Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov
Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies • Vol. 8 (57) No. 2 – 2015

# The logic of visualization in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*

Sławomir KOZIOŁ[1]

*The article analyses the way in which Virginia Woolf shows the importance of the visual in the social space of London in the third decade of the 20th century, which she represents in her novel "Mrs Dalloway". The analysis draws on the terminology and theory developed by Henri Lefebvre, who claims in "The Production of Space" that one of the main characteristics of the social space of modern society is the logic of visualization. According to Lefebvre, this logic has two aspects: metaphoric, which treats writing and visual signs in general as focal points of human life, and metonymic, which transforms the visible into totality. The article argues that Woolf shows in her novel how the logic of visualization in both its aspects is used as a mechanism helping to implant proper models and values in members of society and how it is responsible for the emptiness of human life which is limited to its surface value.*

Key-words: "*Mrs Dalloway", Virginia Woolf, Henri Lefebvre, social space*

## 1. Introduction

In *The Production of Space* Henri Lefebvre argues that one of the main characteristics of the social space of modern society is the logic of visualization, which has its source in this society's rationalism and its drive for abstraction. This logic "fetishizes abstraction and imposes it as the norm. It detaches the pure form from its impure content – from lived time, everyday time, and from bodies with their opacity and solidity, their warmth, their life and their death" (Lefebvre 1991, 97).

According to Lefebvre, the logic of visualization has two aspects: "the first is metaphoric (the act of writing and what is written, hitherto subsidiary, become essential – models and focal points of practice), and the second is metonymic (the eye, the gaze, the thing seen, no longer mere details or parts, are now transformed into totality)" (1991, 286).[2]

[1] University of Rzeszów, Poland, musajos@interia.pl
[2] Elsewhere in the book Lefebvre describes the metaphoric aspect in broader terms as having its source not only in writing but, more generally, in "images, signs and symbols" (1991, 98).

BDD-A22796 © 2015 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 09:10:46 UTC)

As Lefebvre indicates, the former of these aspects is the subject of Marshall McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The making of Typographic Man*, whereas the latter is analyzed in Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (1991, 286).

In his work McLuhan is concerned with the way in which alphabetic writing – and printing in particular – gave "a dominant role to the visual sense in language and art and in the entire range of social and of political life" (McLuhan 1962, 43). He argues that print should be seen as "a public address system that gave huge power of amplification to the individual voice" (1962, 197). As such, print has often been used as a tool of propaganda and persuasion, helpful in creating "uniformly processed individuals" (1962, 212) of nationalistic and commercial societies.

In *Society of the Spectacle* Debord uses the term *spectacle* to refer to the predominantly visual character of present-day life. Like Lefebvre, Debord is aware that the spectacle thrives to the detriment of real life:

> Considered in its own terms, the spectacle is an *affirmation* of appearances and an identification of all human social life with appearances. But a critique that grasps the spectacle's essential character reveals it to be a visible *negation* of life – a negation that has taken on a *visible form* (Debord 2006, 9; emphasis in the original).

The aim of this article is to analyze the way in which Virginia Woolf shows what could be described using Lefebvre's terminology as the logic of visualization to be an important characteristic of the social space of London in the third decade of the 20th century, which she represents in her novel *Mrs Dalloway*. The novel offers a panorama of London life of that time, with Woolf showing pictures and glimpses of almost all social strata of the city. Her main focus, however, is Clarissa Dalloway and the class to which she belongs – the governing class, as one of the characters calls it – and it is the influence of the logic of visualization on this class that is mostly explored by Woolf, although she also demonstrates how the lower classes are affected by it.

## 2. *Mrs Dalloway* and the logic of visualization

In *Mrs Dalloway* both aspects of the logic of visualization – metaphoric and metonymic – are represented and Woolf shows their influence on Londoners from the very first scenes of the novel. When Clarissa is at the florist's buying flowers for her party, she hears a sudden loud bang from outside. The noise comes from a car stopped in a nearby street. The explosion is loud enough to make everybody look at the car.[3] At that moment, the car, moving "slowly and very silently" or just

[3] According to Lefebvre, under the influence of the logic of visualization "any non-optical impression – a tactile one, for example, or a muscular (rhythmic) one – is no longer anything more than a symbolic form of, or a transitional step towards, the visual" (1991, 286).

BDD-A22796 © 2015 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 09:10:46 UTC)

"gliding," becomes solely a spectacle, a mysterious sight to be deciphered. On the blinds of the car there is a strange sign, "a curious pattern like a tree," and people know this is the sign of the greatness of the person in the car. A face in the car is seen for a moment, a face evocative of great dignity, but it is too short a moment for anybody to recognize the person inside, as the blinds are immediately drawn: "But nobody knew whose face had been seen. Was it the Prince of Wales's, the Queen's, the Prime Minister's? Whose face was it? Nobody knew" (Woolf 1996, 17). And for a few moments, the car, the thing seen, becomes a metonymic sign of the great person inside.

The car, however, seems to arouse feelings which belie Debord's claim that the spectacle reduces human social life to appearances – as the car passes, it touches in people "something very profound" and it makes everyone think "of the dead; of the flag; of Empire" (1996, 21). These apparently deep feelings, however, are intended by the author to be a satiric caricature (Moody 1970, 50-51), of which the following passage is the apex:

> Gliding across Piccadilly, the car turned down St. James's Street. Tall men, men of robust physique, well-dressed men with their tail-coats and their white slips and their hair raked back, who, for reasons difficult to discriminate, were standing in the bow window of White's with their hands behind the tails of their coats, looking out, perceived instinctively that greatness was passing, and the pale light of the immortal presence fell upon them as it had fallen upon Clarissa Dalloway. At once they stood even straighter, and removed their hands, and seemed ready to attend their Sovereign, if need be, to the cannon's mouth, as their ancestors had done before them. (1996, 21)

The "profoundness" of these feelings is exposed as the car approaches Buckingham Palace. Here, too, people are moved by the sight of the car:

> A breeze flaunting ever so warmly down the Mall through the thin trees, past the bronze heroes, lifted some flag flying in the British breast of Mr. Bowley and he raised his hat as the car turned into the Mall and held it high as the car approached; and let the poor mothers of Pimlico press close to him, and stood very upright. The car came on. (1996, 23)

Suddenly people hear the sound of an airplane and everyone looks up (again it is a sound that leads to the visual, which then asserts its hegemony): "There it was coming over the trees, letting out white smoke from behind, which curled and twisted, actually writing something! making letters in the sky!" (1996, 23). The plane writes the name of a product, which everyone tries to decipher – whereas the

BDD-A22796 © 2015 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 09:10:46 UTC)

car, the flag, and the dead are simply and immediately forgotten: "'It's toffee,' murmured Mr. Bowley – (and the car went in at the gates and nobody looked at it), and shutting off the smoke, away and away it rushed, and the smoke faded and assembled itself round the broad white shapes of the clouds" (1996, 24).

What defeats the car as spectacle is the writing in the sky, which is an example of the other aspect of the logic of visualization, namely the metaphoric. Most people watching the plane are fascinated not with the plane itself but with the fact that it is writing letters in the sky – they focus their attention on this writing.[4] They are fascinated both by the way the letters are created and by the possibility of extracting meaning from them – thus "the act of writing and what is written become essential – models and focal points of practice" (Lefebvre 1991, 286). The practice meant here is obviously the consumption of the advertised sweets.[5]

Some people, however, focus not on the writing but on the plane itself:

> Away and away the aeroplane shot, till it was nothing but a bright spark; an aspiration; a concentration; a symbol (so it seemed to Mr. Bentley, vigorously rolling his strip of turf at Greenwich) of man's soul; of his determination, thought Mr. Bentley, sweeping round the cedar tree, to get outside his body, beyond his house, by means of thought, Einstein, speculation, mathematics, the Mendelian theory – away the aeroplane shot. (1996, 32)

Mr. Bentley ignores the writing and sees the plane as a symbol of man's soul – a soul that seeks fulfillment in science. This, however, does not mean that he is admiring something completely different than most spectators. First of all, there is an obvious link between the two objects of admiration. It is precisely because of its scientific sophistication that the plane can be used for writing in the sky. But science has something more in common with writing than merely the fact that it can be used for the production of writing equipment, even most sophisticated and unusual. In *Aristotle's Syllogistic* Jan Lukasiewicz writes: "Modern formal logic strives to attain

[4] If, as Walter J. Ong claims, the evolution of writing techniques shows clearly "how the use of printing moved the word away from its original association with sound and treated it more and more as a 'thing' in space" (qtd. in McLuhan 1962, 104), then writing of words in the sky by a plane may be seen as another step in the process of reification of words, as words written in this way certainly attract attention to their physical, visible existence.

[5] The use of visual means in advertising – "the modern frontier of the verbal and the pictorial" (McLuhan 1962, 74) – is also given attention in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, a novel contemporary with *Mrs. Dalloway*, whose main character, Leopold Bloom, is a freelance ad salesman. At one point in the novel we read about him: "What were habitually his final meditations? Of some one sole unique advertisement to cause passers to stop in wonder, a poster novelty, with all extraneous accretions excluded, reduced to its simplest and most efficient terms not exceeding the span of casual vision and congruous with the velocity of modern life" (Joyce 1992, 848). It could be said that the letters written by the plane are like a giant poster hung in the sky.

BDD-A22796 © 2015 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 09:10:46 UTC)

the greatest possible exactness. This aim can be reached only by means of a precise language built up of stable, visually perceptible signs. Such a language is indispensable for any science" (qtd. in McLuhan 1962, 59). In *The Production of Space* Lefebvre indicates the relationship between science and visual abstraction in general:

> There is a 'common sense' for which the visual order that reduces objects to specular and spectacular abstraction is in no way distinct from scientific abstraction and its analytic (and hence reductive) procedures. A logic of reduction/extrapolation is applied to the blackboard as to the drawing-board, to the blank sheet of paper as to schemata of all kinds, to writing as to contentless abstraction. (1991, 298-299)

Science is in fact not very different from the visual order of writing – both are kinds of abstraction. And abstraction, according to Lefebvre, is not innocuous:

> For abstraction's *modus operandi* is devastation, destruction (even if such destruction may sometimes herald creation). Signs have something lethal about them – not by virtue of 'latent' or so called unconscious forces, but, on the contrary, by virtue of the forced introduction of abstraction into nature. The violence involved does not stem from some force intervening aside from rationality, outside or beyond it. Rather, it manifests itself from the moment any action introduces the rational into the real, from the outside, by means of tools which strike, slice and cut – and keep doing so until the purpose of their aggression is achieved. (1991, 289; emphasis in the original)

One cannot resist the impression that it is the sky itself that is struck, sliced and cut by the plane writing the letters. The abstraction is introduced into nature and the image of gulls crossing the sky while people are trying to decipher the message underlines this introduction.

The theme of writing is again touched upon in the writing of the letter to the *Times* after the lunch at Lady Bruton's. Millicent Bruton has one idée fixe, towards which her pent-up egotism is directed – the emigration of unemployed young people to Canada. She realizes, however, that her plans have little chance of success without being publicized in newspapers; that is, without being first transformed into writing and then into a printed message – only then could they become a model and focal point of practice, to use Lefebvre's terminology.

And it is at this moment, when the idea has to be reduced to the written text, that Lady Bruton does not feel up to the task. On such occasions she turns to Hugh Whitbread, "who possessed – no one could doubt it – the art of writing letters to the *Times*" (1996, 121). Significantly, it is Hugh Whitbread who is a master of writing letters. As Clarissa notices at one point, he is "almost too well dressed always"

BDD-A22796 © 2015 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 09:10:46 UTC)

(1996, 8), and his impeccability of dress and manner translates effortlessly into impeccability of writing style. These are the only two qualities that he can take credit for, but they assure him a solid position in society, as they both represent the logic of visualization. Thus "his name at the end of letters to the *Times,* asking for funds, appealing to the public to protect, to preserve, to clear up litter, to abate smoke, and stamp out immorality in parks, commanded respect" (1996, 114). His physical appearance also commands respect:

> A magnificent figure he cut too, pausing for a moment (as the sound of the half hour died away) to look critically, magisterially, at socks and shoes; impeccable, substantial, as if he beheld the world from a certain eminence, and dressed to match; but realised the obligations which size, wealth, health entail, and observed punctiliously, even when not absolutely necessary, little courtesies, old-fashioned ceremonies, which gave a quality to his manner, something to imitate, something to remember him by. (1996, 114)

He beholds the world from a certain eminence, and dresses to match. He is well aware that his high standing in society exposes him to the gaze of others, and he dresses and behaves to meet the gaze. His external appearance is the thing that he wants to be remembered by – besides his name at the end of the letters to the *Times*. Thus the character of Hugh Whitbread can be associated with both aspects of the logic of visualization.

The significance of writing as a stimulus for social practice is also indicated in the novel in the scene witnessed by Peter Walsh during his walk through the streets of London. A moment after he passes the statue of the Duke of Cambridge he first hears and then watches a group of boys in uniforms, marching to lay a wreath at the Cenotaph, "on their faces an expression like the letters of a legend written round the base of a statue praising duty, gratitude, fidelity, love of England" (1996, 57). Describing the boys in this way Woolf points to the relationship between nationalistic feelings and the written word. This relationship is emphasized by Marshall McLuhan, who builds upon the work of Alexis de Tocqueville. In McLuhan's view, modern nationalism reflects a particular viewpoint, namely that of the writing elites who spread their nationalistic ideas through the medium of print (1962, 219). In this way, it could be said, nationalism among the lower classes is (at least partly) the product of the logic of visualization in its metaphoric aspect.

But in the scene of the marching boys, Woolf also directs the reader's attention to the other aspect of the logic of visualization, namely the metonymic. After a moment of keeping in step with the boys, Peter is overtaken by them: "on they marched, past him, past every one, in their steady way, as if one will worked legs and arms uniformly, and life, with its varieties, its irreticences, had been laid under a pavement of monuments and wreaths and drugged into a stiff yet staring corpse by discipline" (1996, 57). Life is reduced here in a metonymic way: the only

BDD-A22796 © 2015 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 09:10:46 UTC)

activity left to it is staring, and it is the monuments and wreaths that, apparently, should be stared at.

It seems that the boys should stare at the monuments because the memorials convey a message to them, and this points again to the metaphoric aspect of the logic of visualization.[6] In *The Production of Space* Lefebvre considers the possibility of "reading" space which is not a text: "That space signifies is incontestable. But what it signifies is dos and don'ts – and this brings us back to power. . . . Thus space indeed 'speaks' – but it does not tell all. Above all, it prohibits" (1991, 142). In *Mrs Dalloway*, the moment Peter is overtaken by the boys, he reaches Trafalgar Square and faces the statues of Nelson, Gordon and Havelock. Here, it is the great heroes themselves who look "as if they too had made the same renunciation . . . , trampled under the same temptations and achieved at length a marble stare" (1996, 58). The monuments of the great heroes, which seem to be models for the marching boys, "speak" about discipline, dos and don'ts, a result of which is the marble stare. Thus the watched validate the importance of watching. But the marble stare is only one result of the discipline – another, more important, is the heroic status these men achieved. And what is important here is that this status was gained in the service of power – that of the British Empire – which now gives them authority to "speak" as monuments. In other words, this authority "brings us back to power." The importance of this power seems to be the ultimate "message" conveyed by the monuments.

The evident role of this "message" is to influence staring people. In Jeremy Tambling's view, what Peter witnesses during his walk is "the formal, public, squared-off London of statues in rigid poses which helps to form those who live within its environment" (Tambling 1993, 60). Woolf shows, first of all, how the monumental space of London influences members of the governing class. Richard Dalloway, after looking at Buckingham Palace and the memorial to Queen Victoria thinks that he lives in "a great age" (Woolf 1996, 129). Peter's reflections during his walk indicate that the statues which he looks at arouse in him nostalgic pride in the Empire, in spite of his socialist bias.[7] Some characters apparently try to imitate the

[6] It could be argued here that the monuments in the novel represent both the metonymic and metaphoric aspects of the logic of visualization. This phenomenon of double interpretation is also visible in linguistic expressions and is explored in, among others, *Metaphor and Metonymy at the Crossroad: A Cognitive Perspective*, edited by Antonio Barcelona. For example, in one of the articles included in the volume Kurt Feyaerts demonstrates that "the meaning of a linguistic expression may be determined by several conceptual hierarchies which might be of a different nature: metaphoric as well as metonymic" (Feyaerts 2000, 59).

[7] Peter, it must be indicated here, is capable of a certain level of detachment, as he repudiates the marble stare of the statues, which he interprets as a sign of overcoming of "the troubles of the flesh" (58), and he is clearly not willing to make such a sacrifice (although he can respect it in others). This repudiation, however, is considered as the source of his failure in society: "'There's Peter Walsh!' she [Lady Bruton] said, shaking hands with that agreeable sinner, that very able fellow who should have made a name for himself but hadn't (always in difficulties with women)" (Woolf 1996, 197).

BDD-A22796 © 2015 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 09:10:46 UTC)

rigid postures of the great heroes, in this way showing their identification with the power. Lady Bexborough always holds herself upright. Lady Bruton, after being presented with carnations by Hugh, holds "them rather stiffly with much the same attitude with which the General held the scroll in the picture behind her" and remains "fixed, tranced" (1996, 116). The influence of the monumental space of London could be seen in the character of Hugh Whitbread with his magnificent figure, groomed to be stared at. But Woolf also shows how this space affects people from the lower classes. This influence is indicated in the scene of the boys marching to lay a wreath at the Cenotaph, and in the scene of people watching the mysterious car at the beginning of the novel.

Social space, however, not only helps to form people, but is formed by them. According to Lefebvre (1991, 142), social space is always both a producer and a product; a cause and a result. In other words, the self and space are mutually constitutive. Jeremy Tambling points out that the London of the novel is the historical London which was being created then as a reflection of a society which worshipped imperialism (1993, 60). Much of Westminster was at the time of the novel's action (and the time when the novel was created) quite new, with the Victoria Memorial, for example, still under construction. Of course, one has to bear in mind that the endorsement of this space depends to a greater extent on the conditioning by the space itself in the case of the lower classes than in the case of the members of the governing class, who – although they are also subject to the influence of this space – would support it anyway, because it validates their work and their existence as leaders of the nation. As Guy Debord notices: "The spectacle is the ruling order's non-stop discourse about itself, its never-ending monologue of self-praise, its self-portrait at the stage of totalitarian domination of all aspects of life" (2006, 13). The production of the spectacle by the administrators of the existing system gives them "the means that enable them to carry on this particular form of administration. The social separation reflected in the spectacle is inseparable from the modern *state* – the product of the social division of labour that is both the chief instrument of class rule and the concentrated expression of all social divisions" (2006, 13; emphasis in the original).

The reason why the spectacle – which is a reflection of social separation and exploitation – can still be endorsed by those who are exploited is that the spectacle "does not tell all" (Lefebvre 1991, 142). Some of the "messages" of power conveyed by the spectacle are hidden from the superficial gaze. Writing about monumental buildings, Lefebvre points out that they "mask the will to power and the arbitrariness of power beneath signs and surfaces which claim to express collective will and collective thought" (1991, 143). Evidently, in *Mrs Dalloway* this masking does not have as its object the imperial power of the United Kingdom seen in the international context, with which, as Woolf makes it clear, the characters belonging

BDD-A22796 © 2015 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 09:10:46 UTC)

to all social classes identify themselves. In fact, it could be said that it is this imperial power that is supported by the collective will of the (almost) whole society – however conditioned this support may be. What is masked is, rather, the power of the governing class on the domestic level and the dominating position of men within this class.

The subservient role of the lower classes is indicated by Woolf – although rather indirectly – in the scene of the marching boys. When Peter watches them, he reflects: "But they did not look robust. They were weedy for the most part, boys of sixteen, who might, to-morrow, stand behind bowls of rice, cakes of soap on counters. Now they wore on them unmixed with sensual pleasure or daily preoccupations the solemnity of the wreath which they had fetched from Finsbury Pavement to the empty tomb" (1996, 57). The boys try to look like the great heroes from the monuments but their physical shortcomings and, most importantly, their social status make the effort laughable. Peter, however, knows that this effort should not be dismissed: "One had to respect it; one might laugh; but one had to respect it, he thought" (1996, 57-58). Influenced (partly) by the monuments, the boys turn into supporters of the Empire – and they are vital for its existence in their mass, however insignificant their individual lives might be. But this glaring discrepancy between their position in society and that of the models they try to imitate makes it clear that they have been conditioned to behave in this way by the logic of visualization in both its metaphoric and metonymic aspects.

Not all members of the lower classes, however, are successfully conditioned by this logic. One of them is Doris Kilman, who is evidently a misfit in the space of London. She was dismissed from the school in which she worked for defying the jingoistic mood prevailing in the Empire during the war. Now, a plain woman past forty, poor and embittered, she hates those who have had good luck in their life. One of the ways in which she shows her contempt for the standards of the society that has made her unhappy, and which allows such people as Clarissa Dalloway – for Miss Kilman a completely worthless woman – to thrive, is her way of dressing. All year round she wears a green mackintosh coat, declaring in this way that she does not care about her appearance. This habit, which infuriates Clarissa Dalloway, could be seen as an act of defiance against the logic of visualization.

The dominating position of men within the governing class is shown by Woolf – again indirectly – through the identity crisis that Clarissa experiences at the beginning of the novel. For Clarissa has her moments of doubt when she wonders whether she can live up to the models endorsed in the social space of London. These doubts trouble her during her morning walk to the florist's. When she meets Hugh Whitbread, the presence of his imposing figure makes her "feel a little skimpy beside Hugh; schoolgirlish" (1996, 8). A few moments after leaving Hugh, Clarissa openly admits to herself her dissatisfaction with her body, although the model for her is not a statue of a hero, but a woman with a statuesque body, Lady Bexborough. Given another life, she would like to look like her:

BDD-A22796 © 2015 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 09:10:46 UTC)

> She would have been, in the first place, dark like Lady Bexborough, with a skin of crumpled leather and beautiful eyes. She would have been, like Lady Bexborough, slow and stately; rather large; interested in politics like a man; with a country house; very dignified, very sincere. Instead of which she had a narrow pea-stick figure; a ridiculous little face, beaked like a bird's. (1996, 13)

By comparing herself to Lady Bexborough Clarissa realizes her own shortcomings and tries to emulate her. As Peter remembers: "Lady Bexborough, she said once, held herself upright (so did Clarissa herself; she never lounged in any sense of the word; she was straight as a dart, a little rigid in fact)" (1996, 85).

Women like Lady Bexborough successfully imitate the rigid poses of the statues of the great heroes. Their role is to expose their dignified figures to the public gaze, to be seen and admired. And during her walk to the florist's Clarissa is bitterly aware that her own body is insufficient for such a role:

> But often now this body she wore (she stopped to look at a Dutch picture), this body, with all its capacities, seemed nothing – nothing at all. She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown; there being no more marrying, no more having of children now, but only this astonishing and rather solemn progress with the rest of them, up Bond Street, this being Mrs. Dalloway; not even Clarissa any more; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway. (1996, 13)

Her lean body, which was good enough for her role as a bride or mother, is no longer adequate when she thinks of herself as an individual in the social space of London. Here, with her "pea-stick figure" and her "ridiculous little face," she believes that she is "invisible; unseen; unknown." And being unseen, she cannot have a meaningful existence on her own. For to be seen and admired is the only role that the women of the governing class can play, as they are not supposed to act – to govern. Therefore, Clarissa is afraid that her existence is given meaning only by the fact that she is the wife of her husband.

To stress the difference between men and women belonging to the governing class, Wolf makes it clear that men themselves – although it is the male heroes who set the standards of physical appearance – do not have to impress with their looks. When the Prime Minister appears at Clarissa's party, he looks commonplace: "And to be fair, as he went his rounds, first with Clarissa then with Richard escorting him, he did it very well. He tried to look somebody. It was amusing to watch. Nobody looked at him. They just went on talking, yet it was perfectly plain that they all knew, felt to the marrow of their bones, this majesty passing; this symbol of what they all stood for, English society" (1996, 189). The man does not have to look great because he represents real power and this power is sensed by people around him.

BDD-A22796 © 2015 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 09:10:46 UTC)

Immediately after this passage, Woolf contrasts the Prime Minister's appearance with the mannish look of Lady Bruton, who "looked very fine too, very stalwart in her lace" (189). A woman has to look good to be taken seriously.

After the walk to the florist's, Clarissa's self-esteem sinks even deeper when she learns that Lady Bruton has asked her husband to lunch without her. In this scene, however, Woolf shows how the logic of visualization helps Clarissa to cope with her identity crisis, as it makes her believe again that she can play an important role in the social space of London. But it is an important role by female standards only. At first Clarissa imagines that this lack of invitation to the lunch has its source in some deficiency on her part as a woman and wife. As she goes upstairs after receiving the message about Millicent Bruton's lunch she feels herself "suddenly shrivelled, aged, breastless." She has the impression that her body and brain are failing her "since Lady Bruton, whose lunch parties were said to be extraordinarily amusing, had not asked her" (1996, 35).

Musing in her single bedroom upstairs, she tries to explain to herself the reasons for this failure: "She could see what she lacked. It was not beauty; it was not mind. It was something central which permeated; something warm which broke up surfaces and rippled the cold contact of man and woman, or of women together" (1996, 36). In this context she remembers her youth, the time when she still possessed this "something warm," and she contemplates her youthful affections for Sally and Peter.

Thinking about Peter, she asks herself if he will think that she has grown older when he comes back from India. But when it seems that she will fall into despair over her lost youth and femininity, a sudden turn occurs in her thoughts: "Laying her brooch on the table, she had a sudden spasm, as if, while she mused, the icy claws had had the chance to fix in her. She was not old yet. She had just broken into her fifty-second year. Months and months of it were still untouched. June, July, August! Each still remained almost whole" (1996, 41). Trying to escape dejection caused by her awareness of the passage of time, Clarissa focuses on the present moment:

> as if to catch the falling drop, Clarissa (crossing to the dressing-table) plunged into the very heart of the moment, transfixed it, there – the moment of this June morning on which was the pressure of all the other mornings, seeing the glass, the dressing-table, and all the bottles afresh, collecting the whole of her at one point (as she looked into the glass), seeing the delicate pink face of the woman who was that very night to give a party; of Clarissa Dalloway; of herself. (1996, 41-42)

The experience of isolated moments of time is, according to McLuhan, a result of the growing use of print technology in modern world. The habit of sequential analysis of separate components in rational thinking – created by reading of printed lineal texts – influenced human experience of time, which for the modern man can

BDD-A22796 © 2015 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 09:10:46 UTC)

consist of a sequence of arrested and isolated moments (McLuhan 1962, 241). What is at stake in lives experienced as "lineal sequences of moments" is human identity. Quoting Georges Poulet, McLuhan writes:

> The self is obliged, such is the discontinuity of these typographic moments, "each time to forget itself in order to re-invent itself, to reinvent itself in order to regain interest in itself, in short to effect a mocking simulacrum of continued creation, thanks to which it believes it will escape the authentication of its nothingness, and out of its nothingness refashion a reality." (1962, 249)

Clarissa, significantly, re-invents her self looking at her reflection in the mirror: "How many million times she had seen her face, and always with the same imperceptible contraction! She pursed her lips when she looked in the glass. It was to give her face point. That was her self – pointed; dartlike; definite" (Woolf, 1996, 42). Her self re-constitutes itself in relationship to its body seen in the mirror. According to Lefebvre, the mirror is an important means through which our Ego can become aware of its own material presence, that is, its body. This awareness is possible "not because the reflection constitutes my unity *qua* subject, as many psychoanalysts and psychologists apparently believe, but because it transforms what I am into the sign of what I am." The mirror "reproduces and displays what I am – in a word, signifies what I am – within an imaginary sphere which is yet quite real" (Lefebvre 1991, 185; emphasis in the original). Because of this mechanism, however, there is a danger that the *sign* of what I am may eclipse that *what* I am. If our Ego fails to reassert control over itself "by defying its own image, it must become Narcissus – or Alice." Then it will be "in danger of never rediscovering itself, space *qua* figment will have swallowed it up, and the glacial surface of the mirror will hold it forever captive in its emptiness, in an absence devoid of all conceivable presence or bodily warmth" (Lefebvre 1991, 185; emphasis in the original).

This is precisely what Clarissa does when looking into the mirror – she takes the sign of herself for herself. When she purses her lips to make the image of herself in the mirror more pointed she thinks:

> That was her self – pointed; dartlike; definite. That was her self when some effort, some call on her to be her self, drew the parts together, she alone knew how different, how incompatible and composed so for the world only into one centre, one diamond, one woman who sat in her drawing-room and made a meeting-point, a radiancy no doubt in some dull lives, a refuge for the lonely to come to, perhaps. (1996, 42)

BDD-A22796 © 2015 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 09:10:46 UTC)

In the mirror she is a diamond – a diamond that constitutes a meeting-point on social occasions, a stone that certainly cannot be "shrivelled, aged, breastless" – but also a stone that in its crystal transparency is devoid of all warmth. In Lefebvre's view, the logic of visualization "detaches the pure form from its impure content – from lived time, everyday time, and from bodies with their opacity and solidity, their warmth, their life and their death" (1996, 97). Although a moment earlier Clarissa realized that her lack of warmth may be the reason for her problems in genuine contacts with people, she does not contemplate what she could do to regain this warmth. Instead, she focuses solely on her mirror reflection, that is, on the form which she finds adequate for a woman who is about to host a party.

Clarissa's transformation in front of the mirror could be said to represent the metonymic aspect of the logic of visualization. She takes her mirror reflection for her self and in this way what is seen is transformed into a totality. The process of rebuilding the self, however sudden, is complete. Now, thinking about Lady Bruton not asking her to lunch, Clarissa can dismiss it as merely "utterly base" (1996, 42) – it is Lady Bruton who is at fault here, not her. And, when a moment after musing in front of the mirror she takes one of her dresses to mend it in the drawing room and goes downstairs, the image of the diamond reappears again:

> Strange, she thought, pausing on the landing, and assembling that diamond shape, that single person, strange how a mistress knows the very moment, the very temper of her house! Faint sounds rose in spirals up the well of the stairs; the swish of a mop; tapping; knocking; a loudness when the front door opened; a voice repeating a message in the basement; the chink of silver on a tray; clean silver for the party. All was for the party. (1996, 43)

In her diamond shape, she is no longer just a wife who would like to accompany her husband on social occasions – she is the mistress of the house and the perfect hostess. What is also important, in this role she does not have to possess a stately figure she admires so much in Lady Bexborough. Thus, being the perfect hostess is the most important position in society she can achieve with her body and her social status.

It was probably her ambition to become the perfect hostess in high society – the ambition which Peter noticed in her on the very same day when she met Richard Dalloway – that was responsible for suppressing in her – or just making her let it die from inattention – this "something warm which broke up surfaces and rippled the cold contact of man and woman, or of women together." The perfect hostess does not need warmth – what she needs is the proper appearance, as she must be the centre of attention of all the guests. Clarissa recognizes such an appearance in her mirror reflection.

What is important at this point is the ease with which Clarissa identifies herself with this reflection. In the mirror she sees herself as she is seen by others –

BDD-A22796 © 2015 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 09:10:46 UTC)

she sees her own form, her surface. And because she herself sees only the glittering surface of the world, so as a mirror reflection, as an image of the surface, she automatically becomes a part of the world as she perceives it, she becomes Alice in Wonderland. This mechanism is visible when, for example, a mysterious car majestically cruising the streets of Westminster makes her think about "candelabras, glittering stars, breasts stiff with oak leaves, Hugh Whitbread and all his colleagues, the gentlemen of England, that night in Buckingham Palace. And Clarissa, too, gave a party. She stiffened a little; so she would stand at the top of her stairs" (1996, 20).

In "*Mrs Dalloway* as Comedy", A. D. Moody writes about Clarissa:

> She is shown to be of not much interest in herself; she has to offer only a sharp awareness of the surface of her world and its people. This makes her something of an animated mirror, having a life made up of the world she reflects. But to be and to do that is precisely her function for the novel; she is a living image of the surface of the society Virginia Woolf was concerned with.
> At the same time she is a criticism of her society, for the proposition that she is what she reflects holds true as well in its converse form: that is, her society is what it is seen to be in her; and her character, such as it is, is the character of her society. If her life is a kind of non-life, so too is the life of her society as a whole. (1970, 48-49)

This non-life is the emptiness which is characteristic of the world as it is perceived through the looking glass. Society is caught in the glacial surface of the mirror and it is devoid of human warmth. Clarissa herself can on occasion be aware of the essential hollowness and coldness of her world, as is the case at the moment of her apparent triumph when the Prime Minister comes to her party:

> Indeed, Clarissa felt, the Prime Minister had been good to come. And, walking down the room with him, with Sally there and Peter there and Richard very pleased, with all those people rather inclined, perhaps, to envy, she had felt that intoxication of the moment, that dilatation of the nerves of the heart itself till it seemed to quiver, steeped, upright; – yes, but after all it was what other people felt, that; for, though she loved it and felt it tingle and sting, still these semblances, these triumphs (dear old Peter, for example, thinking her so brilliant), had a hollowness; at arm's length they were, not in the heart; (1996, 191-192)

This experience of the world seen from a distance is what happens, according to Lefebvre, in the social space of modern society, in which the logic of visualization plays a major part. The eye "tends to relegate objects to the distance, to render them passive. That which is merely *seen* is reduced to an image – and to an icy coldness. The mirror effect thus tends to become general" (1991, 286; Lefebvre's italics).

BDD-A22796 © 2015 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 09:10:46 UTC)

The criticism of the logic of visualization, visible in the characterization of Clarissa Dalloway and other members of the governing class, is, however, presented most clearly in the novel by a completely episodic, lower-class character – the battered old woman who sings opposite Regent's Park Tube Station, and whom Peter gives a coin during his morning walk. At first, the words of her song are incomprehensible to him, but listening to her he has an impression of a wind-beaten tree whose branches sing in the eternal breeze. As her words become clearer, Peter understands that she is singing about a love which has lasted a million years, and then "how once in some primeval May she had walked with her lover, . . . – he was a man, oh yes, a man who had loved her." The old woman ends her song asking the lover: "'give me your hand and let me press it gently' . . . 'and if some one should see, what matter they?'" (1996, 91). And indeed,

> all peering inquisitive eyes seemed blotted out, and the passing generations – the pavement was crowded with bustling middle-class people – vanished, like leaves, to be trodden under, to be soaked and steeped and made mould of by that eternal spring –
>
> ee um fah um so
>
> foo swee too eem oo. (1996, 92)

The woman symbolizes the pre-modern world which stands in sharp contrast to the London of Clarissa Dalloway. Her performance suggests that love, the eternal spring of life, cannot be apprehended by peering inquisitive eyes, which belong, as Woolf indicates, to the bustling middle-class people who are governed in their lives by the logic of visualization.

## 3. Conclusions

One might say that Woolf indicates in *Mrs Dalloway* the importance of the logic of visualization in the social space of London in several ways. The novel shows how this logic is used as a mechanism helping to implant proper models and values (however superficial they may be) in members of society. It can be utilized for commercial gains, which is made clear in the episode concerned with the plane writing letters in the sky. In the context of politics, this logic is used as a means of propagating certain points of view, but most importantly, as a method of strengthening the position of the governing class. Endorsing nationalistic values by means of this logic, the members of this class underline simultaneously their position as leaders of the nation. Woolf also shows how women belonging to the governing class have to live up to the models put forward with the help of this logic, as these models present the male figure of a soldier as the ideal. The writer seems to be most critical of the logic of visualization when she describes its effect on

BDD-A22796 © 2015 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 09:10:46 UTC)

Clarissa, as she shows – and later underlines this in the singing woman episode – how this logic is responsible for the emptiness of human life, which is limited to its surface value, devoid of any real warmth which makes contacts between people genuinely human.

## References

Debord, Guy. 2006 (1967). *Society of the Spectacle* [Trans. by Ken Knabb]. London: Rebel P.

Feyaerts, Kurt. 2000. "Refining the Inheritance Hypothesis: Interaction between metaphoric and metonymic hierarchies." In *Metaphor and Metonymy at the Crossroad: A Cognitive Perspective*, ed. by Antonio Barcelona. 59-78. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Joyce, James. 1992 (1922) *Ulysses*. London: Penguin.

Lefebvre, Henri. 1991 (1974). *The Production of Space* [Trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith]. Oxford: Blackwell.

McLuhan, Marshall. 1962. *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Moody, A. D. 1970. "*Mrs Dalloway* as Comedy." In *Critics on Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Jacqueline E. M. Latham. 48-51. Coral Gables: University of Miami Press.

Tambling, Jeremy. 1993. "Repression in Mrs. Dalloway's London." In *"Mrs Dalloway" and "To the Lighthouse,"* ed. by Su Reid. 57-70. Houndmills: Macmillan.

Woolf, Virginia. 1996 (1925). *Mrs Dalloway*. London: Penguin.

BDD-A22796 © 2015 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 09:10:46 UTC)