

Definitely not a snapshot. On Welty's *Helena Arden*

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Eudora Welty's photographs depicting the American South, its faces, bodies, lines, spaces, and atmospheres, have been celebrated and acknowledged as snapshots, a sign that carries a deep ambiguity because it simultaneously highlights casualness and conceals an ethic attitude and an aesthetic concept.

Francis O'Connor ponders on this word and unveils its meaning vis-à-vis the artist's relationship with the object (sitter?): 'Welty always referred to her photographs as 'snapshots.' This term was not a self-effacing assessment. It was, instead, a statement of high intention. She valued the unpredictability of the moment.' (O'Connor 36). In order to confirm her statement she quotes the author on this topic:

They [the snapshots] were taken spontaneously — to catch something as I came upon it, something that spoke of the life going around me. A snapshot's now or never...

The human face and the human body are eloquent in themselves, and stubborn and wayward, and a snapshot is a moment's glimpse (as a story may be a long look, a growing contemplation) into what never stops moving, never ceases to express for itself something of our common feeling. (36)

Welty's emphasis on the importance of capturing the fleeing, transient instant derives from the decorous relationship that she maintains with her object. Hers actually is an attitude of respect that refuses to explore the social and political pathos of the Depression. Although the snapshot reveals a tension, in my view this tension lies within the axis photographer-sitter, not within the axis sitter-beholder. This is the reason why Sandra S. Phillips claims that Welty 'used the word "snapshot" to confirm a personal record, for her eyes and mind only, like a private conversation or a sharing secret' (Phillips 77).

Bearing in mind Roland Barthes' distinction between *studium* and *punctum*, we come to the conclusion that instead of exploring the impact of the social and cultural codes which are summoned by the *studium*, Welty plays with the '*punctum* effects which perturb the scope of their *studium*,' because they 'are poignant, moving and/or striking.' (Chouard 21) Her deep involvement — should we say personal projection? — with her object(s) somehow turns her absence from the captured scene into a poignant presence. And the secret of this presence lies in the *punctum*.

Maybe with this personal investment in mind Danièle Pitavy-Souques 'insist[s] ... on identifying the images she took of others as a series of self-portraits of the artist, in a way — and Welty knew it instinctively — those photographs into which she put so much of herself were the fragments of a deconstructed self-portrait.' (Pitavy-Souques [2] 108) The investigation on the author's projection (personal investment) on her works may be very challenging but my aim is a different one.

Having reached a stage where the notion of self-portrait stands out in connection with the snapshot and within the axis photographer-sitter, I will approach now *Helena Arden*, a singular and marginal photograph within Welty's photographic work. Hopefully I will show how her choice of an explicit self-portrait meant an emphasis on a different axis, the axis sitter-beholder, and eventually a refusal of the snapshot as she usually conceived it.

In *Helena Arden* Welty exposes herself draped in a sheet, looking sideways, maybe towards a mirror, and *applying* with a tooth brush what is supposed to be some kind of cosmetics. In front of her stands a row of cans: NU Shine Black, Flit, Sunbrite Cleanser, Campbells Pea Soup, Irradol Malt. Under this row Helena Arden, the title, so to speak, appears in a kind of mosaic made up by single letters.

The artist herself reveals the personal and Historical context within which this photograph was conceived:

During the Depression we made our own entertainment and one of our entertainments was to take funny pictures. We dressed up a lot, something to do at night. Even when we had little dinner parties for each other with four or six people, we wore long dresses. And everybody came, you know, we came as somebody, like parties in Vanity Fair, people like Lady

Adby, and the Lunts, all the people that Cecil Beaton photographed doing things at parties. We were doing our version of that. We didn't take ourselves seriously.' (Welty xxi)

Welty makes clear that these photographs had no artistic intentions whatsoever; although they were meant as satire, there was no subliminal political scope or agenda.

While mimicking the fashion world, the artist recognized and echoed a change that was taking place in American society; a change that meant the emergence 'of what the French theoretician Guy Debord would call in 1967 "the society of the spectacle", a culture in which the "simulacrum", the representation of the thing, would gradually displace the thing itself as the most powerful generator of desire.' (Orvell 184) Eventually, "[w]here everything is transformed into images," as Roland Barthes wrote, "only images exist and are produced and consumed." (192)

I shall be back to this topic, meanwhile we must bear in mind that advertising and the society of the spectacle conceived of women within very specific (social) roles. For instance [in the Roaring Twenties], the 'women shown in the ads were always bright and eager typists making a good impression in the office, or capable mothers running a neat and caring home.' (Goodrum 38) On the other hand publicity received a powerful support from a new emerging art, cinema. Both publicity and the Hollywood industry interacted and contributed to the building of an imaginary anchored in the idea of success.

In Oscar Wilde's vein, we may conclude that life seemed to imitate art, the charming and alluring visual stereotypes that it was massively divulging. Inevitably women were framed within these seductive and successful signs:

[After the first World War]... the advertisers found that it was easier to follow the images of the most successful movie stars than try to show the customers how they should look and which cosmetics would achieve the end they sought. Thus the adds showed the Clara Bow look, then the Jean Harlow and Claudette Colbert image, and finally the Norma Shearer and Madeleine Carroll open-faced, with teeth and large-mouth style — with pale lips but flaming fingernails. (Goodrum 129)

Life definitely imitated art, and *Helena Arden*, Welty's syncretic title metonymically summoning both products (signs, industries) Helena Rubinstein/ Elizabeth Arden, definitely figures this new contemporary reality.

Both those characters and the imaginary that they summon belong to a different social background from the one that Welty captured in her snapshots. Deborah Willis rightly states that '[t]he women she photographed were not bound to traditional roles found in the American imaginary.' (Willis 82-3) These were women that stood on edges of the American Dream. These were indeed women whose presence reminded how fragile that Dream and the imaginary that provided its subtext were. Thus, her work 'bring[s] into focus perspectives that should not go unseen, to expose myths and misconceptions, smugness and self-deception.' (Pollack and Mars 224) But, as I mentioned above, this is not the reality and the imaginary that she exposed in *Helena Arden*.

In order to fully understand the meaning of this photograph within the context of the visual arts in the early 20th century, we must recall the dialogue between advertising photos and painting. As Fernando Guerreiro has shown, during the first decades of the previous century photography mimicked painting, and above all a special genre, the portrait (33). Visual aesthetic apart, painting lent photography specific rules of dramatization that eventually determined the photograph's aesthetic impact. Before moving ahead we must bear in mind that dramatization stands at the centre of all advertising photos.

Dramatization demands a dynamic dialogue between sign and beholder; on the one hand it presupposes a suspension in time, a stasis (staging and/or representation) inherent to the sitter's pose; on the other hand it reveals an extra value both in the photograph and in its sign(s) (35) — since the beholder is ostensibly required to be an active reader (player) of the microcosm, s/he definitely must unfold the photograph's aesthetic anchorage in a specific social and cultural context. One does not have to look further for an explanation of this context since Welty clarifies it when she says that *Helena Arden* is a satire of the 1930s advertising game in a time when people were still allowed to make fun of advertising (Pitavy-Souques [1] 31). The jazz age mundane microcosms depicting an idealized American Dream provided the aesthetic background for the satire made by her 'funny pictures'. Here she played with a society that was mimicking

an Idea of beauty and success. Besides, as Pitavy-Souques rightly remarks, she was also building a deeper criticism of photography's social function: instead of being a reliable source of daily reality, when it allowed itself to be a mere vehicle of an hypnotizing discourse, photography became a debased mimicry of its previous noble function (31-32). The mask had become the real presence in the emerging society of the spectacle, and photography lied at the center of a whole new deceiving process. Spectacle, theatricality, mask, game, all become structuring vectors in the dialogue between sign and beholder, and eventually in the way the beholder conceives his/her identity.

Despite the power of the image to reveal a political discourse, *Helena Arden*'s satire lies deep in a strange (alien) presence, the word. In his analysis of Magritte's *This Is Not a Pipe*, Michel Foucault reminds that between the 15th and the 20th century Western painting consecrated 'the separation between plastic representation (which implies resemblance) and linguistic reference (which excludes it)' (Foucault 32). This separation also meant a relationship of subordination between the two systems, and hence an order that 'hierarchizes them, running from the figure to discourse or from discourse to the figure.' (33) In line with painters such as Magritte, Welty breaks with this tradition (gap) in *Helena Arden* and requires the beholder to be (literally) a reader, a semiotic traveller floating between the figure (the self-portrait) and the word, the referential system unveiling the early 20th century consumer society and the role middle-class women play within it. As I mentioned above the photograph's title, *Helena Arden*, reminds a mosaic. The word eventually is conceived of as a kind of figure; a figure that is assembled as if in a game (scrabble?). Dramatization thus widens its sphere involving different (antagonistic) components of the visual sign.

As Fernando Guerreiro has shown, one of the main aspects of this dramatic strategy derives from a specific dimension of the pictorial tradition, the self-portrait. Biographical data inform us that Welty '... studied painting when a child because she wanted to become a painter' (Pitavy-Souques [2] 90), and that latter her 'interest in painting was broadened and deepened as she regularly visited art galleries and discovered avant-garde European painting...' (91). Critics such as McHaney have pointed out how this contact hopefully echoed in her snapshots, namely in its '... line, shadow, curve, complexity, foreground and distancing — elements she learned from

her deliberate study and practice of painting...' (3). All these dimensions eventually merge in Welty's "organic visual composition" (O'Connor 74). Needless to remind at this stage *Helena Arden*'s syncretic status as satire of an era (the society of spectacle), of a medium (photography) of the interaction between image and word, of the dialogue between sign and beholder, and of the artist herself.

This aspect gains a new light when we summon the pictorial tradition of the self-portrait, a relevant pictorial tradition in advertising in the early 20th century (Guerreiro 30-32). Though briefly we must unveil the way this tradition relies on a sense of theatricality. In her study of the self-portrait in painting Laura Cumming writes that already in the 17th century 'painters in particular tend to have a very strong sense of self-portraiture precisely as a form of theatre' (Cumming 155), since they 'must admit that some kind of show is involved, [they] must acknowledge their audience...' (156). The beholder definitely becomes part of a whole process of representation that goes beyond the mere confinement of the canvas and of its historical setting. On the other hand, even in its natural appearance the sitter assumes a mask (the pose) that enhances a specific dialogue with the beholder, and even, in some cases, a whole theatrical system, such as Joseph Ducreux's, when he '... painted "character" self-portraits in which he puts on a variety show of expressions' (162). With the rising of the spectacle society the theatricality inherent to the self-portrait is naturalized, namely with the help of '...all those other professions that specialize in appearances — hairdressing, make-up fashion, the styling of the photographic shoot ' (165). Like in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* the mask invades the subject and eventually assumes (takes control of) his/her own identity.

In *Helena Arden* Welty builds a syntheses of all the aspects mentioned above. With the society of the spectacle as background she exposes the theatricality inherent to its advertising iconic masks. Besides, she exposes (plays with) the process of building the mask while stressing the game with the beholder; a game that is enhanced by the presence of the product's names and by the title itself (the mosaic, a kind of figure). Eventually when she chooses to emphasize her own presence (the self-portrait) and the axis sitter-beholder, she makes clear her aesthetic option: *Helena Arden* is definitely not a snapshot.

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ABSTRACT

This essay considers the photograph *Helena Arden* as a humoristic exercise that parodies and deconstructs the conventions of the advertising industry in the early 20th century. This self-portrait by Eudora Welty points towards the referential system of consumer society and the role middle-class women play within it. Based on the interaction between image and word and foregrounding the dialogue between sign and beholder, *Helena Arden* is a political satire of an era, an artistic medium, and of the artist herself.

KEYWORDS

Eudora Welty; Photography; Self-portrait; Advertising.

RESUMO

Este ensaio considera a fotografia *Helena Arden* como um exercício humorístico que parodia e desconstrói as convenções da indústria publicitária no início do séc. XX. Este auto-retrato de Eudora Welty aponta para o sistema referencial da sociedade de consumo e para o papel nele desempenhado pelas mulheres da classe média. Baseada na interação entre imagem e palavra e sublinhando o diálogo entre signo e observador, *Helena Arden* faz a sátira política de uma era, de um *medium* artístico e da própria artista.

PALAVRAS CHAVE

Eudora Welty; Fotografia; Auto-retrato; Publicidade.
