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Perspective

Esther Peeren

What is the perspective of critique? This question not only asks from what perspective (point of view or standpoint) practices of critique are developed, but also what perspective (outlook or prospect) such practices offer. The Kantian notion of critique saw it emerging from an externalized, superior view presumed to be universal and comprehensive, and offering disinterested judgment. In today's condition of global **entanglement** – “being twisted together or entwined, involved with” (Nuttall 2009, 1) – the claims to completeness and objectivity that inhere in this notion of critique are more problematic than ever. At the same time, concluding that such entanglement renders perspective as a particularized point of view or standpoint irrelevant and perspective as outlook or prospect impossible would play into neoliberal discourses that present globalization as an ungraspable process for the excesses of which no **responsibility** can be assigned and to which there is no alternative.

While perspective as point of view or standpoint remains relevant to mark the embodied situatedness of critique, it needs to be redefined from a stable point of view that preexists and remains separate from what it perceives to something dynamic that enters into a reciprocal relationship with what it perceives and is therefore subject to constant feedback and re-vision. As outlook or prospect, moreover, it should be seen as **speculative**

92 and open rather than as offering a determinate **vision** of what will be. No perspective can oversee global entanglement to obtain a full, independent picture of its present status or future, but at the same time global entanglement is not undifferentiated. There are perspectives *of* entanglement – human and nonhuman – that mark differences, distances, possibilities, and tensions within it. Perspective also shifts as soon as matters move and is always multiple: global entanglement appears differently from the Global South than from the Global North, even if these perspectives only emerge in their “intra-action” (Barad 2007, 33).

A text that marks the importance of acknowledging differences in perspective as catalysts for **immanent** critique in a particularly clear and forceful manner is Virginia Woolf’s epistolary essay *Three Guineas* (1938), which stages a feminist, pacifist, and (to some extent) anti-colonial intervention in the context of the unfolding Spanish Civil War and the looming threat of German and Italian fascism. Woolf begins by insisting to her interlocutor, introduced as “an educated man” who had written her asking for a donation to help prevent war, that “though we look at the same things, we see them differently” (Woolf 1996, 109 and 111). This statement, which summarily rejects the possibility of absolute judgment or complete consensus, resonates with Mikhail Bakhtin’s phenomenological contention that, because two people cannot be situated in exactly the same place at the same time, “there are as many different worlds of the event as there are individual centers of answerability, i.e., unique participative (unindifferent) selves” (Bakhtin 1993, 45). At the same time, it ties these **worlds** or “faces” of the event (45) to collective social positions, which Woolf proceeds to elaborate in terms of structural gender inequality.

Thus, she has the “educated man’s daughter,” having obtained her own income (“the sacred coin”), ask herself: “What shall I do with it? What do I see with it?” (Woolf 1996, 123). In answering this question – “Through that light we may guess everything she saw looked different” (111) – Woolf initially envisions perspective

as something separate from the eye, interfering with what it registers. However, the rest of “Three Guineas,” especially in its recurring references to several photographs she has received portraying dead bodies from the Spanish Civil War, suggests that it is not a question of choosing or being made to see the world *through* a certain light that is, as it were, added onto a universal way of seeing. Instead, it is a question of one’s way of seeing emerging *as* a particular light on the world due to one’s entanglement in gender, class, and colonial relations. Such a perspective can be expressed and brought into negotiation with other perspectives, but it cannot simply be transferred or relinquished. In Bakhtin’s terms, since it emerges from an active participation in “Being-as-event,” one is bound to this perspective by a fundamental answerability or “*non-alibi-in-Being*” (Bakhtin 1993, 31 and 40). It is, then, not merely that everything looks different to the educated man’s daughter after she secures “the sacred coin,” but that, as an educated man’s daughter, she already participated in and thus saw the world differently from others.

When Woolf first describes the Spanish Civil War photographs (which, significantly, are not reproduced in the text), she notes that “photographs, of course, are not arguments addressed to the reason; they are simply statements of fact addressed to the eye” (Woolf 1996, 117). She continues to detail how, when looking at the photographs, via the physiological trajectory that connects eye to brain to nervous system, “some fusion takes place within us; however different the education, the traditions behind us, our sensations are the same; and they are violent” (118). Four aspects, however, immediately disrupt the alleged facticity of the photographs and their supposedly unitary and unifying interpretation through the universally shared physiology of human sight. First, the rhetorical overkill of the interjection “of course,” more than confirming the validity of Woolf’s statement, incites the reader to question it. Second, her remark that it is the Spanish Government that sends these photographs “with patient pertinacity about twice a week” invests them with a particular, partial perspective

94 on – or “face” of – the Civil War (117). Third, the speculative description of one of the photographs – “This morning’s collection contains the photograph of *what might be* a man’s body, or a woman’s; it is so mutilated that *it might*, on the other hand, *be* the body of a pig” (117, emphasis added) – installs doubt as to photography’s objective nature. Finally, there is the formulation of the last sentence of the photographs’ first textual appearance: “For now at last we are looking at the same picture; we are seeing with you the same dead bodies, the same ruined houses” (118). This makes explicit the temporal dimension that inhabits the fusion of perspectives that is said to take place; seeing the same thing in a photograph is not a self-evident consequence of the medium, but an interpretative process involving the echoing of the other’s words whose end-point – “at last” – is unstable – “for now.”

The fusion that is really a delayed echoing of another’s perspective becomes subject to fission – splitting – as alternative connections are “brought out” between the dead, mutilated bodies in the photographs and the “prostituted culture and intellectual slavery” (213) of women. These connections are not visibly present in the photographs, but emerge as a result of a sustained engagement between them and the perspective or “face” brought to bear on it. Illuminated by the light of Woolf’s way of seeing as an educated man’s daughter, the photographs are made to show more than they previously did and become critical tools, no longer statements of fact, but openings for discussion and dissent.

Accordingly, the final appearance of the Spanish Civil War photograph with the dead bodies reveals it as no longer showing the same: “as this letter has gone on, adding fact to fact, another picture has imposed itself upon the foreground” (266). The dead bodies and ruined houses have been superimposed by “the figure of a man” or even “Man himself” – “called in German and Italian Führer or Duce; in our own language Tyrant or Dictator” (266). The connections unearthed by looking at the world from

the perspective of the daughters of educated men, a perspective that claims difference and validity, materialize in the photograph, which now “suggests” (a notably nonfactual term) “that we are not passive spectators doomed to unresisting obedience but by our thoughts and actions can ourselves change that figure. A common interest unites us; it is one world, one life. How essential it is that we should realize that unity the dead bodies, the ruined houses prove” (267).

There is indeed a common interest, but this interest is not served by the fusion of perspectives or by an insistence on the photograph’s unequivocal factuality. As Woolf notes, “opinions differ” on the man (Hitler? Mussolini?) who has invaded the pictorial plane and she only has her addressee’s letter “to prove that *to you* the picture is the picture of evil” (267, emphasis added). Even if they could agree that what the photograph shows is indeed evil and that this evil must be destroyed, their ways of going about this may be – *must be* – different, as they arrive at their critical perspective (as point of view or standpoint) and at the perspective (as outlook or prospect) it yields with **regard** to how to prevent war in the future from differently situated entanglements that also make them answerable in divergent ways.

This brief reading of “Three Guineas” shows how accepting that “critique is always of the world, it is always situated and expressed from within worldly engagements – and as such also always itself an expression of the world” (Kaiser, Thiele, and Bunz 2014) does not do away with the question of the perspective of critique, but makes it more urgent. Critique is an expression of the world, yet emerges from a particular position and moment within this world’s becoming. Recognizing, with Bakhtin, that the events through which this becoming unfolds always have many “faces” that may yield different critiques and answerabilities is imperative, especially as it has become clear that even in a world widely recognized as globally entangled, certain of these “faces” continue to be privileged and dominant, while others are obscured, overlooked, or disavowed.

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