The London Scene and documentary culture

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Lucrecia Radyk
Universidad Nacional de Río Negro
LabTIS
CONICET

Between December 1931 and December 1932 Virginia Woolf published a series of six articles in the British edition of *Good Housekeeping* magazine. They did not appear under a unifying title, but in two issues they were signalled as "The London Scene", which was the name later adopted for the publication of the pieces in a volume in 1975, and also for its subsequent editions. Each article dealt with a distinctive landmark in London and a variety of subjects related to the city, its history, economy, politics, and people. The magazine had a circulation of nearly one million copies; hence, the texts were profitable for Woolf in terms of money as much as on the number of readers they reached (Battershill 102; Wood 13-14). Maybe in part due to the financial significance of the publication and in part because of the difference in style and tone between these articles and Woolf's most notorious fiction and essays, modernist and Woolfian scholarship alike until the last few years paid little attention to the pieces. This paper argues that recent investigations that delve into the relationship between modernism and documentary culture offer new insight which will prove valuable in the analysis of *The London Scene*—shedding new light to what can be read as the 'literary version' of documentary film as much as to Virginia Woolf's *oeuvre* and 1930s modernism.

In the last few decades, scholarship has insisted on the necessity to breach the existing gap between modernist literature as exclusively experimental and a realism either concerned about the representation of appearances or associated to a politically engaged species that sprung with force during the 1930s. If this line of inquiry counts as a first approximation to *The London Scene* texts, which would surprise the Virginia Woolf reader with solid buildings and sounding facts, the lack of elements of fiction in most of them calls for new associations.

Also, the subjective perspective in the rendering of reality, so characteristic of Woolf's works—even in her essays about literature—seems to have given way to a different one. Considering that the series presents a buzzing capital city as the central subject, with reflections on its political, economic and social life, the link with the documentary movement appears as quite appropriate.

The documentary film in English has a founding definition: in the words of John Grierson (McLane 4 ff), it is "the creative treatment of actuality." It was also Grierson who first used the term "documentary" to designate Robert Flaherty's 1926 film *Moana* (Grierson 1926). In the following decade, he would develop his aesthetic theory in published articles and essays. In "First Principles of Documentary", from 1932, he defined the genre as opposed to Hollywood productions as well as to other kinds of films made from materials filmed on the spot. He also explained that "documentary can hope to achieve the ordinary virtues of an art (…) [if] we pass from plain (or fancy) descriptions of natural material, to arrangements, rearrangements, and creative shapings of it" (20). Thus, according to Grierson, the "natural material", is as much a distinctive characteristic of documentary as its manipulation by the filmmaker. Moreover, said interpretation of reality "reflects" the maker's philosophy. Grierson believed that, even when there are various species of film that deal with raw material, only documentary is of the highest quality; further, documentary involved for him a social responsibility implicit in its poetry and prophecy (26). The sociological sense challenges the filmmaker to produce beauty while revealing matters of social injustice.

Regarding the critics that have examined the relation between modernism and documentary, among others, Tyrus Miller has argued in favour of a complementarity of their conceptual frameworks in a broad modernist poetics by exploring the 1930s prose poem. Also, Laura Marcus in the chapter she contributed to *Intermodernism: Literary Culture in Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain* thoroughly illustrates the topic of literature and film inter-relations during the period, by exploring what she explains as a "shared project (…) of different modes of translation: from verbal to visual forms, and from inner to outer, private to public representations" (6). Contesting views that propose a linear influence of

one art to another, Marcus examines collaborations among artists as well as inter-artistic practices of writers and filmmakers in the context of “documentary culture”. She claims that “‘the documentary idea’ not only intersected different media but created new terms for an interdisciplinary synthesis” (16). Thus, it is possible to say that *The London Scene* articles seem to expose concerns similar to the ones Grierson developed in the early 1930s.

Also, from a wide perspective, Thomas Davis examines the period in terms of an “outward turn”, that is to say, “the impulse toward actuality” (28) of modernist artists and writers. Concerned about how in particular late modernists “render legible their moment of systemic disorder”, Davis focuses on their attention to the particulars of everyday life and argues that “the arrangement of those particulars might yield some knowledge about the crumbling world-system” (14).

Additionally, with regard to documentary film history, Bill Nichols in “Documentary Film and the Modernist Avant-Garde” stresses “how the appearance of documentary film involves conditions peculiar to the moment of its inception after World War I” (585) and a “similarity and overlap between 1920s documentary and contemporaneous practices, most notably the avant-garde” (586). Among the elements that Nichols deems necessary contributions to the emergence of the movement, one of them appears to be particularly insightful with relation to Woolf’s articles about London, that is, rhetoric. The rhetorical strategies, Nichols argues, “called on the audience to put itself at one with the social perspective of the film and to prepare itself to act accordingly”. (599)

Let us now examine how *The London Scene* articles use a particular rhetoric to appeal to their readers. “The Docks of London,” the first piece to be published, opens with a quotation from a poem by Robert Bridges: “Whither, O splendid ship.” This phrase references to the subject of the article and at the same time hints at one of the recurrent preoccupations in the series, namely, the difference and distance between a present and a past built throughout the texts in opposition to one another. The images of the cited poem about a beautiful ship amid idyllic landscapes come to the reader’s mind and stand in contrast to the filthy docks and the piles of garbage product of global capitalism that the narrator

describes a few paragraphs later. Even if there are some markers of an interiority, a subjectivity guiding the writing, exposition and impersonal description dominate most of the article so that facts and material reality settle any doubt or impression that may arise.

And yet, a certain voice appears in this first article that will emerge again and again in the following pieces. It is indeed subtle in occasions, as Susan Squier has noticed by comparing the manuscript with the published article, but no doubt it makes itself heard. In "The Docks of London," it explains global commerce and its implications. Those little bits of broken china that in the short story "Solid Objects" were purely of an ornamental nature, are described here as "rarities and oddities" that even if they occur, "they are instantly tested for their mercantile value". In addition, the reader is instructed about the provenance of everyday things, as well as their economic significance. Beauty here, of course, is associated with "the aptness of everything to its purpose".

The closing lines instruct about citizen's centrality in this organisation. Woolf writes:

> The only thing, one comes to feel, that can change the routine of the docks is a change in ourselves. (…) Our body is their master. We demand shoes, furs, bags, stoves, oil, rice puddings, candles; and they are brought us. Trade watches us anxiously to see what new desires are beginning to grow in us, what new dislikes.

This instructive, pedagogic and sometimes poetic commentary can be equated to the off-camera voice in the documentary film. It is possible to spot it also in the other articles of the series. In "Oxford Street Tide", the following article, the reader learns that "the human form has adapted itself no less than the animal product" and that past aristocrats and present merchants have similar intentions. He also learns that behind the surface, beyond well-dressed women and colourful merchandise, what drives this buzzing street is people trying to make a living. In regard to the article "Great Men's Houses", it is poignant with feminist criticism and no doubt sarcasm can be heard in a second reading. Carlyle is a "great" man only because there were women with him who made sure he lived comfortably while he was thinking and writing. As for "Abbeys and Cathedrals", it focuses on the individual and public space, places of quiet in the modern city, and on how from burial

places we can draw conclusions regarding past and present modes of living. Perhaps it is worth noting that the worldly matters presented by this piece stand in contrast to the omission of any reference to god or religion while talking about temples. The movement in the fifth article seems to be contrary to that of the first. While in "The Docks of London" a seemingly impartial description of the docks gives way to an exposition on global commerce and a somewhat critical outlook of the present state of affairs, "This is the House of Commons" begins by mocking the members of parliament to praise them by the end. The comparisons of those men to animals and the total lack of reverence give way to a celebration of the fact that they are simply people debating Britain's destiny. Moreover, in opposition with the past of "great men," the politicians of the present renounce to their individuality in favour, the narrator hopes, of democracy and the common good.

The London Scene took Woolf and her readers outside: outside of the library and into the city, as much as beyond the characters' personal feelings and thoughts. Except for Mrs. Crowe in "Portrait of a Londoner", the fact that there is no character development or no character at all in these texts also call to mind the documentary movement and the debate around the representation of types. In these articles too the focus is society—the individual is regarded only in relation to it.

The "outward turn" concept, as developed by Davis, collaborates as well to make a distinction between these pieces and Woolf's works published before 1931. The writer appears here exclusively as editor of scenes and facts. If one of the salient traits of Woolf's essays is to stage the train of thought guiding the argumentation, the method in these articles has been omitted to highlight, instead, the subject and message.

The documentary perspective might have offered Woolf a new possibility to put in writing the social and feminist matters that were for her a lifelong preoccupation. Pieces of evidence of this concern can be found in her participation in activities of social commitment as much as in her writing. Among other actions, she taught a class for women workers in Morley College from 1905 to 1907 (Bell 105ss), and got involved in activities with the Women's Cooperative Guild. Woolf addressed class distinctions in literature in essays such

as “The Leaning Tower” and “The Niece of an Earl”, and about women in society, in book length, in *A Room of One’s Own*. However, the publication of these pieces in the magazine *Good Housekeeping* allowed her to reach a bigger audience in a contemporary format.

The London Scene series also evince once more of Woolf’s ability to experiment in various genres, modify, and amplify them. It most certainly reveals a different modernist aspect of the author.

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