, who would have no doubt wanted to avoid further challenges to their authority (a claim supported by several accounts of the hoax that attempt to intensify the drama about Adrian playing a German interpreter).⁹⁹ The following section will look at

⁹⁸ Stansky, *On or About December 1910*, 18.

⁹⁹ In his own account, Adrian recalled that he had originally chosen ‘an English name that sounded a little like Kauffmann’ but Cole, who was ‘rather deaf’, misheard him. Adrian admitted being ‘a little alarmed [...] ‘because German spy scares were for ever being started in those days’ (see Stephen, *The ‘Dreadnought’ Hoax*, 38.) Ironically, the inadvertent German name ascribed a strongly political meaning to the hoax in ways that might not have occurred to the protagonists: to their audience of 1910 this would have elevated the sensation of the progressive anti-imperialist politics of the Bloomsbury, self-declared outsiders and pacifists as they were (see also Paulina Pająk, “Moments of liberty:(Self-)Censorship Games in the Essays of Virginia Woolf,” *Acta Universitatis Lodzianensis Folia Litteraria Polonica* 7(45), 2017, accessed Oct 17, 2018, <http://dx.doi.org/10.18778/1505-9057.45.15>).

the *Dreadnought* hoax image that circulated widely in the press. In my reading of this photographic record, I seek to examine the prank from the point of view of its visual construction. Drawing from a shot that captures this ludicrous moment, I explore how the *Dreadnought* hoax might have influenced or pointed the way to Woolf's methodology in *Orlando*, especially her manipulation of the trope of escapade.



Figure 1.1 The *Dreadnought* Hoaxers. From left to right: Virginia Stephen, Duncan Grant, Adrian Stephen, Anthony Buxton, Guy Ridley and Horace Cole

Scholars and critics who have addressed the portrait of the *Dreadnought* hoaxers tend to rely on the context outside the photographic frame—the battleship and the social-political tensions in European countries—to mobilize the image as a framework for a discussion of Woolf's later works. However, we can also view the image as a photographic record in its own right. Even without reference to the socio-historical context of the hoax, and without any knowledge about the subjects, we can appreciate how the *Dreadnought* hoax might have encouraged Woolf's tendency to embrace the trope of escapade. The apparently mixed-race troupe portrayed in the image consists of two white

men in formal gentlemen's outfits (a tail coat and top hat) and four black bearded figures wearing the kind of embroidered kaftan and turban normally worn in countries of the Near East, further adorned by gold chains. Even without the background of the scandalous prank, the image *per se* is imbued with flamboyantly stagy and fictitious qualities. For instance, a striking feature of the subjects is the relationship between the ostentatiously elaborate costume and the austere expression: a juxtaposition which oscillates ambivalently between formality and parody. On the one hand, the stern attitude serves as a complement to the apparent sartorial authority of the subjects. On the other, the deceptive connotations of the 'poker face' curtail the formality of the costume and, as such, hint at an element of pretence and masquerade. Similarly, Elisa deCourcy observes the way the "Abyssinian" delegates stand 'shoulder-to-shoulder with hands clasped in front of their torsos'. DeCourcy compares the foreign dignitaries' submissive demeanour with that of a minstrel ready to bow to the audience. She maintains that their bodily comportment makes them look 'much like actors at the curtain call about to take their bow'.¹⁰⁰

Expanding on deCourcy's minstrel metaphor, I suggest that it is not only the facial expressions and bodily comportment of the subjects that evokes the theatrical, but also their costumes and make-up, which includes the elaborate use of props. Standing towards the right of the frame, the gentleman sporting a tailcoat and an ostentatiously shiny top hat is the only one who is not looking at the camera. What is striking about his appearance is the cane firmly gripped in his left hand. This prop dovetails with his costume and body language, rendering him a figure of power over the rest of the party. As for the imposing figure who is wearing a long coat and a bowler hat, his great height makes those around him appear small by comparison. This, in tandem with his central position, divides the men of foreign extraction into two sides. Given that blackface was a common theatrical practice at the time, the white man's role might almost be that of

¹⁰⁰ DeCourcy analyses both versions of the portrait and emphasises that the one circulated in the newspapers (Fig. 1) overtly diverges from the tradition of the formal elite portraiture. See Elisa deCourcy, "The Dreadnought Hoax Portrait as an Affront to the Edwardian Age," *Early Popular Visual Culture* 15 no. 4 (2017): 411, accessed Aug 1, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17460654.2017.1379425>.

circus ringmaster or master of ceremonies.¹⁰¹ In addition, the conspicuously oriental regalia by means of which the impostors passed successfully as the Abyssinian dignitaries points graphically to the narrow Edwardian view of the world and its limited knowledge of ‘the other’. What is notable about the photograph, then, is that it illustrates the ludicrous—as in ‘ludic’—ease with which the pomposity of the Navy was pricked, and the ease with which they were fooled. The costumes and make-up are evidently inauthentic, and yet the hoax worked just the same. Recognising that such a hoax was relatively easy to perpetrate would certainly not have discouraged Woolf from re-engaging with these methods, and we see her later utilise this technique of cross-dressing in *Orlando*.

To Woolf’s biographer Hermione Lee, the *Dreadnought* escapade ‘combined all possible forms of subversion: ridicule of empire, infiltration of the nation’s defences, mockery of bureaucratic procedures, cross-dressing and sexual ambiguity’.¹⁰² Lee and other critics’ opinions tend to focus on the political aspects of the *Dreadnought* hoax— its crossing of boundaries of class, gender, or race—and overlook one important aspect Woolf herself emphasises in both her public discussion of the incident (the interview published by the *Daily Mirror* and her talk on the *Dreadnought* hoax at the Women’s Institute in Rodmell in 1940). That aspect is the fun and excitement of breaking of rules and conventions. It is perhaps because hoax is fun and exciting, I suggest, that Woolf ends up continually returning to the trope of escapade: a temporary excursion into an unfamiliar realm, be it of gender, race, or a different medium. As such, it is important not to overlook the excitement of the hoax since, in fact, Woolf did not wait for very long before embarking upon another daring instance of cross-racial (although not cross-gender) escapade.

In mid-December of the same year, Woolf once again browned up, this time as a Tahitian with her sister Vanessa, to ensnare the attention of the crowd at Roger Fry’s Post-Impressionist Ball. The Stephen sisters appeared as ‘bare-shouldered bare-legged Gauguin girls’ at the Grafton

¹⁰¹ About history of blackface in British Theatre see Theresa Jill Buckland, “Black Faces, Garlands, and Coconuts: Exotic Dances on Street and Stage,” *Dance Research Journal* 22 No. 2 (1990): 1–12.

¹⁰² Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, 283.

Galleries in London.¹⁰³ In a manner reminiscent of the *Dreadnought* hoax, Woolf identified herself with those whom the patriarchy and imperialism had dominated. Moreover, the exotic costume allowed for the free stride of the legs and exposed shoulders, and as such subverted, however briefly, the sartorial codes of bourgeois propriety. Both escapades, as I read them, were not simply a thrilling sartorial venture for Woolf, but also a precursor of what was to become a recurrent trope of traversing the expanse of an unfamiliar realm as a means of self-reflection. What perhaps began as a pursuit of fun and excitement would gradually develop into a more refined approach through which Woolf could channel her iconoclastic impulses into a parodic subversion of patriarchal values –in both her performative and literary endeavours. Reading in tandem these ludic moments of masquerade offers a profound insight into Woolf’s mode of representation, illuminating her *penchant* for the escapade and her interrogation of the escapade as a mode that links narrative and experience. This characteristic of Woolf’s oeuvre and biography is something that continues to be ignored by the writing about her either as a serious critic or a cantankerous, melancholic writer, and by those arguing about the performative aspects in her work.¹⁰⁴ Woolf would probably not have bargained for the impact of the *Dreadnought* hoax, which played out in a number of ways. In the most obvious case, the practical joke set a new benchmark for safety procedures. The Admiralty, demeaned for their ‘breathhtaking degree of ignorance’ and gullibility, rejected any subsequent request to visit the *Dreadnought*, even one made by the real Emperor.¹⁰⁵ On a personal level, the escapade affords an entertaining (on Woolf’s part), yet impactful (on her audience), way to give a playful but compelling critique of a patriarchal society. To illustrate this, I will discuss in the following section how Woolf harnesses the idea of boundary transgressing inherent in the trope of escapade and continually refines it. Reading the *Dreadnought* hoax as a springboard for a slightly more serious strategy of self-representation, I draw on a variety of examples

¹⁰³ Bell, *Virginia Woolf*, 170.

¹⁰⁴ See for example Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997) and Randi Koppen, *Virginia Woolf, Fashion and Literary Modernity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

¹⁰⁵ Johnston, “Virginia Woolf’s Talk on the Dreadnought Hoax,” 31.

of Woolf's writing including a short story, a play and a novel that bear the trace of the escapade in various respects. My analysis is organised chronologically, allowing us to trace the development of Woolf's use of escapade. Beginning with a textual inscription of the *Dreadnought* hoax, the short story "A Society" (1921), I focus distinctively on its handling of women's emancipation from prescribed gender roles through the materiality of clothes (fashion as a technology of self); I then link "A Society" with her later work *Freshwater: A Comedy* (1923), Woolf's first and only play. These works, as I read them, prefigure the more fanciful but no less serious exploration of the relationship between sartorial codes and gender in the mock-biography *Orlando*. The subversive approach afforded by the trope of escapade – of outlandish but temporary flight from convention – I will argue, comes to fruition in this gender/genre-bending text.

1.2 "A Society": 'This is how it all came about'

In essence, the *Dreadnought* hoax and "A Society" share a common theme of sexual oppression and male dominance. In the latter, the protagonist's life is subject to conditions set by a literal father (whose presence and power are felt throughout the story despite his absence) and literary fathers. (Note that such a plot is interestingly close to Woolf's life story). The title "A Society" connotes English society in general as much as it does the smaller unit of it formed by a group of young women who "ask questions". After Poll, one of their members, inherits a fortune that can only be collected upon her completing the task (assigned by her father) of reading all of the books in the London Library, she comes to the realisation that so many books and poetry are 'for the most part unutterably bad!'.¹⁰⁶ As a result, they task themselves with finding out more about the world, before they are willing to "play their part" by bringing more children into it. Their method includes perpetually asking questions, such as: 'Why, if men write such rubbish as this, should our mothers have wasted their youth in bringing them into the world?'¹⁰⁷ As part of the investigation they assign the

¹⁰⁶ Virginia Woolf, "A Society" in *A Haunted House: The Complete Shorter Fiction*, ed. Susan Dick, (London: Vintage, 2003), 119.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 121.

members of the salon a mission to infiltrate various areas of society so that they can find their answers.

Three of the members of the group undertake the quest by employing the same method that Woolf herself had used for slipping into the exclusively male space of the *Dreadnought*: a masquerade. Castalia disguises herself as a charwoman to gain access to the room of several (male) Professors in Oxbridge, Elizabeth dresses as a man and is taken on as a reviewer to explore the male-dominated world of literature. The connection to Woolf's actual experience runs much closer even than this in the narrative as Rose passes herself off as an 'Aethiopian prince' and boards a ship of the Royal Navy. When her masquerade is discovered, she receives six taps from behind as a partial means of avenging the Navy's honour. Woolf obviously draws upon the account of the *Dreadnought* hoax when she satirically alludes to the "ceremonial taps" actually given by the officers to Grant and some hoaxers.¹⁰⁸

The trope of escapade in the *Dreadnought* hoax as well as in Woolf's recounting of it in "A Society" attests that her life and art are intertwined, that life-living is productive of narrative. My focus is, however, on how in "A Society" Woolf redeployed the trope in question for more serious purposes. In her reiteration of the *Dreadnought* hoax, an episode originally undertaken for fun and excitement, we see what Woolf accomplishes with "A Society": exposing, to borrow from Susan Dick, 'the absurdity inherent in such solemnly cherished codes of honour' and raising questions about patriarchal cultural dominance.¹⁰⁹ Woolf by providing a quasi-autobiographical account of her *Dreadnought* experience exploits technologies of publicity. It is a notable evolution from the practical joke she took part in, becoming a subject of public scandal, to a short story written a decade later about women questioning the merit and legitimacy of the work of men to "civilise" the world. In this light, we can infer that Woolf looked at her life experience as a text itself and used it as another channel of self-expression. Obviously, "A Society" is one of a number of

¹⁰⁸ Johnston, "Virginia Woolf's Talk on the Dreadnought Hoax," 41.

¹⁰⁹ Susan Dick, "What Fools We Were!: Virginia Woolf's 'A Society'," *Twentieth Century Literature* 33, no. 1 (1987): 56, accessed July 10 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/441332>.

modes through which Woolf was working to challenge patriarchal values. While “A Society” self-referentially speculates about the liberation of feminine subjectivity earned by the transformation of the self through masquerade (much the same way that we see in the execution of the *Dreadnought* prank), Woolf’s later work demonstrates further refinement of the trope of escapade and its extension to domains beyond simple impersonation. In *Freshwater: A Comedy* the protagonist takes a slightly different yet no less subtle approach to sartorial signs than that of the Society’s members.

1.3 *Freshwater: A Comedy*: ‘spread your doctrines, propagate your race, wear your trousers’

Woolf created *Freshwater* two years after “A Society”. It is her only play and was initially written for a theatrical evening of the Bloomsbury Group in 1923, but was subsequently revised and performed in 1935 at Vanessa Bell’s London studio on Fitzroy Street.¹¹⁰ Set in the artistic hothouse of Freshwater Bay on the Isle of Wight, the subject is Woolf’s great-aunt Julia Margaret Cameron, the famous Victorian photographer. Mrs. Cameron, with her distinguished artist friends, painter G. F. Watts and poet Alfred Tennyson, is working busily on her pictures of Mrs. Watts (the 16-year-old vivacious actress Ellen Terry). Wrapped herself in a white veil Ellen (played by Angelica Bell when performed in 1935) is posing as ‘Modesty’ ‘crouching at the feet of Mammon’. Feeling out of place and wilting in the community of three eminent artists of the Victorian period, Ellen decides to escape to Bloomsbury. She sneaks away with a handsome young naval officer; she later returns dressed as a man – sporting a pair of checked trousers.

Via sartorial codes as a technology of power, *Freshwater*, addresses a clash between modern and traditional gender norms through a metaphor of sartorial items such as a veil (which represents traditional values) and checked trousers (which represent the modern concept of gender). Ellen’s trousers provoke an adverse reaction from Mr. Watts, to whom her

¹¹⁰ There are two manuscripts of the play but which version was performed in 1935 is still an issue. The version discussed in this chapter is the one written in 1923.

masculine fashion is as outrageous as infidelity: ‘In trousers in the arms of a youth! My wife in trousers in the arms of a youth! Unmaidenly! Unchaste! Impure! Out of my sight! Out of my life!’¹¹¹ To his disgrace, the young Ellen is determined to trade a veil for a pair of checked trousers— ‘Here’s your veil. I intend to wear trousers in future. I never could understand the sense of wearing veils in a climate like this’.¹¹² Mr. Watts’ reaction here illustrates the notion of fashion as a tool to govern individual bodies. Ellen’s transgression of the sartorial codes – taking off the veil in favour of the checked trousers – represents her liberation from the confinement of her prescribed domestic role (and thus her escape from the attempt to use fashion as a technology of power), and consequently has the effect of provoking heightened outrage over her moral transgression. Moreover, her appeal to ‘a climate like this’, encompasses the metaphorical climate of modern society as well as the balmy climate of *Freshwater*, reinforcing the play’s emphasis on a modern rupture with the Victorian culture and values associated with Tennyson and co.

In terms of gender roles, Ellen symbolically exposes the flimsy rationale for the unjust distribution of labour whereby women are confined to narrow limits of respectability and display. Mr. Watts’ reaction contrasts with that of Mrs. Cameron (who chooses to ‘retain conventional Victorian gender and class dynamic’, regardless of her prerogative of holding the gaze behind the camera).¹¹³ Mrs. Cameron bursts out, ‘How becoming trousers are, to be sure!’¹¹⁴ With her new look, Ellen’s character epitomises the boyish figure of the “flapper” which was then the height of the fashion at that time. By making Ellen throw off the veil, a sign of Victorian restrictive society, Woolf parodies and lampoons conventional ideals of what is considered “becoming”, and this is given voice in Mrs. Cameron’s reaction. Despite photographer Mrs. Cameron’s role as a creator of art (as opposed to Ellen’s), she displays no desire to transgress the sartorial code in the way the younger Ellen does. Here, the older character remains conservative in

¹¹¹ Virginia Woolf, *Freshwater: A Comedy*, ed., Lucio P. Ruotolo (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 70.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 71.

¹¹³ Kristine Swenson, “Hothouse Victorians: Art and Agency in *Freshwater*,” *Open Cultural Studies* (2017): 183. accessed Oct 17, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2017-0017>.

¹¹⁴ Woolf, *Freshwater*, 70.

her behaviour, despite her observation that Ellen's trousers are 'becoming'. The character of Ellen, because of its divergence from a pattern of a sexual masquerade performed by the female cross-dressers in "A Society" and even by Woolf in the *Dreadnought* hoax, rings the changes on Woolf's sense of escapade. In her flight from the confinement of gender hierarchy in the Victorian hothouse Ellen (now in trousers) ventures into the unknown territory with the sailor lover.

"A Society" and *Freshwater* similarly address a question of how far women can aspire to represent intellectual freedom. In "A Society" Woolf does it in a more pronounced and straightforward way through the members' long-drawn quest for logical explanation for male domination. In *Freshwater* Woolf challenges an assumption that women are represented objects as opposed to representing artists by aligning Mrs. Cameron with male creators and by making Ellen stand up for herself and abandon her 'male-determined female role' as the artist's model or the poet's muse.¹¹⁵

In the work to come, Woolf would continue to be caught up in a deepening scrutiny of the same question. In doing so, she never fails to call on a trope of escapade to transgress the traditional boundary of gender. In this regard, *Orlando*— a story of the life of a historically and sexually mobile poet who in the middle of the narrative undergoes a change of sex against the backdrop of the exotic landscape of Constantinople—is the prime example. It is what Jean E. Kennard deems as 'the prime example of what the *Dreadnought* hoax had demonstrated'.¹¹⁶ Viewed through the lens of Foucault, it disrupts the technology of sign systems (through its confusing signification of genre and gender) and the technology of power (through its subversion of established traditions in biographical writing) in ways that reflect, to a large degree, the influence of the *Dreadnought* hoax. The following section will read *Orlando* in relation to its reiteration of the *Dreadnought* escapade in three ways: for its exploration of the unforeseen consequences of escapade as an adventure; for its challenge to The Law of the Father; and for its transgression of gendered norms.

¹¹⁵ Claire Violet Nicholson, "In Woolf's Clothing: An Exploration of Clothes and Fashion in Virginia Woolf's Fiction," (PhD thesis, Anglia Ruskin University, 2013), 197.

¹¹⁶ Jean E. Kennard, "Power and Sexual Ambiguity: The 'Dreadnought' Hoax, 'The Voyage Out', 'Mrs. Dalloway' and 'Orlando,'" *Journal of Modern Literature* 20, no. 2 (1996): 162.

1.4 ‘Escapade’ and unforeseen consequences

While the trope of escapade, as utilised across multiple settings, enables Woolf to explore an expansive approach to challenging the institutional establishment in literature and in the domain of gender, what is at stake is the outcome of such a daring adventure, which is, more often than not, unpredictable. Looking back into the genesis of the *Dreadnought* hoax and at *Orlando*—which similarly falls within Woolf’s idea of pure fun and iconoclastic interest—we can see that such a performance of flightiness for its own sake (rather than a permanent escape) fosters a sense of freedom, on the one hand, and subjects one to unforeseen consequences of a temporary adventure, on the other. In the case of the idiosyncratic but charmingly genre-bending *Orlando* such complexities emerge from the very outset. Whereas *Orlando* was initially conceived as ‘an escapade’,¹¹⁷ ‘the truth is’, as Woolf recalled, ‘I expect I began it as a joke, & went on with it seriously’.¹¹⁸ The scenario seems to repeat the trajectory of the *Dreadnought* experience in which Woolf was looking for some fun but came out of it with renewed seriousness about female subjectivity (as testified by “A Society” and *Freshwater*’s sarcastic but searching contemplation of questions of gender hierarchy and gendered norms). Woolf complains that the outlet she pines for—‘I want fun. I want fantasy. I want (& this was serious) to give things their caricature value’—¹¹⁹ ironically materialises into a text ‘too long for a joke, & too frivolous for a serious book’.¹²⁰

For instance, in her play with sign systems Woolf complicates a primary technology of literary categorization in *Orlando*’s decidedly confusing subtitle. ‘The fun of calling it a biography’, however, was quickly revealed to be problematic when the book was first brought out and there was ‘a high price to pay’ for the seemingly imprudent action.¹²¹ Booksellers refused to shelve *Orlando* as fiction but placed it with ‘real’ biographies. As a result, the advance sales were relatively low. Ironically, however, *Orlando*

¹¹⁷ Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Vol. III*, 161, 168.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 185.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 203.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 161, 177.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 198.

ultimately turned out to be a triumph in both critical and financial terms. This surprisingly favourable outcome, I suggest, acts as a reassurance to Woolf who was initially uncertain about her method and chose to just ‘toss this up in the air and see what happens’.¹²² Now she is reassured she can avail herself of this strategy of embarking on a risk-taking venture (the strategy she has employed since the *Dreadnought* days)— be it out of fun or a revisionist interest—to stretch the possibilities of her craft to lengths not previously imagined. The bottom line is that the consequences of escapade are incalculable, if unpredictable.

To Woolf the success of the literary ‘escapade’ marks another significant moment in affirming her accomplishment as a writer. She wrote in her diary, ‘*Orlando* has done very well. Now I could go on writing like that’.¹²³ In what follows, I will argue that in ‘writing like that’ Woolf uses the trope of escapade as a conceptual foundation for *Orlando*’s narrative of sexual and temporal boundary-crossings in a way that resists patriarchal configurations of literary traditions. I hope to show that this transgressive essence of *Orlando* is tonally in step with the predilection for ridiculing masculine hegemony expressed in her formative years.

1.5 Challenging The Law of the Father: ‘It sprung upon me how I could revolutionise biography in a night’

Having outlined the impish masquerading events of 1910 as an indication of the direction of travel of things to come, I now move to the crucial moment in Woolf’s artistic development in which she took on the traditional forms of fiction writing. Unflinchingly determined, she wrote in her 1922 diary entry, ‘I’m to write what I like; & they’re to say what they like’.¹²⁴ Woolf, at the age of forty, finally ‘found out how to begin...to say something in my own voice’.¹²⁵ In doing so, she draws on her ability to deploy the technologies of production by producing, transforming, and

¹²² Virginia Woolf to Vita Sackville-West 9 October 1927, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Vol. III, 1923-1928*, 429.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 209.

¹²⁴ Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Vol. II, 1920-1924*, 168.

¹²⁵ Virginia Woolf, *A Writer’s Diary: Being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Leonard Woolf (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), 46. It was also in this period that Woolf met Vita Sackville-West, a ‘pronounced Sapphist’ as she describes her, who was to become *Orlando*’s biographical subject.

manipulates an already available repertoire of strategies of ludic self-invention. Gaining more sense of confidence in her own method she embarks on a phase of stylistic and technical experimentation. Woolf rejects the imposition of an abstract formula upon a literary form, declaring in her diary in 1925, ‘I will invent a new name for my books to supplant “novel”. A new --- by Virginia Woolf. But what?’¹²⁶ Perhaps what was to be put in the blank came into her mind three years later when she dismissively took on the legacy of her father—Sir Leslie Stephen, the founding editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*—in a mock-biography *Orlando*.

In her diary Woolf envisions ‘a biography beginning in the year 1500 & continuing to the present day...Vita; only with a change about from one sex to another’.¹²⁷ As we can see, Woolf structures her relationship with the conventional models of life-writing in the manner of a rebellious daughter issuing a challenge to her father who has played a key role in the process of building the lexicon of biography.¹²⁸ Further, she even boasted in her letter to Sackville-West that she could ‘revolutionise biography in a night’.¹²⁹ Departing from the conventions of biography (such as commemorating men’s—rather than women’s—characters and achievements, and writing about the complete life of the dead—opposed to the living—men because ‘no man is fit subject for biography till he is dead’), *Orlando*’s fantastical plot centres on a life of an aspiring poet from the Elizabethan period to Woolf’s present day.¹³⁰ The eponymous hero ‘was a man till the age of thirty; when he became a woman and has remained so ever since’.¹³¹ With a new sex, Orlando’s ownership of a house of ‘three hundred and sixty-five bedrooms’—which had been in the possession of her family for four or five hundred years—is in limbo.¹³² The fluidity of gender

¹²⁶ Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf Vol. III, 1925-1930*, 34.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 161.

¹²⁸ See also Susan M. Squier, “Tradition and Revision in Woolf’s *Orlando*: Defoe and ‘The Jessamy Brides,’” *Women’s Studies* 12, No. 2 (1986): 168 and Jane de Gay, *Virginia Woolf’s Novels and the Literary Past* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 132-159.

¹²⁹ Virginia Woolf to Vita Sackville-West 9 October 1927, Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf Vol. III, 1923-1928*, 429.

¹³⁰ Sidney Lee, *Principles of Biography: The Leslie Stephen Lecture, delivered in the Senate House, Cambridge on 13 May 1911* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911), 12.

¹³¹ Woolf, *Orlando*, 89.

¹³² Orlando’s country home is modeled on Sackville-West’s ancestral manor Knole which she was not allowed to inherit on account of her female sexuality. Woolf by making the female Orlando win the

afforded by dressing as both a man and a woman allows the female Orlando a temporary liberation. Towards the end of the novel Orlando gives birth to a son and consequently retains at least temporary control over her property. She publishes her poem 'The Oak Tree' and ultimately manages to bring her multiple selves into harmony.¹³³

In its first page *Orlando* quickly establishes that it is all about challenging The Law of the Father. The biographer starts with a depiction of the protagonist 'in the act of slicing the head of a Moor', pledging to follow in the footsteps of his male forebears who 'had struck many heads of many colours off many shoulders'. Nevertheless, the narrator reveals a few pages later that the headstrong offspring of many mighty men is to deviate from the path of the fathers and pursue aspirations of his own.¹³⁴ Orlando 'vowed that he would be the first poet of his race and bring immortal lustre upon his name'.¹³⁵ His eagerness to take a path unexplored by his forebears runs in parallel with that of Woolf who lampoons the fathers' legacy of austerity and fidelity to the ideal of veracity that demands them to 'plod, without looking to right or left, in the indelible footprints of truth'.¹³⁶ In doing so, Woolf relies on a voluble but often fickle narrator whose gender can be as obscured as that of his subject.¹³⁷ In this chapter I designate the biographer as male, taking into account *Orlando's* premise to disparage the omniscient outlook of a biographical persona traditionally ascribed as male. Where convention demands a biography to be 'complete', 'serious' and 'of a certain magnitude', *Orlando* refuses to provide any straightforward conclusion, whilst constantly undermining the text's solemnity with its parodic and comical array.¹³⁸ Moreover, challenging the notion of magnitude, *Orlando* values the trivial details while disregarding the pivot points. This is quickly demonstrated in the opening page in which the

lawsuit and manage to keep her property offers Sackville-West a consolation after the loss of Knole. See also Julia Briggs *Reading Virginia Woolf* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 200.

¹³³ In 1927 Sackville-West won the Hawthornden Prize for her poem "The Land" the theme of which overtly influences "The Oak Tree".

¹³⁴ Woolf, *Orlando*, 1.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹³⁷ There are several debates about the sexuality of Orlando's biographer. See for example Karin E. Westman, "The First Orlando: The Laugh of the Comic Spirit in Virginia Woolf's 'Friendships Gallery,'" *Twentieth Century Literature* 47 (2001): 43, John Graham, "The Caricature Value of Parody and Fantasy in Orlando," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 30 no. 4 (1961): 309.

¹³⁸ Lee, *Principles of Biography*, 13.

narrator invests time and energy to put in a disclaimer about Orlando's ambiguous gender, simply to throw into doubt not only the gender of his subject but also the authenticity of his account. He asserts that 'He - for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it'.¹³⁹ Why would we or should we doubt his sex? Surely, the phraseology cannot be very assuring to the reader. It works essentially to introduce Orlando as a sexually ambiguous figure.

A similar kind of ostentatious concern with purportedly trivial details reappears after Orlando's sex change when the narrator notes, 'but in the future we must, for convention's sake, say "her" for "his", and "she" for "he"...'¹⁴⁰ While being pedantic about linguistic encoding of the protagonist's new genital body, the flippant narrator promptly discards his role as a mouthpiece of conventional wisdom and puts in little effort to come terms with the Orlando's newly sexed body: 'Let biologists and psychologists determine...let other pens treat of sex and sexuality; we quit such odious subjects as soon as we can'.¹⁴¹ These examples of the narrator's deliberate laxity in rationalising the pivotal moment in the narrative (Orlando's sex change) and the scrupulous attention to minor details should suffice to prove Woolf's urge to subvert the 'principles of biography' proposed by Stephen. Here, Woolf simultaneously exploits technologies of sign systems (here the conventions of biographical writing) and technologies of power (the rules of the father). In the former case Woolf, in a conspicuously exaggerated manner, comically and ironically draws from the sign system that signifies traditional biography in order to subvert it. At the same time, she undercuts the legitimacy of her father's methods by presenting the biographer's authority as vague and obfuscatory. In a sense, the pretentiousness of the pedantic phraseology resonates with the elaborate but fake Abyssinian costume donned by the *Dreadnought* impostors to match the pomposity of the Navy's gold-laced uniform and ceremonial. The latter was unveiled as no less spurious than the hoax. This leads us back to

¹³⁹ Ibid., 1.

¹⁴⁰ Woolf, *Orlando*, 89.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 89.

Woolf's identification with the trope of 'escapade' which often involves a belabouring of patriarchal ideologies and rationality.

How Woolf formulates a kind of interlude between the long traditions of biographical writing in relation to the trope of escapade is not limited to *Orlando's* unconventional prose style but extends to its use of visual media.¹⁴² Transcending the limit of verbal language, Woolf frequently embraces visual art in her fiction. In the case of *Orlando* the pictorial aesthetics of the illustrations do much more than catch the reader's attention. Superficially, the aim is to give the book a flavour of "actual" biography, but closer scrutiny, I argue, reveals an underlying impulse to poke fun at the serious presentation of biographical "truth". In *Orlando*, Woolf employs technologies of publicity, drawing from available resources (the art of writing and the art of photography) to attain a state of fun, at least in the process of the photo shoot, if not writing *per se*, as she later complained. In either case, the outcome is ultimately a deconstruction of the rigid codes of patriarchal cultures, especially when read with the *Dreadnought* pranksters' portrait in mind. The following section discusses one of the photographic illustrations that feature in *Orlando* (the 1928 edition): 'The Russian Princess as a Child', represented by Woolf's niece Angelica Bell. The observation I wish to make at this juncture is that the feature of costume and staged pose shown in the picture under study, by and large, reproduces the effect of the *Dreadnought* pranksters portrait in ways that allow Woolf (although here she vicariously undertakes the masquerade through Angelica) a forum facetiously to expose the elements of theatricality and performance of social and gender identity. As such, it comically and ironically highlights the inherent limitation of the traditional (usually patriarchal) language of biography to reflect many qualities of human character.

¹⁴² It is noteworthy that throughout her writing career Woolf published three books she gave a subtitle, 'a biography': *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), *Flush: A Biography* (1933) and *Roger Fry: A Biography* (1940). All of them, especially the first two, notwithstanding their biographical elements, hardly conform to the conventions of traditional biography. *Orlando* and *Flush*, both of which Woolf conceived as 'an escapade' technically subvert the construct of a supposedly actual biography, whereas in *Roger Fry* Woolf, according to Elizabeth Cooley, 'failed to emancipate herself from the shackles of traditions'. See Elizabeth Cooley, "Revolutionizing Biography: *Orlando*, *Roger Fry*, and the Tradition", *South Atlantic Review* 55 no. 2 (1990): 72.

The illustrations of *Orlando* consist of reproductions of paintings of Sackville-West's ancestors and some photographs taken by Vanessa Bell (with Duncan Grant, one of the members of the sham Abyssinian delegation). The elaborately staged images of costumed figures include snapshots of Sackville-West as 'Orlando on her return to England', and as 'Orlando about the year 1840'. There is also an image of Woolf's niece Angelica Bell presented as 'The Russian Princess as a Child'. R.S. Koppen, who explores Woolf's account of the photographic shoot for *Orlando*, notes how 'the fun that was obviously generated by the fancy dress and the staging involved [creates] an atmosphere of childish pranks' in the process of producing the illustrations.¹⁴³ This kind of fun—from transforming the ordinary self through an exotic fancy costume, from mocking the codes of traditional portraiture, and from the *tableaux vivant*-like posing—Woolf herself experienced on the day of the *Dreadnought* hoax. Taking one example from the pictures appearing in *Orlando*, I would like to briefly look at a shot of Angelica as the Russian Princess as a child. My point here is to elaborate not only on how the images relate to the text, but also on how Woolf exploits the mimetic nature of the photograph in her mock biography.

In the course of Orlando's existence as a man, he encounters a Russian princess called Sasha (modeled on Violet Trefusis) who becomes his first love and broke his heart.¹⁴⁴ A verbal description of Sasha who is 'dressed entirely in oyster-coloured velvet, trimmed with some unfamiliar greenish-coloured fur' and whose speed and agility on the ice rink makes Orlando describe her as 'a fox in the snow' does not seem to resonate with how she is illustrated in the photographic account.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ Koppen, *Virginia Woolf, Fashion and Literary Modernity*, 51.

¹⁴⁴ During her affair with Violet Trefusis, Sackville-West donned men's clothes and reinvented herself as Julian. Together they strolled around London as a heterosexual couple. See Nigel Nicholson, *A Portrait of a Marriage* (London: Phoenix 1992), 201-203.

¹⁴⁵ Woolf, *Orlando*, 18.



The Russian Princess as a Child

Figure 1.2 Woolf's niece Angelica Bell presented as 'The Russian Princess as a Child'

Figure 1.2 shows the nine-year-old Angelica wrapped in loose summery Eastern draperies which do not match the image of 'a fox in the snow' described by Orlando.¹⁴⁶ Her royal dignity is signified by strings of pearls dangling from her headscarf and exuberantly wrapping round her neck and hanging down to her chest. What is striking about the image is the princess's posture—the head that tilts up forty-five degrees, the sultry facial expression, the pouting lips, the eye gaze at the camera that creates an air of mystique—that evokes a mannequin-like or theatrical pose, quite different from the stern attitude hitherto seen in portraits of royal or political figures. Woolf herself was galvanised by the potential eroticism and sensuality of the image. Her letter to Bell did not show much of her enthusiasm about consistency between the photographic illustration and verbal description of Sasha: 'The photographs are most lovely ...I'm showing them to Vita, who doesn't want to be accused of raping the under-age. My God - I shall rape Angelica one of these days'.¹⁴⁷ In addition, biographical records of the Stephen and later the Bell family's passion for posing in costume (*Vanessa Bell's Family Album* [1981] features several photographs of Angelica in

¹⁴⁶ Woolf, *Orlando*, 18.

¹⁴⁷ Virginia Woolf to Vanessa Bell Woolf, 12 May 1928, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Vol. III, 1923-1928*, 497.

elaborate masquerade) justifies the iconographic apparatus chosen for the novel.¹⁴⁸ The resultant photograph is, unsurprisingly, far removed from traditional royal portraiture, not to mention the “historical account” provided by the narrator. This seemingly deliberate misrepresentation of the Russian princess that disputes the photographic reality of the image works closely with the mocked preface, footnote and index not only to undermine the factual attempt at biography but also to denigrate the conventions of life-writing. In this sense, this image of Angelica as the young Sasha is reminiscent of the *Dreadnought* hoaxers portrait in a way that the buffoonery and pomposity of costume and the staged pose functions to highlight false nature of the subject.

What is also interesting about the illustration under scrutiny is Woolf’s decision to present the Russian princess in her childhood, rather than the princess in the year that sees her romance with Orlando. That she fails to provide, if not intentionally obliterates, any clear or relevant picture of an important figure in the story, when viewed through the lens of Foucault’s technologies of production, works on different levels. In terms of aesthetics, the illustration, as critic Talia Schaffer notes, ‘adds new layers of mystery’ to the image of Sasha.¹⁴⁹ Like Orlando, Sasha is also representative of a body that cannot be comfortably put in an easy gender category—her androgynous appearance leaves him ‘with vexation that the person was of his own sex’. In its relation to Woolf’s iconoclastic agenda, the “photographical record” of the Russian princess in her childhood calls into question the authenticity of the narrator’s account by spotlighting his largely absent effort to provide reliable evidence or (as in the sex change episode) minimal explanation of the circumstances related to his subject.

By juxtaposing Woolf’s engagement in exploring, in the words of Christy L. Burns, ‘the science of the self’—her ceaseless experiment with a nuanced register of self-expression—and her tendency to seek distraction from the established norms of biographical writing, we can see that in both cases the element of excitement, fun and audacity plays a key role as a

¹⁴⁸ Quentin Bell, *Vanessa Bell’s Family Album* (Martinborough: Alister Taylor, 1981).

¹⁴⁹ Talia Schaffer, “Posing Orlando,” in *Sexual Artifice: Persons, Images, Politics*, ed. Ann M. Kibbey, Kayann Short, Abouali Farmanfarmaian (New York; London: New York University Press, 1994), 32.

driving force in the act of boundary crossing.¹⁵⁰ Having discussed Woolf's non-conformist mode of biographical writing—a strategy she achieves by posing a challenge to the Law of the Father—and her dismissal of strict genre categorisation in *Orlando*, I will now pay attention to another aspect of norm transgressing in which the crux of the text lies. Critics often overlook the significance of how Woolf formulates *Orlando*'s transgression of gendered norms in relation to the trope of escapade and consequently miss the symbolic essence of the *Dreadnought* escapade it captures. The following section will look into the interdependency between the escapade and the temporary excursion into unfamiliar realms of gender.

1.6 Escapade and gender transgression

Orlando is invariably punctuated by pivotal moments where a desire to break with the conventions or to escape from unpleasant realities compels the protagonist's departure into the unknown, an exotic, even uncanny, region not habitually one's own. In the boldest and most fanciful case, Woolf sends her hero out to Turkey where Orlando metamorphoses into a woman. In this respect, critic Celia R. Caputi Daileader asks why Woolf finds 'an Orientalist setting necessary to her uncannily prescient vision of transsexuality'.¹⁵¹ To answer Daileader's question one can simply look back to a story of an audacious young woman who passed herself off as a man of conspicuously Oriental (but purportedly Abyssinian) dignity and managed to gull the military. Although the young Virginia and her troupe did not make an actual journey to the Near East, they used the Orientalist costume as a tool to accomplish a most daring and scandalous adventure, and consequently to unveil the credulity and the cultural naivety of the British Navy. In this regard, Stansky also notes, 'it is possible that the robes worn on the *Dreadnought* that day had something to do with the central hinge of that dazzling fantasy' in *Orlando*.¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰ Christy L. Burns, "Re-Dressing Feminist Identities: Tensions between Essential and Constructed Selves in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*" in *Twentieth Century Literature* 40, No.3 (1994): 356.

¹⁵¹ Celia R. Caputi Daileader, "Othello's Sister: Racial Hermaphroditism and Appropriation in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*," *Studies in the Novel* 45 no. 1 (2013): 64.

¹⁵² Peter Stansky, *On or About December 1910: Early Bloomsbury and Its Intimate World*, (London: Harvard University Press, 1996), 45.

This section analyses a series of Woolf's escapades (both actual and fictional) in order to demonstrate that there are always two concurring elements in *Orlando*'s manipulation of escapade: a transgression of gendered norms and a traversing into an unfamiliar domain. Either for the artistic or personal venturing the protagonist's (and the author's) act of crossing the cultural boundary facilitates gender transgression.¹⁵³ Here, the transgression into an uncanny territory goes beyond the spatial or geographical dimensions as *Orlando* moves across time, culture and different concepts of the inhabited body and selfhood. My reading of the symbiotic relationship between escapade and gender transgression, thus, explores the idea of venturing into an 'unfamiliar' landscape in various aspects. Through a Foucauldian lens, I examine what the trope of escapade in *Orlando*, in relation to its two synchronising components, tells us about Woolf's register of self-representation or, in Foucault's sense, her appropriation of technologies of the self.

The idea of venturing into an 'unfamiliar' landscape emerges for the first time in *Orlando* when the aspiring poet in his attempt to 'ransack the language' to describe Sasha, realises that 'English was too frank, too candid, too honeyed a speech' for the Russian Princess.¹⁵⁴ When 'words failed him', the young poet feels a strong urge to explore 'another landscape, and another tongue'.¹⁵⁵ And he does so as they secretly plan to take ship to Russia, to 'a landscape of pine and snow' and 'frozen rivers'.¹⁵⁶ Nevertheless, the elopement does not happen because Sasha—'devil, adulteress, deceiver' as he called her— betrays him.¹⁵⁷ In a biographical reading, the idea of running away with a lover has long held a particular fascination for Woolf. A biographical anecdote reveals that Woolf had fantasies of running away with Sackville-West long before the gestation of *Orlando*. This she confides to her friend Jacques Raverat, 'To tell you a

¹⁵³ See also Jean O. Love, "Orlando and its Genesis: Venturing and Experimenting in Art, Love, and Sex," in *Virginia Woolf: Revolution and Continuity*, ed. Ralph Freedman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 189.

¹⁵⁴ Woolf, *Orlando*, 24.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 36.

secret, I want to incite my lady to elope with me next'.¹⁵⁸ Read in this light, Orlando's longing for 'another landscape, and another tongue' becomes richly symbolic of the author's own desire.

Two years later, as if to respond to Woolf's predatory fantasy, Sackville-West wrote to her tongue-in-cheek, 'I should steal my own motor out of the garage at 10 p.m. tomorrow night, be at Rodmell by 11.5 [...] throw gravel at your window, then you'd come down and let me in; I'd stay with you till 5. and be home by half past six'.¹⁵⁹ The scenario is slightly different from what Woolf had envisioned, but certainly the idea of a late night tryst must have thrilled the creator of *Orlando*. Sackville-West's imagined nighttime adventure finds its echo in the episode where the female Orlando, in the guise of a young gentleman, sneaks out of her mansion at night and enjoys the company of a prostitute called Nell. If their supposed rendezvous was really in her mind when she was writing this scene, then it can be said that Woolf's venture into another sexual landscape manifestly earns her a new tongue or a new language of her own in which she develops a nuanced register of self-expression in the form of a fanciful biography.

The motif of an excursion into a foreign land reemerges halfway through the novel. Orlando, already devastated by Sasha's abandonment, desires to escape from the Archduchess Harriet who persistently pursues him. On this account the young poet asks King Charles to send him as Ambassador to Constantinople where he undergoes the sexual transformation. The unfamiliar land of 'Persian mountains', of the 'strident multi-coloured and barbaric population' where coats and trousers 'can be worn indifferently by either sex', to a significant degree, makes a good backdrop for the mystical if not magical sex change episode.¹⁶⁰ While the Orientalised landscape attributed to Turkey sets the stage for a fairy-like metamorphosis, back in England the mist of the Oriental magic is dispersed by the fact (at least to Orlando) that becoming a 'real' woman simply means

¹⁵⁸ Woolf was excited by a sexual scandal of Sackville-West's elopement with Violet Trefusis. As she reported to her friend, 'they fled to the Tyrol, or some mountainous retreat together, to be followed in an aeroplane by a brace of husbands'. See Virginia Woolf to Jacques Raverat 24 January 1925, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf Vol. III, 1923-1928*, 155-156.

¹⁵⁹ Vita Sackville-West to Virginia Woolf 11 June 1927 *The Letters of Vita Sackville-West to Virginia Woolf*, ed. Louise DeSalvo and Mitchell Leaska (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2001), 181.

¹⁶⁰ Woolf, *Orlando*, 206, 76 and 89.

putting on the clothes of a woman and acting like one. Further, the hero-now-heroine learns that masculinity is similarly conveniently afforded by the way one expresses oneself physically. Here, it is appropriate to restate my interpretation of an ‘unfamiliar’ realm, which is unfamiliar in the sense that it transcends the narrow confinement of dimensions of space. In her earlier existence in England Orlando was a man. Now that she has become a woman the erstwhile familiar land has now become unfamiliar as her home country now imposes a completely new set of disciplines on the new Orlando. This is also reinforced by the change in social milieu following the change of empires (bear in mind that within her great longevity Orlando travels across a series of different eras ranging across the Renaissance, Jacobean, Romantic, Victorian and modernist). This almost unknown setting illuminates a state of disorientation in which Orlando is trying to come to terms with new gender identity.

Not until Orlando takes a ship home (dressed) as a young Englishwoman of rank does she realise ‘the penalties and the privileges’ of her new sex. That is, she secretly enjoys herself being treated as a lady (‘the Captain offered, with the greatest politeness, to have an awning spread for her on the deck’), while simultaneously being aware of constraints of the regulatory etiquette.¹⁶¹ For instance, her movement is now restricted by a long skirt lest the sight of her legs would stupefy men who see them. Moreover, her occupation once setting foot on English soil is ‘to pour out tea and ask my lords how they like it D’you take sugar? D’you take cream?’ (This is definitely a reminiscence of the tea party etiquette at the Hyde Park Gate; see 1.1).¹⁶² But more importantly, Orlando also learns that ‘women are not...obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely apparelled by nature’ but by ‘the most tedious discipline’.¹⁶³ The process of constituting and articulating her identity through her appearance includes ‘the hairdressing, ‘the looking in the looking glass, another hour glass, ‘staying and lacing’, ‘washing and powdering’ and ‘changing from silk to lace and from lace to paduasoy’.¹⁶⁴ Woolf’s critique of physical markers often superficially inscribed on the

¹⁶¹ Woolf, *Orlando*, 99.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 102.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

female body corresponds to the way Butler describes our tendency to identify one's gender from what we wear, or how we wear it.¹⁶⁵ The fundamental logic of *Orlando* and Butler's premise share a common aspect in their recoiling from biological determinism. I contend, however, that Orlando's performing of gender conforms more to Bloomsbury's theatricality and vestimentary play than to Butler's paradigm of gender performance.

In other words, Orlando treats gender performance in a light-minded mode of escapade laced with fun and frolics, and as such it is something quite distinct from what Butler visualises as a repeated process that must conform to highly rigid social gender norms.¹⁶⁶ This is evident when Orlando avails herself of cross-dressing after going through the soul-destroying 'ceremony of pouring out tea' for Mr. Pope.

[Orlando] sought her bedroom and locked the door. Now she opened a cupboard in which hung still many of the clothes she had worn as a young man of fashion, and from among them she chose a black velvet suit richly trimmed with Venetian lace [...] dressed in it she looked the very figure of a noble Lord.¹⁶⁷

Here, sexual masquerade is used as an antidote to the unpleasant company of 'a man of sense' who never 'respects her opinions, admires her understanding or will refuse, though the rapier is denied him, to run her through the body with his pen'.¹⁶⁸ That Orlando, drained by the company of an eminent writer, resorts to masculine fashion brings into mind the character of Ellen in *Freshwater* who emancipates herself from the Victorian hothouse and wears checked trousers (See 1.3). In this sense both Orlando and Ellen employ technologies of the self by transforming themselves (through sartorial items) in order to attain a certain state of freedom, however briefly in the case of Orlando.

¹⁶⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999) Preface.

¹⁶⁶ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: on the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 231-232.

¹⁶⁷ Woolf, *Orlando*, 142.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 141.

It might be argued that *Orlando*'s motif of cross-dressing corresponds to Butlerian thinking in that clothes are simultaneously presented as something to keep social order by distinguishing one sex from the other, and as 'the resources from which resistance, subversion and displacement are to be forged'.¹⁶⁹ Butler cites drag as an example of performativity that subverts the sexual and social mores and exposes 'the mundane impersonations by which heterosexually ideal genders are performed and naturalized'.¹⁷⁰ Nevertheless, the discursive criterion does not fully account for Orlando's predilection for wearing the clothes of the opposite sex. Drag, in Butler's sense, is generally triggered by the political needs of an emergent queer movement. Moreover, it is often regarded as a show or a caricature of gender stereotypes rather than an actual lived experience. It is important to note, however, that there are some cases where individuals—such as Radclyffe Hall and Edward Carpenter—embrace sartorial freedom in their lives. In particular, Hall—a self-proclaimed 'invert' (the most popular term for homosexual of her time)—makes a striking case for recognition of those whose gender identity found its expression through clothes. Hall, like other homosexual women, had been contemplating about her place within a heterosexual society. Her masculine fashion serves as an outlet for her self-expression. As critic Katrina Rolley notes, Hall and her lover Una Troubridge 'appear[ed] together in clothes which announced, to an informed viewer, their respective roles within a lesbian relationship'.¹⁷¹ By contrast, the act of embodying different gender identities in *Orlando* is more of a performance of flightiness for its own sake and treated as the heroine's delightful recess from her 'arduous occupation'.¹⁷²

Far from being constrained by a regulatory regime of gender, Orlando changes sex at will and 'far more frequently than those who have worn only one set of clothing can conceive'.¹⁷³ Moreover, she enjoys 'a twofold harvest'—'the pleasures of life were increased and its experiences

¹⁶⁹ Judith Butler, "Critically Queer," *GLQ* 1 no. 1 (1993): 22.

¹⁷⁰ Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 231.

¹⁷¹ Katrina Rolley, "Cutting a Dash - The Dress of Radclyffe Hall and Una Troubridge," *Feminist Review* no. 35 (1990): 55

¹⁷² Woolf, *Orlando*, 141.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 211.

multiplied’ —provided by the imposed visual markers of the differences between men and women.¹⁷⁴ This remarkable passage shows that gender identity for Orlando is not always contingent on the ‘ritualized repetition’ of the norms of sex.¹⁷⁵

So then one may sketch her spending her morning in a China robe of ambiguous gender among her books; then receiving a client or two (for she had many scores of suppliants) in the same garment; then she would take a turn in the garden and clip the nut trees—for which knee-breeches were convenient, then she would change into a flowered taffeta which best suited a drive to Richmond and a proposal for marriage from a great nobleman, and so back again to town, where she would don a snuff-coloured gown like a lawyer’s and visit the courts to hear how her cases were doing...when night came, she would more often than not become a nobleman complete from head to toe and walk the streets in search of adventure.¹⁷⁶

In a playing-dress-up game Orlando explores the freedom the wardrobe has to offer.¹⁷⁷ Or to put it differently, she puts on and off the identity of different sexes, like clothes. Moreover, that she impersonates a lawyer, a gardener and a gentleman reaffirms the constructed nature of gender which is contingent upon the role one performs. Changing from one role to another Orlando is actively seeking for new adventure, like an

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, Preface.

¹⁷⁶ Woolf, *Orlando*, 146-147.

¹⁷⁷ Regarding *Orlando*’s treatment of gender and sexuality, Craps has voiced similar concern about critics’ obliviousness to Orlando’s slippage into different sexual guises and the undue attempt to squeeze *Orlando* into Butler’s paradigm of gender performativity. He remarks, ‘It should be noted, however, that Woolf’s idea that costumes creates identity is not fully consonant with Butler’s position insofar as it suggests that performativity is a matter of choice, rather than a necessity if one is to have an intelligible identity in terms of the current gender system. According to Butler, there is no subject which decides on its gender, rather gender is part of what decides the subject’. See Stef Craps, “Gender Performativity in Woolf’s *Orlando*,” 61.

adventuress who is eager to probe the unfamiliar land. Through a myriad of costumes — a China robe, knee-breeches, a flowered taffeta, a snuff-coloured gown and a nobleman outfit—Orlando explores different spaces and performs different tasks.

When Orlando's gender disrupts the formalities, it becomes a legal matter for the courts to decide. Pending the outcome of the lawsuits against her, she is to remain 'legally unknown' until it turns out 'our hero is not dead but female', which the biographer drily notes, 'amounts to much the same thing'.¹⁷⁸ As we can see, Orlando becomes female by being called a woman. The contingencies of identity, as Woolf deftly conveys, are regulated by several factors (none of which is natural or internal) such as lawsuits, the functioning of language (See 1.5) and of course clothing. These are combined into what Burns has called 'external social trappings'.¹⁷⁹ The earlier question of whether any change of the body alters the person's interior self is not the ultimate endgame of *Orlando's* quest to capture the truth about life. After all, the temporary liberation derived from cross-dressing throws light on the abiding element of escapade in the novel. When her comfortable gender ambiguity and masquerading spree become subsumed by oppressive social norms, Orlando, rather than feeling at odds with her "self" manages to maintain her autonomous entity as she masters her multiple persona.

Biographical anecdotes reveal Woolf's absorbed interest in the idea that a person is composed of a number of different selves. On one occasion Woolf remarked to Lytton Strachey, 'I'm 20 people'.¹⁸⁰ *Orlando's* eponymous hero/ine is reported to be composed of 2,052 people, among them 'a Renaissance noble; a Jacobean gallant; an introspective of the metaphysical seventeenth century; an Ambassador for Charles; a woman writer; a Romantic; a Victorian and a modernist'.¹⁸¹ *Orlando's* multiplication of the self epitomises 'the modern constructive figuration of subjectivity'.¹⁸²

¹⁷⁸ Woolf, *Orlando*, 168.

¹⁷⁹ Burns, "Re-Dressing Feminist Identities," 351.

¹⁸⁰ Quoted in Frank Baldanza, "Orlando and the Sackvilles," in *Woolf Critical Assessments*, ed. Eleanor Jane McNees (Mountfield [England]: Helm Information, 1994), 426.

¹⁸¹ Henry Seidel Canby, "Orlando, a Biography," in *Woolf Critical Assessments Vol. II*, ed. Eleanor Jane McNees (Mountfield [England]: Helm Information, 1994), 417.

¹⁸² Burns, "Re-Dressing Feminist Identities," 346.

Having the narrator say ‘a biography is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas a person may well have as many thousand’, Woolf mocks the traditional biographical method and at the same time undermining any attempt to reduce the individual into a particular type.¹⁸³ Woolf’s disavowal of the traditional concept of the inhabited body and selfhood is in tune with her rejection of any capitulation to the gendered establishment. In other words, vacillating gender facilitates the subject’s exploration of the complexities of multiple selves. The next section pays attention to *Orlando*’s homoerotic undertone with which Woolf’s sexual adventure is interlaced. It seeks to explore to what extent the trope of escapade plays a central role in the author’s personal indulgence and her reiteration of it in this gender/genre-bending text.

1.7 ‘I shall dream wild dreams. My hands shall wear no wedding ring’

In the opening remarks of this chapter I drew from Woolf’s correspondence with Sackville-West and from her diary entries in order to elaborate how the writer uses the term ‘escapade’ in the sense of divertissement, of a break from serious writing. In the following excerpt from her 1927 letter to Sackville-West the idea of escapade is projected in a different light: ‘I shall be alone here to dinner on Thursday. Why not come then—if you’re coming –and let us have a lark?’¹⁸⁴ The quotation is saturated with sensual, quite likely erotic, connotation—she will be alone, and she envisions herself spending the evening revelling in a daring and amusing adventure with Sackville-West. The concept of ‘escapade’ as ‘a minor interlude amidst more serious acts’ of commitment is now moving from the literary to the sexual domains. In this case a serious act is Woolf’s marriage with Leonard to which her short-lived love affair with Vita is a minor interlude.¹⁸⁵ Tracing how the trope has progressed from the practical joke to something more intimate, this section examines the reciprocity of correlation between what we might call the writer’s own ‘sexcapade’ and

¹⁸³ Woolf, *Orlando*, 209.

¹⁸⁴ Virginia Woolf to Vita Sackville-West 6 November 1927, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Vol. III, 1923-1928*, 435.

¹⁸⁵ Sherron E. Knopp, “‘If I Saw You Would You Kiss Me?’: Sapphism and the Subversiveness of Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*,” *PMLA* 103 No. 1 (1988): 25.

Orlando's sexual hijinks. It seeks to suggest how the former is informed by the latter and vice versa.

Notwithstanding Woolf's claim that *Orlando* is based on Sackville-West's life, several scholars have perceived the resultant book as embracing the author's personal experience to a significant degree. On the artistic side, the mock-biography *Orlando*, as mentioned earlier, serves as a testing ground for new literary devices and a writing style unfettered by the demands and condition of pre-established patterns. At the personal level, *Orlando* is accepted as Woolf's memoir of her love affair since it experimentally documents her brief lesbian relationship with Sackville-West. In the words of Shirley Panken, *Orlando* is 'underlyingly a reflection and re-examination of the author's sexual ambivalence'.¹⁸⁶ In a similar vein, Burns argues that Woolf 'weaves strands of herself together with references to Sackville-West... a process that [she] seems to believe will give her back to herself'.¹⁸⁷ In a more vigorous tone, Jean O. Love maintains that *Orlando* 'tells a great deal about Virginia's own profound problems in achieving a coherent perspective of herself, and tells very little about Vita'.¹⁸⁸ In parallel to intellectual currents that identify *Orlando* with Woolf, I would like to note Woolf's own mediation on the novelistic approach to biography. In her critique of Nicolson's *Some People* (1927) Woolf maintains that the supposed subject metaphorically 'holds up in his or her small bright diminishing mirror a different reflection' of the biographer.¹⁸⁹ She further concludes, it is 'in the mirrors of our friends, that we chiefly live'.¹⁹⁰ *Orlando* is unmistakably a mirror image of Woolf. At any rate, it is a creative documentation of those moments of her desire, transgression and excess.

In a talk for the Rodmell Women's Institute in 1940, Woolf recalled her personal experience with the elaborate Oriental costumes that presumably informed her sartorial semiotics in *Orlando*: 'I remember

¹⁸⁶ Shirley Panken, *Virginia Woolf and the "Lust of Creation": A Psychoanalytic Exploration* (Albany: State University of New York Press), 1987, 174.

¹⁸⁷ Burns, "Re-Dressing Feminist Identities," 356.

¹⁸⁸ Jean O. Love, "Orlando and its Genesis: Venturing and Experimenting in Art, Love, and Sex," 216.

¹⁸⁹ Virginia Woolf, "The New Biography," in *Granite and Rainbow: Essays by Virginia Woolf* (London: Hogarth Press, 1958), 152.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

standing among jewels [*sic*] and turbans and splendid eastern dressing gowns and putting on one after another'.¹⁹¹ Indeed, the magic of the brocade robe persistently clings to Woolf's imagination which she projects onto Orlando and vicariously Sackville-West, the object of her homoerotic desire. So Woolf was the Abyssinian prince. What was Sackville-West? This Woolf envisions in her correspondence: 'I see you, somehow, in long coat and trousers, like an Abyssinian Empress, stalking over those barren hills'.¹⁹² I suggest that Woolf summons up an image from her earlier escapade and through it articulates her erotic attraction to Sackville-West. This reading leads us back to the reciprocal relationship between the escapade as adventure (the *Dreadnought* hoax, Woolf's sexcapade) and the escapade as genre/trope (*Orlando* as mock biography): genre/trope itself becomes an adventure.

A letter written to Sackville-West when Woolf finished *Orlando* implies her affinity with the biographer who toils to pin down his elusive, indefinable subject, but to no avail: 'I have lived in you all these months. Coming out, what are you really like? Do you exist? Have I made you up?'¹⁹³ Woolf's line suggests multiple dimensions of escapade in many respects. Her homoerotic liaison with Sackville-West is a self-contained narrative over which Woolf has no absolute control. *Orlando* was initially conceived as something light-hearted, a 'writer's holiday', but turned out to be otherwise. The fun and adventure that she was initially after turn out to be an illumination of the self. As the correspondence testifies, Woolf's steamy affair with Sackville-West is infused with romantic infatuation and deep emotion. The fleeting fantasy is underscored by the capricious image of Sackville-West whom Woolf perceives as a phantasm of her dream. In the process Woolf ventured into an unfamiliar realm and came out without the slightest control over the outcome. This takes courage and a truly independent mind, hence can be linked to the idea of escapade.

¹⁹¹ Johnston, "Virginia Woolf's Talk on the Dreadnought Hoax," 14.

¹⁹² Virginia Woolf to Vita Sackville-West, 3 February 1926. *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Vol. III, 1923-1928*, 238.

¹⁹³ Virginia Woolf to Vita Sackville-West 20 March 1928, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Vol. III, 1923-1928*, 474.

In her attempt to negotiate with ‘the spirit of the age’ and to regain control of her writing, Orlando declares, ‘I shall dream wild dreams. My hands shall wear no wedding ring.’¹⁹⁴ As it turns out, both Orlando and Woolf end up in a marriage. But is it not autonomy that Orlando finds in her marriage to Shelmerdine, and Woolf to Leonard? I propose that it is the married state that allows them (and perhaps Sackville-West), under its protection, to dream wild dreams and to explore their own sexuality in particular and their sense of themselves in general. In turn this licenses each to write what she likes.¹⁹⁵

Reading Woolf through the lens of Foucault’s four types of technologies illuminates a fundamental trope of her life and her novel throughout. In the former, the mode of escapade not only emboldens Woolf to negotiate the cultural authority of the patriarchal values but also provides her a deep insight into her own sexuality. In the latter case, the charm and ecstasy of the escapade offers Woolf ingredients for her literary concoction. It opens the door for other plot devices and experiments with different forms of art and writing styles. Additionally, the fantasy and the supposed fictionality inherent in the mode of escapade take the edge of *Orlando*’s scandalous aspect, although tendency towards lesbianism is discernible. As such the novel escaped public banning (unlike Hall’s overtly sapphic project *The Well of Loneliness* which was published only three months before *Orlando*).¹⁹⁶ Viewed in this light, is it too much to say that *Orlando* is actually another form of prank, daringly and unapologetically ridiculing authority and managing to pass off triumphantly?

The trope of escapade provides a creative conduit for Woolf’s experiment with nuanced approaches to challenging the institutional establishment in literature and gender domains. Probing variations throughout the different phases of her writing career, I have suggested that Woolf’s iconoclastic impulse, to which the *Dreadnought* hoax was the

¹⁹⁴ Woolf, *Orlando*, 166.

¹⁹⁵ See also Karyn Z. Sproles, *Desiring Women : the Partnership of Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West* (Toronto; London: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 87.

¹⁹⁶ It is important to note a specific historical moment before *Orlando* came out. On the morning of 9 November 1928 Woolf, among the forty expert witnesses, was called to speak in the defence of Hall’s ‘risqué’ lesbian novel, *The Well of Loneliness*. See Julia Briggs, *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life* (London: Allen Lane, 2005), 220.

major catalyst, potentially serves as an intellectual impetus to her strands of argument in relation to sexual difference and gender. As I have attempted to suggest earlier in this chapter, through reference to various textual practices and criticisms, *Orlando* vividly demonstrates Woolf's progression towards a kind of escapade which spurs the protagonist (as well as the author) on to undertake great expeditions both on a narrative and symbolic level. In a manner consistent with the book's recurrent motif of exploring an 'unfamiliar' realm Woolf works across the spectrum of literature and visual arts including photography. She puts a new meaning into the accepted conventions of biographical writing. Her trope of escapade, finally, offers a mode of expression that links the narrative with lifestyle.

CHAPTER 2

Refocusing the image of life and the ‘life-as-image’ of Dora Carrington

In *Singular Women: Writing the Artist* (2003), Kristen Frederickson bemoans banal studies of female artists that opt to foreground the sensational aspects in their life at the expense of their artistic endeavour. She wryly observes, ‘To be a famous female artist (retroactively, posthumously) requires a compelling life story or an attachment as wife, lover, sister, daughter, or devoted student to a male artist with a compelling life story’.¹⁹⁷ Painter Dora Carrington is a case in point. During her lifetime Carrington’s critical recognition had drifted into obscurity. One explanation that accounts for such relative anonymity is her own willingness to veil her identity as an artist. Even posthumously, her artistic contribution to the world of English modern art has been overshadowed by her personal experience, especially by her acting upon emotional and sexual attraction to both men (one of them homosexual) and women. The following description of Carrington by critic A. Mary Murphy, while pointing out some paradoxical truths about Carrington’s short and tempestuous life, perpetuates the myths about her as a curious cult figure, in a way that inevitably lets her artistic output fall by the wayside.

Carrington was the consummate cultural grotesque: female in a male-dominated culture, a bisexual in a supposedly (and legislatively) heterosexual culture, a visual artist in intimate society with writers, a dyslexic art school graduate surrounded by university-educated intellectuals, a woman who utterly rejected motherhood in a body designed to conceive.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁷ Kristen Frederickson, *Singular Women: Writing the Artist* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 3.

¹⁹⁸ A. Mary Murphy, “Carrington: The Culturally Grotesque Hybrid Monster,” *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 15 no.1 (2000): 85, accessed Oct 1, 2018, DOI: 10.1080/08989575.2000.10815236.

While taking into account the price of “playing up” not the artistic competency but the personal circumstances of women painters, this chapter suggests that a profound understanding of Carrington’s art can best be achieved by exploring along with it the complexity of her situation.¹⁹⁹ Put differently, Carrington’s life and her art are bound together into a mesh of threads, making it impossible to read the latter without some analysis of the former. Although this thesis sees each subject’s artistic practice as intimately interwoven with her construction of the self, this alone does not provide a rationale for my approach in this chapter. Especially in the case of Carrington, this chapter sees the lifestyle she invented as part of the performance of selfhood, just like her artwork. But rather than working towards a single, coherent self, Carrington, as I will argue, is painstakingly ‘juggling with modes of life’: those, for example, of painter and housekeeper, of creator of art and art object, and so on.²⁰⁰ Put differently, Carrington constitutes and reiterates multiple possible narratives of her life, in which contradictions and conflicts play an important part. This chapter thus explores the way in which Carrington sublimates such discrepancies into a creative mode of self-inscription, and how she has had recourse to the state of liminality in her performance of recognisable, yet not necessarily intelligible, identities.

We begin with a snapshot of Carrington posing naked as a ‘living statue’ taken at Garsington Manor in 1917. This offers a point of departure for an analysis of the artist’s, to use Foucault’s term, ‘practices of the self’.²⁰¹ Then, in chronological sequence, this chapter will discuss three examples of Carrington’s visual and verbal rhetoric, in which her preoccupation with variable meanings frequently manifests itself in demonstrably playful ways. The first example is an excerpt from her correspondence, the source of a vast and intimate life record. The second and the third examples address Carrington’s artistic works, which are recognisable as wholly original, despite having been unknown to the general

¹⁹⁹ Pamela Todd, *Bloomsbury at Home* (London: Pavilion, 1999), 129.

²⁰⁰ Julia Strachey, *Julia: A Portrait of Julia Strachey by Herself and Frances Partridge* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), 119-120.

²⁰¹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 2: The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1985), 28.

public until the end of the 1960s. The first is one of her most frequently cited landscapes, *Mountain Ranges from Yegen, Andalusia* (1924), widely acclaimed for its blending of the facts of visual perception with interior desires and fantasies. Then the final section examines a *trompe-l'oeil* window, *The Cook and the Cat* (1931), the last surviving painting of her life.²⁰²

2.1 Contradictory impulses

‘I have been suffering agonies because I am a woman. All this makes me so angry, & I despise myself so much’.²⁰³

Despite her shame over and disgust with any palpable physical reminder of her femininity, in 1917 the speaker of these lines, Dora Carrington, at the age of 24, exuberantly exhibited her body, posing naked as a free-spirited living statue at Garsington Manor in Oxfordshire (Fig. 2.1). Considering such bold display, it is understandable why friends were puzzled by (what they deemed) her virginity complex. The residents of Garsington, Philip and Ottoline Morrell, for example, sought to convince Carrington to give up her chastity. In an infuriated tone she reported in 1916 to Lytton Strachey,

Philip after dinner asked me to walk round the pond with him and started without any preface, to say, how disappointed he had been to hear I was a virgin!...Ottoline then seized me on my return to the house and talked for one hour and a half in the [asparagrass] bed, on the subject...this attack on the virgins is like the worst Verdun on-[slaughter] and really I do not see why it matters so much to them all.²⁰⁴

²⁰² Having contacted the current owner of the property, I can confirm that Carrington's *trompe-l'oeil* window is still intact, although somewhat faded. Email message to Rosaleen Mulji, August 22, 2017.

²⁰³ Dora Carrington to Mark Gertler, no date, quoted in David Boyd Haycock, *A Crisis of Brilliance: Five Young British Artists and the Great War*, (London: Old Street, 2009), 283.

²⁰⁴ Dora Carrington to Lytton Strachey July 30, 1916, *Carrington: Letters and Extracts from her Diaries*, 33.

Carrington identifies the ‘attack on the virgins’ with the Verdun battle, ‘the largest and longest Franco-German battle of the First World War’, equating the act of persuading, not even coercing, one to surrender her virginity with mass killing.²⁰⁵ Carrington, by envisaging the apogee of the slaughter, points to a dialectic between questions of embodiment, gender, sexuality and shame on the one hand, and militarism, violence and nationalism on the other. From the excerpt it can be interpreted that for Carrington the strict gender binary which subjects a woman or a man (at a suitable age) to heterosexual coupling represents a kind of societal violence to individual volition. In addition, borrowing the connotations of regimentation and fierce combat from military language (attack, on-slaughter) Carrington is simultaneously trivializing the war effort and aggrandizing her treasured chastity – a stance which is at pointed variance with the loose sexual mores of the Garsington coterie and the Bloomsbury group.²⁰⁶

With biographical hindsight, one can attribute Carrington’s avowed distaste for sex to her stern Victorian upbringing. According to Noel Carrington, the artist’s youngest brother, their mother Charlotte Houghton was a conservative bourgeoisie who was ‘obsessed at all times with “what people would think”’.²⁰⁷ Usually Carrington describes her mother, whose ‘refinement and purity of life’ she finds ‘inconceivable’, in sharp contrast to her father Samuel Carrington, who ‘never altered his life to please the conventions or people of this century’.²⁰⁸ Such biographical accounts prevent an easy reading of the photographic images as the product of an outwardly puerile act. Carrington’s motive for posing naked as a living statue might be that of a daughter who vigorously rejects her mother’s strident Victorian morality. Or considering how desperately she aspires to be like her dissentient father, the audacious display of a female body

²⁰⁵ Ian Ousby, *The Road to Verdun: France, Nationalism and the First World War* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2002), 3.

²⁰⁶ One of the radical values of Bloomsbury lies in its sexual nonconformity. It was an open secret that Ottoline Morrell conducted extensive love affairs with the painter Augustus John and later the philosopher Bertrand Russell. See Sean Latham, *The Art of Scandal: Modernism, Libel Law, and the Roman à Clef* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 129.

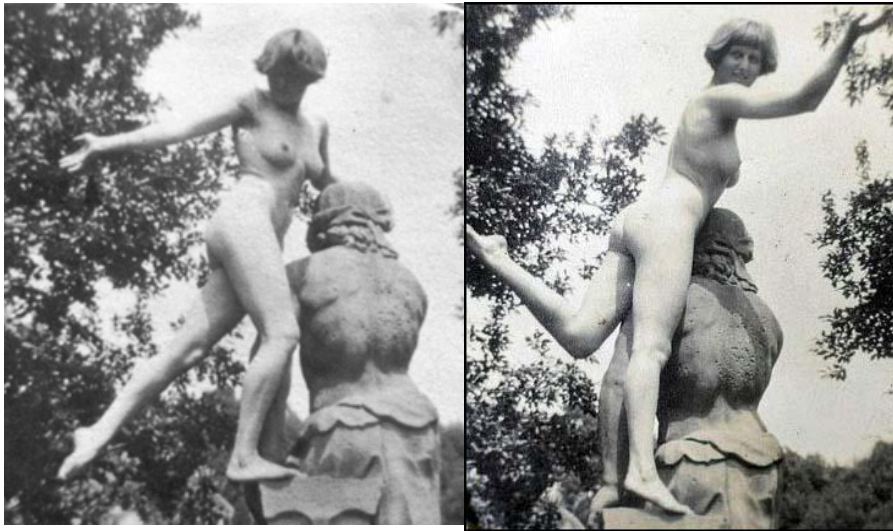
²⁰⁷ Carrington, *Carrington: Paintings, Drawings and Decorations*, 19.

²⁰⁸ Dora Carrington to Mark Gertler, January 1919, *Carrington: Letters and Extracts from her Diaries*, 123.

generally encumbered by cultural taboos suggests that Carrington places herself against established paradigms of sex/gender politics. As we shall see, the push and pull between the creative faculties and the inner force asserts itself in a vigorous breaching of barriers and conventions.

As the opening quotation testifies, Carrington is not reticent about expressing the repulsion she feels for the female aspects of her body. Juxtaposing her lines with the snapshots of her posing naked reveals the contrapuntal rhythms— of reserve and disclosure, pleasure and shame, primness and exuberance— that characterise her work and self-construction. Hence the paradox I seek to explore in this chapter. Even as Carrington chooses to expose to the outside world what she despises, she possessively hides away her artistic output. In early 1917 (the same year as the whimsical performance as a life-sculpture) she wrote in her diary of her personal reasons for keeping to herself a portrait of Strachey she had just painted: ‘I hate only the indecency of showing them what I have loved’.²⁰⁹ While making an exhibition of a naked body that always repulses her, Carrington feels it is “indecent” to show what she loves: in this case the portrait and the subject. As we shall see, the desire to conceal what she loves and the impulse to reveal what she hates are playing against each other in a systematic “branding” of her own image. Such competing forces are strongly felt both in her art and her epistolary discourse. Before proceeding with my analysis, it is worth examining in detail certain aspects of the snapshots. A close reading of the images will provide insight into the artist’s reflection on her own identity at the personal, psychological and even political levels.

²⁰⁹ Dora Carrington, *Carrington: Letters and Extracts from her Diaries*, 52.



Figures 2.1 and 2.2 Carrington posing naked as a 'living statue' at Garsington Manor (1917), courtesy of the Archive Centre, King's College, Cambridge

Figures 2.1 and 2.2 present Carrington with her signature pageboy haircut, completely nude, balancing on one foot next to the stone statue of a bare-chested figure whose back is all we see. As distinct from other snapshots which usually portray her as, in the words of Michael Holroyd, 'an elusive subject for the camera', Carrington in these pictures looks natural and shows no sign of inhibition as she exposes herself to the camera.²¹⁰ A more than willing subject in front of the lens, Carrington is engrossed in her bodily choreography. She refers to nothing outside herself, except the stone statue against which her left arm and half of her right foot press tightly to balance herself. In one of the photos, Carrington lifts her face up, exposing to the camera her signature big hooded eyes and mischievous smile. She is seen bending her left leg in an angular line, with her free arms rising above her head in a posture like that of a burlesque dancer.

Indeed, the images capture very well what Holroyd has called the 'dynamism of her physical personality', a wellspring of the vitality and charm felt by her friends and those around her.²¹¹ 'So eager to please, conciliatory, restless, & active...such a bustling eager creature, so red &

²¹⁰ Michael Holroyd is a distinguished biographer of Lytton Strachey. His book covers much of Carrington's life and on it Christopher Hampton's film *Carrington* (1995) is based. See Michael Holroyd, *Lytton Strachey: A Critical Biography Volume II: The Years of Achievement (1910-1932)* (London: Heinemann, 1968), 183.

²¹¹ Holroyd, *Lytton Strachey*, 183.

solid, & at the same time inquisitive, that one can't help liking her' is Virginia Woolf's description of this high-spirited figure.²¹² Apart from proclaiming her vitality and playfulness, Carrington's performance of herself as a sculpture anticipates the way she makes her art into an extension of her personality.

Consciously or unconsciously, Carrington, by climbing upon the imposing stone statue, challenges the preceding century's physical culture that constrained the female body. At the same time, the wilful exhibition of her flesh can be identified with the contemporary craze for a sporty and athletic body among some young women.²¹³ To some extent, the twist of her lower body and the clenching muscle of the calf evoke a trope of 'female athleticism', a new ideal of attractive femininity—the modern physicality of a flat-chested, agile and healthy body—which had shifted a great deal from the previous century's model of the curvaceous figure.²¹⁴ In fact, Carrington's 1923 letter to Strachey reveals her liking for spry activities which entail freedom of movement: 'If only there weren't so many pictures to paint, so many hills to climb, rivers to explore, letters to write, I might learn how to cook an omelette'.²¹⁵ With tongue-in-cheek humour Carrington spurns the confines of social conventions which tend to base a gendered division of social roles and labour on biological sex. Her clear preference for activities commonly performed by men over domestic activities simultaneously resists and reinforces the demarcation between male/public and female/private spaces which is very clear here.²¹⁶ This is not to say, however, that Carrington by choosing the "presumed" male public role over the female counterpart restricts herself to one end of the spectrum. Instead, she crosses over and crosses back at will. There are also times, several

²¹² Virginia Woolf, *Diary of Virginia Woolf, Vol. I, 1915-1919*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (London: Hogarth Press, 1977-1984), 152-153.

²¹³ Birgitte Sølund, *Becoming Modern: Young Women and the Reconstruction of Womanhood in the 1920s* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 57.

²¹⁴ Sølund, *Becoming Modern*, 21.

²¹⁵ Dora Carrington to Lytton Strachey, August 27, 1923, *Carrington: Letters and Extracts from her Diaries*, 259. Although Carrington opts for the more adventurous, dynamic activities, she ironically maneuvers into a maternal role, making and keeping house for Strachey.

²¹⁶ It is important to note that Carrington's epistolary styles are deeply literary despite the misspelling and inconsistent standard of grammar and punctuation. In particular, her illustrated letters show her as a woman of genuine talents and an eccentrically original letter writer. Apart from her paintings, her correspondence gains no less attention from critics and has become a topic for studies. See for example Maria Tamboukou, *Visual Lives: Carrington's Letters, Drawings and Paintings* (British Sociological Association), 2010.

times, that this maverick artist dismantles the barriers between those prefigured norms as it is, to borrow from her intimate friend Julia Strachey, her ‘major occupation’ ‘to counteract the life-frames in which she found people already mounted’.²¹⁷ In these living-stature snapshots, (and in the examples to be discussed later in this chapter) Carrington manages to find a place of her own beyond the prescribed societal limits of what is acceptable for female bodies. From the vantage point which provides her an opportunity to remake herself according to readily available resources, Carrington constitutes a self-presentation that is attached to salient cultural and social norms on the one hand and appears to be categorically different from what is traditionally accepted on the other. This gesture can be well explained by Foucault’s concept of ‘the practices of self’ which I will illustrate later in this section.

By posing as a living sculpture Carrington consciously treats her female body as the locus of a public gaze.²¹⁸ Working upon her body she reinvents herself as one of the art objects that she continually creates, yet rarely exhibits. Given that artists often paint self-portraits and sit for other artists, Carrington’s enigmatic disposition makes it a difficult job to determine whether she identifies herself with the artist or the objectified body. In other words, Carrington blurs the boundary between the realms of image-maker and made image. She makes a break with the conventional separation of photography whereby the labour is divided according to the position behind and in front of the lens (here I focus on the general experience of photography as a practice as opposed to the resultant photographs). Resolving the photographic paradox that the subject becomes object, Carrington disrupts the conventional separation and allows herself into the realm of both. This is evident in the act of looking and being looked at, as in one of the images in which she gazes back and smiles at the camera. Her gaze and manner of expression somewhat suggest a co-creative relationship between herself and the camera operator (presumably Lady Ottoline Morrell, the hospitable mistress of Garsington). The distinction

²¹⁷ Strachey, *Julia: A Portrait of Julia Strachey by Herself and Frances Partridge*, 119-120.

²¹⁸ Although these snapshots were taken at the private residence of the Morrells, different copies of the images were shared and passed on among friends and family. In a way, the notion of the publicity of the private is apt, as the photographs end up being exposed to many gazes.

becomes clear if we compare these images with the snapshots of Garsington's statues taken by surrealist painter Paul Nash.²¹⁹ Unlike Carrington's snapshots, Nash's are candid and less theatrical in style. In most shots he casually captures the statues alone. Nevertheless, there is one image showing a statue with a human subject: a man dressed in checked jacket and black trousers is smiling roguishly and in a rather spontaneous and cheeky manner he is embracing a statue (Fig. 2.3).²²⁰

Taking Nash's snapshots as a counterexample, I argue that Carrington's living statue images are so clearly posed and staged that it necessarily implies the cooperation between the camera operator and the subject. Certainly, Nash's subject must have shared the participatory pleasure; but Carrington's physical act— she has unwrapped herself, climbed upon the statue and struck a pose that entails the jointed segmentation of the body—requires a certain effort and competence in performance and theatrical skills (Fig. 2.4). This suggests not only a performative process on her part, but also a strong collaboration and communicative interaction between photographer and subject in the process of setting up and taking the shot. In this sense, it can be said that Carrington is the co-author of these shots, despite her role as *object* of a gaze: not so much because she is aware that she is being photographed and is willing to be, but because she is extensively in control. The ludic pose attests her authority.

²¹⁹ Nash's collection of black and white negatives of Garsington's statues is now being preserved in the Tate Archive. Garsington, accessed July 1, 2017, <https://www.tate-images.com/results.asp?txtkeys1=Garsington>.

²²⁰ Paul Nash, "Black and white negative, a man embracing a statue, Garsington Manor, Oxfordshire," accessed July 1, 2017, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/archive/items/tga-7050ph-1039/nash-black-and-white-negative-a-man-embracing-a-statue-garsington-manor-oxfordshire>.



Figure 2.3 A man embraces a statue, Garsington Manor by Paul Nash (Date Unknown)



Figure 2.4 Carrington climbing upon the stone statue, Garsington Manor (1917), courtesy of the Archive Centre, King's College, Cambridge

Despite her unclothed body, what is being disclosed is also being painstakingly filtered down to us through the artist's choice. In a self-revealing yet self-concealing vein, Carrington projects one side of her body to the camera, bearing only her bosom while deftly eclipsing her pudendum with the angle of her leg. Such teasing obscurity is also applied to the bare-chested stone statue, the front of whose torso is likewise hidden from the view. We can barely identify the stone figure. Possibly it may be the statue of a classical god or a mythical creature, given that other sculptures of a similar kind populated the garden.²²¹ Even so, one can hardly tell whether the stone figure is male or female. The muscular back makes it tempting to infer that it is a male body, whereas the feminine waistline prevents one from doing so. Symbolically, the sexual indeterminacy of the statue mirrors Carrington's ambivalent stances towards her sexuality.

The levels of obscurity to contend with in relation to these snaps concern not only the diegetic world of the photo but the off-frame context about which little information is known. Since there is no available recorded account of the living statue incident, neither by Carrington nor her friends, what galvanised the artist's posing naked on a statue or on what occasion the photographs were taken remains mysterious. A clue given by Frances Partridge is that this image may have been taken at Garsington Manor in 1917.²²² Another jigsaw piece is given by the National Portrait Gallery website which claims that the snapshots in question were taken by Ottoline Morrell.²²³ To throw further light on these clues, the tales of Garsington Manor lend a layer of aesthetic significance to the enigma of this living statue. This Tudor manor is most talked about as a pacifist centre during the Great War.²²⁴ Philip Morrell, who had lost his seat in the House of

²²¹ Much remembered along with the glamour and spell of Garsington, was the Italianate garden in which the statues of cherubs and putti prevailed. Indeed, its hospitable hostess Lady Ottoline Morrell took a great deal of pride in her collection. One of her visitors, David Cecil, recalled the joke that 'if the Morrells had to choose between adding a bathroom to their house or a statue to their garden they would choose the statue'. See David Cecil (Introduction), *Lady Ottoline Album: Snapshots and Portraits of her Famous Contemporaries (and of Herself)*, ed. Carolyn G. Heilbrun (New York: Knopf, 1976), 8.

²²² The photograph album was bequeathed to her by Carrington. Frances Partridge, *The Papers of Frances Catherine Partridge*, accessed July 1, 2017, <https://janus.lib.cam.ac.uk/db/node.xsp?id=EAD%2FGBR%2F0272%2FPP%2FFCP%2F7>.

²²³ Dora Carrington (portrait) accessed July 1, 2017, <http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw278320/Dora-Carrington>.

²²⁴ Daniel Hahn and Nicholas Robins, *The Oxford guide to literary Britain & Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford

Commons due to his courageous stance against warfare, had moved into Garsington with his wife Ottoline in 1915.²²⁵ Together they made the place a haven from the war. Morrell had taken up farming, so he was able to employ conscientious objectors to do agricultural work, among them Lytton Strachey, Duncan Grant and David Garnett. Notwithstanding the farm work, Garsington offered free accommodation and even gracious living to the conscientious objectors.²²⁶ This claim is supported by Ottoline's description of the place as 'a romantic theatre where week after week a new company would arrive, unpack, shake out their frills and improvise a new scene in life'.²²⁷ In fact, during its golden period the old Oxfordshire manor house saw the staging of several amateur theatricals and occasionally hosted fancy-dress parties and dances.²²⁸ Garsington thus became not only a sanctuary for pacifist artists and intellectuals but also a different world isolated from the harsh reality of warfare. The manor house's anachronistically convivial atmosphere can in part be attributed to its ravishing décor, which reflected the flamboyant and ludicrous nature of chatelaine Ottoline.

Despite the austerity of wartime when the Morrells 'could not afford to do very much', they went up and down between London and Garsington to 'supervise the painting, decorating of the house and the planting in the garden'.²²⁹ They created out of it 'a work of original imaginative art, revealing a highly individual taste which extended to every detail of its furnishings down to the very writing paper and the matchboxes'.²³⁰ In those glorious days Garsington's highlights included peacocks, monastic fishponds and an Italian garden. Such a taste for home decoration verging

University Press, 2008), 40.

²²⁵ Richard Gill, "Invitation to Garsington," *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, 50 no. 2 (1974): 205, accessed July 1, 2017, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1291782988?accountid=15181.199>.

²²⁶ In her journal entry Ottoline wrote of her determination to make Garsington into 'a harbour, a refuge in the storm, where those who haven't been swept away could come and renew themselves and go forth strengthened'. Ottoline Morrell, *Ottoline at Garsington*, 35.

²²⁷ Morrell, *Ottoline at Garsington*, 256.

²²⁸ On Christmas 1916, for example, Katherine Mansfield during her visit wrote a short play "The Laurels" for the occasion. Carrington was among the cast. She played Muriel Dash, a grandchild of Dr. Keit (played by Strachey). Dash slyly elicited the personal entanglements of Carrington herself as she 'rushed frantically between her male and female lovers'. See Jeffrey Meyers, *Katherine Mansfield: A Darker View* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2002), 133.

²²⁹ Morrell, *Ottoline: The Early Memoirs of Lady Ottoline Morrell*, ed. Robert Gathorne-Hardy (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 276.

²³⁰ Cecil (Introduction), *Lady Ottoline Album: Snapshots and Portraits of her Famous Contemporaries (and of herself)*, 7.

on the outlandish is no doubt connected with its mistress's odd habit of 'prioritising beauty before practicality'.²³¹ In a delightful tone Ottoline wrote how elegantly the Italian statues 'stand[ing] against the yew hedges and green paths' provided a contrast to the old grey Jacobean house.²³² Inspiring as they were, these marvels of Garsington would become the central presence in the frame of both Ottoline and her guests 'who felt the war intensely, and were certainly neither careless nor heartless about it'.²³³ Metaphorically and in practice Garsington's hedonistic exile, forged by the surreal, dreamlike atmosphere of carnival and theatre, made its callers 'oblivious of the ordinary world' and 'stimulated them to give vent to hidden impulses'.²³⁴ Such qualities of sheer escapism—related to what in Chapter 1 I called escapade—invoke Foucault's concept of the *heterotopia* in so far as Garsington's bizarre spirit makes the place at once absolutely real and unreal. The "different world" of Garsington is both a real site and a virtual space in which eccentric culture concomitantly contests and confirms the prevailing social ideologies. The quirky, reckless aesthetics of the Garsington setting reinforces the significance of the enigma of Carrington's life-sculpture performance.

Turning now to Carrington's execution of a living statue, the act of transforming oneself into a motionless object corresponds to what Richard Shusterman calls 'the *mise-en-scène* of the photographic situation'. The process entails a purposeful physical paralysis both in so far as Carrington is playing a statue, and insofar as she is posing motionlessly in front of the camera. Technically, her self-presentation and self-styling is a product of a very conscious process, reminiscent of *tableau vivant* to a significant degree.²³⁵ Although not a *tableau vivant* in the strictest sense, her "performance-as-object" adheres to its main principles in that it, in the words of artist Aura Satz, 'fixes, solidifies, frames into visibility, congeals

²³¹ Ottoline's notoriously eccentric manners and personal style were often lampooned by the literary and artistic luminaries in receipt of her hospitality. Carrington on one occasion complained 'I think it's beastly of them to enjoy Ottoline's kindness and then laugh at her'. Dora Carrington to Mark Gertler, December 1915, *Carrington: Letters and Extracts from her Diaries*, 21.

²³² Morrell, *Ottoline at Garsington*, 255.

²³³ Morrell, *Ottoline: The Early Memoirs of Lady Ottoline Morrell*, 276.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 256.

²³⁵ Richard Shusterman, "Photography as Performative Process," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 70, no. 1 (2012): 68, accessed July 26, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42635857>.

into sculpture'.²³⁶ Satz argues further that 'the living picture' which 'lacks articulation (vocal, physical and narrative)' imitates the '*rigor mortis*'—the stiffness of the muscles that normally occurs in a dead body—but without truly dying. Satz's explanation of the fundamental concept of *tableau vivant* resonates with Roland Barthes's reflection on photography in ways that it compares a subtle moment in portrait photography to 'a micro-version of death'. However, Barthes (in a grim mood) identifies the subject with a 'passive victim'.²³⁷ While such withdrawal into the silence and immobile state of the statue, as of the photographic model, might frame one reading of this inarticulate self-made statuary—whether it reflects an actual lack of voice or of authorship—the intention here (and of the whole chapter) is to shed light on the element of 'interart discourse', to borrow from Sarah J. Paulson.²³⁸ Here, Carrington is experimenting with a pastiche of art forms and genres—photography, portraiture, dance and sculpture—in a single moment. To some extent, a range and diversity of genres can be read as an essential tool for her artistic effort, wherein she hovers over the threshold between fixity and freedom, play and performance, revealing and concealing.

In his classic study *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1980), Barthes discusses two distinct planes of an image: what he terms the *studium* and the *punctum*. The *studium* refers to the self-contained and easily comprehensible dimension of a photograph, the meaning of which can be perceived through 'the figures, the faces, the gestures, the settings, the actions', whereas the *punctum* is a detail of the photograph that breaks the conventions of the *studium*. The *punctum*, according to Barthes 'shoots out like an arrow and pierces' or even 'pricks' and 'wounds' the observer.²³⁹ Unlike the *studium* that is ordered in a universal way, the *punctum* attracts

²³⁶ Aura Satz, "Tableaux Vivants: Inside the Statue," in *Articulate Objects: Voice, Sculpture and Performance*, ed. Aura Satz and Jon Wood (Oxford: Peter Lang 2009), 163.

²³⁷ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 1993), 14.

²³⁸ Sarah J. Paulson, "'The Body Expressed in Word and Image: An Attempt at Defining Cora Sandel's Aesthetics,'" in *Changing Borders: Contemporary Positions in Intermediality*, ed. Jens Arvidson, Mikael Askander, Jørgen Bruhn and Heidrun Führer (Lund: Intermedia Studies Press, 2007), 377. See also Geneviève Sanchis Morgan, "Pouring Out Tea and Emptying Chamber Pots: Woolf, Carrington and the Domestic Front," in *Virginia Woolf and the Arts: Selected Papers from the Sixth Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf, Clemson University, Clemson, SC, June 13-16, 1996*, ed. Diane F Gillespie; Leslie K Hankins (New York: Pace Up, 1997), 115.

²³⁹ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 26.

the viewer's gaze but is always intelligible. To an individual viewer the *punctum* will be poignant to the extent that its mere presence changes one's reading of a photograph. As an example, Barthes discusses Kertész's photograph of a blind gypsy violinist being led by a boy. What catches his attention and then moves him emotionally is the texture of the dirt road, not the subject or the context of the photograph. This particular *punctum* brings back his memory of 'the straggling villages I passed through on my long ago travels in Hungary and Rumania'.²⁴⁰ Underpinning a multiplication of possible narratives, Barthes's conceptualisation of the *punctum* is compatible with Carrington's production of an image which repels a monolithic interpretation.

Reading Carrington's living statue images through the conceptual lens of Barthes, the *studium* is artist Dora Carrington posing naked, impersonating a statue at Garsington Manor in 1917. At this juncture it is important to clarify that the '*punctum*' here (in Barthes's sense) is neither the uncanny display of the body, nor the aspect of burlesque and *tableau vivant*, nor the fact that the snapshots were gleefully taken against the backdrop of a wartime atmosphere of emotional burdens and anxieties. While these features may well function to surprise and to grab the viewer's attention, they are not necessarily the *punctum*, but fit more within what Barthes has called the 'gamut of "surprise"' since they chiefly 'obey a principle of defiance'.²⁴¹ Here, that the naked subject is posing astride a statue is 'surprising' enough, as it is a strange thing to be doing, even in a time of peace. I would argue that the *punctum* or poignant detail of Carrington's live statuary images is the small, almost rectangular stone block that provides support for both Carrington and the stone statue. Upon a closer scrutiny, the block looks far too small to support both figures. Even for the huge statue alone it barely provides a secure grip, as only the left half of its body rests firmly on the lump. Very poignantly Carrington as a human statue manages to find herself a foothold out of that limited space. At some point the stone block arrests one's eye and makes one think how strenuous

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 45.

²⁴¹ According to Barthes, the photograph becomes "surprising" when the photographer 'def[y] the laws of probability or even of possibility', Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 33.

and precarious this playful posture actually is: she may literally fall off. This is where the photos become provoking or piercing. The *punctum* invites viewers to consider Carrington's (lack of a secure) foothold in a contemporary art scene where men define the terms of work and value.²⁴² Carrington might be aligned here with Lily Briscoe in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927). Briscoe arduously maintains a professional identity and defies the mantra 'women can't write, women can't paint'.²⁴³ Nevertheless, Carrington, who is a talented portraitist and a painter of prize-winning nudes, by performing as living statue, manifestly points to the place given to women in masculine canonical culture.

Seen as the muse for the male artist, women have traditionally not been deemed to possess the same creative power as men, although they inspired them. Carrington herself was ascribed such a role by Mark Gertler, her insistent lover from the Slade years.²⁴⁴ Desperately in love with Carrington, he wrote to her,

[...] ever since I got to know you I thought of you in every stroke I did. I want you badly to see all that I paint and I keep wondering what you will think of my work ... You can't think how difficult it is to have no one to work for, no one to share one's real success with.²⁴⁵

Seeing Carrington as his fountain of inspiration, Gertler, despite his recognition of her passionate commitment to her art, did not see her as having equal expertise and creative power—"creative power" not only in sense of the intellectual/artistic capacity someone has, but also in the sense

²⁴² Christopher Nevinson, Carrington's colleague at the Slade, recognised the problem facing women artists and warned her: 'I don't want to discourage you but as you happen to be aiming high you have quite simply a bloody struggle in front of you of course not only with your actual self-expression but that vile dead wall of prejudice and hatred against a woman', Nevinson to Carrington, 9 September 1912, quoted in David Boyd Haycock, *A Crisis of Brilliance: Five Young British Artists and the Great War* (London: Old Street Publishing, 2010), 101.

²⁴³ Virginia Woolf, *To The Light House* (1927) (New York: Harcourt, 1955), 75.

²⁴⁴ In 1910 Carrington left home and entered the far freer world of London artists at the Slade School of Art where she was entangled in her first love triangle involving Mark Gertler and Christopher Nevinson. Gertler suffered a long agonising relationship in which Carrington could be loving and caring yet curiously aloof.

²⁴⁵ Mark Gertler to Carrington June 1912, *Mark Gertler: Selected Letters*, ed. Noel Carrington (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1965), 36.

of a positive encouragement to create, as generally male artists were privileged and favoured by dealers and patrons. This is reflected in his list of ‘the advantages’ Carrington would have by marrying him. He offers, ‘I could help you in your art career’ and promises her ‘absolute freedom and a nice studio of your own’.²⁴⁶ Gertler’s proposal is indicative of a long-standing tradition of male chauvinism which strongly holds that women, even women with exceptional talents, need a man’s support in order to be successful in their chosen career.²⁴⁷ By performing a sculpture Carrington is perhaps ironising the role of the woman artist as a muse/model to the male artist, who always does the “real” painting. She, who once had the privilege of setting the pose and selecting her place for her easel as a Slade prize-winning painter, is now posing nude, not unlike the models in the Women’s Life Room.²⁴⁸ This interpretation ultimately brings us back the reading of the images I suggested earlier: an actual lack of voice or of authorship. In respect of the gendered division of social roles and labour, the images of the living statue poignantly speak of the predicament faced not just by a female artist in particular, but by women in general. Or an obvious incongruity in the image between something which society suggests one ought to revere (classical art, high art) and the practice of streaking (Carrington stripped naked and posed as a classic Italian statue) is a parody of the conventional artistic standard, usually male-dominated. Considering so much classical art depicts public nudity, it is art mimicking art’s mimicking of life.

Reading the images of Carrington posing naked as a statue in the wider context of those sombre days of 1917—the fourth and penultimate year of the Great War—suggests how this gender-nonconforming artist implicates herself in the established paradigm of the sex/gender politics of wartime Britain. Undoubtedly Carrington, whose three brothers had immediately joined the first wave of the voluntary army (one of them, Teddy, was reported dead in 1916), denounces the logic of ‘giving people

²⁴⁶ Mark Gertler to Carrington, 19 June 1912, *Gertler: Selected Letters*, 36-37.

²⁴⁷ Being made a decade earlier than the publication of *A Room of One’s Own*, Gertler’s proposal to provide financial security and a studio for Carrington is interestingly and ironically close to Woolf’s suggested preconditions for women’s creativity.

²⁴⁸ The Slade School of Art was the first school in Britain to allow female students to use nude models for painting, albeit with restrictions: male and female students sketched models in separate rooms; and male models for female students were partially covered. See Hill, *The Art of Dora Carrington* (London: The Herbert Press, 1994), 14-21.

back what they give you’ and attacks politicians and journalists who adopt it: ‘we give the German soldiers back underground explosion, gas fumes, hand grenades, & every horror that they give us. & yet it has not altered their state of mind—what idiots these press people are’.²⁴⁹ Rather than enlisting for the women’s service, like some middle-class women of her time, Carrington shut herself off from the war business, and from time-to-time joined the other self-declared war objectors at Garsington. She was among the ‘cropheads’ who appeared, as described by Ottoline, ‘in corduroy trousers, coloured shirts, short hair’ and ‘seemed fresh and interested in life, and hated the war’.²⁵⁰ Thus, we can identify her as an individual artist (playful and fond of practical jokes as she was) who works upon her body to reflect on the absurdity of the war. Viewed in this light, Carrington’s audacious performance echoes the ludic anti-militarism of the *Dreadnought* hoax.

Thus, in a political sense, the naked living statue can be construed as demonstrably provocative at least in two respects: the atmosphere of unseemly entertainment it implies, and the downplay of contemporaneous anxieties about wartime social disorder— anxieties which were often played out upon the mores and bodies of women. Carrington’s physical exposure re-enacts, appropriates (if not *echoes*), the images of the female body— ranging from those with a strong impact in an erotic sense to depictions of the self-sacrificing mother or wife— which found their way into visual propaganda produced as early as 1915.²⁵¹ With a view to encouraging men to enlist, one of the most emotive posters released by the British government depicts a young woman, presumably violated by the German army, lying with her breast exposed.²⁵² In contrast to the repeated images of victims of male sexual predators, the female body was also seen as the site of temptation and the transmitter of disease, as such a threat to the fighting

²⁴⁹ Carrington to Noel Carrington, no date, quoted in David Boyd Haycock, *A Crisis of Brilliance: Five Young British Artists and the Great War* (London: Old Street Publishing, 2010), 241.

²⁵⁰ Morrell, *Ottoline: The Early Memoirs of Lady Ottoline Morrell*, 277-278.

²⁵¹ The compelling sources of propaganda emphasised the extreme brutality of the German army. This featured reports, which became known in Britain as the Bryce Report, on sexual assaults of women by German soldiers. See Grayzel, *Women and the First World War* (London: Routledge, 2016), 16.

²⁵² Grayzel, *Women’s Identities at War*, 65.

man.²⁵³ The varied constructions and presentations of female sexuality during the war emphasise the status of the women as an image made, as opposed to that of the maker of image (in most cases, men). The physiological dynamism in Carrington's naked photos, I argue, fits her in neither group—neither the sexual temptresses nor the innocent victims of sexual abuse— but again taking a position in the liminal zone between the oppositional sides.

Yet notwithstanding the verve and energy of the images, her naked body invokes a strong sense of vulnerability. On the one hand, Carrington is portraying an individual put at the behest of a highly authoritarian and strictly autocratic institution, political and sexual. On the other hand, the array of mockery and fun prevents her from being just a passive victim of oppressive conventions and restrictions on the female body. In other words, she is using her nakedness in a particular kind of passive-aggressive resistance which, discursively, if symbolically, articulates a critique of wartime propaganda even as it speaks to the inarticulacy of “woman”.

At first glimpse, Carrington's withdrawal into the silence and immobile state of the statue runs counter to the image of women in Britain who actively participated in the war in many ways, both on the home and fighting fronts: especially those doing work which before the war had only been done by men.²⁵⁴ Upon closer scrutiny, however, the “new freedom” brought with it new hardships which came in a variety of forms, such as long working hours, hazardous working conditions, male opposition and even more oppressive rules.²⁵⁵ In this sense, Carrington's state of inarticulate statuary reflects the reality of some English women of those years, whose voices were still hardly heard and whose role was merely peripheral to the task of national governance. Thus they were no different from the immobile statue whose function was merely for ornamentation. What is static for women at this time is *genuine* or *meaningful* social

²⁵³ Ibid., 122.

²⁵⁴ There were several women who went to the war zone, working behind the actual fighting line. They ‘drove ambulances, ran soup kitchens, put on shows and plays for the soldiers, and worked as clerks and telephonists in army bases’. See Gill Thomas, *Life on All Fronts: Women in the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 30.

²⁵⁵ For example the rules for selling drinks to women in some towns and the rules to control women's sexual behavior, rather than men's. See Thomas, *Life on All Fronts*, 24.

situation. It was not until the following year that (some) women were granted the vote in England, despite the movement for enfranchisement beginning some half a century earlier.²⁵⁶ By 1917 it must have seemed that progress was frozen.

Carrington's expressive live sculpture thus encapsulates a complex interplay of opposing qualities—subject and object, power and powerlessness, creator of art and art object—that counterbalance each other in certain respects. From one point of view she seems to be seeing herself as a corporeal allusion to the stone figure; from another her effortful pose and co-creative interaction with the camera imply a living, fluid interiority embedded in the unmoving body. In his notion of 'the practices of self' Foucault proposes that 'there are patterns that [the individual] finds in his culture and which are proposed, suggested and imposed on him by his culture, his society and his social group.'²⁵⁷ In a process of self-formation Carrington draws on existing cultural patterns in a particular socio-historical context—the presumed roles and tasks of women in both the art world and beyond—and from there she diverges as far apart as the perceived constraints and conditions allow her. This serious work-in-progress entails a sustained effort to balance two or more competing meanings. This early playful impression of a statue can be read as a precursor or a pretext for her *sui generis* punning aesthetics. As we shall see, Carrington would go on to ponder, reflect on, and play with multifariousness, whether visual or verbal.

2.2 A Theory of Triangulation

My analysis of Carrington's performance-art/sculpture/image forms a necessary background for my reading of the following excerpts from her correspondence, which in turn offer penetrating insights into her struggle with herself, her relationships and her work. As Frances Partridge notes, Carrington 'has painted her own portrait much better than anyone else could

²⁵⁶ It took a sixty-two year of struggle until all English women over the age of thirty were finally given the vote in 1918. See Christine Fauré, ed., *Political and Historical Encyclopedia of Women*, trans. Richard Dubois [et al.] (New York: Routledge, 2003), 518.

²⁵⁷ Michel Foucault, "The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom: An Interview with Michel Foucault," in *The Final Foucault*, ed. J. Bernauer and D. Rasmussen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 11.

in her letters and diaries'.²⁵⁸ A glimpse of her 1919 letter to Gerald Brenan, for example, reveals how Carrington conceptualises her sense of self in relation to others, and brings to light the perennial dilemma at the heart of this sexual being:

I believe if one wasn't reserved, and hadn't a sense of "what is possible" one could be very fond of certainly two or three people at a time. To know a human being intimately, to feel their affection, to have their confidences is so absorbing that it's clearly absurd to think one only has the inclination for one variety. The very contrast of a double relation is fascinating. But the days are too short. And then one has work to do. So one has to abandon some people and the difficulty of choosing is great. Don't you find it so?²⁵⁹

This short epistolary extract is full of references to the artist's attempt to come to terms with 'the difficulty of choosing'. Carrington loves discovering a new person, and enjoys the privilege of knowing someone's secrets (as opposed to revealing hers). But most of all she wants passionate intimacy that demands no emotional bond because the commitment does necessitate her settling on one choice and giving up the other. This excerpt shows that Carrington is well aware of the cerebral and intellectual aspects of her predicament. She is cognizant of 'a responsibility of having someone in love with one', although, very characteristically, she cannot resist the temptations of a new love and continuously ushers new people into a series of shifting triangulations.²⁶⁰ By the time she wrote this letter, Carrington was already entangled in a web of 'plural affections' for two men; Lytton Strachey (known for his homosexuality) and Ralph Partridge (for whom Strachey developed an unrequited passion).²⁶¹ Together the trio formed an

²⁵⁸ Frances Partridge, *Memories* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd), 1981), 96.

²⁵⁹ Dora Carrington to Gerald Brenan 15 December, 1919, *Carrington: Letters and Extracts from her Diaries*, 149-50.

²⁶⁰ Dora Carrington to Gerald Brenan 12 January, 1920, *Ibid.*, 152.

²⁶¹ Strachey himself wryly commented on their multiple and overlapping affairs in which each member of the threesome was in love with one another, 'everything is at sixes and sevens – ladies in love with buggers and buggers in love with womanisers, and the price of coal going up too'. Strachey

unconventional sexual arrangement, the ‘Triangular Trinity of Happiness’, at the Tidmarsh and later Ham Spray Houses.²⁶² In the meantime Carrington was on the verge of starting a new affair with Brenan, Ralph’s lifelong friend. Throughout the course of her life, she was to repeat the emotional pattern of triangulations with both sexes, while remaining loyal to Strachey.

Carrington first met Brenan in May 1919 during his annual return to England from Spain, where he had found himself a peasant house in a remote village high up in the Andalusian Mountains. She suggested they correspond and began writing to him in November 1919.²⁶³ Her interest in Brenan was growing. In a 1920 letter she writes, ‘I should like to know more about your imaginings, and mental travels’.²⁶⁴ Their later correspondence would become so intimate that Brenan had to put a red stamp upside down so that Carrington could conceal a particularly passionate letter before Ralph could see it.²⁶⁵ The letter quoted above figures in their early correspondence. Illuminating her inability to “abandon some people”, this epistolary discourse can be interpreted in several ways. On one level, it can be read as a fascinating declaration of her desire, but on another level it could be seen—at least by David Garnett, Carrington’s “casual intimate” and the editor of *Carrington: Letters and Extracts from Her Diaries* (1970)—as a confession of her vulnerability. In his preface Garnett writes, ‘Like a child, [Carrington] found it hateful to choose; and after breaking off a relationship for ever she would immediately set about starting it again’.²⁶⁶ In his chiding tone Garnett associates Carrington’s vacillation with immaturity and attributes it to complications in her involvement with others. I contend, however, that Garnett obtusely misreads her approach. Garnett may be right that Carrington tends to avoid settling on one choice. At any rate, Carrington is never ambiguous in her railing against the norm

to Dora Carrington, 11 July 1919, *The Letters of Lytton Strachey* ed. Paul Levy (London: Penguin Group, 2005), 444.

²⁶² Dora Carrington to Lytton Strachey 6 November 1922, *Carrington: Letters and Extracts from Her Diaries*, 234.

²⁶³ Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy, *The Interior Castle: A Life of Gerald Brenan* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1992), 138.

²⁶⁴ Dora Carrington to Gerald Brenan 12 January 1920, *Carrington: Letters and Extracts from Her Diaries*, 152.

²⁶⁵ Dora Carrington to Gerald Brenan 3 May 1922, *Carrington’s Letters: Her Art, Her Loves, Her Friendships*, 202.

²⁶⁶ David Garnett, *Carrington: Letters and Extracts from her Diaries*, 12.

of conventional coupling. In 1920 she wrote to Brenan, ‘I dislike merging into a person, which marriage involves... I *prefer* the friendships of *grown-up human beings* [emphasis added]’.²⁶⁷ Here, Carrington implies that marriage is ill-suited to a grown-up mind, unlike her kind of “friendships”. Moreover, her tone, far from being childish, is at once determined and speculative, a kind of thinking normally articulated by ‘grown-up human beings’. In a mature and hardheaded vein, Carrington clearly states her choices: what she likes and what she does not. In this context I am focusing on knowing what one wants rather than knowing what one *ought* to want. By comparison the latter is more of a mature thought, but note that we are following the life of a nonconformist artist who is a member of a clique in which ‘marriage contracts and exclusive sexualities were not unassailable fortresses’.²⁶⁸ I, therefore, argue that Carrington’s gesture, read within the mindset of Bloomsbury, is anything but an infantile attitude.

Viewed in this light, Carrington does make her choice. In other words, she chooses not to choose and this underscores her strong predilection for a state of liminality which she attains through playful, yet not puerile, prevarication. This very strategy, as we have seen, is used in her performance as a living statue whereby she vacillates between the roles of a creator of art and an art object. In this epistolary discourse, Carrington takes it to the next level as she pursues equivocality through a play with numbers, a painstaking use of words and a complex array of personal pronouns.

As the excerpt testifies, Carrington is so exceedingly protective of her freedom and independence that she can hardly abide the thought of restricting ‘oneself’ to just one person or occupation, especially when ‘the days are too short’. Perhaps this accounts for her denunciation of ‘the inclination for one variety’ and her proclivity for a more liberal, if not necessarily “seemly”, option. Carrington, hence, far from being “reserved”, plunges into the entanglement of ‘a double relation’. A purposive juxtaposition of numbers – ‘one variety’ and ‘a *double* relation’ – dovetailed with the verbal rhetoric, hints at her interest in the possibilities of

²⁶⁷ Dora Carrington to Gerald Brenan, October 1920, University of Texas at Austin quoted in Gerzina, *A Life of Dora Carrington*, 163.

²⁶⁸ Murphy, “Carrington: The Culturally Grotesque Hybrid Monster,” 87.

triangulation, an integration of ‘two or three at a time’. Such relatively geometrical structure, rather than an unsystematic or random pattern, is by no means childish, not least because she is calculating and intellectualising the problem.

Carrington is very adept at rationalising her rejection of commitment to any single course of action or person. In doing so she deploys a facility with word-play which is so shrewd that Brenan’s biographer Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy, accuses her of ‘seduc[ing] men with her letters’.²⁶⁹ In the preceding lines of this excerpt Carrington has been elucidating her feelings for Ralph. While expressing her fondness for her future husband, her line shows a stark classification of her affection: ‘I certainly will never *love* him but I am extremely *fond* of him’ (emphasis mine).²⁷⁰ Her choice of words, ‘love’ and ‘fond’ suggests two hierarchically and significantly different layers of affection, whereby she securely places Strachey on top of the triangle.²⁷¹ Those desperately in love with and trying to make emotional demands upon Carrington must be fazed by such prevarication. This is the case with Gertler, whom she would never love, yet was unable to let go. Unsurprisingly, Brenan would later find himself falling into the same situation as Gertler. In the meantime, Carrington is going to let history repeat itself: she will never commit herself to Ralph and will set out to create another emotional and erotic (tri)angle around her. For her, love always comes with commitment and is something to be reserved for only one person, obviously Strachey. As the excerpt shows, to love ‘two or three people at a time’ is something undoable (in the sense of not practical rather than illegitimate), whereas to be ‘be very fond of’ many people concurrently is otherwise. Juxtaposing two terms against each other, Carrington is using her letter to theorise the triangulation in which she puts the beloved on the top of the pyramid and those she is very fond of at the base. Here, the geometry is precise.

²⁶⁹ Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy, *The Interior Castle: A Life of Gerald Brenan*, 135.

²⁷⁰ Against her will Carrington agreed to marry Ralph in 1921 in order to keep the *ménage à trois* intact. See *Carrington: Letters and Extracts from Her Diaries*, 149.

²⁷¹ Carrington wrote to Brenan, ‘I deserted almost everyone, except Alix, for Lytton[...].’ Also in her poignant lines to Strachey written after she had agreed to marry Ralph, Carrington burst out how terribly she devoted to Strachey, ‘You who I would have given the world to have made happier than any person could be, to give you all you wanted[...]. I’ll always care as much.’ See *Carrington: Letters and Extracts from Her Diaries*, 152, 178.

In a spontaneous and playful idiom Carrington expresses herself quite openly and convincingly in this long, confiding letter. She draws constantly on a variety of sexual metaphors and innuendoes. The resultant language is simultaneously waggish and sensual. For example, her three steps of relationship: ‘to know a human being intimately’, ‘to feel their affection’ and then ‘to have their confidences’ conveys a shift in the degree of emotional and sensual intensity. It gives a sense of a strong emotional desire that is developing as one plunges into much more tangled depth. Moreover, such words as ‘intimately’, ‘feel’ and ‘absorbing’ are relatively suggestive in an erotic sense. Her language interestingly unfolds physical desires the speaker has erstwhile resisted.²⁷² To a great extent, it suggests that the rigidly Victorian assumptions she had been raised with no longer appear valid. Her exposure to the sexual subculture of Bloomsbury has changed her attitude towards sexual desire radically. As we shall see, Carrington, does much to undermine the prevailing cultural norms and has her own sense of “what is possible”.²⁷³

Also noteworthy is her use of a gender-neutral, third person pronoun. Carrington’s other letters (including those to Strachey) testify to her habit of using the pronoun “one” instead of “I”, most especially when she wants to put forward her own point of view.²⁷⁴ Nevertheless, her motivation for choosing this indefinite pronoun here may be much more complex. Carrington feels that she does not know Brennan well enough and is ‘still baffled by his character’.²⁷⁵ By using the generic pronoun, Carrington circumspectly places herself in a position of calculated deniability, as ‘one’ functions in an objective manner, standing for the average person of both sexes. Obviously, the pronoun ‘one’ here refers to Carrington herself, but it

²⁷² Dora Carrington to Mark Gertler, 16 April 1915, ‘You must know one could not do, what you ask, sexual intercourse, unless one does love a man’s body. I have never felt any desire for that in my life’, *Carrington: Letters and Extracts from her Diaries*, 17.

²⁷³ As it turns out, Carrington came up with her own sense of “what is possible” and she ventured into new realms of romantic desire. In 1923 she had a same-sex relationship with Henrietta Bingham, the daughter of the American ambassador to the Court of St. James. In 1928 Carrington started an affair with Bernard Beakus Penrose, ten years her junior and by whom she became pregnant.

²⁷⁴ See for example Dora Carrington to Gerald Brennan 21 May, 1923, Dora Carrington to Gerald Brennan, 1 June, 1923, Dora Carrington to Lytton Strachey, 10 January, 1924, Carrington, *Carrington: Letters and Extracts from her Diaries*, 248, 253, 276.

²⁷⁵ ‘At moments one thinks he’s only an energetic talkative Bunny...But then unlike Bunny he is much more obstinate, and not in the least influenced by people evidently’ Dora Carrington to Lytton Strachey, 29 August, 1919, *Carrington: Letters and Extracts from her Diaries*, 142.

can also be applied to Brenan. Upon a closer scrutiny, the term is paradoxical. While semantically and grammatically signifying singularity, it conveys a sense of collectiveness. Put differently, its grammatical indicators are those of singularity, but its (non-grammatical) semantics contain plurality/multiplicity. Obviously, there is much to semantics, and the vagueness of this usage is pragmatic (i.e. it can be used, in different contexts, to convey either a singular or a collective). In this sense, the semantic territory of ‘one’ expands to cover more than just one aspect or one type of being, regardless of sex, age, race and so on. As such, it is individual yet combined, distinguishing yet unclear. Veering this way and that, Carrington’s seemingly ‘vague remarks’ help camouflage her desire and determination, and subtly implicate her interlocutor in the discourse.²⁷⁶

There is another striking case of Carrington’s conscientious use of pronoun: the title of her diary which reads “Her Book”.²⁷⁷ Rather than asserting the right over her own life story by using the first person possessive pronoun “my”, Carrington chooses to be evasive and avoids emphasis on herself as the subject of actions performed. This evasive attitude can be felt in the letter to Brenan, which exemplifies Carrington’s persistent refusal not only of the prescribed societal limits of acceptable couplings but also of an imposition of one absolute entity. This is, however, not to say that Carrington, by promoting multiplicity and variables, aims for a limitless plurality or plenitude of meanings.

Just as in her meticulous wordplay and punning, we shall see her propensity for precise geometry extending to her visual language. The following section discusses how Carrington continually constructs different, if not discordant, possibilities, which consequently interrogate questions of identity, gender and even genre, as her paintings—the Andalusian landscape and the *trompe-l’oeil* window—testify.

²⁷⁶ Dora Carrington to Gerald Brenan 12 January, 1920, *Carrington: Letters and Extracts from her Diaries*, 152.

²⁷⁷ It is noteworthy that on the cover of her diary “Her Book” Carrington misspelled her name as D.C. Patride, dropping one letter from her married name Partridge. Despite a common knowledge of her tendency to misspellings, this is very controversial among her critics whether it was done deliberately.

2.3 Visual pun and the rhapsody of the unexplored realm

Carrington's landscapes cannot be easily labelled and categorised into traditional artistic pigeonholes. Although bombarded by the wealth of new artistic ideas from the burgeoning modernist movement, her style was generally tailored to the sensibilities of English art. Yet it demonstrates a refusal to be culturally and traditionally legible. Highly self-reflexive and self-critical, Carrington is well aware of the downsides of being outside the dominant paradigm. She laments that 'I see I shall never fit in any "school". I am not modern enough for the French style, and too clumsy to be a New Englisher'.²⁷⁸ Carrington's introspection about her failure to settle within any precise artistic parameter reflects in a broader sense the whole picture of her complicated life, in which a clash between opposing elements prevails. Consider, for example, her *Mountain Ranges from Yegen, Andalusia* (1924), a landscape that is of artistic and psychological importance. The picture, which lies somewhere on the boundaries of traditional English landscape painting and French Surrealism, of imagination and reality, reflects something of the artist's complicated and multi-faceted subjectivity.



Figure 2.5 *Mountain Ranges from Yegen, Andalusia* (1924)²⁷⁹

²⁷⁸ Quoted in Hill, *The Art of Dora Carrington*, 64.

²⁷⁹ *Mountain Ranges from Yegen, Andalusia* (1924). Oil painted on canvas, Tate Collection, accessed September 2, 2017, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/carrington-spanish-landscape-with-mountains-t11896>.

Carrington's landscapes vividly demonstrate her sophisticated and intense feelings for nature. In 1923 Carrington visited Brenan in the remote village of Yegen, Spain. On a walk along the spine of a high ridge of mountains she was completely won over by the Andalusian landscape. During her other visits Carrington had also made several studies of the landscape.²⁸⁰ Back in England she painted the canvas from her recollections of geographical details (Fig. 2.5). Prior to *Mountain Ranges from Yegen* Carrington had painted *Hill Town in Andalusia* (c.1920), a Spanish landscape based on a village near Brenan's home.²⁸¹ The two Yegen landscapes, however, differ in subject matter, colour scheme and techniques. *Hill Town in Andalusia* is hardly a departure from her early landscapes, in which she mainly worked with the cool colours of white, blue and green. Moreover, its most outstanding feature— its anti-refinement pointillist aesthetics— shows the influence of Post-Impressionism, a style preached in Bloomsbury.²⁸² In contradiction to the earlier landscape, *Mountain Ranges from Yegen* shows a sharp and clear outline. The colour scheme is also different: the warm tones dominate the landscape, whereas the blue hue of the daylight sky and the sea simply works to heighten the definition of the yellow and orange-brown topography. A forceful composition of shapes, textures and strong deep colours makes the resultant painting a far from faithful rendition of the Spanish countryside.

Notwithstanding her hypersensitivity to the judgments of others in regard to her work, Carrington constantly experiments with new techniques of painting and exhibits self-mastery through manifold aspects of art. Regarding her execution of *Mountain Ranges from Yegen* Carrington, in a letter to Brenan in 1924, claims that this canvas saw her experimenting with glazing techniques for more transparent effects.²⁸³ No less experimental, however, is the eccentric and flamboyant configuration of the mountain

²⁸⁰ Carrington wrote to Frances Marshall from Yegen, 'In the afternoon I generally go out with a little village girl of 12 and paint the mountains.' Carrington to Frances Marshall, January 1924, *Carrington: Letters and Extracts from her Diaries*, 271.

²⁸¹ Carrington, *Carrington: Paintings, Drawings and Decorations*, 61.

²⁸² Tony Bradshaw, *The Bloomsbury Artists: Prints and Book Design* (Aldershot: Scolar Press; Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Pub. 1999), 12.

²⁸³ 'I am trying a new plan, an entire underpainting in brilliant colours, over which I shall glaze green and more transparent colours.' Carrington wrote to Gerald in 1924 quoted in Noel Carrington, *Carrington: Paintings, Drawings and Decorations*, 60.

ranges. The gigantic, unnaturally smooth, glowing yellow hills in the centre of the frame are at variance with the tranquility of the scene. In the background, the boldly artificial jagged peaks of the mountain ridges peculiarly, and almost symmetrically, dash up from the ground like waves of triangles. It comes as some surprise to see massive cacti growing abundantly on a plateau of barren land of the foreground. The towering plant is visually at odds with the four tiny mules and their muleteers, almost invisible on the narrow road carved into the hillside. From one perspective, the whimsical scale gives a glimpse of a typical eighteenth-century landscape painting, which tends to perpetuate the trope of ‘the individual dwarfed by the vastness of his natural surroundings’.²⁸⁴ From another it evokes the artistic vision of Surrealism, whose ethos is to reconcile reality with the ‘illogical processes that arise in ecstatic states or in dreams’.²⁸⁵ In the manner of a surrealist artist, Carrington creates the at-once familiar and unfamiliar world of the painting within which a realist painting style allows the viewer to recognise familiar objects—the jagged peaks and the massive cacti—albeit with some quirky elements. Cohering with surprising success, all these elements work to lend exoticism and dream-like qualities to the view.

Mountain Ranges from Yegen sees Carrington deliberately blurring the boundaries between the real and the imaginary. To give more weight to this, I quote here Brennan’s letter to Carrington in which he vividly depicts the scenic view of the Yegen mountains.

[...] at one’s feet in the “plain”, or rather basin, of Ugijar are row after row of desert hills, rounded, carved out and shaped by wind and water, covered with little bushes or else with almond trees...The mountains are completely bare, but are not steep or jagged. They are wonderfully

²⁸⁴ Timothy Wilcox, “Painting the Alps: Transforming Perceptions of Francis Towne and His Contemporaries,” access May 6, 2017, <http://www.bl.uk/picturing-places/articles/painting-the-alps-transforming-perceptions-of-francis-towne-and-his-contemporaries>.

²⁸⁵ Sarane Alexandrian, *Surrealist Art*, trans. Gordon Clough (London: Thames and Hudson, 1970), 48.

modelled by a network of gullies and ravines... which, if I could draw, I should like to draw all day long.²⁸⁶

Carrington's landscape portrays the 'completely bare' mountains in a way that is consistent with Brenan's verbal description. However, the jagged and pointed mountains receding into the background are otherwise. Unlike Brenan, Carrington positions herself as distinct from the surroundings. She gazes upon, negotiates, and even reshapes them. Such a complex interplay between reality and fantasy can be taken as a spontaneous expression of creative emotion enjoyed for its own sake. This very sensation, much coveted by surrealist artists, interestingly matches what Carrington regards as an amazingly inspiring moment in which 'suddenly one soars without corporeal bodies on these planes of thoughts'.²⁸⁷ *Mountain Ranges from Yegen*, when read against the landscapes and the sketches made in preceding years, is indicative of her stepping across an artistic threshold from the Old Master tradition taught at the Slade to a new artistic realm. She compromises the rules of composition, tonality and the accurate rendition of the essential character of the landscape in her execution of this distant, unexplored geography.

A surreal intensity also lies in the evocative feature of the bare sunset hills. In the idiom of the surrealist pictorial pun, an image represents two or more objects simultaneously.²⁸⁸ Art critics such as Jane Hill and Heather Birchall, as well as Carrington's biographer Gretchen Gerzina, draw attention to the extraordinary feminine lines of the hills and unanimously agree that with a little imagination, the great swelling hills become strongly lit female breasts, the tips of which point up to the sky and

²⁸⁶ Gerald Brenan to Dora Carrington, November 29, 1919, quoted in *Carrington: Letters and Extracts from her Diaries*, between pages 48 and 49.

²⁸⁷ Dora Carrington to Gerald Brenan, January 12, 1920, *Carrington: Letters and Extracts from her Diaries*, 152.

²⁸⁸ One example of a double image is a work of a British surrealist painter Ithell Colquhoun (1906-1988) *Scylla* (1938). Colquhoun paints twin rocks referring to a mythical sea-monster Scylla, who haunted the rock one side of the Straits of Messina and devoured passing sailors. The painting shows the rocks with a boat coming towards them. From a different perspective the same rocks look like female knees pressing against each other, while the red algae is readable as pubic hair covering the intimate part. The artist openly states her intention to deliver a double effect in *Scylla* as she remarks, 'it was suggested by what I could see of myself in a bath'.²⁸⁸ Given its strong identification with female embodiment, for some critics like Fiona Bradley, the painting becomes a powerful reassertion of a woman's right to reclaim her own body. See Fiona Bradley, *Surrealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 41-51.

are in parallel with the horizon.²⁸⁹ For those coming into contact with Carrington's early works, these feminine lines may be a reminiscence of her 1912 prize-winning reclining nude.²⁹⁰ Or alternatively, the arching curves can be read as 'knees under a bedspread' with the warm shades of orange and yellow emulating the tonalities of human skin and the red orange cracks of the soil can be interpreted as blood vessels.²⁹¹ The surrealist pun that allows for a range of possible readings of what is visible and available in the picture corresponds to Carrington's mode of self-expression in her living statue snapshots, in which the surface meanings are decidedly mixed and played out against each other.

Full of ups and downs like the outline of the rolling hills, her story, in which the trigonometry of love and an aura of self-indulgence predominate, highlights many themes in her painting. Given her propensity strongly to identify places with people with whom she emotionally engages, it is possible to read *Mountain Ranges from Yegen* as something of an extended meditation on her relationship with Brenan. In 1924 Carrington retrospectively wrote of the joyous moment in Yegen she had shared with him, for which she felt grateful: 'You know my life is almost entirely visual and no place ever gave me such exquisite happiness as last winter with you'.²⁹² From this line we can infer that Carrington may have taken her landscape imagery as an expressive response not only to places but also to people of psychological significance which are not necessarily limited to those she shared the places with. That is to say, the people playing influential roles in her life during that period may inform the painting as much as those present within the scene. The following lines to Brenan give the surest sense of such traits:

²⁸⁹ See Jane Hill, *The Art of Dora Carrington* (London: The Herbert Press, 1994), Gretchen Gerzina, *A Life of Dora Carrington 1893-1932 A Life of Dora Carrington 1893-1932* (London: Pimlico, 1995), and Heather Birchall, March 2005, accessed Jan 26, 2017, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/carrington-spanish-landscape-with-mountains-t11896>.

²⁹⁰ Given her overt repugnance for female physical features, especially of her own, Carrington's success in female nudes is indeed a nice irony. See *Reclining Nude*, Prize-winning oil painting at the Slade 1912-13.

²⁹¹ Teresa Grimes, Judith Collins and Oriana Baddeley, *Five Women Painters* (Oxford: Lennard Publishing, 1989), 88.

²⁹² Dora Carrington to Gerald Brenan 17 December, 1924, *Carrington: Letters and Extracts from her Diaries*, 309.

‘My chief fault, if it is one, is that when I am with a person I forget everyone else, all my other relations, & feel only this person I am with, and these present moments exist’.²⁹³

By the same token, Carrington may have felt the emotional intensity towards someone she met in the year she painted – rather than saw – *Mountain Ranges from Yegen*.

It was in 1923 when Carrington met Henrietta Bingham, the daughter of the American ambassador to the Court of St. James, by whom her sexual feelings towards women were awakened.²⁹⁴ Biographical records reveal that Carrington was working on the Andalusia landscape when she plunged into a new realm of romantic relationship with the ‘Kentucky Princess’.²⁹⁵ During their brief time together Carrington created a couple of sensual pen-and-ink nude studies of Henrietta.²⁹⁶ One of them shows Henrietta standing naked, confidently posing in high heel shoes. Her head is tilting and her right hand beckoning. Henrietta is looking forward and exchanging her gaze with the painter, provocatively with her chin up and lips slightly parted. Her solid but sensual posture implies the fetishistic passion between the model and the artist. Apart from the sketches, Carrington also put into words the feelings Henrietta aroused in her: ‘I am glad I knew her, as I did know her. It was an experience and I feel I have known the strange possibility that some women are capable of.’²⁹⁷ The romance was short-lived. As it turned out Henrietta saw Carrington as one of many suitors and, as Carrington ashamedly admitted to Brenan, ‘repay[s]

²⁹³ Quoted in Mary Ann Caws, *Glorious Eccentrics: Modernist Women Painting and Writing* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 116.

²⁹⁴ Henrietta Bingham, whose homosexual inclinations worried her father, received a “treatment” for her sexual inversion in London provided by Earnest Jones, a strong proponent of Freud. See *Carrington’s Letters: Her Art, Her Loves, Her Friendships*, ed. Anne Chisholm (New York: Vintage Publishing, 2017), 272. See also Gretchen Gerzina, *A Life of Dora Carrington 1893-1932* (London: Pimlico, 1995), 208.

²⁹⁵ Dora Carrington to Gerald Brenan 22 June, 1924, *Carrington: Letters and Extracts from her Diaries*, 295.

²⁹⁶ Hill, *The Art of Dora Carrington*, 100.

²⁹⁷ Dora Carrington to Gerald Brenan, 6 August, 1924, *Carrington’s Letters: Her Art, Her Loves, Her Friendships*, 237.

my affections almost as negatively as you find I do yours'.²⁹⁸ The brief *affaire de coeur*, however, was not entirely futile. Perhaps greater than the exhilaration that such a homoerotic experience gave her was 'a clue to my character', as Carrington later confided to Brenan.²⁹⁹ She even bemoaned that 'Probably if one was completely Sapphic it would be much easier. I wouldn't then be interested in men at all, and wouldn't have these conflicts'.³⁰⁰ At this pivotal moment, as she discovered sexual and emotional compatibility, Carrington developed a clear sense of her 'struggle with two insides': her attraction to men and her ecstasy with women, the latter she regrets suppressing.³⁰¹

Perhaps not coincidentally, the surreal formalised mountain ranges unfold something of Carrington's contemplation of her own sexuality. In particular, the mystic rolling curves which are suggestive of female bodies may imply the artist's excitement in her journey into the new terrain of a romantic affair. Full of energy, the outlandish geography may be read as symbolising an erstwhile unexplored homoerotic realm, into which she has traversed and has 'no feelings of shame afterwards'.³⁰² Or put in the context of their correspondence during the period in which the feelings of jealousy and distrust from Brenan's side predominate, it is tempting to say that the more or less triangular shape of the hills evokes another case of Carrington's eternal triangle. In this sense, her landscape is personal, if not autobiographical, as she projects onto the outside world her innermost thoughts and her seemingly contradictory desires: one for men, the other for women. In significant respects, Carrington's newly discovered bisexuality is in tune with her strong refusal to be committed to just one object. Artistically and in life, she is always exploring two or more meanings that are playing against each other.

²⁹⁸ Dora Carrington to Gerald Brenan 25 July 1924, *Carrington: Letters and Extracts from her Diaries*, 296.

²⁹⁹ In July 1925 letter she confided to Brenan, 'I think H[enrietta] although she gave me nothing else, gave a clue to my character'. See Dora Carrington to Gerald Brenan 21 July 1925, *Carrington: Letters and Extracts from Her Diaries*, 324-325.

³⁰⁰ Dora Carrington to Gerald Brenan 21 July 1925, *Carrington: Letters and Extracts from Her Diaries*, 324-325.

³⁰¹ Carrington wrote Alix Strachey, 'I feel now regrets at being such a blasted fool in the past, to stifle so many lusts I had in my youth, for various females.' quoted in Gretchen Gerzina, *A Life of Dora Carrington*, 210.

³⁰² 'Really I had more ecstasy with [Henrietta] and no feelings of shame afterwards.' Dora Carrington to Gerald Brenan 21 July, 1925, *Carrington: Letters and Extracts from her Diaries*, 324.

By virtue of its connection with Carrington's aesthetic and (potentially) sexual experimentation, *Mountain Ranges from Yegen* may have many allusions woven into its canvas, just as the surrealist pictorial pun visually encodes the fecundity of the mind. Here, the visual quirks which play on possible double meanings facilitate the proliferation of interpretations of and perspectives on the artist's mental and probably sexual complexity. In the final section I will discuss Carrington's playful *trompe-l'oeil* window, in which two competing surfaces become a useful tool for the artist's engagement with a variety of possibilities and subject positions, among them, as I read it, her constitution as a woman and as an artist.

2.4 Identity resurfacing and the art of *Trompe-l'oeil*

The last surviving painting of Carrington's life was a *trompe-l'oeil* window, *The Cook and the Cat* (1931; Fig. 2.6).³⁰³ This "window" painting she executed on the west wall of Biddesden House, which belonged to her neighbours Diana and Bryan Guinness.³⁰⁴ As if to accentuate its deceptive nature, this *trompe-l'oeil* piece was bound up with subterfuge and deflection from the moment it was conceived: Bryan wanted it to be a surprise for Diana on an occasion of the birth of her second son Desmond; the execution of the painting was thus surreptitiously done.³⁰⁵ Carrington recalled that on that day she 'kept [her] presence dark all this morning and pretended [she] had walked over from Ham Spray' (her car had to be hidden from Diana's view).³⁰⁶ As might be expected, her correspondence to Strachey shows that she was pleased to fall in with the secret mission. To a large extent, it must have appealed to Carrington, who was so keen to deflect interest from her

³⁰³ Prior to this false window Carrington had produced a *trompe-l'oeil* work. After moving to Ham Spray in 1924, Carrington transformed a door that connects Strachey's library to a boxroom into a *trompe-l'oeil* bookcase. She decorated the projecting spines of the "books" with realistic bindings of her own making and labeled them all with fake titles: *The Empty Room* by Virginia Woolf, *False Appearances* by Dora Wood, *Deception* by Jane Austen. See Hill, *The Art of Dora Carrington*, 95.

³⁰⁴ The Biddesden House was built for John Richmond Webb between c1711 and 1724 and later purchased by the Guinness family in 1931. See A P Baggs, Jane Freeman and Janet H Stevenson, "Parishes: Ludgershall," in *A History of the County of Wiltshire: Volume 15, Amesbury Hundred, Branch and Dole Hundred* ed. D A Crowley (London: Victoria County History, 1995), 119-135, accessed May 13, 2017, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/wilts/vol15/pp119-135#h2-0015>.

³⁰⁵ Mary Ann Caws, *Women of Bloomsbury*, 143.

³⁰⁶ Dora Carrington to Lytton Strachey 29 October, 1931, *Carrington: Letters and Extracts from her Diaries*, 475.

behind-the-scenes artistic practice, although ironically the final product would be exposed to people's gaze.³⁰⁷ Given her chronic unwillingness to display her works, her agreement to paint on the wall of someone's house (which was barred to the public, yet not completely private according to her standards), and the fact that this would be her last painting, this *trompe-l'oeil* window is particularly significant, aesthetically and biographically.³⁰⁸ In the following section I will discuss these two aspects alongside each other. The aim is to show how Carrington uses her art (the *trompe-l'oeil* window) and the lifestyle she has invented (a *de facto* housewife) as tools for configuration of her own image which cannot be pinned down straightforwardly into a specific type.



Figure 2.6 *The Cook and the Cat* (1931)

³⁰⁷ In fact, Carrington also painted pub signs, did tinsel and glass paintings to augment her small income. That is to say, when it comes to decorative art she seems to have no problem showing it.

³⁰⁸ Carrington herself on one of the rare occasions was happy with the work and thought it was carried out successfully. She later wrote of it in her diary 'perhaps one of the only pictures I have ever "brought off". I am glad Lytton saw it and liked it'. See *Carrington: Letters and Extracts from her Diaries*, 496.

If the point of *trompe-l'oeil* is meant to fool the viewer into thinking that the painted object is real, Carrington's *The Cook and the Cat* paradoxically exposes the failure of the mimesis and invites a deeper reflection. In the first instance, the fact that the fake moulded timber frame is painted in the same shade as the adjacent windows operates as an effective camouflage. With some tricks of perspective, the lattice hides from the viewer the surface plane of the picture, creating an illusion of space seen through "the glazing bars". There we see a female cook (based on her housekeeper's younger sister Phyllis Slater) sitting in the left of the frame. The cook is looking out of the window, paying no attention to the apple she is peeling, presumably for a pie. Opposite to the cook is the cat (modeled on Strachey's favourite Tiberius) which is looking longingly at a canary suspended in a cage. Unlike other *trompe-l'oeil* murals that aim for some three-dimensional effect to achieve perfect duplication of reality, however, *The Cook and the Cat* hardly neither relies on sharp contrast of light and shade nor explicitly plays with the laws of optics. Moreover, the completely dark background, which is apparently at variance with the light of the day, does not look very convincing. Given that Biddesden House is a private property, it is highly unlikely that Carrington's blank window would be admired by a random nighttime passerby. Even if one ignores the discrepancy between the light inside and outside and focuses instead on the diegetic world of the painting, still one can unmistakably identify the false nature of "the window".

With a quick glance one may feel uncomfortable with the outline of the cook, as it is fraught with salient incongruities and blunt contrast.³⁰⁹ For example, the cook's old-fashioned costume—the combination of the olive green dress under the white apron and her laced cap— is rather the type of what relatively genteel women wore in the privacy of home back in the early eighteenth century.³¹⁰ In particular, the smooth and shiny silk-like fabric is a rare thing in a domestic servant's livery, although many

³⁰⁹ Tamboukou, *Visual Lives*, 61.

³¹⁰ See for example John Styles, *The Dress of the People: Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2007), 47.

eighteenth-century historians agree that sartorial extravagance among domestic servants was not uncommon.³¹¹ Even if she represents a household servant, the fashionable cut and the material of her clothes suggest her status as someone of a high rank, a ladies' maid or housekeeper rather than kitchen staff.³¹² Here, clothes as a marker of class or status fail to do their job, which makes it difficult to fix her as one character.

Another uncanny aspect of the cook is her enigmatic gaze. Seated at the table peeling apples, she does not immerse herself in her task. Nor is she aware of the cat on a ledge to the right. At first glance it looks as if the cook is gazing out at the viewer; at another it seems she has her head in the clouds. Falling into a reverie, her mind is wandering despite a body encased in a Georgian casement window of which the glazing bars give a stifling, prison-like atmosphere. Metaphorically, the lattice might be read as an expanded version of the cage hanging above, while the canary might be read as symbolising the cook who is confined in the domestic realm and in service. Or, given the chronological confusion of the costume, she could be the apparition of an eighteenth-century female cook trapped in the old house. Carrington may have aimed it that way as she herself referred to her creation as a 'ghostly cook'.³¹³ Within this analytical frame, the 'ghostly' aspect evokes a close relation between materialisation and illusion. The materialised cook, who seemingly blends in with the cultural architecture of the house but is at odds with the current fashion, reinforces the deliberately false impression of the *trompe-l'oeil*. She seems real but she is not.

Thematically, *The Cook and the Cat* is imbued with unfulfilled desires. As we can see, the subjects all longingly pine for something they cannot have; the cook implicitly for freedom from her domestic life or alternatively for the love of her life, the cat for the canary and the canary for the world outside of the cage. Note two aspects of desire here: one is ideal, the other predatory. In the first case it is ideal in the sense that the subject is

³¹¹ In his chapter "Involuntary Consumption? Servants" Styles examines arguments against the eighteenth-century servants' extravagance in dress and points out that their consumption of clothing was involuntary as the clothes came to them, for the most part, directly from their employers. See Styles, *The Dress of the People*, 277-278.

³¹² Phillis Cunnington and Catherine Lucas, *Occupational Costume in England from The Eleventh Century to 1914* (London: Black, 1967), 195.

³¹³ Dora Carrington to Lytton Strachey 15 November, 193, *Carrington: Letters and Extracts from her Diaries*, 476.

yearning for a particular state: the bird and perhaps the cook yearning to be free. The second case is predatory because there is prey or an object of desire: the canary is desired by the cat. The dual dimension of the unfulfilled desires resonates with the trope of the pun which fosters more than one understanding or interpretation. In a general sense it can be a desire for liberty from the life of conventions or more personally it mirrors Carrington's unrequited passion for Strachey. Viewing the picture in this light also allows us to nuance our reading of the visual composition. That is, if we draw a line from the position where each subject is located, we will configure a triangle: the bird becomes the apex with the cook and the cat form the base (Fig. 2.7). Taking together the motif of unfulfilled desires with the visual configuration of the triangle, the painting brings to mind the repeated emotional patterns of triangulation which poses the predicament throughout her life yet inspires several of her paintings.

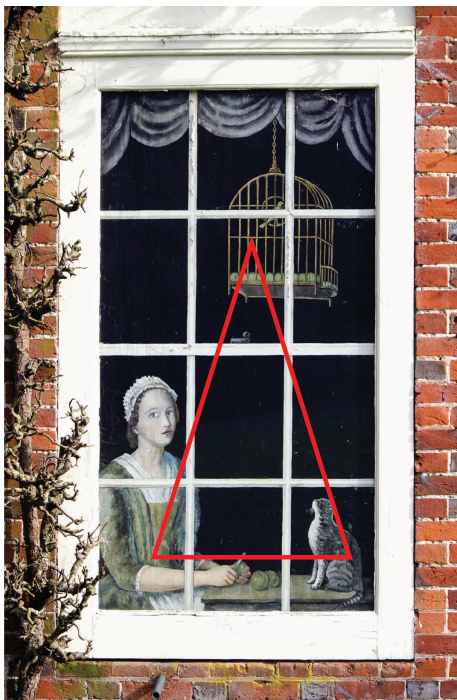


Figure 2.7 The visual composition of *The Cook and the Cat* configures a triangle shape

With respect to a desire for a particular state, critic Genevieve Sanchis Morgan, in tracing an impetus behind Carrington's choice of subject, establishes convergence between the birdcage in *The Cook and the Cat* and a birdcage metaphor in the artist's 1915 letter to Gertler. There, Carrington compares her parents' home in Hurstbourne Tarrant with a domestic cage:

It's just like being in a birdcage here, one can see everything which one would love to enjoy and yet one cannot. My father is in another cage also, which my mother put him in, and he is too old to even chirp or sing.³¹⁴

Morgan contends that *The Cook and the Cat* 'aligns Carrington with her father and the caged bird'. By painting the domestic "cage", as the argument goes, 'Carrington is able to free herself from it'.³¹⁵ For Morgan, Carrington uses her domestic situation in two modes: first as a way to deflect interest from her artistic practices, and on a deeper level as a channel to displace her discomfort at being both a woman and, especially, a woman painter.³¹⁶ Morgan thus concludes that, 'this "public" mural functions as Carrington's most autobiographical work'.³¹⁷ She even goes further to assert that *The Cook and the Cat* is 'Carrington's 'self-portrayal' as Strachey's housekeeper'.³¹⁸ Here, Morgan makes two major claims. The first is that Carrington identifies herself with the female cook. The second is that Carrington cultivates a hidden identity behind the restraining domestic role and promotes instead her role as a housekeeper. In the following section I will discuss each assumption in turn, drawing from existing accounts and a range of perspectives on Carrington's approach to the self and its presentation.

The first claim, that *The Cook and the Cat* documents Carrington's life as Strachey's servant, can be attributed to the fact that the cat is modeled on Carrington's own cat Tiberius. According to this logic, it is

³¹⁴ Dora Carrington to Mark Gertler, May 1915, *Carrington: Letters and Extracts from her Diaries*, 19.

³¹⁵ Morgan, "Forms of Masquerade," 15.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*

tempting to equate the cook with Carrington herself. To clinch this equation one can draw from her illustrated letters in which she, with the playfulness and humour intrinsic to her style, likes to draw herself and her cat being preoccupied with their own business. The scenario is similar to what we see here: the cook is absorbed in thought, whereas the cat is avidly eyeing the canary in the cage.³¹⁹ Still, there is no recorded evidence to support the assumption that Carrington conceives *The Cook and the Cat* as her self-portrait. Nevertheless, it is appropriate to note that there are three *trompe-l'oeil* pieces on the east elevation of the Biddesden House (Fig. 2.8). In 1935 Carrington's former fellow student at the Slade, Roland Pym, was commissioned to paint these fake windows.³²⁰ While Carrington chose to paint a female servant, Pym embellished the wall with young ladies of the upper-middle class.³²¹ One of the paintings, for example, depicts a young lady playing a harp. The spiral blonde curls tied up meticulously with a hair accessory, her pale green dress with white muslin sleeves, the lavish ornamentation of the harp, all suggest the subject's good breeding and refinement.³²² Pym might have intentionally painted the ladies from the upper-middle class in order to contrast with Carrington's kitchen maid. Or, more straightforwardly, he might have aimed for variation. Either way, it would make no sense, artistically or logically, to have the wall teeming with paintings of female servants. I juxtapose the different choices of subject against each other in order to foreground Carrington's tendency to portray female servants, evident in her earlier works such as *The Servant Girl* (1917) and *Annie in a Pinny* (1925). The recurring servant motif and the fact that she actively fosters an identity as Strachey's handmaiden can be

³¹⁹ See for example *Carrington: Letters and Extracts from her Diaries*, 203, 383, 407, etc.

³²⁰ "Biddesden House," *Historic England*, accessed May 13, 2017, <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1001228>.

³²¹ In this regard, art historian Nikolaus Pevsner posits that Pym's fake windows represent the elegant romanticism of Regency England. Obviously, Carrington who had passed away few years before Pym's commission knew nothing about Pym's false windows. See Nikolaus Pevsner, *Wiltshire*, 2nd ed. (Harmondsworth; Baltimore: Penguin, 1975), 110.

³²² Another salient point is that, unlike Carrington's musing cook, the lady playing the harp looks absorbed in her practice, with her eyes fixed onto the music book in the right corner of the frame. Also noteworthy is that the floor plans as surveyed in 1907 (Fig. 9) show that the false windows were located on the outer wall of what was then the dining room, with a small servery at one end. Carrington's *The Cook and the Cat* may have been painted on the outer wall of the servery area but there is no available evidence to support this. Nor is there a written record of Carrington's aiming her *trompe-l'oeil* to match the spatial distribution of the rooms. In the case of Pym's work, the connection with the cultural geography of the architecture is even more tenuous. As we can see, his subjects are engaged in activities that do not belong in the dining room.

adduced as *prima facie* evidence that Carrington identifies *in some way* with the servant role. However, even if the false window is intended to speak symbolically about her double roles, and if the artist is to be identified with the cook, it is the lingering aura of trickery and playfulness that persistently clings to Carrington’s presentation of a “self” to the outside world.



Figure 2.8 Roland Pym’s *trompe-l’oeil* windows on the east elevation of the Biddesden House (1935)

As for the second claim—that Carrington encourages her own critical neglect by projecting out her image as a housekeeper, some critics and commentators take a slightly different view from Morgan. In this strand of argument Carrington was a martyr who selflessly accommodated her whole being to keep the house for Strachey, the role that consequently prevented her from developing her artistic potential. Far from being in a self-chosen position, Carrington is confined in a domestic role that conflicts with her ability to paint without interruption. In this line of thinking, Frances Partridge, for example, notes that Carrington’s task as a ‘domestic manager of the household with Strachey’, coupled with her own diffidence, frequently ‘thwarted her ambition to paint’.³²³ Similarly, more recent critic Tony Bradshaw describes Carrington as a persistent artist robbed of her

³²³ Frances Partridge, “Carrington, Dora de Houghton (1893–1932),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004); online ed., Jan 2008 accessed 27 April 2017, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/37262>.

time for her own art by a burden of domestic chores.³²⁴ Moreover, in a less berating but more critical tone, Christopher Neve points out the irony that Carrington, ‘having always fiercely disapproved of marriage and certainly of children as dangerous and unnecessarily restrictive distractions from her painting’, ‘spends most of her time and energies in making and keeping house for Strachey and entertaining his friends’.³²⁵ These accounts, while hardly doing justice to Strachey (who always insists that Carrington’s painting ‘shouldn’t be hampered’), correspond to Morgan’s in that they agree upon the conflict between domesticity and art.³²⁶

The consensus view is probably informed by Carrington’s vivid letters to friends in which she speaks of her delight at engagement in a domestic muddle, while occasionally complaining about a whole weekend spent away from the easel ‘mak[ing] bed[s]’ and ‘empty[ing] chamber pots’ when they had visitors.³²⁷ Carrington’s own ambivalence towards domestic commitments may elicit different reactions from friends and commentators. This, coupled with the numerous surviving accounts of the artist’s diffidence about her work, perpetuates an assumption that Carrington resurfaces her image as an artist with the image of a domestic drudge.³²⁸ In a sense, this looks like the technique she has employed in *trompe l’oeil*. Carrington paints on an open space, an exterior wall, and in doing so playfully uses her painting to hide – not hidden depths – but the brick walls underneath. At this juncture it is important to note the mechanism of *trompe l’oeil* in which an illusion becomes dispelled once we shift our gaze and see the object resolving itself into mortar lines on the background. In other words, it requires nothing like a penetrating gaze. The gaze is instead fixed alternately at two competing surfaces—the surface plane of the picture and

³²⁴ Bradshaw, *The Bloomsbury Artists: Prints and Book Design*, 12.

³²⁵ Neve, “The Passionate Landscape,” 611.

³²⁶ Lytton Strachey to Dora Carrington 15 May 1919, British Library.

³²⁷ The fact that Strachey’s brother and friends financially contributed to the Mill House means they could call upon them as frequently as they like. On Carrington’s part this means extra work as ‘nearly all of time has been taken up preparing food for human consumption and cleaning rooms’. See Dora Carrington to Gerald Brenan 12 January 1920 and Dora Carrington to David Garnett, 2 October 1918, *Carrington: Letters and Extract from her Diaries*, 104, 152.

³²⁸ For example, in his letter to Ottoline Morrell, Strachey recounted, ‘Carrington spends all day in an attic, painting pictures which I am never allowed to see’. This accords with Woolf’s account of Carrington who was ‘a little absorbed with household duties; secreting canvas in the attic’. See Lytton Strachey to Ottoline Morrell, March 3, 1918, *The Letters of Lytton Strachey*, 387 and Virginia Woolf, *Diary of Virginia Woolf, Vol. I, 1915-1919*, 311.

the surface of the wall. This visual experience I wish to link to Julia Strachey's perception of Carrington's character, to which such words like 'ambiguous', 'secretive' and 'elusive' are frequently applied. Describing Carrington as 'a modern witch' Julia compares her large blue eyes with a window, which is 'unnaturally transparent, yet reflecting only the outside light and revealing nothing within, just as a glass door betrays nothing to the enquiring visitor but the light reflected off the sea'.³²⁹ Julia's metaphorical description of Carrington's eyes applies well to my reading of the *trompe-l'oeil* window as it deals with the aspect of bouncing off the surfaces. Covering the brick wall underneath, the false window fools the eye (at least to the point of disillusioning) and reflects out instead a listless female servant who looks out to us, as if to deny access to her interiority. This is not to conclude, however, that Carrington is the cook, or vice versa. My point here is that the illusionistic conceit of the *trompe-l'oeil* window bears out a characteristic of Carrington's approach to her embodiment. That is, rather than suppressing or hiding one identity under the other, or using one identity as a mode of escape from the other, she plays with interchangeable meanings of both possibilities, embracing both the roles of painter and housekeeper. The voluminous correspondence with friends, and the servant motif in her art, should suffice to demonstrate that Carrington is conscious of her audience's perception of her quasi-housemaid status and that she enjoys herself in this trick of self-presentation. In doing so, Carrington masters the technologies of publicity, using any possible channel—visual, verbal or even a mode of living—to juggle between the modes of disclosure and concealment, prudishness and exuberance and advances and retreats.

Given the playfulness and vitality that persistently cling to Carrington's persona, her range and diversity of identifications are much greater than the prevailing paradigms would imply. Carrington's penchant for the art of punning and a complex interplay between different elements prevent facile interpretation. Or to read Carrington's register of self-representation we may apply to it the visual experience of *trompe-l'oeil*. We position ourselves at a certain angle and allow the conflation of

³²⁹ Strachey, *Julia: A Portrait of Julia Strachey by Herself and Frances Partridge*, 119-120.

interchangeable meanings, observe how they playfully act against each other in well calculated, precise geometries.

By conjugating a close textual analysis with biographical readings, we see that Carrington always opts for variable rather than hegemonic patterns, although is hugely selective in doing so. Carrington’s occupation of a liminal position between a passive victim of the gaze and a subversive, active commentator in her living-statue performance, her interest in eternal triangles, visual puns and *trompe-l’oeil* work find common ground in crossing the boundaries between gender roles, identity, sexuality, genres.³³⁰ All are effectuated with prudence and calculation. Not only in artistic but also in personal terms, Carrington overtly negates entire commitment to any category. On one occasion in an act of self-mockery Carrington dubbed herself ‘a hybrid monster’.³³¹ While there is an element of playfulness in this introspection about her ambivalent feelings towards her gender, Carrington, in doing so, may be giving a sort of validity to her own principle of self-construction. Pushing the dividing line to explore a liminal space devoid of cliché and stereotypes about cultural expectations, she redefines the limitations of “what is possible”.

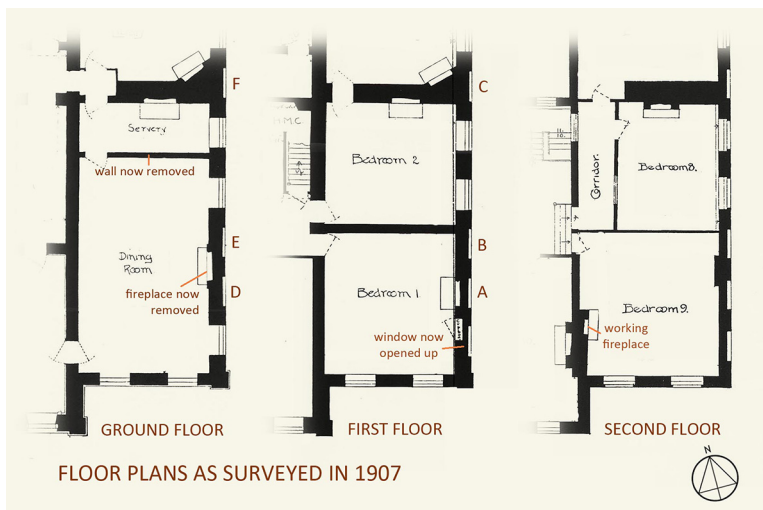


Figure 2.9 The floor plans of the Biddesden House as surveyed in 1970

³³⁰ When they moved to Ham Spray in 1924, Carrington transformed a door that connects Strachey’s library to a boxroom into a *trompe-l’oeil* bookcase. She decorated the projecting spines of the “books” with realistic bindings of her own making and labeled them all with fake titles: *The Empty Room* by Virginia Woolf, *False Appearances* by Dora Wood, *Deception* by Jane Austen. See Hill, *The Art of Dora Carrington*, 95.

³³¹ Dora Carrington to Lytton Strachey 21 May, 1919, *Carrington: Letters and Extracts from her Diaries*, 136.



Figures 2.10 and 2.11 (Above) Carrington's *trompe-l'oeil* window viewed from outside (Below) Roland Pym's *trompe-l'oeil windows* viewed from outside

Part B

Part A offered accounts of the life and art of Woolf and Carrington that pose a challenge to the conventional classification in gendered and cultural terms in the social and political context of their time. Chapter 1 illustrated that the idea of escapade acts as a driving force behind Woolf's interrogation of the established order in the mutually constitutive domains of literature and gender. With a hint of the concept of escapade Chapter 2 examined how Carrington hinges on the state of liminality to redefine the meaning of gender, sexuality and sexual embodiment in her art and style of living. While still focusing on the aesthetics of boundary transgression and escapade, Part B shifts the focus to the social and cultural context of Germany from the late Wilhelmine period to the beginning of the Weimar (1910s-1920s). As the political, economic and social conjunctures shifted, phallogocentric ideologies about gender roles, sexual behaviour and dress codes faltered in the face of women's growing trust in their own abilities and opportunities amidst these unprecedented social and sexual freedoms. Seeing Nielsen as actively delivering social messages about modern women who asserted their sexuality, Chapter 3 thus assesses the actor's commitment to her using artistic experiments to explore contemporary shifts in power relations. It sets out to demonstrate that the spectrum of the literature on Nielsen's star persona shows a tendency to work on the premise of binary, either-or categories, (masculine/feminine, before/after, subject/object, hetero/homosexual etc.). Contrary to these intellectual currents, Chapter 3 argues that Nielsen's artistic practice consistently combines and remakes genres, as well as gender, in a way that is a good deal more complicated than the logic of binary thinking would account for.

In a close reading of Nielsen's performing of gender and gender roles onscreen, I argue that her conflicted positions as a fetish for the male gaze and as an aggressive sexual agent are testimony to her manipulation of technologies of the self. To support this I discuss her *Hosenrolle* (breeches role) comedies, made between the 1910s and 1920s. They are particularly

powerful examples of how she reflexively draws on various conventions or aspects of heterosexually defined ideologies without compromising her principles, even when her presence in male garb potentially reaffirms the supposedly stable binary opposition. As a brief introduction to a chapter on Nielsen's significance as a pioneer in the terrain of gender in the German cinema, it is appropriate to provide some general information about the German film industry at the time when these comedies were produced. My aim is not to offer a comprehensive overview of all other critical and historical accounts since they have been offered many times before. The focus is only on examples which relate to this thesis's approach to Nielsen's high profile in 'performing' the construction of an unusually gendered identity.

Wilhelmine cinema is generally deemed as the pioneer of the German silent film. Film historian Sabine Hake has divided films produced in this period into three phases: 'the early years of emergence and experimentation (1895-1906), a phase of expansion and consolidation (1906-1910), and the process of standardisation that gave rise to the longer feature films (1910-18)'.³³² In its novelty years, the German cinema, like in other countries, consisted mainly of actuality films showing military parades, naval launches and the Kaiser reviewing troops and vaudeville and trapeze acts.³³³ In terms of content and styles, Wilhelmine cinema in its first decade privileged the hegemonic male gaze but fostered a massive exclusion of the female subject position. When women appeared on the screen it was, as film historian Thomas Elsaesser has observed, typically fashion shows or erotic bathing.³³⁴ Such prejudices of a gender-specific code of representation emphasises the cinema's function to gratify visual pleasure mainly of men. When the movement to elevate the new medium's status as art required increasingly sophisticated production, the attractions that once served aesthetics of spectacle became subordinated to a style increasingly oriented towards coherent narratives. It is in the transition between the

³³² Sabine Hake, *German National Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 12.

³³³ Hans-Michael Bock and Tim Bergfelder, ed. *The Concise Cinegraph: Encyclopedia of German Cinema* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2009), 557.

³³⁴ Thomas Elsaesser, "Germany: The Weimar Years," in *The Oxford History of World Cinema*, ed. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 137-138.

phase of consolidation and standardisation that Danish films established their international reputation for high standard production and assumed a dominant position in the German film market. Among the films exported to the German audience was, of course, the first Asta Nielsen film of Kosmorama, *Afgrunden* (1910), the film that espoused her a meteoric rise in the German film industry.

The phase of expansion and consolidation saw the German cinema beginning to pay attention to female subjectivity and to tell a story both about the reality and the fantasies of women, although the supremacy of the male omniscient gaze was still apparent. In the standardization phase there was a quest for the institutionalisation of cinema. As a result, the so-called *Autorenfilm* (authors film) emerged in 1912.³³⁵ Adopting the style of French *film d'art*, the *Autorenfilm* is basically an adaptation of a prestigious literary work.³³⁶ Film producers signed the established playwrights, well-known theatrical actors and directors who once boycotted the cinema to write original screenplays and to act in their films.³³⁷ The same enthusiasm motivated Nielsen to rework Shakespeare in her cross-dressing tragedy of *Hamlet* (1920). In a parallel move, filmmakers and producers developed a number of narrative styles such as social dramas, detective films and the *Sensationsfilme*.³³⁸ The appearance of such themes as marriage, motherhood and even prostitution suggests that the film industry was taking into account a female audience. Nevertheless, there were ambivalent attitudes towards the presence of women on the screen—reflected through the female stock character of a seductive *femme fatale*—and in the audience. In this respect,

³³⁵ *Autorenfilm* by definition in this context means a film with the script written by a famous writer or by a writer of the original literary work from which the film was adapted. See Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994), 57.

³³⁶ In France the vigorous competition between the theatre and cinema (which was deemed a lowbrow form of entertainment) led to the establishment of the *Société Film d'Art* in 1908. Part of its strategies to attain cultural legitimacy is “transferring prestigious stage plays starring famous performers to the screen” which became a pattern for other film-producing countries to follow. See David Robinson, *The History of World Cinema*, (London: Eyre Methuen, 1973) and Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994). David A. Cook and Robert Sklar, “History of the Motion Picture,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, November 10, 2017 accessed January 14, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/art/history-of-the-motion-picture/The-silent-years-1910-27>.

³³⁷ In May 1912 the Association of Berlin Theatre Directors prohibited stage actors to work in films. See Robinson, *World Cinema*, 86.

³³⁸ *Sensationsfilme*, a kind of film promising ‘plenty of sensations’ such as circus attraction as well as ‘horror effects, danger and life-and-death thrills’ See Heide Schlüpmann, “Cinema as Anti-Theater: Actresses and Female Audience in Wilhelminian Germany,” in *Silent Film*, ed. Richard Abel (London: Athlone, 1996), 139.

Schlüpmann has noted that the films of the Wilhelmine period ‘deal with the reality and the real problems of women’ (who, in fact, constituted a large number of the audience) but ‘the stories repress forms of exhibition whose appeal to the eye, to curiosity, is not appropriate for women’.³³⁹ Given such a mixture of an attempt to allay contemporary anxieties about changing patterns of gender relations and its interest in presenting transgressive femininity, the Wilhelmine era was a propitious moment for a narrative of a woman who cross-dresses and executes a successful incursion into the hitherto male sphere.

For Nielsen, who dared to dream what seemed like an impossible dream and left behind the Danish film industry (which at that time was in its golden period) for Germany, and who never ceased to reinvent herself through a role she played, the social and cultural climate of the Wilhelmine years offered an opportunity she could not afford to miss. In 1912 Nielsen ventured to display herself in pants in *Wenn die Maske Fällt* (*When the Mask Falls*). Nielsen/Sanna appears in tight-fitting hose that reveal the shape of her slim legs as she does an impression of a male hunter of the Middle Ages. In her later cross-dressing comedies Nielsen went further to engage in playful deconstructions of gender and sexuality. She explored the limits and possibilities to speak of the theme of gender relations in particular, and personal identity in a broader sense. Such themes, as many critics believe, find their crescendo in her *Hamlet*. Chapter 3 will illustrate that Nielsen’s presence in her early trousers roles is no less impactful in its rhetoric and spectacle. Further, I wish to add that my discussion of Nielsen’s *Hosenrolle* comedies is not limited only to those featuring the heroine’s sexual disguise. In my last example, *Das Eskimobaby* (1916), the character does not impersonate a man, although she appears in trousers throughout the film. My point is to demonstrate that Nielsen’s transgression of boundary is a far-reaching project in which cultural and national dimensions can also be read in gendered terms.

³³⁹ Heide Schlüpmann, *The Uncanny Gaze: The Drama of Early German Cinema* trans. Igna Pollmann (Urbana, Ill: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 9.

CHAPTER 3

Asta Nielsen: Undoing Binary, Redoing Hybridity

Asta Nielsen's significance as a pioneer in the terrain of gender in both the Danish and German film industries across the 1910s and 1920s has typically been ascribed to three aspects of her career. Scholars have either focused on the iconography of her stardom, have celebrated her sexual agency, or have pursued the implications of her national and cultural hybridity. Over the course of this chapter I shall take each approach in turn, suggesting that, because of their reliance on a binary scheme, they only get us so far in understanding Nielsen's importance in German cinema, or her significance for modernist gender experimentation more generally. This chapter will examine how these writers, in many cases, have undermined Nielsen's many-sided challenge to dualistic modes and paradigms (masculine/feminine, pre/post, subject/object, inside/outside, etc.). Additionally, it aims to show that Nielsen, through her life and work, establishes herself as a transgressive figure and a sly critic of the gender order of her time in a way that is more complex and intricate than the often-reductive framework of either-or categories can explain.

In the first section, I shall explore prevailing accounts of Nielsen's star persona, from contemporaneous commentaries to the work of recent critics. I will point to the way in which early accounts, while imposing on her a series of exceptionalist labels such as cinematic icon, erotic myth, and film prima donna, limit the possibilities in understanding Nielsen as more than the object of fetishism. In addition, I will show that the concept of opposing polarities persistently clings to critiques of Nielsen, even in their appreciation of her innovative acting style. That is, critics tend to place her either within the frame of theatrical conventions or innovative filmic codes. I argue, by contrast, that Nielsen's practice consistently combines and remakes genres. Such practices of merging and reconstructing things are also discernible in her treatment of gender. Taking into account Nielsen's professional agency—her performance before the camera and her critical and authorial engagement in pre- and post-production—I will illustrate that

Nielsen's virtuosity depends rather on her consistent navigation of, and oscillation between, such categories. As a way of illuminating her decidedly conflicted position as, on the one hand, a fetish for the male gaze and, on the other, an aggressive sexual agent, I draw on scenes from her debut *Afgrunden* (*The Abyss*, 1910) made in the thriving Danish film industry. That is not to say, however, that Nielsen's sexual agency is only strongly felt in her portrayal of a prototype *femme fatale*. Her *Hosenrolle* (breeches roles), in which she depicts a woman in male garb or a woman pretending to be a man, speak of emancipated female subjectivity in no less critical and sometimes no less sensual a way. The second section then goes on to suggest that whereas most critics of Nielsen point to her reworking of Shakespeare in the cross-dressing tragedy *Hamlet* (1920) as the apex of her feminist experimentation, her earlier *Hosenrolle* comedies of cross-dressing articulate just as clearly contemporaneous anxieties about gender conformity. In the third section, I will contest prevailing ideas of Nielsen as either representing German or Danish culture. I argue that she consistently defies narrowly national or nationalist construction of identity and femininity, and aspires to espouse trans- or post-national identities. Through a discussion of the film *Das Eskimobaby* (1916) I illustrate how Nielsen deploys a supranational identity as an escape from the cultural and social limits imposed by the "civilised" world. Venturing into the fantasy of "the other Nielsen" offers a range of new interpretive possibilities through which the cultural dimensions of her identity can be read in gendered terms.

I

‘Lower the flag in her honour, she is incomparable and without peer.’³⁴⁰

Béla Balázs (*Visible Man*, 1924)

‘It was only after the first World War that the German cinema really came into being’, asserts German film critic Siegfried Kracauer in his influential study *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (1947).³⁴¹ Critics and film historians seem to agree, at the expense of the aesthetics of prewar cinema, that in its ‘prehistory’ (before 1914), the German motion picture industry was ‘insignificant in itself’ and that the Great War was a milestone in German film production and distribution history.³⁴² Potentially, Kracauer and other commentators may have based their assumptions on the comparatively slow progress made in German film production during the pre-war years (in comparison with other countries such as France, Italy and the United States).³⁴³ Notwithstanding the mechanical innovations in cameras and projectors developed by inventors such as the Skladanowsky brothers, Max (1863-1939) and Emil (1866–1945), and early filmmaker Oskar Messter (1866-1943), Germany’s role in European film industry, as film scholar Heide Schlüpmann concisely summarises, ‘began primarily as a consumer for the international market, not as a supplier’.³⁴⁴ This is attested by a pre-war boom in cinema exhibition whereby the widespread establishment of permanent screening facilities served to receive the flood of imports of films from abroad, including Denmark.³⁴⁵

³⁴⁰ Béla Balázs, *Early Film Theory: Visible man and the Spirit of Film!* Béla Balázs, ed. Erica Carter; trans. Rodney Livingstone (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011), 88.

³⁴¹ Kracauer was celebrated for introducing the new terrain of socio-psychoanalysis into German film study. See Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (1947), ed. Leonardo Quaresima (Princeton, N.J.; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), 15.

³⁴² *Ibid.*

³⁴³ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁴ Heide Schlüpmann, “Cinema as Anti-Theater,” 125.

³⁴⁵ David Robinson, *The History of World Cinema*, (London: Eyre Methuen, 1973), 86.

More recent German film historian Thomas Elsaesser, nevertheless, has cast doubt on the often-repeated assertion that Germany had no film culture before World War I.³⁴⁶ He maintains that ‘the standard histories have little to report as being worthy of detailed study’.³⁴⁷ As if reacting to Kracauer’s contention, he further argues,

Especially after 1945, the explanatory deficit about the origins and rise of national socialism was so great and the memory of the regime’s blatant use of the cinema as a propaganda instrument so keen that an account of the German cinema of whatever period found itself offering its own version of hindsight history.³⁴⁸

Read in the light of gender discourse, Elsaesser’s observation points to how the dominant histories regard cinema narrowly as the business of men, like warfare. In this respect, an account given by Paul Davidson, a producer and one of the founders of the then most powerful German film company Projektions-AG Union (PAGU) not only challenges such phallogocentric conjectures but also lends some credence to Elsaesser’s rejection of the more conventional argument about German cinema during the industry’s first two decades. From Davidson’s perspective it seems that what potentially shaped the future of German cinema had taken place even before the war. It was the advent of Danish actor Asta Nielsen into the German film industry as early as 1911, he believed, that acted as a catalyst for change in the country’s rich cinematic history. He notes,

I had not been thinking about film production. But then I saw the first Asta Nielsen film. I realised that the age of the short film was past. And above all I realised that this woman was the first artist in the medium of film. Asta Nielsen, I instantly felt, could be a global success [...] This woman can carry it. Let the

³⁴⁶ Thomas Elsaesser, “Early German Cinema: A Second Life?,” in *A Second Life: German Cinema's First Decades* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 1996), 10.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

films cost whatever they cost. I used every available means and devised many new ones in order to bring Asta Nielsen films to the world.³⁴⁹

As the quotation testifies, Davidson had found in Nielsen a figure made for setting the artistic standard of German cinema. Thus, the producer who had started his career as a distributor was not hesitant to import Nielsen and Urban Gad (her director and future husband) to Germany, and in June 1911 contracted them for thirty-two Asta Nielsen films over the next four years.³⁵⁰ Together they developed the most prestigious production company in Germany, Art-Film. As film scholar Sabine Hake also notes, Nielsen, along with her director, was offered full artistic freedom in several aspects of the filmmaking process.³⁵¹ Considering the effort of contemporary German filmmakers and producers to transform film into an art form that could compete with the theatre, Nielsen's collaboration with Davidson was fortuitous timing. As if substantiating Davidson's speculation about Nielsen's accomplishment in bestowing artistic respectability on the new media, early critic Paul Elsner wrote in his 1911 article "The Duse of Film",³⁵²

From the silent theater in Denmark, a Duse has emerged, which this new art form has so long been lacking, a Duse who has made it her mission in life to elevate the art of film, which resides between photography, painting, and poetry, to a true, noble, and ennobling art, to a momentous moment in the spiritual development of the nations. This [Duse] is Asta Nielsen.³⁵³

³⁴⁹ Paul Davidson, quoted in *Peter Lähn*, "Paul Davidson, the Frankfurt Film Scene, and *Afgrunden* in Germany," in *A Second Life: German Cinema's First Decades*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser, 85.

³⁵⁰ Allen, *Icons of Danish Modernity*, 144.

³⁵¹ Sabine Hake, *German National Cinema*, 44.

³⁵² The term 'Duse' derives from the name of Italian stage actress *Eleonora Duse* (1858–1924) best known for her tragic roles, particularly in plays by Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen and Italian playwright Gabriele d'Annunzio. See Alois M. Nagler, "Eleonora Duse," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Jul 20, 1998, accessed Mar 15, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Eleonora-Duse>.

³⁵³ Paul Elsner, "Die Duse des Films," *Reclams Universum Weltrundschau* (Leipzig) [1911]: 517 quoted in Julie K. Allen, *Icons of Danish Modernity: Georg Brandes and Asta Nielsen* (Seattle, London: University of Washington Press, 2012), 136.

Not only does Elsner affirm the artistic value of the new medium but he also endows Nielsen with an aura of exceptionality, even a sense of sanctity. Apart from ‘The Duse of Film’, Nielsen during her career earned several extravagant epithets such as ‘Die Asta’, ‘The Queen of Cinema’, and ‘The Silent Muse’ to name but a few. Along with such appellations magnifying her status as a cosmic icon, accounts of the star’s virtuosity tend to idealize her gestural language to the point of grandiloquence.

Analyses of Nielsen’s screen persona share a common discourse of aesthetic innovation. In particular, her ‘unique art of mime’ was said to be so compelling that it captured critical attention from those who had never before taken cinema very seriously as an art form.³⁵⁴ In his seminal work on silent cinema *Visible Man (Der sichtbare Mensch)*, originally published in 1924, Hungarian-Jewish writer Béla Balázs celebrates Nielsen’s gesticulation, comparing her ensemble of body movements with Shakespeare’s extensive vocabulary. He notes, ‘It is said that Shakespeare used 15,000 words. Only when advances in cinematography enable us to assemble our first gesture lexicon will we be in a position to gauge the extent of Asta Nielsen’s thesaurus of gestures’.³⁵⁵ Later in his landmark *Theory of the Film: Character and Growth of a New Art* (1948), Balázs coins the term ‘microphysiognomy’ to describe Nielsen’s poses and gestures and in a similar glowing tone he writes of them as ‘surpass[ing] what the greatest writer, the most consummate artist of the pen could tell in words’.³⁵⁶ Balázs’s critique, and the reference to Shakespeare which can be read as a deliberate deprecation of literary culture, bring to mind accounts of Nielsen’s assertion that her maverick *Hamlet* (1920) was not based exclusively on Shakespeare’s *oeuvre*. According to Anthony R. Guneratne, Nielsen disavowed the Elizabethan playwright’s tragedy as a source of her *Hamlet* and the (partial) credit went instead to the twelfth-century story of

³⁵⁴ Robinson, *The History of World Cinema*, 87.

³⁵⁵ Balázs, *Early Film Theory*, 87.

³⁵⁶ The pivotal term ‘microphysiognomy’ was first coined in his 1930 *The Spirit of Film (Der Geist des Films)* Erica Carter ed., Rodney Livingstone (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2010), 91. See also Béla Balázs, *Theory of the Film: Character and Growth of a New Art*, trans. Edith Bone (Dobson, 1952), 66.

Danish revenger Amleth recorded by Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus (1160-1220).³⁵⁷

Aside from Grammaticus, as it was made clear in the opening credits, the film found a pretext in a scholarly work by American Shakespearean Edward Payson Vining, *The Mystery of Hamlet* (1881), in which he argues ‘this womanly man might be in very deed a woman, desperately striving to fill a place for which she was by nature unfitted [...]’.³⁵⁸ Nevertheless, Nielsen’s virtuosity—her aspiration to undo the shibboleth that ‘film can never be more than a lame version of theatre’—does not entirely lie in the act of reworking Shakespeare’s play *per se*.³⁵⁹ For both critics of the time and the more recent, it is Nielsen’s innovative approach to film acting that signifies a departure from, if not a rejection of, codified conventions of stage performance. Taking into account the film industry’s preoccupation with “quality films”—the films based on prestigious literary, theatrical, and historical sources—film critics and historians of later generations find in the clash between the new media and the traditional art form fruitful matter for their discussion of Nielsen’s mode of acting. Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, among others, maintain that Nielsen’s screen performance ‘seem[ed] to owe nothing to the stage’.³⁶⁰ More recently, Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs take a less assertive stance, on the other hand, arguing that Nielsen’s idiosyncratic acting style compromises the diva performance tradition of a bourgeois highbrow culture by combining ‘comic or “low” gestures’ with graceful ‘gestural soliloquies’.³⁶¹ In similar vein, Angela Dalle Vacche posits that Nielsen’s ‘microscopic and precise gestures’ are attributable to ‘the marriage of cinematic acting with theatrical naturalism’, pointing out that the actress received acting training at the Royal Danish Theatre from the age of

³⁵⁷ Anthony R. Guneratne, *Shakespeare, Film Studies, and the Visual Cultures of Modernity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 155. The film’s hitherto distance from Shakespeare’s play resulted in the prologue telling the backstory of Gertrude giving birth to a daughter but claims it a son in order to secure the throne (cross-cut between the elder Hamlet’s slaying of the elder Fortinbras), and in the replacement of the ghost narrating the circumstances of the senior Hamlet’s murder with prince Hamlet’s astounding discovery of Claudius’s dagger in the royal snake pit.

³⁵⁸ Edward Payson Vining, *The Mystery of Hamlet* (1881), 59. The book was translated into German in 1883.

³⁵⁹ Balázs, *Early Film Theory*, 87.

³⁶⁰ Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, *Film History*, 31.

³⁶¹ Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs, *Theatre to Cinema: Stage Pictorialism and the Early Feature Film* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1997), 90.

twelve.³⁶² In fact, Nielsen herself poses in her 1928 article ‘*Mein Weg im Film*’ (My Way to Film) a question as to whether film and theatre are completely different. She then concludes, ‘In my opinion, by no means! Basically they are the same, but with different techniques’.³⁶³ While Nielsen’s remark does not provide a definite answer, her pursuit of cohesion between the two art forms is unequivocal. As she asserts, ‘I would never have become what I became without the school of the theater through which I went’.³⁶⁴ Nielsen’s reflection on her acting career conveys her principles of experimenting with overlapping effects from different arts without the complete rejection of either. My point here is to bring into light a strong linkage between the multifaceted nature of Nielsen’s acting style and the transcendence of gender boundary. Expanding on existing scholarship on Nielsen’s expressive cinematic performance—a narrative of progress and improvement towards a plausible, individualised characterisation—I aim to illuminate the negotiation of power relations implicit in her repertoire of gestures and movement.³⁶⁵ To illustrate this I will discuss existing responses to Nielsen’s debut *Afgrunden* (*The Abyss*, 1910).³⁶⁶

This first film of her cinematic career tells the story of a bourgeois piano teacher, Magda, who climbs out of the window of her fiancé’s house and elopes with a fickle circus performer (Poul Reumert). In the penultimate scene Magda stabs her unfaithful lover to death, overcome by humiliation and the desire for revenge. *Afgrunden* manifests a high degree of experimentation and creativity, not only in terms of Nielsen’s engagement with the aesthetics of film, but also as a meditation on power relations between genders. In what follows I will examine Nielsen’s groundbreaking

³⁶² Angela Dalle Vacche, “Asta Nielsen’s Acting: Motion, Emotion, and the Camera-Eye,” in *Framework*: Spring 43, No.1 (2012): 84.

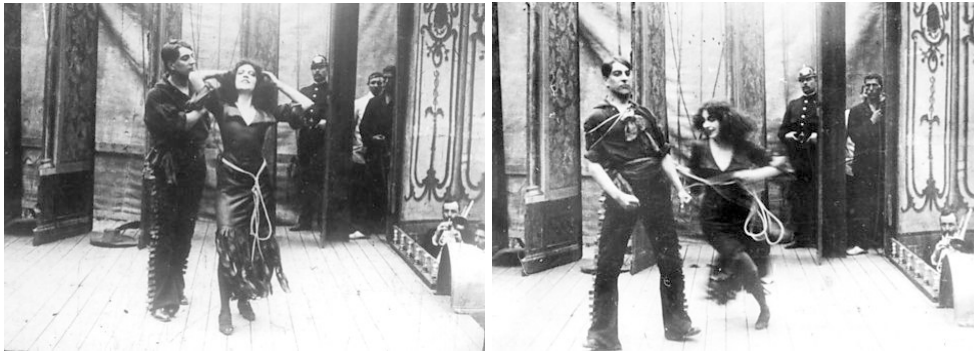
³⁶³ Asta Nielsen, “Mein Weg im Film,” *B.Z. am Mittag* 29 September 1928 reprinted in Renate Seydel and Allan Hagedorff, ed., *Asta Nielsen—ihr Leben in Fotodokumenten: Selbstzeugnissen und zeitgenössischen Betrachtungen* (Munich: Universitas Verlag, 1981), 102. (unpublished translation by Diana Kayser).

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁵ In her discussion of the novelty of this cinema, Roberta Pearson points out the distinction between the earlier acting style where ‘movements were broad, distinct, and forcefully performed’ and the newer or ‘verisimilar’ form in which actors, with a view to mimicking everyday behaviour, ‘externalized characters’ thoughts and emotions through facial expression, small individuated movements, and the use of props’. See Roberta Pearson, “Transitional Cinema,” in *The Oxford History of World Cinema*, ed. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (Oxford: U.P., 1996), 32.

³⁶⁶ *Afgrunden*, a tragedy in two acts, running time: 37 min. The film is can be accessed at Videoteket, The Danish Film Institute. It is also available on YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9qrG-luCW0k>.

experimentation with gender dynamics in this film, drawing specifically on its scandalous gaucho dance scene.



Figs 3.1 and 3.2 Stills from *Afgrunden* (1910) portray Magda and her lover performing the gaucho dance

Leaving behind bourgeois culture and society, Magda takes up the nomadic life of a circus dancer. In one of the shows Magda and her lover (who begins to show his true colours) perform the sensual gaucho dance. This widely censored dance sequence (which paradoxically made Nielsen an international sensation) provides the impetus for critical engagement within the frames of film history and of gender study alike. Nielsen, as Magda, dressed in a skin-tight black silk dress that heightens the visibility of her bodyline, uses a lasso to rope in her cowboy partner and titillatingly presses her slowly gyrating body against his. As she lets go of her own self and delves deeply into Magda's psychology, the actor's frugal but powerful bodily expression communicates the innermost feelings of a woman who left behind a respectable bourgeois life to pursue her own happiness but has met with tragedy. Despite the limitations of the early technology—the static camera which did not allow for a close-up shot—her physiognomy is sufficiently intelligible. With her eyes closed she gropes his body, rubbing her buttocks against him, as if carried away by a fantasy. Suddenly the eyes become wide open. She continues dancing, now with her gaze fixed on her victim. The cowboy's sturdy body becomes limp before collapsing into her

arms. Thanks to the role reversal drama of this highly provocative dance scene, critics see *Afgrunden* as surpassing the stereotypical representation of woman on screen. For example, Vacche notes that in the gaucho dance episode Nielsen is experimenting with power relations between genders, between ‘being and having, looking and being looked at’.³⁶⁷ Apropos of the gender dynamics, the acting, as she further argues, ‘protects [Nielsen] from becoming just a seductive object to be looked at, an alluring fetish to be played with, an erotic icon to be consumed with no personal will-power’, which is the more conventional understanding of other females film stars of the era.³⁶⁸ Or put differently, in this erotic gaucho dance sequence Nielsen appears as an agent whose choice of self-representation subverts the validity of the gender dynamic commonly portrayed in cinema.

Whereas Vacche believes that it is the actor’s self-aggrandizing acting style that “protects” her from being subjected both to the intradiegetic gaze of the theatre audience and the extradiegetic gaze of the cinema audience, Schlüpmann focuses on a different aspect. Grounding her assertion in the camera’s position at a 90° angle to the stage, she observes that Nielsen acutely constructs a visual space that renders her immune to becoming merely the fetishistic object of the camera gaze. From this well-calculated perspective the camera simultaneously captures Nielsen—who is frontally exposing her body to the camera to address the film spectator—and part of the auditorium’s wall as well as some of the musicians in the orchestra pit. For Schlüpmann, Nielsen’s self-referential acting, which indicates her awareness of the idiosyncratic camera angle, illuminates her autonomy in the process of her image making.³⁶⁹ In other words, Nielsen’s self-knowing acting style—her full-frontal pose and well-calculated choreography—dovetailed with this particular performance frame, fosters a vigorous resistance to the status of object of male desire. Schlüpmann’s note on the full-frontal pose and self-conscious performativity can be linked to Lawrence Danson’s observation about Nielsen’s onscreen persona: Nielsen ‘seldom hides her gaze either from the other characters or from the viewing

³⁶⁷ Vacche, “Asta Nielsen’s Acting,” 90.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 87.

³⁶⁹ Heide Schlüpmann, “Asta Nielsen and Female Narration: The Early Films,” in *A Second Life: German Cinema's First Decades* ed. Thomas Elsaesser (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 1996), 119.

audience’.³⁷⁰ Through her gaze she claims a freedom to express the fullest potential of her autonomous identity. Her ‘intense, dramatically focused gaze’, as American film scholar Patrice Petro also notes, represents ‘a highly motivated female gaze’ which ‘was imbued with a pathos so intense that [her] performances become emblematic of an era, and a premonition of things to come’.³⁷¹ In this regard, several critics and film historians have aligned Nielsen with the succeeding German film star Marlene Dietrich, who gains her agency by returning the gaze in *The Blue Angel* (1930).³⁷² Elsaesser, for example, argues that it is Dietrich’s ‘ability to ironically invert her own image’ that ties her with Nielsen.³⁷³ In a more recent discussion of the cult of stardom, Anton Kaes alludes to Balázs’s paradoxical depiction of Nielsen as being ‘innocent like a predator’ to elaborate Dietrich’s eroticism.³⁷⁴

Somewhat paradoxically, however, the early readings of the power relations implied by modes of looking, for instance Balázs’s, are not only a gender-neutral but also holds the spectator (gazer) as submissive. Balázs’s 1948 recollection of his cinematic viewing experience suggests the latter dimension:

The camera carries my eye into the picture itself. I look at things from within the space of the film. I am surrounded by the characters of the film and enmeshed in its action which I witness from all sides[...] My gaze and with it my consciousness is

³⁷⁰ Lawrence Danson, “Gazing at Hamlet, or the Danish Cabaret,” *Shakespeare Survey* 45 (1992): 47.

³⁷¹ Petro, *Joyless Street*, 160.

³⁷² *The Blue Angel* (1930) is a film by Josef von Sternberg acclaimed for its subversion of stereotypical gender images and its reflection on a crisis of traditional male authority in Weimar. A stern Professor Rath (Emil Jannings) falls for a sexually unabashed cabarettist Lola Lola. He gives up his career and ends up in a tour through nightclubs with her troupe in which he is made to perform as a clown in front of the audience, among them his former students. Consumed with humiliation, Rath descends into insanity and finally takes his own life. It is noteworthy that in Leopold Jessner’s 1923 film of *Erdegeist* Nielsen played a *femme fatale* Lulu, whose name and character interestingly resembles Dietrich’s Lola.

³⁷³ Thomas Elsaesser, “‘...und sonst gar nichts!’ Marlene Dietrich’s Star-Discourse Between Negation and Deferral” accessed June 8, 2018, http://www.thomaselsaesser.com/images/full_texts/marlene%20dietrich%20obituary.pdf.

³⁷⁴ Anton Kaes, Nicholas Baer, and Michael Cowan, ed., *The Promise of Cinema: German Film Theory 1907–1933* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 342.

identified with the characters of the film. I look at the world from their point of view and have none of my own.³⁷⁵

Viewed in this light, the audience, male or female, is perforce submitted to the control of the camera, through whose lens his/her visual perception of the image is alone made possible. In 1985 Gertrud Koch, following on the observations of the earliest film theorists such as Balázs and Walter Benjamin, has developed a similar description of ‘the cinematic orchestration of the gaze’ whereby the spectator’s vision is ‘completely controlled’ through being guided by ‘an instrument of the gaze’, the camera. In this conceptualisation of the look, as Koch summarises,

the spectator has no other choice but to follow the *mercilessly* [emphasis added] segmenting gaze [...] The camera thus prescribes the direction of the spectator’s gaze, its movement and foci, as well as the meaning that is to be distilled from it.³⁷⁶

As distinguished from Mulveyian ways of thinking which closely associate the gaze with an active process, such readings by Koch and the early film theorists seem to correspond more to the artistic evidence in Nielsen’s films.³⁷⁷ For example, the self-referential acting in the gaucho dance sequence confounds the Mulveyian reading of the formulation of the gaze. Nielsen by self-consciously juxtaposing her empowerment and her own objectification reconfigures the dominance/submission relation

³⁷⁵ Balázs, *Theory of the Film: Character and Growth of a New Art*, trans. Edith Bone (Dobson, 1952), 56.

³⁷⁶ Gertrud Koch, “Exchanging the Gaze: Re-visioning Feminist Film Theory,” *New German Critique*, No. 34 (1985), 141, accessed November 13, 2018, DOI:10.2307/488342.

³⁷⁷ In 1975 Laura Mulvey introduced a model of gendered spectatorship in cinema in her best-known article, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”. The argument goes that pleasure in looking is split in terms of an active male gaze and a passive female image. Significantly male oriented, Mulvey’s theory of spectatorship has been widely debated (see for example Jennifer Williams, “Gazes in Conflict: Lola Lola, Spectatorship, and Cabaret in The Blue Angel,” *Women in German Yearbook*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2010): 55 and Gaylyn Studlar, *In the Realm of Pleasure: Von Sternberg, Dietrich, and the Masochistic Aesthetic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988). In 1981 Mulvey consequently published “Afterthoughts on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’”, taking up the issues of female spectatorship. Nevertheless, her key paradigm persistently prioritizes a male audience as she concludes that the female spectator either adopts a passive or masochistic position of the fetishized woman character or identifies with the consuming male gaze presumably for whom the image of woman is constructed. See Laura Mulvey, “Visual and Other Pleasures,” and “Afterthoughts on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ inspired by King Vidor’s *Duel in the Sun* (1946),” in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1989), 14-26 and 29-38.

between the presented image and the gaze. This, when read along with her decisive engagement in pre- and post-production work, overturns the assumption about women's position in the film industry as traditionally understood and iconised. The following section, thus, pays attention to Nielsen's enactment of power which is not limited to her compelling performance, but goes further to her role beyond the screen.

Nielsen's authoring presence in the production process has attracted the interest of recent feminist film scholars. Schlüpmann, for example, in her socio-political analysis of important figures and incidents in the early German cinema, underscores Nielsen's scrupulous adherence to the artistic quality of the filmmaking process in virtually all its aspects.

[Nielsen] does not merely play a role, but rather influences the entire creation of a film [...] she *controls* [emphasis added] the shooting and discussions with the camera people, she *controls* [emphasis added] the darkroom to look on while the film is developed.³⁷⁸

As the quotation testifies, Nielsen's reputation for meticulousness in her craft is beyond doubt. That 'she controls' multiple aspects of the creative process also brings to the fore her instantiation of a very rare, even unprecedented case of female empowerment in the film industry at a time when the place of women was, more often than not, fixed in front of the camera and often in a limited range of roles. In fact, an image of Nielsen's authority in the process of film making is clearly illustrated in her 1913 film *Die Filmprimadonna*. Nielsen acts as a megastar—Ruth Breton—who takes control of virtually every stage of (her) image production. Hardly coincidentally, the film shows Ruth selecting scripts, negotiating with producers and director and even working in the printing lab.³⁷⁹ As *Die Filmprimadonna* dramatises, Nielsen/ Ruth's image of the cinematic icon

³⁷⁸ Heide Schlüpmann, "27 May 1911: Asta Nielsen Secures Unprecedented Artistic Control," in *A New History of German Cinema*, ed. Jennifer M. Kapczynski, Michael David Richardson (Rochester, N.Y.: Camden House, 2012), 45.

³⁷⁹ The surviving fragments of the film, which were restored by Nederlands Filmmuseum in 2007, are sufficient to show Ruth engaging in exerting her creative influence on the entire production process.

exudes an aura of both power and glamour, regardless of her position in relation to the (intra-and extra-diegetic) camera.

From the perspective of feminist film historiography, Nielsen is significant because her preeminence behind the camera signifies a shift in the position of woman from aesthetic object to active creator. In this respect, Erica Carter revisits Balázs's early celebration of Nielsen in her article whose combative approach begins with the title: "The Visible Woman in and against Béla Balázs" (2014). She laments that the renowned Hungarian film theoretician's account of Nielsen lacks a history of the star's artistic autonomy in film production. Carter further argues that his occlusion of Nielsen's specific historical and personal circumstance—her status as an independent producer and distributor—forges 'a hypostasis that confines her image to the realm of erotic myth'³⁸⁰ (an oddly saintly realm insofar as he lauds Nielsen for 'restor[ing] our faith and our conviction').³⁸¹ This reading, as the argument goes, 'obscur[es] her (powerful) agency in the industrial production and dissemination of her star image' and potentially perpetuates 'a gender division that places masculinity on the side of film-historical agency [...] and femininity on the side of ahistorical myth'.³⁸² Carter suspects Balázs of confining his criticism to Nielsen as a performing artist for gender-political reasons: that thinking about her behind the camera, and as part of the production process offers a disquiet contrast to how the film industry was supposed to be. At any rate, it was clearly thought safer to confine a woman to the performance space even if what she does in that contained frame is far from safe.

Taking a different stance from other feminist critics, Julie K. Allen creates a counter-discourse to expose to reader other facets of Nielsen's stardom, not just the glitz and glamour in her showbiz life. Providing a slightly less sanguine view of Nielsen's image as a female icon, she sees it as a part of a deliberate effort of the film distribution company to create Nielsen's impact on a global scale. Allen notes, 'Nielsen herself was

³⁸⁰ Erica Carter, "The Visible Woman in and against Béla Balázs," in *The Emergence of Film Culture: Knowledge Production, Institution Building and the Fate of the Avant-Garde in Europe, 1919-1945*, ed. Malte Hagener (New York: Berghahn, 2014), 63.

³⁸¹ Balázs, *Early Film Theory*, 87.

³⁸² Carter, "The Visible Woman in and against Béla Balázs," 63.

commodified in order to become the first commercially constructed cinema celebrity'.³⁸³ In her recent article, "Divas down under: the Circulation of Asta Nielsen's and Francesca Bertini's Films in Australian Cinemas in the 1910s" (2017) she goes further, arguing 'Nielsen became one of the most marketed and widely exported stars in the pre-war era'.³⁸⁴ Allen's claims, while unfolding the mechanism of the star system within consumer culture, illuminate the affinity between female agency in relationship to stardom—Nielsen as the ultimate product for consumption that was 'marketed' and 'exported'—and the classic cinematic apparatus that often subjects female figures to the audience's consuming gaze. In this sense, Allen's account shatters Balázs and later critics' idolisation of Nielsen all together. My own response is that such demystification may be entirely conceivable only if we push aside the fact that Nielsen is directly involved in supervising the making of her screen persona. This is not to say, however, that Nielsen does acquire her autonomy merely by temporarily leaving her place in front of the camera and stepping into the territory behind the lens. Even when she is subjected to the consuming gaze, she acts just as forcefully as she does in the active creation of the film. Nielsen would always particularise her agency by playing knowingly with the gendered and sexual meanings of her persona and image. Her exploration of multiple identifications and positions can be conceptualised in a more complex way than along the narrow lines of dominance/submission, masculine/feminine oppositions. My study thus aims to fill part of that gap. This I will show through a discussion of Nielsen's *Hosenrolle* (breeches role) films in which she explicitly brings gender into play with the dynamics of the power relations.

³⁸³ Allen, *Icons of Danish Modernity*, 172.

³⁸⁴ Julie K. Allen, "Divas down under: the circulation of Asta Nielsen's and Francesca Bertini's Films in Australian Cinemas in the 1910s," in *Studies in Australasian Cinema* 11 no. 2 (2017): 66, accessed Nov 24, 2018, DOI: 10.1080/17503175.2017.1385142.

II

‘Nielsen is strikingly handsome, her mannered, tailored gestures suggestively queer.’

Alice A. Kuzniar (*The Queer German Cinema*, 2000)³⁸⁵

Existing scholarly accounts of Nielsen’s breeches parts reveal interesting discourses on gender, especially insofar as they run parallel to contemporary critiques of the masculine look in female fashion of 1920s. The radical changes in women’s fashion which include the appropriation of masculine styles articulate just as clearly the transgression of traditional notions of docile femininity by the emancipated city women. Nielsen’s role as a cross-dressed Hamlet, for example, has served as a platform for wide-ranging commentaries on topics from sexual politics to fashion. For critic Ann Thompson, the film evokes the sophisticated decadence of the Weimar concept of the sexually-emancipated New Woman who exercised unprecedented forms of social and sexual autonomy.³⁸⁶ In a socio-historical reading, Tony Howard maps out a connection between clusters of women’s activism with appearances of female Hamlets from 1741 to 2000. He maintains that Nielsen, by portraying a female *Hamlet* who intrudes into the male public sphere via the manipulation of sartorial convention, became ‘a figure of sexual mobility’.³⁸⁷ From a cultural perspective, Mila Ganeva notes that Nielsen’s ‘distinctive hairstyle, the shawls, tight dresses, and hats’, which found their apotheosis in *Hamlet* ‘made many women in her audience aspire to reinvent themselves as “à la Asta Nielsen”’.³⁸⁸ At the same time, Judith Buchanan points out that Nielsen both draws from and contributes to something that was already becoming popular in women’s

³⁸⁵ Alice A. Kuzniar, *The Queer German Cinema* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000), 42.

³⁸⁶ See Ann Thompson, “Asta Nielsen and the Mystery of Hamlet,” in *Shakespeare the Movie: Popularizing the Plays on Film, TV and Video* ed. Lynda E. Boose and Richard Burt (New York: Routledge, 1997), 228 and Tony Howard, *Women as Hamlet: Performance and Interpretation in Theatre, Film and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 34.

³⁸⁷ Howard, *Women as Hamlet*, 156.

³⁸⁸ Mila Ganeva, *Women in Weimar Fashion: Discourses and Displays in German Culture, 1918-1933* (Rochester, NY Camden House, 2008), 113.

fashion: figure-denying clothes and a bobbed haircut.³⁸⁹ In the context of gender study, the curious mix of a unisex tunic, a slender boyish figure, short dark hair, and a strikingly luminous face which was in sharp contrast to typically heavy dark eye make-up renders Nielsen an obvious subject in discourses on “queer” erotic fascination. Her image in a transvestite version of *Hamlet*, as Danson notes, ‘designates her both as desiring and desirable, whether viewed with a male or a female subjectivity’.³⁹⁰

Nevertheless, my own response is that Nielsen’s pansexual persona is not an immediate consequence of her presence in *Hamlet* but rather of a process of accumulation of associations which uniquely inform her own androgynous look. In this section I aim to do justice to Nielsen’s relatively neglected *Hosenrolle* comedies which, I believe, provide a platform for Nielsen’s image as what Gary Morris calls a ‘gender-bending silent star’.³⁹¹

Although *Hamlet* has received much attention in feminist film studies as an iconic film essay on gender, Nielsen’s earlier cross-dressing roles, as I read them, convey a message about changes in gender relations and about subjectivity in crisis certainly as serious, if not more so, than her quasi-Shakespearean tragedy.³⁹² This section perforce demonstrates that the games of masquerade in Nielsen’s early *Hosenrolle* films, though seemingly facile, are only outwardly so, especially when situated in the political and social milieu of the Wilhelmine era. These years saw the arrival into public discourse of a supposed lewdness amongst young women and the homosexual rights movement coming in full swing long after German Jewish sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld had initiated it in 1897.³⁹³ Considering

³⁸⁹ Judith Buchanan, *Shakespeare on Silent Film: An Excellent Dumb Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 227.

³⁹⁰ Danson, “Gazing at Hamlet, or the Danish Cabaret,” 47.

³⁹¹ Gary Morris, “Nielsen,” *Bright Lights Film Journal*. April 1, 1996. accessed October 23, 2015. <http://brightlightsfilm.com/meet-asta-nielsen-gender-bending-silent-star-taught-everything-knowgarbo/#.VhJdyOnOx94>.

³⁹² As I have studied critiques of Nielsen so far, her prewar breeches-role comedies have never been much critically explored at least in English language. Nevertheless, I explored some relevant texts in German and had some translated into English.

³⁹³ Expanding upon a theory of the third sex developed by early homosexual rights activist Karl Heinrich Ulrichs (1825-1895), Hirschfeld, informed by his clinical and pathological study, argues that homosexuality was an innate characteristic rather than a congenital condition or a perversity. See John C. Fout, “Sexual Politics in Wilhelmine Germany: The Male Gender Crisis, Moral Purity, and Homophobia,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 2, no. 3 (1992): 403, accessed May 31, 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3704331> and Elena Mancini, “A Brighter Shade of Pink: Magnus Hirschfeld, the Third Sex, and the Sexual Freedom Movement in Germany,” PhD Thesis, The State University of New Jersey, 2007.

how urgently keen was the struggle to maintain the model of gender relations in this period in which male remains the dominant sex, the release of Nielsen's *Hosenrolle* comedies between 1913 and 1916 was a distinctively daring intrusion into the discursive moment. Moreover, these pre-war comedies, remarkably topical as they were, symbolically point to signs of distress in the established patriarchal order. In this sense they reflect Nielsen's wit and striking disregard for social convention and the prevailing *zeitgeist*.

Nevertheless, Nielsen, as the written record shows, was not incognizant of the subversive potential of her decision to sport a sleek Eton crop wig and to drape her slender body in an oversized suit and trousers. In 1928 she reflected in a German tabloid newspaper *Berliner Zeitung am Mittag* upon the strong reactions that her first project of cross-dressing in the comedy *Jugend und Tollheit* (*Lady Madcap's Way*, 1913) provoked.

When I had decided to make my first comedy of *Jugend und Tollheit* and to portray a trousers role in it, protest came from all sides: I was doomed to ruin my name and to corrupt the business. I let them speak, but put aside their advice. [...] My effort was to always be different in every movie and always bring *surprises* [emphasis added]. I did not want to be pressed into a certain type.³⁹⁴

Nielsen's statement reveals an implicit hostility in public opinion of the time towards the masculinisation of women. At its most extreme, her provocatively masculine appearance might have been perceived as unacceptable and as such might have ruined her film career. Nielsen was nonetheless unstirred by the anticipated outrage from certain commentators. Her zeal for the nuanced portrayal of femininity coupled with her eagerness to break through the confines of fixed categories was greater than the fear of hostile reaction against her. As we shall see, Nielsen further challenged the

³⁹⁴ Nielsen, "Mein Weg Zum Film," *B. Z. am Mittag* 29 September 1928, reprinted in Renate Seydel and Allan Hagedorff, ed., *Asta Nielsen—ihr Leben in Fotodokumenten: Selbstzeugnissen und zeitgenössischen Betrachtungen* (Munich: Universitas Verlag, 1981), 102. (Unpublished translation by Diana Kayser).

period's conventional social and sexual values in her later cross-dressing films. In addition, her determination to 'bring surprises' suggests something of a bold, audacious character. Such qualities can be associated with the idea of escapade in so far as they involve risk taking and unpredictable results. Further, surprises connote some kind of fun and excitement, be they on her side or that of her audience.

To advance my discussion, in the following section I situate Nielsen's breeches parts in the historical and cultural context of the Wilhelmine period. In particular, I pay attention to one significant incident in German popular media and visual culture on the eve of the First World War, that is the reemerging of the *Doppelgänger*. When the rapid onset of modernity brought with it economic instability, political tensions and an array of complex social changes, artists and filmmakers drew from the familiar theme of *Doppelgänger* to address the crises of identity that pervaded the country at that time. Understanding Nielsen as a sly critic of the gender regime of her time, I maintain that the actress must have found in what this culturally privileged moment offered the source material for her narratives of sexual masquerade and for the play of appearances. To demonstrate this I explore to what extent the motif of elaborate and playful disguise, role reversal and mistaken identity that figures in Nielsen's comedies establishes itself in dialogue with the prevailing narrative of the double. I seek to understand how Nielsen, through her breeches roles, produces diversity and complexity of meaning for female cross-dressing which may have been perceived otherwise without the context of the modern *Doppelgänger*.

The modern *Doppelgänger* and Nielsen's breeches role

The theme of *Doppelgänger* that was regaining currency during the Wilhelmine period has its origin in the literary motif of a double of a living person that features in German folklore. The modern *Doppelgänger* in the German cinema, as distinguished from that of German Romanticism, has been understood to reflect the period's obsession with the idea of a divided self triggered by the modern experience of social upheaval and rapid industrialisation. With regard to the perceptual dilemma arising from the

depiction of what Kracauer has called ‘outer duplicities as inner dualities’, several critics and film historians, ranging from Elsaesser and Tom Gunning to, more recently, Bahareh Rashidi, have pointed out the connections between the reemergence of the *Doppelgänger* canon and the concurrent formation of the modern visual culture.³⁹⁵ That is, the modern concept of the *Doppelgänger* reflects modernity’s visual regimes whereby the development in ‘optical mimetic technologies’ subjects the modern observer to ‘the perceptual dilemma arising with a blurring of boundaries between the natural and artificial’.³⁹⁶ In this regard, Rashidi summarises common types of *Doppelgänger* appearing in German cinema since the pre-war years: an ominous shadow or mirror reflection; an invention by a scientist-magician; an individual with multiple identities or a split personality; two people who look weirdly alike; and the “unreal” double generated by technology, imagination, or hallucination.³⁹⁷ Rashidi’s classification of the modern *Doppelgänger* sees the double as two separate entities representing different ends of the spectrum—the real versus the unreal. However, she totally disregards the gendered aspect of the motif that held currency during the Wilhelmine era.³⁹⁸ Rashidi fails to take into account what figures predominantly in Nielsen’s approach to the meaning of the *Doppelgänger*: the undecidability of the body which may strike one as neither definitively masculine nor feminine but double entities. In addition, her interpretation of the double, as I will elaborate in the following section, is nothing like an individual with a split personality but rather multiple signs of both femininity and masculinity being simultaneously at play.

Robert James Kiss’s analysis of the *Doppelgänger* motif in Wilhelmine Cinema (1895 -1914) has provided a reading quite close to my own in that he brings to the fore a blurring of gender boundaries inscribed

³⁹⁵ Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, 30-31. See more about the *Doppelgänger* in Bahareh Rashidi, “Divided Screen: The *Doppelgänger* in German Silent Film,” (PhD Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2007), Thomas Elsaesser, “Weimar Cinema, Mobile Selves, and Anxious Males: Kracauer and Eisner Revisited,” in *Expressionist Film: New Perspectives*, ed. Dietrich Scheunemann (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2003), 56-57, *A Second Life: German Cinema’s First Decades*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser and Tom Gunning, “Re-Newing Old Technologies: Astonishment, Second Nature, and the Uncanny in Technology from the Previous Turn-of-the-Century,” in *Rethinking Media Change: The Aesthetics of Transition*, eds. David Thorburn, Henry Jenkins, & Brad Seawell (Cambridge: Mass., MIT Press, 2003), 48.

³⁹⁶ Rashidi, “Divided Screen,” 2-3.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

³⁹⁸ Frevert, *Women in German History*, 1-5.

on the physical appearance of Nielsen's androgynous women.³⁹⁹ Examining promotional stills and visual materials from her pre-war *Hosenrolle* films—*Jugend und Tollheit* and *Zapatas Bande* (1914)—Kiss attempts to decode Nielsen's constitution of 'Doppelgänger identities'. He points to how the film star 'is located –as befitted her “Doppelgänger identity” –between the representatives of male and female sex, at once separating the two and filling the space between them with her neoteric presence.'⁴⁰⁰ My own reading is, however, slightly different. While Kiss sees Nielsen as hovering over the threshold between separating and merging two divided realms, I argue that Nielsen's model of *Doppelgänger* is afforded by a coalition of two independent selves into one body. In this sense, my analysis is distinguished from Kiss's in that Nielsen's operation of the double promotes the idea of two simultaneous selves, as opposed to the dismissal of one, however briefly, in favour of the other. To provide a clear picture, I choose a still from *Jugend und Tollheit*, not discussed in Kiss's study, in which a pronounced emphasis on ambiguous gender identity allows for an insight into Nielsen's approach to the theme of *Doppelgänger* in much greater degree than the other surviving images that show her more fully masculinised.

The film itself, sadly, appears to be lost but contemporary accounts of it survive, as do a number of stills. According to the surviving advertising materials, *Jugend und Tollheit* tells the story of Jesta Müller (played by Nielsen) who disguises herself as a young male student in order to win back her beloved.⁴⁰¹ On financial grounds, Jesta's lieutenant lover is encouraged to marry the daughter of a rich landowner. Jesta then passes herself off as a young man, hoping to seduce her rival and subsequently to expose to the lieutenant his fiancée's fickleness. The plot of a strong-willed, sexually

³⁹⁹ Robert James Kiss, "The *Doppelgänger* in Wilhelmine Cinema (1895 -1914): Modernity, Audiences and Identity in Turn-of-the-Century Germany," (PhD Thesis, University of Warwick, 2000), 217-231.

⁴⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 222.

⁴⁰¹ I wish to point out an interesting "coincidence" here. At age twenty Nielsen bore an illegitimate daughter the father of whom she refused to reveal. The daughter was named Jesta. Her decision to have a child out of the wedlock was quite a rebellious act at the time but typical of her tenacity and audacity. Such qualities perceived as key components of her legend, I assume, are projected on to a bold character of Jesta, the character she portrayed twelve years later in *Jugend und Tollheit*.

active woman who would use any possible means to keep her lover may sound provocative enough, but the visuals are no less so.

The image I have selected (Fig. 3.5) presents Nielsen as Jesta sporting a sleek Eton crop and dressed in a traditional white cotton nightdress with lace appliqués on the front panel and ruffled sleeves. The maidenly sleepwear tones in with silk pointed pumps with front detail, but is at variance with the slickly-groomed boyish bob. Even in the absence of the film itself, therefore, it is possible to make some inferences not just about the film's gender-subversive narrative but also some aspects of its visual charge.



Figs 3.3 and 3.4 Advertisements for *Jugend und Tollheit*⁴⁰²

⁴⁰² Fig. 3.3 is downloaded from the database of the Danish Film Institute, accessed November 15, 2018, <https://www.dfi.dk/en/viden-om-film/filmdatabasen/film/ungdom-og-daarskab>. Fig 3.4 is



Fig 3.5 Nielsen as Jesta in *Jugend und Tollheit* (Deutsche Bioscope GmbH, 1913)⁴⁰³

In this suggestive play with an inconsistent wardrobe in which clichéd gender indicators overlap with each other, the central figure looks at first glance like a boy impersonating a girl, and, at the next, like a girl impersonating a boy. From the querulous expression one can even fabricate the story of a sulky schoolboy forced to take a girl's role in the school play, or of a girl made to crop her hair short like a boy. Put differently, the subject negotiates the spectacle of gender through her ambivalent bodily expression. The incline of the head and the tight interlacement of the hands in front of her body, which contrasts sharply with the burning eyes and the pursed lips, exacerbate the ambiguity the image seems to encode. Her sullen look at the

derived from *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, London, 23 January 1913, accessed November 15, 2018, <http://importing-asta-nielsen.deutsches-filminstitut.de/index.php?site=database>.

⁴⁰³ Given that the image in question is part of the collection of the stills from *Jugend und Tollheit* archived by the Danish Film Institute, it seems reasonable to assume that this shot, like other photos in this collection, was captured from the film and used for promotional purposes. However, it is also possible that some or all of the photos in the collection might have been made exclusively for promotional purposes and so not directly derived from the film itself. An email from the film archivist Anne Siegmayer of the Friedrich-Wilhelm-Murnau-Stiftung (the film's right holder) confirms the absence of the film, as such makes it impossible for any final verification. I mention the lack of validation here to forestall a possible objection to the image I am attempting to draw on. On the whole, I find the image perfectly studyable as either. Email message to the film archivist, November 6, 2017. For full account of the film's synopsis and copyright registration see more Karola Gramann and Heide Schlüpmann, *Nachtfalter: Asta Nielsen, ihre Filme* (Wien: Verlag Filmarchiv Austria, 2009).

camera implies the bold, autonomous characteristics often associated with the male, whereas the demure gesture—the lowered head, the protecting of her lower body—downplays such autonomy and hints at something more submissive, typically coded female. Here, the image of Jesta in a liminal state between masculine and feminine shows genders as potentially co-existent in a self: both gender identities can simultaneously be constituent parts of a singular person and either can be consciously *expressed* (this resonates closely with *Orlando*). In this supposedly non-performative moment in the narrative when Jesta is by herself, living the consequences of her partial appropriation of the code of masculinity (e.g. a short haircut) while still able to inhabit her own clothes, the interest is that who she ‘honestly’ is, away from other intra-diegetic observers, has itself been ambiguated. This makes it distinct from any other image, for example that of an eighteenth-century actress in a breeches role, in which the natal sex was completely and deliberately obscured.

Close attention to the setting—the overtly male-identified items: rifles, pistols and medals (a robust affirmation of masculinity and military achievement), as well as a bookshelf filled with books of similar size in the background, a bulky wooden writing desk on the left of the frame—suggests that Jesta is in the study of the lieutenant. Evidently, with the help of the male garb (now stripped off and piled onto the chair behind her), Jesta gains privileged access to this distinctly male space—just as Woolf in a guise of the Abyssinian prince gained access to the *Dreadnought*. Situated against the backdrop of the sociological context of the Wilhelmine period, this equivocal image of Nielsen/Jesta can be read as conveying a compelling message about a crisis of masculinity. When read as a “male” Jesta dressed in a girl’s nightwear it may say something about the effeminate or homosexual male, as opposed to the “heteronormative” one. Another possible interpretation—a “female” Jesta with cropped short hair intruding into a male-identified space—can be related to women’s ongoing effort to live outside of the place allocated to them, which was often defined by ‘*Kirche, Küche und Kinder*’ (church, kitchen and children).⁴⁰⁴ This visually

⁴⁰⁴ Bridenthal, “Beyond Kinder, Küche, Kirche: Weimar Women at Work,” 148.

striking image shows us how far, and within what limits, her appropriation of a masculine identity gets this heroine into ostensibly exclusively male territory. However, it must be emphasised that my point is not to suggest that the film, as far as we can tell from reconstituting it from the surviving accounts and stills, endorses the idea that women who go outside traditional female gender roles will be masculinised. After all it symbolically speaks of women's enlarging their sphere and challenging the supremacy of patriarchy in a broad sense.

In addition, I wish to note that the visual composition of the image implies another way in which the film complicates gendered power relations. A careful analysis of the *mise-en-scène* enables one to notice that all reminders of masculinity (books which represents rationality and intellectuality, a quality associated with men; trousers and jacket; pistols and rifles) are reduced to the background. By contrast, what dominates the eye is the figure of Jesta who assumes and casts off gender identity at will, like clothes. Besides the guns and medals hanging at a precise angle above the bookshelf, the wall is also decorated by a few picture frames arranged in a straight line. Jesta is being shown as independent of such rigid alignment. Metaphorically, she is not confined in the solid frame of patriarchal power and traditional values. A sociological reading renders such subversion of conventional gender expectations clearer still inasmuch as a young, strong-willed Jesta embodies a dissonance— between the loosely fitting, relaxed femininity of the nightgown and the masculinity of the stiff, heavily-gelled hair.

Being highly historically-specific and culturally inscribed, Nielsen/Jesta's masquerade is legible within the complex frame of Wilhelmine and later Weimar *Doppelgänger*. Her image as a figure of sexual hybridity serves less as a reverberation of German Romantic literature than as a visual manifestation of the modern experience of confused genders—effeminate men and mannish women—following the ever-increasing subjectivity crisis of the modern era. Although Jesta eventually crosses back into traditional feminine territory, a portrayal of herself as a repository of multiple (often contradictory) genders is far from reinforcing heteronormativity. Instead, it offers another version of sexual

identity that does not just equivocate about its own placement on a binary gender scale but also questions the basis for those binary positions.

Given a fragmentary part of a longer moving narrative, in this case, a single image which might be either a still from a moment in the story or a publicity shot, and may or may not actually appear in the film, a legitimate justification for any reading may be hard to see. Nevertheless, I would argue that there is reason to believe that Nielsen, through the gendered and sexual meanings of her persona and image, initiates here a complicated process of doubling that challenges binary-organised norms. At the same time I seek to avoid iconising a single moment (clearly not part of an animated sequence), purely on the basis of the accident of its survival. I, therefore, provide a few more examples of Nielsen elaborating a moment in which a young, audacious heroine adopts male garb as a means of challenging traditional conceptualisations of female beauty and feminine character and of the social presumptions that underpin these. My examples extend from an image from *Jugend und Tollheit* (1913) to Nielsen's later breeches comedies *Zapatos Bande* (1914) and *Das Liebes-ABC* (1916).

“The trousers shots”

In the following examples, I pay attention to the moment of sexual transgression of each female protagonist from Asta Nielsen's three *Hosenrolle* comedies; *Jugend und Tollheit*; *Zapatos Bande* and *Das Liebes-ABC* (*ABC of Love*, 1916). In my analysis of each I focus specifically on a “trousers shot” in which the heroine is seen holding up a pair of men's pants (varying in style and pattern) against her female body. In a broad sense, these trousers sequences (Figs. 3.6, 3.7 and 3.8) suggest—somewhat disingenuously—that female incursion into a hitherto male sphere is possible through a simple change of wardrobe and gesture. Upon a closer scrutiny, the apparent similarity of each shot, varied in terms of plot and in

detail as they are, suggests a deliberate pattern (as opposed to a coincidence) Nielsen has already developed as her playful means to provide a perspectival take on the fragmentation of the hegemonic representation of gender.



Fig 3.6 Nielsen in a swimming trunks scene from *Jugend und Tollheit*

I start with another image from *Jugend und Tollheit* (Fig 3.6) which portrays Nielsen as Jesta, in disguise as a young man, tentatively holding up a pair of male swimming trunks –as if to test them for size. Also in the foreground are two gentlemen who are pointing towards the stretchy trunks in an encouraging manner. Evidently, this single moment is simply a single snapshot from a moving sequence but there are reasons to believe that it has survived partly because it characterises some of the film’s central drives about gender issues. It was an image that appeared in the trade press advertising the film and was therefore considered sufficiently representative to advise the interests and character of the film.

As we can see, a successful transformation earns Jesta some of the prerogatives of white heterosexual males.⁴⁰⁵ This privilege, however, places her in a position of extreme discomfort and jeopardy. In this shot we can extrapolate from the body language that Jesta is being persuaded to go

⁴⁰⁵ There are other stills that show Jesta infiltrating male spaces and engaging in male activities. For example, one displays her receiving a wet shaving service at the barber’s and in the other she is engaged in an exclusive men’s talk in a smoking room.

bathing in swimming trunks with other men in the landowner's pool.⁴⁰⁶ Jesta's baffled and sceptical expression is in sharp contrast with the calm faces of the two male characters, who are shown convincing her that there would be nothing amiss with wearing trunks. Fully aware that her female identity being would be fully disclosed by doing so, she is trapped in an awkward predicament. This trousers shot is thus imbued with a wide range of emotions: tension, excitement, nervousness and certainly humour. At the same time, it tacitly says something about the wobbliness of gender signification, when the signifier (the costume) and the signified (the essence) are not necessarily based on a correlative relationship. Surely, the opposite relation holds. If the costume did *not* signify gender, Jesta would not have been able to fool the men around her to such an extent that this comic moment is possible. Hence, it is precisely the break in correlation that makes cross-dressing an effective way of gaining access to what would otherwise be an exclusively male space. Considering Nielsen's inclination to reify "in-between" subjectivities, what I wish to emphasise here is not the success of this masquerade, but rather the interpolation between the costume and the essence. I maintain that if they ever cohere, the signifier (Jesta's exuberant male attire) slyly works to unveil the meticulously concealed female identity.

Upon a closer inspection, Jesta's spectacularly masculine appearance—the over-determined details such as a necktie, a dressage whip tucked into her boots and her perfectly sleek black hair—ironically distinguishes her from those other "real" men who, less effortfully, look more "natural". In brief, she seemingly outperforms the male subject for signified maleness. Her ultra-masculine look, as I read it, is analogous to that of a drag performer whose self-fashioning strategically exaggerates certain characteristics of either sex. Moreover, the bulky outfit underscores Jesta's ostensibly frail physique. Her overtly "feminine" physiognomy and figure compare more readily with the lady seated in the background. Such a

⁴⁰⁶ The film's synopsis is translated by Diana Kayser (unpublished) from review of *Jugend und Tollheit* originally published in *Politiken* Feb 2, 1913 and reprinted in Seydel and Hagedorff, *Asta Nielsen: Ihr Leben in Fotodokumenten, Selbstzeugnissen und zeitgenössischen Betrachtungen* (Berlin: Henschelverlag, 1981), 84.

play with excess and inadequacy highlights to her off-screen audience her “hidden” feminine identity.

Notwithstanding her meticulous camouflage, Jesta still needs a real man to instruct her how to be one. To be a man is to be comfortable wearing swimming trunks, as implied by the two gentlemen on the foreground. To be a man is also to escort a lady (as demonstrated by a military officer in the background). By putting on show of the making of a man, the image unequivocally exposes the “constructedness” of gender and gender roles. Although the film deliberately signals to the audience that Jesta, even in the male apparel, is and will be “the other” rather than one of the men, at its most successful, the result of this masquerade shows that a sexual and social identity is acquired through a mere display of its attributes. By the same token, gender reveals itself as nothing but a choice of costume and behaviour, and therefore itself a hollow signifier.

The next trouser shot presents Nielsen’s character in a slightly different light. While the image of spectacularly masculine Jesta ironically presents her at odds with the men’s world, the following picture from *Zapatas Bande* shows a pre-metamorphosis actress who is overtly enthusiastic about her new (male) role.



Fig 3.7 Nielsen tries on a vagabond costume in *Zapatas Bande* (PAGU, 1914)

Following the success of her breeches part in *Jugend und Tollheit*, a year later Nielsen appeared in another masquerade. *Zapatas Bande* is essentially the story of an aspiring film crew that travels to a small town in Italy for on-location shooting, in the hope of turning the tale of a contemporary band of bandits into box-office success. In the film within the film, the cast members impersonate the highway robbers. Nielsen as the main actress plays a male leader of the gang. Coming back from shooting, the whole cast, still in costume, find out that their “normal” clothes have been stolen (as revealed to the audience) by the real criminals who assume new identities and make a successful escape. The troupe of actors is then mistaken for the real robbers and is chased by the officer before the confusion is cleared up.

Before proceeding with my analysis, it is important to note that the shot under scrutiny does not appear in the restored version of the film.⁴⁰⁷ It is not clear why this trousers shot is missing from the surviving copy. It is possible that in adding the intertitles, which was done separately in each country of exhibition to avoid paying import tax on a longer version of the film than was necessary (since duties were calculated by the foot of the film), slightly more of the action was omitted than was intended to make room for the title card. It is also possible that the relevant frames became damaged (as often happened) and so were simply cut out at some stage. Whatever the reason, we know the scene was originally shot, that it helps to make sense of the rest of the scene and may have been included in the film’s first exhibition also. Since the image was part of the film as first shot and survives in its own right, its significance as part of the conception of the film in both narrative and thematic terms is not in doubt. And as it happens, this surviving shot felicitously serves as a jigsaw piece that does more than complete the story of the film. It also efficiently communicates the film’s fundamental premise that (gendered) identity can be put on and cast off, like clothes.⁴⁰⁸

⁴⁰⁷ *Zapatas Bande* consists of two acts. There is no report of the original material. The film was restored based on the back up copy belongs to the Gosfilmofond Moscow in 2006 by the Friedrich-Wilhelm- Murnau-Stiftung.

⁴⁰⁸ In what seems to be the preceding sequence of the shot under scrutiny, one of the on-screen cast members comes with a newspaper in his hand and shares the news about the Italian robbers. While they are talking about the plan for the next project, Nielsen as the lead actress of the troupe arrives

To return to the image itself, Fig. 3.7 shows Nielsen as the lead actress holding a pair of distressed trousers (as part of the ensemble) against her long black skirt. In an enthusiastic manner she is bending down to see if they will fit her. Unlike Jesta from *Jugend und Tollheit*, the “film star” in this image looks very keen to try on the trousers, a metonym of her new (male) role. Awaiting her attention on the far right of the frame is a striped blazer presented to her by an old gentleman who looks somewhat less at ease. In contrast, the man on the left side is looking admiringly at the troupe’s star as he is handing over a sword. The other diegetic male members of the on-screen film company’s cast and crew who surround their lead actress with voyeuristic interest eyes. By contrast, another actress who will play a female bandit ignores the main actress and her new costumes. Instead, she is examining a pistol in her hands. Just as the trousers cause great excitement in the main actor, the pistol gives her co-star a pleasurable thrill. Indeed, these two female characters are bemused and excited by the masculine properties and wardrobe in their possession and their anticipatory moment of encounter with these symbolically gendered items is witnessed by both on-screen and off-screen observers. Such surface excursions into a re-gendered identity see a promise of excitement and levity. But the cheerful mood of this image is predicated upon the idea of transvestism, of crossing from one ‘owned’ gendered state into the performance of another. And in this way, the register is very clearly distinguished from the *Jugend und Tollheit* nightdress image discussed above, which queries the binary premise that underpins the very idea of transvestism.⁴⁰⁹

The visual composition of the shot is also striking. Nielsen is surrounded by a group of formally dressed men presenting to her male-identifying items such as trousers, a pistol and a sword. The *mise en scène*,

and takes up the centre position in the frame. The team are eager for her opinion about the new film. She summons vagabond costumes and props. Arriving first is a pair of knee high boots, then, presumably, the trousers as shown in Fig. 3.6. After the actress takes the boots, the man with a hat on her right grabs the trousers and is about to pass them on to her. Suddenly the scene cuts to the intertitle which provides information about the upcoming scene: ‘The actors are in the bandit-infested area’.

⁴⁰⁹ Notwithstanding the pompous introduction to trousers in this shot, the resultant masquerade involves a curious mix of masculine and feminine characteristics. Nielsen appears in ripped and uneven trousers, which seems a deliberate display of a shapely leg. Her slashed shirt with a deep cut exposes the fair delicate cleavage, which looks unmistakably feminine. These female markers, however, are brought into conspicuous juxtaposition with the exuberantly masculine weaponry with which she is equipped. This unconvincing disguise emphasises Nielsen’s androgynous persona.

when situated in a context of the outbreak of war (when the demand for more women in the labour force and in service-related professions brought about drastic changes in gender roles and resulted in, among other things, the demand for less confining modes of dress), can be read as a graphic account of women's exposure to unprecedented freedom and autonomy, here represented by trousers. Symbolically, the very act of the male characters endorsing trousers to the actress brings to mind the *Reformkleidung* (clothing reform) introduced to Germany by the end of the nineteenth century. Although initially brought in on medical grounds, the *Reformkleidung*, as noted by Hake, served as 'the most visible sign of women's newly gained freedom of movement, literally and figuratively'.⁴¹⁰ Here, in what looks like a woman's sartorial emancipation, the lead actress in this shot is introduced to a pair of trousers which undoubtedly gives her more freedom of movement and of experimentation with different identities than her skirt does (although it also gets her into trouble, via the trope of mistaken identity). In these trousers we will see her climbing the hill, jumping across a wall and escaping gunshots. We also see her leading the fictional bandit gang and taking action to get food for her starving colleagues. As if empowered and emboldened by the male outfit the lead actress in masquerade plays the role of a brave and self-sacrificial leader, whilst the male crew members are presented as impotent. Here, vestimentary signs (which signify not only the presumed gender but also the position of the wearer: the leader of gang) are shown as regulating the performance of gender and power. In this sense, this cross-dressing comedy, sociologically distinct as it is, sheds light on the instability and fictitiousness of the social and psychic construction of gender and gender hierarchy.

In my final example of a trouser shot, the protagonist, mirrored and doubled, comes into contact with trousers in a self-reflexive manner. A mirror foregrounds the duality of a self as the film consciously focuses on transgressive moments in which the protagonist sees her own reflection. When read in the light of feminist discourse, the presence of a mirror resists

⁴¹⁰ Hake, "In the Mirror of Fashion," 185.

singularity, and as such licenses gendered questions as part of the dramatisation, or visualisation, of the division of the self.



Fig 3.8 A still from *Das Liebes-ABC* (Neutral-Film GmbH, 1916): Nielsen as Lis checks her trousers in the mirror

The storyline of this wartime comedy *Das Liebes-ABC* occasions another and arguably the last trousers shot of Nielsen's comedies of cross-dressing. Lis, a daring, young, apparently naïve but – as it turns out—bold girl, passes herself off as a young man in order to instruct her fiancé Philip in the art of “manly” seduction. This film, hence, reinforces Nielsen's double image as fetish for the male gaze and as sexual aggressor, the characteristics she has been crafting since the *Afgrunden*. As part of the process, Lis smuggles her intended to Paris (without his initial consent), where Lis's cross-dressing adventure begins. Meanwhile, Lis's father, learning about the “accidental” trip, becomes worried about his young daughter's chastity and rushes to the scene. This compels a chain of masquerades as Lis evades detection: she must now disguise herself as Philip's old school mate, Mr. Raul. The father, however, is not convinced and outwits her by having a man dress as a woman and flirt with Philip. Lis, who falls into a trap laid by her father, now resorts to another disguise as a

waiter to eavesdrop on her supposed rival. She finally reveals her identity and is reconciled with Philip.

Unlike the other stills discussed above, this image portrays the heroine in the midst of the process of transformation: she is trying on her trousers and checking herself in front of the mirror. In the shots that follow, the audience will see her fully transfigured into a young man with the help of the top hat, a bowtie and a suit piled up on the dressing table chair in the right corner of the frame. Lis's performing of a self-reflexive act in front of the mirror again evokes the *Doppelgänger* motif. Doubled and mirrored, Nielsen as Lis develops a manifold play with dual roles as an image-maker (Lis as an individual fashioning her image as the other sex) and as an image (a mirror reflection of herself as spectacle to her own gaze but hidden from our view). In addition, the mirror itself, according to Foucault, has a dual nature. Foucault believes that in our daily life we experience a space called *heterotopia*—the places between *utopias* and real spaces. In order to illustrate this he uses the mirror as an example.⁴¹¹ For Foucault, mirror is both 'a placeless place'—'an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface'—and a real place:

I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there [...] from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am.⁴¹²

This 'simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space' is close to the position at which Nielsen locates herself on the spectrum of gender and gender roles onscreen, that is somewhere between a mythic figure and a commodified feminine spectacle, the dominator and the dominated, and so on.⁴¹³

⁴¹¹ Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16, No. 1 (Spring, 1986): 24, accessed November 15, 2018, <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=03007162%28198621%2916%3A1%3C22%3A00S%3E2.0.CO%3B2-F>.

⁴¹² Ibid.

⁴¹³ Ibid

Returning to the image, I wish to draw attention to a familiar trope of inadequacy/excess in the masquerade executed by Nielsen. We see Lis who is, in a conspicuous manner, struggling to come to terms with trousers obviously too big for her (as distinguished from the relatively tight swimming trunks appearing in *Jugend und Tollheit*). Again the mode of inadequacy/excess is at play. Lis's female body is inadequate, proving too small for the male garb, and excessive is the exuberant and pompous outfit itself. In this 'unconvincing disguise', to use Chris Staayer's term, an attempt at transgenering advertises the incongruity between the body and the outfit.⁴¹⁴ The former is, therefore, neither disguised nor subsumed by latter. Rather, its specificity is clarified through the encounter.

Technically speaking, the coexistence of lack and superfluity can be seen as a crucial modification of the operation of sexual disguise as it preempts public anxieties about the visual masculinisation of women. By precluding the possibility of a "perfect" disguise the film accordingly reinstates the concept of sexual difference and traditional gender roles. However, my own reading is that there is a deeper plane to get to in this image and the last, considering Nielsen's critical desire to portray women who assert their sexuality. Here, the imbrication of masculine and feminine markers—ornate pigtails, heels, suit and trousers—while necessarily serving to disrupt the credibility of the heroine's masquerade as the other sex, preserves the fluidity of gender as it is being (re)constructed. Paradoxically, the visual incongruity that proclaims the inadequacy of the disguise reaffirms the triumph of the female protagonist in that she can still fool the other characters in the film. This is especially the case with *Jugend und Tollheit* when Jesta's lieutenant lover is fooled by the masquerade and also in *Zapatas Bande* in which the police mistake the actress for a male bandit (as in Woolf's case the Navy).

By foregrounding the artificiality of the masquerade, and thus of a binary sex/gender system, Nielsen's breeches role films seem to maintain a significant distance from the stale, if persistent, cross-dressing trope typical of the Early Modern stage. In a classic plot, as James W. Stone succinctly

⁴¹⁴ Chris Staayer, "Redressing the 'Natural': The Temporary Transvestite Film," in *Film Genre Reader III* ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press 2003), 429.

summarises, ‘a woman has played out exhaustively the potential for confusion in her disguise’, before she is eventually ‘freed to resume female attire on condition that she exchanges the unruliness of transvestic dress for submission to a man in marriage’.⁴¹⁵ Hence, as Stephen Greenblatt concisely summarises, sexually-disguised women in Shakespearean cross-dressing ‘pass through the stage of being men in order to become women’.⁴¹⁶ Such patterns, I suggest, are more readily readable in mainstream *Hosenrolle* comedies; for example, one in which Nielsen’s contemporary cross-dresser Ossi Oswalda starred. In Ernst Lubitsch’s *Ich Möchte Kein Mann Sein (I Don’t Want to Be a Man, 1918)* Oswalda plays Ossi, a bold, precocious young lady who finds in a sexual masquerade an antidote to the cloistered life to which she has been subjected by her stern uncle and then by her new guardian. Ossi, dressing as a man, sneaks out on the town and finally yields to the social strictures that come along with her new found “freedom”. Ossi discovers how difficult it is to tie a bow tie (her struggle with male attire is articulated in a way very close to Nielsen/Lis’s transformation sequence which I will discuss later). As a man she has to give up a seat to a lady in the U-Bahn. More traumatically, she is hounded by a group of women at a ball who coerce her onto the dance floor. As the title tellingly suggests, the heroine finally gives up her gender-transgressive freedom and retreats to her assigned domestic realm. The storyline and the narrative device, including the acting, despite their challenge to gender norms, reinstate the phallogocentric, if not misogynistic, principle of sexual difference and the ideologies exerted by normative heterosexuality. In Nielsen’s cumulative repertoire of cross-dressing, however, the impulse to contest mundane assumptions about gender presentation emerges less from a will to be allowed to *transgress* from one thing to another and more from an androgynous mindset that objects to the need to be defined in such constrictingly binary ways.

Nielsen’s trousers roles can be considered in relation to the Turkish trouser in Woolf’s *Orlando*. In both cases a sartorial item—a pair of

⁴¹⁵ James W. Stone, *Crossing Gender in Shakespeare: Feminist Psychoanalysis and the Difference Within* (New York; London: Routledge, 2010), 14.

⁴¹⁶ Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 92.

trousers— metonymically stands as an essential tool for these women to confound normative ideals of patriarchal society. After the change of sex Orlando, who now becomes a gypsy, remains sexually ambiguous and is metaphorically compared to Turkish trousers ‘worn indifferently by either sex’.⁴¹⁷ Indulging in the pleasure of playing a person of obscure (gender/sexual) identity, Orlando redefines rigid codes of manner and definition of one’s sex and formulates instead a hybrid incarnation. Similarly, Lis in male trousers fosters the fluidity of gender rather than being subsumed by one sexual-gender-identity category. Her staged image does communicate the significance of film’s and (Nielsen’s) discourse on gender in substantial ways. That is, seeing her as “simply” a woman in disguise or as only either masculine or feminine is a failure to recognise the scene’s placement beyond fixed hierarchies. It is also interesting to note that Lis and Orlando’s transformation takes place in a foreign land away from their everyday life—Lis’s masquerade occurs in Paris, a city well known for sexual freedom and strong queer culture, whereas Orlando’s metamorphosis is set in Constantinople.⁴¹⁸ In a sense, a combination of masquerade with temporary liberation and enjoyment echoes the theme of a modernist escapade in that it deals with the constructedness of (gender) identity and keeps (although briefly) the rigorous representation of masculinity and femininity at bay.

A close examination of each trousers shot from *Jugend und Tollheit*, *Zapatas Bande* and *Das Liebes-ABC* reveals a similar bundle of mutually contradictory masculine/feminine elements in the heroine’s reconstruction of herself into the other gender. Such discrepancies and overt tropes of unnaturalness are typically used as a resource for slapstick antics and for reasserting a normative social order based upon strict principles of sexual differences and gendered hierarchy in which men remain in control. But as these three examples testify, the idea of ‘in-betweenness of gender’ projected onto the image of the heroine can be read as part of Nielsen’s playful strategy to push against a single, monolithic version of identity

⁴¹⁷ Woolf, *Orlando*, 89.

⁴¹⁸ It was also in Paris that Hall and Sackville-West donned a male garb and assumed a male identity.

construction.⁴¹⁹ Such subversiveness is conspicuously used to deconstruct not only the familiar conventions of a cross-dressing narrative but also the rigid representation of masculinity and femininity. In this light, it can be said that these films suggest another androgynous worldview, or at least allow for the possibility of one.

Taking further my close reading of the trousers scenes, in the next section I will focus four “transformation scenes” in *Das Liebes-ABC* in order to pursue ideas of gender reconfiguration and to bring to the fore Nielsen’s many-sided challenge to dualistic modes of representation. This pivotal moment of gender trespass accords just enough space for the audience to have free interpretive play, especially when the film leaves open a question: What makes a “real” man? In my analysis I draw on Garber’s repudiation of the essentialist tendency to ‘look *through* rather than *at* the cross-dresser’.⁴²⁰ I examine how manifestations of cross-dressing in this film consolidate a sense of a permeable boundary between feminine and (hyper) masculine appearance, rather than ‘subsuming’ the subject ‘within one of the two traditional genders’.⁴²¹

‘I shall make a real man out of him’: Gender (Re)configuration in *Das Liebes-ABC*

In the narrative of a woman who regularly reaches for male attire in *Das Liebes-ABC*, Lis is presented as a dominant counterpart of her effete young fiancé Philip. In an expository sequence, Philip is shown wrapped up in an oversized scarf, like someone perpetually coming down with a cold, and always pampered by female family members (his mother, his aunt and his old nanny). Lis, by contrast, grows up with her military father. She is

⁴¹⁹ Judith and Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University, 1998), 213.

⁴²⁰ Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (London: Penguin, 1993), 9.

⁴²¹ *Ibid.*

highly independent, strong-willed and adventurous. Greatly upset after their first meeting, Lis finds in her passive, “unmanly” fiancé a stark contrast to what she expects of a future husband. An intertitle states her doubts about her intended: ‘Is he really a true man, daddy?’ The later scenes reveal that feeble Philip neither knows how to handle a cigarette, nor dares kiss a girl. Being determined to ‘make a real man out of him’ Lis helps Philip learn the typically gendered codes of manhood: she instructs him on how to smoke and later coerces him into a smooch. Her amorous advances undoubtedly astonish Philip. Lis’s demonstrative candour and sexually forward nature culminates when they go to Paris. At the theatre the male Lis effortlessly attracts two young ladies who end up sitting on her lap, whilst Philip’s demure and submissive gestures do not make a good first impression. After a comic series of masquerade episodes, the ending reconstitutes the orderly gender norms by sending the cross-dressed heroine back both to her traditional role and into her fiancé’s arms. However, as I have suggested in my discussion of Nielsen’s breeches roles in which she invites a series of questions about the relation between the heroine and male outfits, it is possible to view *Das Liebes-ABC*’s cross-dressing narrative in more subversive terms.

Lis’s decision to cross-dress is ostensibly motivated by her own desire to customize a man to satisfy her own expectations. When situated in the social or cultural sites of its enactment, however, it can be viewed as an expression of female sexual incontinence. This is partly because her choice of masquerade deviates from the traditional Shakespearean female-to-male cross-dressers (complicated though this is by the fact of boy players on the early modern stage),⁴²² who according to Marjorie Garber, are compelled by social and economic necessity: ‘to get a job, to escape repression, or gain artistic or political freedom’.⁴²³ For example, Rosalind in *As You Like It* flees the persecution in the court of her uncle. Lis breaks with the convention of cross-dressing as necessity and dares to desire something in

⁴²² Laura Levine, “Men in Women’s Clothing: Anti-Theatricality and Effeminization from 1579 to 1642,” *Criticism*, 28 (1986): 121-143.

⁴²³ Garber, *Vested Interests*, 69.

her own interest.⁴²⁴ Lis's decision to cross-dress is foregrounded as a determined agenda, albeit a light-hearted one. This is testified by her rejection of the patriarchal order inflicted upon her and her disposition to design her own destiny. Lis is betrothed to a man she hardly knows and who turns out to be the opposite of the man of her dreams. Rather than breaking off the engagement she decides to shape him to fit her own definition of a 'real man' and uses cross-dressing as a tool.

Regarding the film's treatment of cross-dressing, I would like to draw attention to the prolonged, frequent scenes of transformation in which Nielsen/Lis is positioned in front of the mirror. In these scenes she intermittently addresses her look directly to the camera (and so to her imaginary cinematic audience), in this way, disrupting the normative dialectics of classic films and their sexual paradigms. Most obviously, these dressing-up scenes comically display the plight of, and the pleasure enjoyed by, the heroine in her handling of male attire. However, my focus for the following section is, more seriously, to show that these dressing-up scenes convey a critical message about the disrupted gender order. The image of sexual and gender transgressions scripted onto the body of Lis provides a teasingly provocative critique of hegemonic heteronormativity.

The "dressing-up" scene

In a cross-dressing narrative, the "dressing-up" scene plays a significant role in establishing a bond between the protagonist and the spectator, insofar as the latter benefits from their status as an observer privy to the conspiracy and to the disguise. In other words, the spectator is exposed to the knowledge of the character's natal sex and identifies with his/her transformation from one gender to another. In this respect, the moment of encroaching (through our gaze) on the private space of the protagonist is more or less a vestige of the cinema's predecessor, the peepshow, especially when it offers voyeuristic pleasure in witnessing the cross-dresser, often in a private space, stripping off and putting on a newly

⁴²⁴ In this respect, one can again compare Lis with her contemporary cross-dresser Ossi in *Ich Möchte Kein Mann* who cross-dresses out of boredom from the restricted life imposed on her by her stern uncle and hypocrite governess.

gendered identity. As Garber posits, the gratification of witnessing ‘the transvestite’s progress’, lies in a sense of unconscious eroticism attached to a constant undoing and redoing of the body. In this light, self-transformations and masquerades can be viewed as ‘versions of fetishism’.⁴²⁵ *Das Liebes-ABC*, as I will demonstrate, overtly plays out this aspect, investing filmic time and energy into obsessively repeated scenes of self-transformation.

In relation to its running time of fifty minutes, *Das Liebes-ABC* contains altogether four sequences of a dressing-up act.⁴²⁶ These scenes alone (not including the “unmasking” part which mainly involves the termination of the act of impersonation) consume almost a quarter of the length of the film.⁴²⁷ They punctuate the narrative and in turn frame an increasingly familiar spectacle in which Lis is witnessed undraping and cloaking herself in front of the mirror. Metaphorically, such sequences invoke the well-known scene of the theatrical dressing room, in which the actress is busy getting changed for the next act. Lis, once being fully masculinised, is typically presented in a wide shot, emerging from her private room (where the transformation takes place) to the drawing room which serves as her stage. The theatrical resonance confirms the construction of gender as something to be performed.

In one of its efforts to spotlight the transgressive moment of the heroine’s transformation, the film prepares the audience for the dressing-up and hence the cross-dressing performances. A “mini” role-playing scene is put in as a prelude to what comes after in a manner that promptly and unequivocally thematises the constructedness of gender identity. In showing Philip the ropes of sex appeal, Lis sets up a situational role play in which she imitates the supposed dynamics of heterosexual relationships: she impersonates a man seducing a woman (as played by Philip). Without much help from elaborate cross-dressing, preparation or planning, Lis and Philip

⁴²⁵ Garber, *Vested Interests*, 72.

⁴²⁶ In terms of the structure *Das Liebes-ABC* consists of three acts. The film was digitized in 2011 by the Deutsche Kinemathek - Museum for Film and Television in cooperation with Det Danske Film Institute.

⁴²⁷ The duration of the first transformation scene is approximately 4.71 minutes, the second (Mr. Raul) 1.64 minutes, the third (the wig scene) 0.83 minutes and the fourth (the waiter scene) 0.37 minutes. Altogether the scenes in front of the mirror take approximately 7.55 minutes. This does not include the removing of the wig scene which is approximately 1.64 minutes long.

thoroughly impersonate the other sex. Philip, who is wearing an improvised bonnet, reacts to Lis's approach in an exaggeratedly feminised manner. Like a bashful young lady he raises his shoulder and tightly squeezes his eyes when she gently kisses his hand (interestingly he fails to impersonate the ideal man, yet excels at impersonating the archetypal woman). Meanwhile, Lis's masculine gestures—she takes a flower out of the vase, kisses it and in a flirting manner hands the flower to Philip—completely overshadows her feminine vestimentary code and her school-girl pigtails. Minimal in props yet rich in effect, the role reversal is not just educative for when they later reassume their own socially assigned roles but also transgressively fun in itself.



Fig 3.9 Lis and Philip in a role-playing scene

Although treated as almost entirely ludic, the scene gives the audience a prompt for the upcoming episodes where gender will be treated as something performative, something which can be explained in Butlerian fashion as a construction contingent upon a typical set of gendered norms and sustained effort.⁴²⁸ Masculinity, in particular, is revealed as constructed. As we shall see, Lis, despite her erstwhile ignorance of male dress codes, successfully passes as a man. In the following discussion of the four dress-up scenes I first describe each sequence and then provide my analysis in the end of the section.

⁴²⁸ Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 232.

In the course of a determinedly drawn-out dressing-up scene, Lis gradually transforms into an approximation of masculinity through the adoption of a specifically gender-coded costume. In Act II the film shows this female to male cross-dresser encountering for the first time the tools of her masquerade: a top hat; an overcoat; a suit and tie; and trousers. For those looking forward to a miraculous moment—a physical, or more precisely, sartorial metamorphosis—the process is being delayed in favour of comic effect. Rather than jumping straight into undressing and re-dressing herself, Lis revels in a moment of play with these inviting “tools” available to her.



Fig 3.10 Lis finds male attire both a burden and a pleasure.

The first transformation scene shows Lis at odds with her male attire. She clumsily handles a collapsible top hat and is amazed when it unfolds. This evokes a common sequence in a magic show— i.e. the magician’s hat— and perhaps implies the magical transformation in social status that occurs as a result of crossing the gender boundary. Thanks to her training in pantomime and theatre, dovetailed with her natural sense of humour, Nielsen deftly caricatures the posturing of a music hall “swell”, a role already associated with cross-dressing women such as Vesta Tilley. In clunky and exaggerated movements she swaggers hilariously with the top hat. The farcical moment is heightened as Lis turns out to be clueless about how to manage a male outfit. She awkwardly wraps the tie round her tiny waist as a belt when the trousers appear to be too big for her. Engrossed in

holding up the loose trousers, she puts the braces on back to front. Moreover, she has no idea how to button a shirt. As she tries to figure it out, a tiny bit of flesh is on display through the front split of the shirt. This racy moment is reinforced by the awkward facial expression of the valet who ostentatiously refrains from looking at her. Finally, with the help of the same manservant, Lis manages to don the garb to elegant effect, and confounds Philip when he lays eyes on her. Buoyed by her newly acquired identity, Lis is presented as untroubled with her new look, despite her earlier sense of being out-of-place.

In Act III the unexpected arrival of Lis's father at the hotel in Paris precipitates another masquerade: Lis will be in trouble if her father knows that she has spent a night in Paris with Philip, despite the presence of a male chaperone. In the tumultuous rush to transform Lis into Mr. Raul, all the fantasy and fun of donning male garb of the previous dressing-up scene disappear. The second cross-dressing sequence is performed in a decidedly anxious, yet still comical mood (Fig. 3.11). Now there is no playing with ties or other accessories. The pace is quickened both by physical movements and, specific to this re-mastered version, the faster beat of Maud Nelissen's music.⁴²⁹ A shot of Lis's awkward facial expression (still hopeless with a tie) is intercut with a scene of her pet dog, which obviously recognises its owner and is thus barking in front of her door.



⁴²⁹ In this study I refer to the version re-mastered and distributed by Deutsche Kinemathek - Museum für Film und Fernsehen in 2012.

Fig 3.11 A transforming mission is carried out in a decidedly anxious, yet comical mood.

In the next dressing-up scene, “the wig scene”, the truth about the fake ‘Mister Raul’ is uncovered. Fig 3.12 shows what Lis’s sceptical father spies through the keyhole. From the point of view of the father, we see Lis (still in male garb) meticulously swirling and tucking in her braids before putting her wig back on. In most cross-dressing films a wig scene often plays a key role in the progression of the plot and generally comes along with the unmasking moment. As Straayer notes in her close examination of the temporary transvestite film, ‘the removal of the wig purposefully or inadvertently ends the character’s impersonation act’.⁴³⁰ However, the wig scene in *Das Liebes-ABC* ironically brings about neither a disclosure nor a denouement, but an additional layer of comic pretence.



Fig 3.12 The wig scene

In the final masquerade scene Lis disguises herself as a waiter in order to sneak into the rendezvous of Philip with his ersatz lover. A concierge surreptitiously provides her with a waiter costume and smuggles her into the hotel dining room. Following the pattern of an ‘unconvincing disguise’, the high-rise trousers and loose fit shirt emphasise her slender female body together, as does her relatively solid eye make-up. A hat placed

⁴³⁰ Straayer, “Redressing the ‘Natural’: The Temporary Transvestite Film,” 417.

at a forty-five degree angle on top of her head decidedly maximizes the comic potential of the scene (Fig. 3.13). Strategically, an act of crossing over class and social role (Lis as a daughter of a person of high military rank impersonating a man of lower class) allows for vivacious comic effects. In this respect, her ludicrous look corresponds to the farcical exuberance of her gestures: she bows gracefully and blunders back and forth between the mirror and the camera. But, unlike the scenes in which she walks with a strut of pride, Lis now bears a relatively solemn, albeit exaggerated demeanour.



Fig 3.13 Lis impersonates a waiter in front of the mirror

As we can see, all four masquerade scenes in this film share a similar composition and visual effects because they all take place in the same location (Lis's hotel room). According to the same pattern, the transformation happens in front of the mirror situated on the right of the frame. Moreover, all of her temporary masquerades seem arbitrary, except Act III in which Lis is trapped in a predicament that necessitates another act of imposture (as Mr. Raul). Nevertheless, in each case her recourse to disguise at this point seems a puerile rather than a well-calculated decision. As such, she subverts the rationale of traditional Shakespearean female-to-male cross-dressing. Even in this instance of apparent intradiegetic necessity, the consequences prove that her choice of masquerade has not, in a logical sense, been the optimal solution to her dilemma. As it turns out,

Lis is incapable of dealing with the pressure of hiding her identity from her father. As Fig. 3.11 testifies, for a moment she becomes a dress-up doll, groomed by another male character as the valet helps her with the tie and the jacket. However, the fact that this masquerade is her own choice prevents Lis from being completely objectified. The gender dynamic in this scene is thus constantly shifting between a sense of autonomy and submission.

In the following shot (Fig 3.12), in what looks like another subjugation to the audience's consuming gaze, Lis is seen through both a literal and metaphorical keyhole. Symbolically, the keyhole unlocks for her father the secret of her masquerade. Visually, as I have pointed out, it evokes the kind of voyeuristic pleasure gained from one of cinema's predecessors, the peepshow. In a sense, Lis is subjected to the father's and the audience's voyeuristic gaze. In terms of the visual configuration, the frame is squeezed into a medium close up shot, unlike the other dressing-up scenes in which the actress is allowed more space for freer physical movement. We get closer to her, although not so uncomfortably close that we are intruding into her private space. Although engaged in private actions whilst supposedly unconscious of our/her father's gaze, Lis strangely faces the audience rather than the mirror. Narratively, the direction of her gaze makes no sense here; symbolically, however, it is a telling moment. Again her knowing pose grants her agency over her own image. Viewed in this light, she is, thus, far from being a victim of the camera's searching gaze. Put differently, her self-referential mode of acting here, which implicitly acknowledges the presence of the audience and offers her body to its gaze, designates a transaction between actor and spectator that is more reciprocal than based on an active/passive binary

The same dynamic can be felt in the last episode of transformation, in which we see Lis doing an impression of a waiter in front of the mirror (Fig. 3.13). In a farcical turn of events (she has credulously come to believe that Philip is seeing another girl who is actually her own male servant in disguise), Lis dresses simply to undress when she impulsively comes out of the masquerade in the penultimate scene. In this final bit of the romp, Lis's

rehearsing in front of the mirror, on a diegetic level, illuminates how she sees her own reflection and relates it to the way others would perceive her. This corresponds to feminist critic Sophie Woodward's observation that 'women's encounters in front of the mirror are both the 'self's dialogue with itself' and simultaneously the 'confirmation of the gaze of others'.⁴³¹ In many respects, Woodward's view echoes Lacanian psychoanalytic readings of the mirror stage. According to Lacan, a human subject's relation to his mirror image hinges on the function of *imago* 'to establish a relationship between an organism and its reality'.⁴³² In the process, infants identify with their own images in the mirror and form first impressions of themselves in relation to what they see in the mirror and to their existence in the world around them. Viewed in this light, Lis assumes an image of herself as seen in the mirror, while being conscious of the presence and the expectation of the others (here the other characters and the cinematic audience). Lis's performance in front of the mirror is, thus, decidedly exhibitionist but not necessarily perceivable as subject to the fetishizing gaze.

As I have shown in a previous example (the gaucho dance episode), Nielsen routinely performs consciousness of her audience and how she is seen by them. In a sense, she personifies the mirror as her imaginary viewer. Impersonating a man in front of it, she is curious to see what kind of effect her performance would make on a diegetic observer. At the same time she is cognizant of the presence of the cinematic audience, as she deliberately walks back and forth between mirror and camera. (This is also a function of the fixed camera position and the relatively rarity with which focal length would change in films of this period.) Cumulatively, Nielsen-as-Lis reveals herself to be fully aware, and even in control, of her own objectification, even as the film dutifully reminds us of the fetish status of the character on screen. In other words, she choreographs and executes her own objectification.

⁴³¹ Sophie Woodward, *Why Women Wear What They Wear* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 90.

⁴³² Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the *I* as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Écrits*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 4.

On closer consideration, the gender-transgressive narrative, recounting a story of a woman who reaches regularly for male attire, resonates with the core message of the film, which revolves around gender configuration. This is evident in the loading of over-determined expectations onto the character of Philip. As if she knows how to be a man better than he does Lis believes she can ‘make a real man out of him’. At least she has in her mind what a “real” one should look like.⁴³³ While the character of Philip raises a question as to what it takes to be a real man, it is Lis who offers a possible conclusion when she complains, ‘Oh, it’s tough being a real man!’ That the film asks the question what constitutes a real man can be best understood within the broader political and sociological context of Germany in 1916, the year when the German army fought in the longest and most devastating battle of the First World War (the battle of Verdun).⁴³⁴ Indeed, it is audacious of Lis to instruct a (biological) man to be a real man. Metaphorically, it suggests something about patriarchy in crisis when a man rethinks the very nature of masculinity and needs a woman’s guidance to perform his role.

Notwithstanding the more exploratory hijinks, the film ends with heterosexual couplings. The gender dynamic has now changed as Philip becomes more active and in control. In a sense, he has finally become a real man (if one does exist and the film seems sceptical about that). Lis, on the other hand, steps back into the more acceptable conventions for upper-middle-class woman. The last scene at the train station suggests Philip’s empowerment as he manages to get train tickets for both of them with Lis’ consent (earlier in the film it was the other way round). Viewed in this light, Lis is, in turn, given a lesson in how to be a “real woman”. However, it is far-fetched to conclude that she sinks into stereotypical and cultural

⁴³³ This is vividly illustrated in the opening scene. The minute Lis is first introduced to the audience in a medium shot we see her absorbedly flipping through a magazine packed with pictures of fashionable gentlemen. One page shows a mature and conventionally masculine man in a tuxedo, with broad shoulders and stylish facial hair. In an elegant posture he wraps his muscular arm round his dancing partner’s waist. In the shot that after we see Lis dotingly kissing the gentleman in the picture. With this as her point of comparison the effeminate Philip will never meet her “standard”.

⁴³⁴ It is interesting to note that Dora Carrington referred to The Battle of Verdun in her letter to Strachey as an analogy to the act of coercing a woman to give up her virginity (See Chapter 2).

perceptions of gender. Lis's journey of identity construction amalgamates, sometimes vacillates between both sexes. This in tandem with Nielsen's projected image as usually reversing the normative dialectics of sexual paradigms prevents any facile conclusion that her character could simply discard one identity and adopt the other. Finally, therefore, the textual economy of *Das Liebes-ABC* simultaneously challenges and commits to, if not reinforces, heterosexuality and traditional gender norms. The ending inevitably feels more socially timid than what has preceded it. At its best, though, the film uncovers, in a frivolous and lighthearted manner, the allegorical meanings of gender and the shared set of social assumptions that underpin its constructedness.

III

‘She stood out so distinct from the other small Danish ducklings in the duckyard that she had trouble finding a place for herself.’

Olaf Fønss (*Danske Skuespillerinder: Erindringer og Interviews*, 1930)⁴³⁵

Olaf Fønss’s Danish folklore metaphor for Nielsen’s estrangement from her home country underpins the myth about this international film star who found in a foreign land an outlet for her unique creativity. At a superficial level, her unusually dark hair and large intense eyes, as Allen puts it, ‘did not conform to the prevailing audience preference for the stereotypically Nordic ideal of blond, blue-eyed beauty’.⁴³⁶ Nonetheless, it was precisely this sort of ‘unconventional beauty’ that became Nielsen’s allure for a German audience as an appealingly exotic and mysterious figure.⁴³⁷ Getting her start in the German film industry, this ‘Danish duckling’ self-knowingly exploited this perception of exoticism to its fullest extent.⁴³⁸ In this final section I explore the way Nielsen’s slipping between national contexts both off-screen (a Danish star of German-produced films) and onscreen (playing a series of different national and ethnic characters) attests to her constant unpicking of what counts as domestic and foreign, and how categories of ‘norm’ and ‘other’ are defined.

Irrespective of her own Danishness, Nielsen was predominantly considered a German film star. Given her distinctive pageboy hairstyle and slender body, critics compare Nielsen with her German contemporary Henny Porten (1890-1960), whose long blond hair and curvaceous figure

⁴³⁵ Olaf Fønss was a Danish actor and a director who, like Nielsen, pursued his cinematic career in Germany and became one of the biggest Germany’s silent film star between the 1910s and 1930s. Olaf Fønss, *Danske Skuespillerinder: Erindringer og Interviews* (Copenhagen: Nutids Forlag, 1930), 113. quoted in Allen, *Icons of Danish Modernity*, 33.

⁴³⁶ Allen, *Icons of Danish Modernity*, 33.

⁴³⁷ Thompson and David Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction*, 30.

⁴³⁸ Despite or perhaps because of her status as Germany’s most acclaimed screen icon, her reception differed in her Denmark. According to Allen, some Danish critics ‘disparaged their countrywomen’s international success and her cinematic work, for reasons ranging from aesthetic distaste to moral outrage’. See Allen, *Icons of Danish Modernity*, 148.

were often associated with typically Germanic beauty.⁴³⁹ Hake, for example, observes that ‘whereas Nielsen was perceived as an almost disruptive presence in silent cinema, Henny Porten became identified with the normative force of traditional gender roles’.⁴⁴⁰ Similarly, film historian Tim Bergfelder notes that, ‘Nielsen and Porten represented opposite constructions of femininity. Porten was promoted as a genuinely German counterpart to Nielsen, a Danish actress with international acclaim’.⁴⁴¹ While existing critiques of Nielsen have tended to label her either as part of the country of production or of the country of her own heritage, my analysis deviates in another way. I argue that Nielsen’s transnational identity is not ascribable to any taxonomical certainties and that such any recourse to binary oppositions (German/non-German, transgression/containment, domestication/dedomestication, and self/other) precludes a potentially more fruitful reading of Nielsen’s capacity to move across different generic terrains and to expand the depth and breadth of identity construction.

Put differently, what I aim to demonstrate in this section is that Nielsen’s supranational identity is a result of a deliberate dislocation, rather than an act of striving for cultural assimilation. Viewed in this light, her crossing of national and cultural boundaries resonates with Woolf and Carrington’s use of Bohemian culture to explore other possible means of self-expression. Nonetheless, Nielsen’s deconstruction of nationalism, nationality or even national identification through her playful deployment of the stereotypical discourses of ethnicity makes her the most extreme case among the three subjects. This is partly on account of the profile her *Hamlet* achieved—a film which dramatised not only sexual but also national and cultural transgression. To elaborate upon this one can simply describe a story of a Danish actress who became the most successful star in the German film industry of her time by playing a Danish prince in a story loosely “adapted” from the most famous play of the English Early Modern

⁴³⁹ Like Nielsen, Henny Poten was regarded as one of German first film stars. Appearing in more than 170 films between 1096-1955 her stardom span earned her the longest career of any German actress. More information on Henny Poten see for example Hans-Michael Bock and Tim Bergfelder, ed., *The Concise CineGraph. Encyclopaedia of German Cinema* (Oxford: Berghahn Book, 2009), 317 -118.

⁴⁴⁰ Hake, *German National Cinema*, 16.

⁴⁴¹ Tim Bergfelder, Erica Carter and Deniz Gokturk, ed. *The German Cinema Book* (London: BFI Publishing, 2002), 125.

theatre. She was no respecter of borders – geopolitical, cultural or sexual—and both her life and her work were the more animated on account of this.

That Nielsen claimed, in *Hamlet*, to be borrowing not from Shakespeare but from the Danish legend of *Hamlet* and from the work of American Shakespeare scholar Edward P. Vining adds more layers to the film's, and even her own, supranational register. Of course, not all critics would agree with this. Allen, for example, reads the film unmistakably as an assertion of Danishness that the film underscores Nielsen's representation of Danishness and is probably informed by the fact that Nielsen is, among the well-known screen versions, the only Dane who plays Hamlet.⁴⁴² My own reading of the film, however, sees it as a place where numerous constructions are elucidated and brought into encounter with one another. And dramatising a series of slippage and scrutinizing encounters between nationalities, ethnicities, expressions of genders and ages was, as this chapter explores, characteristic of her work throughout her film career. A final observation I wish to make at this juncture is about the conceptual link between the concepts of “inter-nation” and “inter-gender” in Nielsen's expansive thinking to break through the generic classification. Further, I seek to show that Nielsen, by trying on different national identities and ethnicities in her films, uses “other” cultures to facilitate her experimentation with gender performance. Pre-determined, stable identities (e.g. nationality and gender) were not to her taste.

This section examines her wartime comedy *Das Eskimobaby* (*The Eskimo Baby*, 1916). In ways that would now be considered racist, the film freely deploys ethnic stereotypes, implying a privileging of German bourgeois values over the “uncivilised” Greenlandic cultures. Where xenophobic views are apparent, they do not necessarily suggest colonialism. Rather, the film itself can be described more accurately as a self-conscious escape from cultural and social limits imposed by the notion of a civilised community into the fantasy of the other. Such an escape, in fact, illuminates a trope of overstepping the line, the principle of Nielsen's tactic to enable a freer and more dynamic performance.

⁴⁴² Allen, *Icons of Danish Modernity*, 190.

***Das Eskimobaby*: Transgressing the Orders of Conformity and the Essence of Germanic Femininity**

As we have seen, in her on-screen characters, Nielsen regularly ventures into various forms of otherness and enjoys the freedom such parts have to offer— as well as performing the processes of assuming those parts. This includes the enthusiastic embrace of other cultures. Take, for example, the gaucho dance in which Magda draws upon some recognisable indicators of the culture of the South American cowboy and experiments with a provocatively sensual dance, or Lis's impromptu trip to "bohemian" Paris where she puts on pants and assumes a male identity in *Das Liebes-ABC*. The same principle is also applied to *Zapatos Bande*, in which the remote landscape of an Italian town fosters the lead actress's transformation into bold bandit. That each character revels in the newfound independence and authority offered by a culture not of their own encapsulates the essence of escapade. Off-screen, Nielsen underwent a similar culture shift. She had experimented culturally, leaving the comfort-zone of Danish theatre to pursue her cinematic career in Germany, and developed an acting style unique to her. In *Das Eskimobaby* Nielsen takes transnational exchange in a straightforward way when she plays Ivigtut, a young Inuit woman who is brought back to Berlin's civilised world from Greenland by a German Arctic explorer, Knud. Out of jealousy, Knud's fiancée plots against Ivigtut who, as the film later reveals, is carrying his baby. Knud manages to rescue Ivigtut and together they move to Greenland. The film mounts a dual challenge to nationalism and gender, both of which are presented as cultural performances.

In the course of the film Ivigtut is portrayed in a traditional Greenlandic costume: sealskin fur trousers and a beaded sweater. Besides the culturally distinctive wardrobe, her striking features include a fabric-wrapped ponytail on the top of her head (Fig 3.14). Ivigtut's unrefined and uncivilised manner—she gobbles her meal with her hands, sleeps on the floor, and rubs her nose against Knud's rather than shaking his hand—is set

at odds with Knud's 'quintessentially German' intended bride.⁴⁴³

Juxtaposing two different types of femininity from two different cultures, the film purposefully confronts the viewer with questions about the fixity and discreteness of the hegemonic civilised world. Is the unwritten cultural legitimacy of the western world static and impenetrable, or is it shifting and amenable to change in encounter with diverse influences? And on what grounds does one form of femininity rather than another gain cultural approval?



Fig 3.14 Nielsen as Ivigtut in a traditional Greenlandic fashion in *Das Eskimobaby* (Neutral-Film, 1916)

Perhaps the film's most striking and suggestive message about blatant chauvinism lies in the line of Knud's fiancée (demonstrated through the intertitles as translated for the American market): 'In our society, one does not fall in love with a woman in fur pants'. This double-layered statement adeptly reflects contemporary concerns about a threat to patriarchy and nationalism and to women who conform to its various dictates. Ivigtut as the foreign other is deemed unmarriageable not only because of her unGerman quality, but because of the ways in which she overt telegraphs this in her "fur pants" To clinch this fur pants motif one can

⁴⁴³ Allen, *Icons of Danish Modernity*, 174.

read it through the lens of Freudian psychoanalysis. The fur pants may come to function as the fetish that substitutes the sexual object. According to Freud in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (first published 1905), fur is reminiscent of the first contact with the maternal body's pubic hair. When a (male) child was exposed to his mother's castration and thus appalled by the possibility of his own: 'the replacement of the [sexual] object by a fetish is determined by a symbolic connection of thought [...] the part played by fur as a fetish owes its origin to an association with the hair of the *mons veneris*'.⁴⁴⁴ Situated in the context both of the rise of Freudian thought, and of the Great War, for which nation and gender are key concerns, the fur motif and its associations both with female genitalia and with castration further underscore the sexual and political tensions implicit in this comedy.

Apart from her "unseemly" fur trousers, Ivigtut's personality is deemed disruptive. Both consciously and unconsciously she challenges symbols of authority and social control in the mode of slapstick performance. Having learned in what acceptable guise she should appear for Knud's reception, the Greenlandic heroine wanders Berlin high streets to acquire what she perceives as a "proper" outfit. Being uninformed about how western consumerism works, she grabs a corset, a white chiffon top and a big bow (but no skirt) without paying. Knud consequently receives an urgent call to solve the conflict. Back in Knud's mansion, Ivigtut is at variance with Berlin women's fashions. The expectations of those familiar with a fairytale-like plot of the makeover story are thwarted by the absence of a magical transformation scene in which Ivigtut is converted into a seemly young lady able to beat the fiancée at her own game. Instead, the film portrays, in a comical vibe, the Eskimo heroine struggling with the corset before she finally and proudly concocts a style of wearing it of her own which provokes an uproar. The corset is wrapped around her waist and her lower rather than upper body, and the white chiffon blouse is put on back to front. Moreover, rather than trading off the fur pants with a proper dress, the film celebrates Ivigtut's firm belief in her sense of clothes, as the intertitle describes, 'and her solution: Eskimo fashion 1917-18' (Figs 3.15,

⁴⁴⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 21.

3.16). Ivigtut's "outlandish" costume outrages Knud's fiancée who earlier disparaged her pants (Fig 3.17). Adopting Ivigtut's outsider's gaze one can sense the culturally intolerant and racist or eugenic attitudes expressed by other characters and be reminded, through Ivigtut's ignorance of them, of the near-arbitrary nature of the West's rigid gender codes as these are conventionally expressed. Nonetheless, while being an imaginative exercise in cultural relativism, *Das Eskimobaby* neither attempts to correct those behaviours, nor ostentatiously promotes political correctness. Offering no unified code of conduct, the film simply embraces the complexity of an individual regardless of class, race and gender, as a closer scrutiny reveals that it is jealousy rather than racial discrimination that mainly accounts for the fiancée's hatred of Ivigtut.

Das Eskimobaby exemplifies how the theme of cultural otherness affords Nielsen an opportunity not only to execute a spirited performance but also to communicate the theme of gendered multiculturalism. Through the character of Ivigtut, she uses cultural dislocation as a tool to free herself from the confinement of national and sexual stereotypes. Further, the film fundamentally deals with the idea of interpersonal relationships in the larger context of nations, and ethnic groups, while challenging assumptions about social and sexual identities. Viewed in this light, its message is thus universal.



Figs 3.15 and 3.16 Stills from *Das Eskimobaby*: Ivigtut struggles with the corset before finally concocting a style of her own



Fig 3.17 Ivigut “outlandish” costume provokes an uproar

Prevailing accounts of Nielsen’s artistic virtuosity give us too narrow a perspective on what is at stake, especially with regard to her own critical reenactment of the demarcation between fixed gender roles. As my examples of the film texts, and of both contemporary and recent critics have shown, Nielsen locates herself not *at* one end of a binary gender scale but at various flexible points on a continuum – and simultaneously, through her choice of film project, asks larger questions about identity formation and expression that transcend purely gendered questions. Nevertheless, it is principally her self-conscious play with the gendered and sexual meanings of her screen image (underscored by her artistic control over the films) that enables her to explore the range and diversity of identifications in ways that ring the changes in representation of women onscreen. Further, by examining the performance of the *Hosenrolle* against the concept of the *Doppelgänger*, one can identify Nielsen’s cross-dressing characters not just as transvested comic heroines, but as tokens of the complexity of contemporary issues of sexuality, gender and gendered identity and identity more broadly. Under the delightful and diversionary mantle of comedy, Nielsen, uses her films to contribute to a modernist contemplation of (multiple) gender configurations, broadening questions of gender transgression into wider considerations of identity and transculturalism. Repeatedly, Nielsen uses the fictive space of the screen as an experimental domain in which to explore the constructions and meanings of particular

sorts of culturally determined identity formation, and to posit humorous and daring ways of challenging those.

Conclusion

This study has discussed the aesthetics of transgression through representations of the life as lived and life as written/painted/acted by three artistic figures of the early twentieth century: Virginia Woolf, Dora Carrington and Asta Nielsen. Each woman exploited to the full a range of ‘technologies’ of self-making and publicity to explore the concept of self-definition. In their own way each reworked assumptions about female subjectivity and persistently stepped outside the cultural, even moral, frameworks of their time to explore new channels of self-expression that their medium as inherited could not always provide. Throughout the three chapters of this thesis I have analysed the interrelated art forms adopted by these women, examining the central question of how each acquired a distinctive voice in their manifestations of the modern concept of subjectivity. My interdisciplinary study is informed by Foucault’s notion of ‘the technologies of the self’. Foucault seeks to understand not the meaning of the self but the process of constituting one. Tracing the mode of self-formation from the early Greek to the Christian Age, he offered a logical explanation of what makes us become who we are. That is, we *have chosen* what to project to the world and how to project it in relation to our existence.⁴⁴⁵ Infinite as it may sound, our choice is, however, subject to the control of ‘the fundamental codes of culture—those governing its language, its schemas for perception, its exchanges, its techniques, its values, the hierarchy of its practice’.⁴⁴⁶ In its approach to how each artistic woman constitutes herself as a subject within existing power relations, this thesis draws on Foucault’s understanding of the ‘technologies of the self’ insofar as it points accordingly towards various tactics each employs in the negotiation of her agency. For example, Chapter 1 discusses how Woolf yielded from technologies of power and sign systems an apparatus for subverting and parodying patriarchal values in the *Dreadnought* hoax. This she would redeploy in her later works, most especially in *Orlando*. Chapter

⁴⁴⁵ See also Patrick H. Hutton, ‘Foucault, Freud, and the Technologies of the Self,’ 127.

⁴⁴⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2001), Preface, accessed November 19, 2018. ProQuest Ebook Central.

2 shows that Carrington's conflicting mode of self-expression is attached to salient cultural and social norms on the one hand and is running counter to what is traditionally accepted on the other. By accounting for Nielsen's challenge to patriarchally defined depictions of women on film—she draws on, for example, self-referential acting strategies to avoid the facile presentation of a two-dimensional fetish object—Chapter 3 foregrounds Nielsen's means of self-definition through which the sheer frequency of performative acts of gender actively challenges not only cinematic conventions but any fixed notion of gender identity. Central to the staged public image of all my subjects is their playful and flamboyant iconoclasm. The incident of the *Dreadnought* hoax discussed in Chapter 1; Carrington's snapshot of herself performing a living statue at Garsington Manor explored in Chapter 2; Nielsen's comical representation of a cross-dressed girl who coaches a man how to be a man examined in Chapter 3: all harness a sly sense of humour as well as a troubled relationship with the canonical rites of gender and gender roles of their time.

Unlike many previous studies of Woolf which tend to foreground products of her artistic venturing, Chapter 1 took as a point of departure what could be a catalyst, if not a genesis, of Woolf's openly critical judgement of patriarchal values: the *Dreadnought* hoax. Examining her fiction and non-fiction writing, including her correspondence and diary entries, this chapter brought to the fore the idea of escapade that acts as a vehicle for the expression of her distinctive vision. The trope of escapade, which connotes (temporary) freedom and flight, also opens to us a new vista on Woolf's writing: her quest for pure fun and excitement. Additionally, by discussing the trope of escapade this chapter differs from existing accounts of Woolf in their engagement with the performative. It reveals that the concept of escapade Woolf employs is not simply a performance; it is actually also an experience. In this sense, it acts as the connecting thread that ties together her oeuvre and life experience, as such forms a mode of self-presentation unique to her. Through a critical examination of her work such as the short story "A Society" and the play *Freshwater: A Comedy* and, her mock-biography *Orlando*, Chapter 1 elaborated on the recurring motif

of a temporary excursion into the unfamiliar realm, literally (through the geographical movement of the protagonists) and figuratively (through crossing over different boundaries of genre and gender). The final section of the chapter is devoted to a discussion of *Orlando* in which the trope of escapade has come to fruition. A close study of this gender/genre-bending text reveals that the trope of escapade provides a creative conduit for Woolf's experiment with a more nuanced approach to challenging institutional constraints in both the literary and sexual-political domains. In the latter case, this chapter showed how *Orlando* informs and is informed by Woolf's own sexual adventure and vice versa.

Refuting the tendency to view Carrington as suppressing one identity under the another (such as artist *beneath* drudge or vice versa), Chapter 2 pointed out a defining feature of her aesthetics: the art of punning and the complex interplay between possible meanings. Opening with the juxtaposition of a snapshot of herself posing naked as a 'living statue' with biographical anecdotes about her feeling deep shame over her female body, the first section unfolded a portrait of a young female artist whose life was imbued with contradictions and conflicts. In doing so, it explored the way in which Carrington sublimates such discrepancies into a creative mode of self-inscription. Examining examples of her artistic outlets, the following sections demonstrated that in a well-calculated manner Carrington strives to maintain a state of liminality which provides her multiple avenues for experimentations with artistic practices that lie somewhere between real/surreal, conventional/original, concealing/revealing dialectics. The first example, the landscape, *Mountain Ranges from Yegen, Andalusia* reveals something of the artist's complicated and multi-faceted subjectivity. This section offered a biographical reading of the landscape, arguing that the exoticism and dream-like qualities, which evince the influences of the Surrealist movement, may be read as symbolising an erstwhile unexplored homoerotic realm. The final section discussed the last painting in Carrington's life, a *trompe-l'oeil* window *The Cook and the Cat*. Where other critics attempt to dispel obfuscation and dig out for the hidden essence behind Carrington's enigmatic public persona, this chapter, drawing on a

visual experience of a *trompe-l'oeil*, strived to show how Carrington actively and reflectively cultivates a double surface appearance of herself. It argued that in this trick of representation she brings to the fore both the roles of painter and housekeeper.

Rather than exploring the troubled relationship between the gazer and the object of the gaze, Chapter 3 challenged existing readings of Nielsen that have tended to rely on the binary oppositions in a way that risks a rhetorical failure to consider the diversity and complexity of meaning in her screen image. This is apparent, for example, in the discussion of the gaucho dance scene from her debut *Afgrunden*. The first section showed that in this erotic dance sequence Nielsen slyly compromises her feminist agenda, playing knowingly with the possibility of being both fetish for the male gaze and sexual aggressor. In this sense, she particularises her agency and discursively complicates the dynamic in gendered power relations within the cinematic text. Nevertheless, Chapter 3 suggested that Nielsen's decidedly hybrid persona should not be considered solely in terms of her portrayal of a *femme fatale*, given that she continuously eschews notions of conventional identity and typecast roles. Paraphrasing a reading of female subjectivity in Nielsen's films, the following section proceeded to discuss her *Hosenrolle* (breeches role). While general criticisms of Nielsen's cross-dressing films give prominence to her transvestite role in the tragedy *Hamlet*, this section pays attention to her earlier *Hosenrolle* comedies—*Jugend und Tollheit*, *Zapatas Bande* and *Das Liebes-ABC*—which obviously speak to the issue of identity crisis and the disrupting of the gender order of the status quo. Drawing on an image from *Jugend und Tollheit* which portrays Nielsen/Jesta partially appropriating the code of masculinity (e.g. a short haircut) while still inhabiting her own clothes, this section contextualised Nielsen's cross-dressing films in the wider cultural frame of the Wilhelmine *Doppelgänger*. A close study of more examples from trouser shots of the films under scrutiny reveals a tactic Nielsen usually employs in crafting a gender-confusing image of her cross-dressed character. That is, she problematises a straightforward representation of gender by reconstructing herself as a repository of mutually contradictory

masculine/feminine elements. Nevertheless, it would be misleading to situate such discrepancies and the overt unnaturalness of the ‘unconvincing disguise’ as adhering to the convention model of Shakespearean cross-dressing. Nielsen’s sexually disguised women tend to present genders as potentially, but not necessarily, co-existent in a self and as something that can be consciously *expressed*. Furthermore, a detailed examination of dressing-up scenes in *Das Liebes-ABC*—this section addressed the frequent use of wide shots and the self-referential acting style which highlight the actress’s control over her appearance in relation to the camera position—suggests that Nielsen perforates both spheres of the object of the look and the active agency as she reifies the ‘in-between’ subjectivity. Additionally, this thesis has not limited the types of significance that Nielsen’s breeches roles may achieve. The final section of Chapter 3 consolidated existing links between sexual and national transgression as the issue of crossing the threshold is never far away from the surface of Nielsen’s screen persona. The film discussed in this section, *Das Eskimobaby*, mounts a dual challenge to nationalism and gender and presents both as cultural performances as it depicts a woman from the other land whose alienation from the civilised world is symbolised by her fur pants.

As the three chapters have discussed different modes of self-inscription of Woolf, Carrington and Nielsen respectively, they have drawn a wide array of meanings from each woman’s assertion and invocations of a desire to live beyond the gender-coded mainstream. In addition, this thesis has shown how commitments to the hegemonic influence of patriarchal ideology have limited our opportunity to take into account the variegated aspects of what were perceived as their social eccentricities: Woolf, through her tendency toward escapade, and Carrington and Nielsen through their ludic performative moments; all embody that sort of aesthetic. This thesis has striven to account for the complexity and variety of meaning with which their constitution and representation of self cast these lives as both exemplary of something wider than themselves and idiosyncratically unique.

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