Writing the Woman: two male constructions of the female other

Chargée de cours, dr. Isabela Merilă
Maître assistante, dr. Lidia Necula
Université "Dunărea de Jos" de Galați, Roumanie

Résumé: *Depuis toujours, le dialogue a été vu par des théoriciens, y compris Gurevitch et Pfuetze, comme un instrument dans la construction d'un sens du moi. Dans le cas de Salman Rushdie et de David Lodge, le dialogue est d'habitude chargé des implications culturelles et métatextuelles aussi, mettant l'accent sur la complexité qui caractérise le processus de représentation. Le miroir, symbole classique et concept lacanien à la fois, est encore soutenu dans le cas des deux exemples choisis de* Fury *et* Nice Work*, qui s'avèrent de plus compliqués par les relations de genre qu'ils mènent.*

Mots- clés: *genre, moi, l'autre, miroir, représentation, art*

In one of his articles on otherness, Z.D. Gurevitch states: "The appearance of otherness throws into relief the element indispensable to any dialogue. It is not the exchange of goods, approval, or power per se but rather a recognition of the *otherness* of *the other*. If all were the same, we would, in fact, be not much different from a throng of egos engaged only in the pursuit of food, mates, safety, and power but devoid of selves. The revelation of the otherness of the other gives rise to the awareness of being separate and different from and strange to one another. Every attempt to communicate entails acknowledgment (however implicit) of the other."[1] Therefore, one may also say that dialogue and the awareness of the other are instrumental in the construction of a *self*.

Jacques Lacan [2] defines the visual encountered first by the infant in the *mirror stage* as the locus of the Imaginary which is a process of self definition. As he points out, the Imaginary is not a developmental phase that the individual undergoes only during infancy; rather it is an ongoing process that inhabits the individual. Therefore, although the self is determined in a totalizing fashion through visual perception, this totalization is continually broken down and re-envisioned.

As far as literature and art in general is concerned, the mirror has always held an intimate and fascinating connection with matters of identity, starting from Narcissus and going as far as the contemporary film world. The 2008 horror film, *Mirrors* played on this fascination with and fear of what is represented, the other becoming more real that the self. On a more symbolic level, but keeping the specular nature of the construction, one may recall E.A. Poe's *William Wilson* and even R. L. Stevenson's *Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde*. In all cases, the encounter with the reflection is accompanied by a strong emotion, from the wonder described by Lacan in the case of the infant to a sense of dread which marks most of the other examples. It is a restlessness which is believed to mark the encounter with the *other*, since this encounter can never be separated from the *self*.

There has to be made a distinction between the reflective and the reflexive, since the former involves contemplation from one's own position and the latter is the act of turning back of experience of the individual upon himself, therefore the enactment of a transformation to another position, a movement from one centrality to another, which is the essential condition for selfhood.

Reading Ovid's work would offer a valuable point of entry into the puzzle at the core of both Salman Rushdie's *Fury* and David Lodge's *Nice Work*, the need for both doubling and differentiation in the development of a coherent self. The work of Ovid focuses on the necessity of the antipodal relationship: he was the first writer in history to pair the mythic figures of Echo, the nymph who loses the capacity for original speech, and Narcissus, the self-centred and self-deceived youth. In psychoanalytic terms, Narcissus is pure ego and Echo is pure other. Narcissus desires separation in order to maintain control of the loop of desire, while Echo seeks merger with another, engulfment, unity to take on another's identity because she lacks her own. She is a verbal reflection of Narcissus that he rejects because she threatens

the autonomy of his spatial existence. In aesthetic terms, Narcissus represents the impulse to order through a maintenance of distance in the static visual image, while Echo represents sound that transgresses the spatial through a temporal flux that promotes merger and unity.

In the first novel we mentioned, the main character, Malik Solanka, is a Narcissus who encounters several echos on his way. The novel and the journey of the main character borrow the characteristics of a Freudian session of psychoanalysis, with Solanka as the patient trying to erase and then re-write his story (in a metafictional wink of an eye as well). The first mirror that facilitates this process is Mila, who reminds him of Little Brain, the beloved doll that Malik made and which inhabits a miniature world, but which is also the star of a television show thus involving the visual in representation on several levels. The relationship that results is apparently marked by transference and displacement, which can be traced back into the past of both Malik and Mila, revealing a complex set of relationships.

On the one hand, for Solanka, Little Brain is also a connection to his son, since Asmaan seems to be mistaken frequently for a girl and to be associated with his father's artificial creation. Therefore, his affection for Mila could be seen as a displacement of the affection for his child (who has not yet gained identity from a sexual point of view). Since Malik is the focus of the story and the psychoanalytic session concerns him, it is possible to see this relationship as actually bearing the mark of one man's thought and psyche, Solanka's, while Mila is only the receiver of his projection into the exterior of his own *fury*, as Rushdie calls it. Therefore, Mila is attributed with the characteristics of one of Malik's areas of the inner, unknown world, so as to help him understand it. As such, Mila's transference of some of the feelings she had for her incestuous father onto Solanka, the idol of her childhood, works as a reference back to the abuse and trauma that marked Solanka's own life and which he is not ready to face at the moment. Mila is the *other* that was hidden and which now, once outside, can be traced and analysed, and eventually (not yet) faced.

One of the feelings that predominate with him is guilt, which leads to fury: "That mind in which Asmaan Solanka and Elian Gonzales blurred and joined was overheating again, pointing out that in his own case no relatives had needed to get between Solanka and his child. As the helpless rage mounted in him, he used, again, his well-practiced techniques of sublimation, and directed the anger outwards." [3]

But since one deals with guilt coming from two different sources – from the knife-incident and from the fact that he abandoned his child – another conflict is revealed, for which a resolution is not yet at hand.

If Mila is connected to Solanka's past and to the world of dolls, Neela is the present and film making. Therefore, the movement is even more clearly towards employing the visual in the representation of the self. There is also an interesting connection between the room where he used to stay, and which used to belong to E. M. Forster, and the room where he lives, in which scenes from a film by Woody Allen were shot.

In the context of his relationship with Mila, Malik starts writing and the product of his imagination could be considered both a stage in his treatment, and a *mise en abyme* for the whole process of psychoanalysis he is going through. At this point the game of mirrors becomes even more complex and the levels to be dealt with are at least three: 1. Kronos and his dolls; 2. Solly and his dolls; 3. the original Doll-maker (God?) and the Puppet-Kings. As mentioned above, fiction was seen by the psychoanalytic critics (for example, Freud's essays on literature and art in general) as similar to dream and thus a gateway towards the analysis of the author's unconscious. What Michaela Praisler writes about the modernists seems to apply to Solanka's story as well: "Deliberately or not, all modernist writers have tried to flee from harsh reality and escape into a dream-text where the merging of illusion with reality becomes possible. The exodus is countered however by various forms of return to the self, the familiar, the end which becomes the starting point." [4]

While Mila gives Solanka the possibility of expression through fiction, Neela brings with her the mechanisms of movie-making. If Malik was pondering regretfully on the fact that

the real world is not as ordered or as eager to solve a situation, a mystery, as the movie world, through Neela he is offered the chance to change that. "All around them in the park the colours were fading. The world became a place of blacks and greys. Women's clothes…faded to monochrome. Under a gummetal sky, the green leached out of the spreading trees." [5] She brings order into his inner world, she is the final stage in his search for identity. Neela is the closest variant of *other* that Malik has to face; she seems to be his feminine counterpart, who appropriates his fury, thus releasing him. The moment is close and Malik reaches it by continuing to fill in the gaps in his story. Thus, this part in the story bears resemblance to another episode in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. In that case, Aadam Aziz, a medical doctor, is allowed to consult a female patient only through the hole in a sheet used as screen. As a consequence, the doctor is tempted to see the artifice of the hole in a sheet as a metaphor of his own inability to relate to the world around him. He endows the fragments he sees through the gap of the woman on the other side with the power to complete him. The result is disappointment, because, after the sheet is removed, the woman is revealed as a person with her own representation of her *self* and not just an appendage to Aadam's psyche. In the case of Malik Solanka, however, Mila and Neela seem to serve only as mirrors in a novel which seems, essentially, metaphorical.

The connection with Mila, which pointed back to the abuse Malik himself had suffered as a child, being a victim of his step-father, is also revealed to have two more implications. On the one hand, it also involved his rejection by his mother and the ensuing resentment and hate, and which is supposed to count for Solanka's almost paranoid fixation of not being desired by anyone: "Eleanor had been a high flier and was greatly in demand. This too she concealed from him…She was wanted, he understood that, everyone was wanted except him, but at least he could have this paltry revenge; he could not want something too, even if it was only that two-faced creature, that traitress, that, that, doll." [6]

Although this seems to mean that he displaces his feelings onto the world of dolls once more, taking into consideration that there is a strange identity between Asmaan and Little Brain, the person whom he rejects seems rather to be his son. The more so, since the hate towards his mother's abandonment in favour of his step-father is transferred onto Eleanor and Asmaan.

On the other hand, because of this transfer and the following abandonment of his son, as well as the guilty feelings he has for Mila-Little Brain, Solanka comes to identify himself with his step-father, and the guilt aliments his death drive, resulting in his desire to disappear. Once he identifies the unconscious mechanisms that motivated his state of mind, his loss of control, the possibility of murder also becomes implausible and the case of the concrete killer proves to have no more influence on or connection with him.

In the light of these facts, one may say that the narrative – *Fury* – is a quest for identity, an introspection in which every element has to do with Solanka's perception and inner life, every reaction and figure is actually created by him, endowed with certain characteristics of his psyche, for the one purpose of telling him something about himself, of being a mirror, or providing him with a more clear view of the pieces and of the empty spaces to be filled among them. From here, the conclusion that the whole novel is a session of psychoanalysis in which on both sides (the doctor and the patient) is Solanka himself. The narrative in itself is a bestower of identity, but so is the visual representation, under its many guises: the comfort of the miniature world, the lure of television, and finally, the excitement of film.

With David Lodge's *Nice Work* we enter even deeper into the world of film, since we would like to focus both on the novel and its homologous 1989 TV production, broadcast in the form of a TV series of four episodes.

In the television production of *Nice Work*, one may register the actual presence of the mirror as a place of inbetweenness, a milieu of being, but also the field of communication between thought and what is other to thought. The mirror, just like the film, is a medium of a

self-reflexive nature that continuously questions and probes its own nature: the image becomes an original for itself in terms other than mimetic. The image reflected in the mirror imitates and is index of particular psychic configuration of the original, and in this respect, it shows the original. Moreover, the mimesis shows the very ability of characters to be other than themselves and their mimetic mirroring becomes a complex inter-mediation and polyphonic intertextuality in which sometimes the representation of what is other to the image is paramount.

The mirror turns the mirroring text into a metaphor of perspective compelling to a self-focussed message. As mentioned above, "man comes to himself, becomes truly a person, in a dialogue, not in a monologue. The feeling of self-hood, self-worth, self-identity comes when one stands over against another." [7]. Therein, the main characters, Robyn and Vic see the world from a different (and differing perspective), so that, each one of them has to mis-understand and eventually reconstruct the other in his/her own way.

Consciously or not, all the characters in *Nice Work* are mirrored as separated into self-contained units, where everyone crawls into their own hole, everyone separates themselves from their neighbour, hiding away and unable to construct themselves a consistent inner self. "I think where I am not, therefore I am where think not … I am not, wherever I am the playing of my thought; I think of what I am wherever I don't think I'm thinking." [8]

By submitting themselves to that otherness which is the language of the *other* image, already exiled from itself into its own substitute, each of them will understand that there is no truth in the absolute sense, no transcendental signified. The *truth* which is re-projected is just "a rhetorical illusion, a tissue of metonymies and metaphors as Nietzsche said." [9] Moreover, according to Lacan, "this two-faced mystery is linked to the fact that the truth can be evoked only in that dimension of alibi in which all *realism* in creative works takes its virtue from metonymy." [10]

Our analysis is particularly focused on the relationship between *Nice Work***,** the film adaptation, and the visual metaphors/connotations that arise from the heightened presence of art objects, mainly the repeated visual references to the painting of the goddess Diana.

The painting of the goddess Diana functions as an analogical representation of the power of the film itself, and registers a degree of sensitivity to the representation of *real,* corporeal bodies. The film becomes readily associated with a so-called *illusionism* which enwraps viewers and mediates a state of mind in which they believe that what is happening on the screen is real: this time-defying magic wrought by the film is not strictly a matter of technology but it is a representation itself that is able to make that which is *absent* seem present.

Usually, objects of art are objects of desire so that it can no doubt be helpful to consider not only the existential and psychological consequences of contemplating still images in relation to moving ones, but also to reflect on the core challenge of mimetic representation in general and of portrayal in particular.

The painting and the film are each constituted by the two-dimensional traces of *real* corporeal bodies and, more than any other representational practice the painting may depend upon a subject's presentation of self. But it depends equally on an artist's re-presentation of the portrayed - thus involving implicitly a tension, or ambiguity, between the portrayed as subject and as object, between self-representation and re-presentation. In Lacanian terms, the body of the portrayed is conceived both as subject and as object, echoing the mortality inscribed in mimesis, since it evokes the basic revelation of the mirror stage (of the reflexive otherness of self beheld as image) which is the initiation of the subject into a universe of gendered sexuality.

Subsequently, if taken in isolation, the portraits are not meaningful – sketched as they are in a photographic style, as it is the case with the portraits of H. James and E. M. Forster; or detailed as the painting of the goddess Diana; nonetheless, what matters, what is truly meaningful is rather the narrative pattern in which these portraits appear. The in-depth

analysis of the film adaptation reveals the story of Vic Wilcox and Robyn Penrose as well as of their enforced relationship as it extends over several weeks. It begins with resentment, hostility and ignorance on both sides, but it develops into mutual respect and understanding and then into liking. However, in the process, Vic's subconscious life is caught in a series of nightmares where he sees Robyn as a goddess. The fact that Robyn uncannily resembles a portrait of a Greek goddess that he remembers seeing in the Gallery of Art as a school boy demonstrates that the representation en abîme is a reification of a component part of the cinematic apparatus itself. The poignant theme is, in effect, allegorical.

The portrait of the goddess Diana, a three-dimensional object of art, fleshes out issues of corporeality, carnality, and embodiment predicating its insistence on baring the female body, too, and preserving, to some extent, a sexist ideology of culture for which the nude is emblematic.

Without a doubt, for the most part of it, the film adaptation of *Nice Work* uses art as mere diversion, or detail, not as central theme, but it is through art (particularly the shots which show the painting of the goddess Diana, or the portraits hanging on the walls of the hotel disco in Düsseldorf) that a myth of femininity is brought to the fore, casting an image of woman as elemental, immanent, fluid, an image that psychoanalysis brings to the surface. Hence, even more so as a representation stands in a particular relation to what it is a representation of, it is necessary to be clear about what the nature of this relation is.

Since the painting of the goddess Diana is, in fact, a picture of a mythical entity, the representation, or rather mediation of such an art object is self-reflexive since it questions its own origins: Diana never existed, so it is quite difficult, if not, rather impossible to know for sure that what viewers see re-projected is actually a painting of hers. In addition, the mythological facts, found perhaps in classical writings and storytelling provide a visual reference point, i.e. enough context for viewers to assume rightly that it is Diana who is depicted and not some other mythical figure.

By making that which is *absent* seem present, the large painting of the goddess Diana mediates a covert and oblique observation on the self-reflexive nature of film: what viewers see is a re-presentation of that which is *absent*, i.e. Haydn Gwynne, the actress who performs Robyn Penrose, strikingly resembles the goddess Diana (a mythical figure whose physical appearance is impossible to be portrayed and whose existence can only be speculated on). However, what they see is a large painting in the style of Titian (produced by the Pebble Mill design team), in which Diana bears a faint resemblance to Haydn Gwynne, and this is actually one of the visual effects created for the film.

In the film, the re-presentation of the painting of the goddess Diana is the only *text* we need to understand and detect erotic ties indicative of the importance of the body in erotic space. Even if the sequence describing Vic's series of nightmares in the TV production is shorter in duration than the series of actions it represents (in the novel, for example) because considerable chunks of non-significant events were deleted, it still confers indirect and metonymic assurance of an erotic tie. [The moment of crisis (Vic's nightmare) was drawn out in the editing room to increase suspense (simply by adding sound effects, visual effects), and so, unlike the novel, the film adaptation manages to produce an effect of an accelerated tempo of events. The cuts are used to jump instantly from one critical point in time to another, without the need to explain how the character got there, since all explanation has a retarding effect.] Hence, the element of spectacle is more noticeable in the sequence of visual images heightened by various devices of perspective and focus (close-ups, wide shot, telephoto, zoom etc.), all controlled by the directing and editing process which imposes a consistent point of view on all the spectators.

In the novel, the origin of the dream sequences in which Vic sees Robyn transformed into the figure of the goddess Diana is caught in a passage describing Vic's thoughts, as he sits in his office one evening after an excursion with his shadow. She has just revealed to him that she has a lover (Charles) and he finds himself surprisingly disturbed by this information.

> She was the most independent woman he had ever met, and this had made him think of her as somehow unattached and – it was a funny word to float into mind, but, well, chaste.
> He recalled a painting he had seen once at the Rummidge Art Gallery on a school outing – it must have been more than thirty years ago, but it had stuck in his memory, and arguing with Shirley the other day about the nudes had revived it. A large oil painting of a Greek goddess and a lot of nymphs washing themselves in a pond in the middle of a wood, and some young chap in the foreground peeping at them from behind a bush. The goddess had just noticed the Peeping Tom, and was giving him a really filthy look, a look that seemed to come right out of the picture and subdue even the schoolboys who stared at it, usually all to ready to snigger and nudge each other at the sight of a female nude. For some reason the painting was associated in his mind with the word 'chaste', and now with Robyn Penrose. He pictured her to himself in the pose of the goddess – tall, white-limbed, indignant, setting her dogs on the intruder. [11]

The interiorized rendering of a character's thoughts is a feature characteristic to novel discourse: by using free indirect style there results a very literary kind of irony at Vic's expense, appealing over his head to the educated reader to supply the missing information that explains why Vic associates Robyn with chastity and with the painting: the subject and the painting was Diana, the goddess of chastity, something he was told by his teacher but has forgotten.

While the novel, is better equipped than the film to represent thought and therefore the subjectivity of experience (in the novel we expect to have access to a character's thoughts and feelings), when still looking for some way of expressing the turmoil of Vic's inner emotional life as he becomes romantically infatuated with Robyn, this passage is a possible key: in dream and reverie Vic pictures Robyn as Diana, the chaste, forbidden, angry, unobtainable object of his desire. His actual acts of voyeurism – spying on her through the peephole when she first arrives at the factory and involuntarily glimpsing her naked breast when he first calls at her house – provoke visions in which he re-enacts watching Diana bathing with her nymphs and is pursued by the huntress and her hounds. A large water pond, complete with waterfall, is assembled in order to produce a tableau vivant of Titian's famous picture of Diana surprised by Acteon.

Furthermore, the ekphrastic/visual textualisation of the painting of the goddess Diana can be taken as an emblem for all forms of visual representation, but it can of course be more closely attached to the genre of the nude. In *Ways of Seeing* (1972) John Berger [12] alleges that the nude portrait serves to advertise *virility*. Entrapped in a marriage that no longer gives him a sense of fulfilment and forced to cope with his wife's menopausal crises, Vic is caught in a continuous process of psychological castration of his virility: for him, marriage seems to mean nothing more than a socially acceptable way to secure the propagation of the species, and once conception has occurred, the pretence of love is not required. In this background, Vic seems to value Robyn more as a symptom of his own masculinity than as a person with a separate existence: she is much more valuable to his self-image as an object.

For the sake of the painting's display value for its *beholder* the nude does an act of violence by exposing the body as a mark of submission. What results is the diminution of the sitter's identity and erotic power, the body becomes an image, and all manifestations of will are transferred to the position of the observer, voyeur. Thus, the body exists not in the domain of life's reality but in the domain of commodity relations. It is quite reasonable to trace the voyeuristic power of the viewer to a compensating decline in the power of the sitter (the goddess Diana, and through her, Robyn).

The problem of "conveying to the audience the reason for the associations between Robyn and Diana in Vic's mind" [13] is solved by a flashback scene in which Vic recalls himself as a boy looking at the painting in the Rummidge Art Gallery, immediately followed by another scene set in the present in which he revisits the gallery to track down the picture and overhears an art historian lecturing some students about it, recounting the myth of Diana.

Vic reacts to the painting of the goddess Diana as to an erotic object, taking delight in the details of her represented body. Furthermore, he explicitly associates the image with the sexual delight that he is denied by Robyn, Diana's *mirrored* image.

Visual images of the imagined beloved (Vic fantasising about Robyn) offer the metaphoric assurance of complete (bodily) possession (see the German episode when the brief love affair between Robyn and Vic is consumed). Thus, the representation of the painting of the goddess Diana is the most accessible way of representing the absent beloved *other*. However, the inherent qualities of the painting as both visual and narrative mode (it tells the story of Diana surprised by Acteon) – its stylization of beauty and its tendency to become self-referential – erase the need for the *other* and narcissistically return the focus of erotic energy to the self.

It is through Vic's nightmares, that the representation of Diana is transformed from a signifier of erotic space which is characterized by desire, absence, and deferral of possession to an indicator of guilt and foreclosure of desire: being rejected by Robyn, Vic eventually reconciles with Marjorie and tries to shut off his fantasies about himself and Robyn. Salman Rushdie's novel also ends with a return to family, this time the abandoned son.

One may say that, in both cases selected for analysis, the representation of the woman is connected with trying to attain a sense of fulfilment. The woman is objectified both by Malik Solanka and by Vic Wilcox and is assigned parts to play in keeping with the representations and expectations each of the characters have of the world and of themselves. The results are rarely the ones expected, but the experience leaves one with a broader understanding of the process of self-representation in the context of a dialogue built on textual and visual references, while marked by social and artistic considerations.

Notes

[1] Z. D. Gurevitch, "The Other Side of Dialogue: On Making the Other Strange and the Experience of Otherness," *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 93, No. 5 (Mar., 1988), pp. 1179-1180
[2] Lacan, J., *Ecrits*, W.W. Norton&Company, New York, 2002, p. 5
[3] Rushdie, S., *Fury*, Vintage, London, 2002, p. 38
[4] *For a Psychoanalytical Approach to Literature. Reality and Fiction with Virginia Woolf and Ernest Hemingway,* Porto-Franco, Galați, 2000, p. 11
[5] Rusdie, S., op. cit., p. 156
[6] Idem, p. 102
[7] P. E. Pfuetze, *Social Self*, Bookman Associates, New York, 1954, p. 80
[8] Lodge, David, *Nice Work*, Penguin, London, 1988, p. 122
[9] Idem, p. 123
[10] Lacan, J., op.cit., p.122
[11] Lodge, *Nice Work*, screenplay, BBC, 1989, p. 158-159
[12] Penguin, New York and London, 1972
[13] Lodge, D., *The Practice of Writing*, Penguin Books, London, 1997, p. 229

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