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Female Visualities and Urban Experience in Amy Levy's *The Romance of a Shop*

Abstract: Amy Levy's first novel, *The Romance of a Shop* (1888), tells the story of four orphaned sisters starting a photography business in late Victorian London. The decision to abandon the domestic safe environment in favour of the risks and pleasures of the modern city allows them to redefine conventional ideologies of space and gender relations. The New Woman proposed by Levy is an urban artist who enjoys riding the omnibus and gazing out at the city through a renovated visual ability. This essay investigates the trope of the female gaze in a reconfiguration of old gender hierarchies, as well as the implications for a woman living in a *fin-de-siècle* urban environment to find opportunities for social recognition and emancipation.

Keywords: Amy Levy. *The Romance of a Shop*. New Woman. Photography. Gaze.

In her first novel, *The Romance of a Shop*¹ (1888), Amy Levy explores the theme of the modern city in late Victorian London as the aptest background for the emergence of the New Woman, an emancipated female character who seeks to become independent and enjoys gazing freely at the boundless sights of the city. The novel's protagonists, four orphaned sisters, make an unconventional decision to open a photography studio in the heart of the city, which exposes them to the risks and pleasures of urban life, such as meeting new people, working in a male business, and travelling around with new modes of transportation. The vibrancy and dynamism of the city's public spaces allow them to break free from the constraints of the Victorian domestic space, while managing to economically sustain themselves jointly. Gertrude, the most introspective of the sisters and the one who most closely resembles the author, stands out as an aspiring urban *flâneuse*, whose camera-like perspective allows her to observe and capture a city in turmoil while riding on top of the omnibus. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the significance of the urban motif and the trope of vision as fundamental elements in the development of a new type of woman, who distinguishes herself as an urban figure characterised by her own subjective perception of reality.

Anglo-Jewish writer Amy Levy has been rediscovered by critical scholarship in the last decades due to a growing interest in rescuing silenced female voices from the Victorian Age and, consequently, an increased accessibility to her texts. Levy was born in an upper middle-class family in 1861 and became the first Jewish woman to attend the Newnham College at Cambridge University. During her brief life (1861-1889), she

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¹ A. LEVY, *The Romance of a Shop*, Cambridge, Black Apollo Press, (1888) 2005. Further references from this edition are given after quotations in the text.

wrote three novels, three collections of poems, short stories, and periodical essays, as well as translations of Hebrew and German poetry. As a well-educated and emancipated woman, Levy witnessed first-hand the significant changes of Western culture in *fin-de-siècle* Europe, which she vividly chronicled in her writings, paying particular attention to the condition of the woman and the restrictions she was subjected to. Indeed, as Cynthia Scheinberg points out, “many of the issues [...] [Levy] addresses in her writing speak to concerns of the contemporary critical moment: Jewish Diasporic identity, lesbian identity, women’s emancipation, and more general theories of ‘otherness’ within the English literary tradition”.² During her lifetime, she was admired by literary figures such as Richard Garnett and Oscar Wilde, among others. After she committed suicide at the age of twenty-eight, due to depression, Wilde wrote Levy’s obituary, praising her artistic talent and calling her a “girl of genius”.³

Much of Levy’s literary production is characterised by the depiction of the urban experience, particularly that of London, as seen through the eyes of women. This is precisely the case of her debut novel, *The Romance of a Shop* (1888), in which she places the Lorimer sisters at the centre of a rapidly evolving modern city, where they open a photography business in order to become financially independent. As a matter of fact, Levy had travelled around many European cities and actively participated in London’s literary life by attending writers’ clubs and circles, eventually establishing herself as a professional woman who economically supported herself through her literary activities. She would thus embody the *status* of the New Woman, namely a contemporary woman who defied traditional conceptions of femininity by plunging into urban life as a freelancer. As Sally Ledger evidences:

The New Woman of the *fin de siècle* had a multiple identity. She was, variously, a feminist activist, a social reformer, a popular novelist, a suffragette playwright, a woman poet; she was also often a fictional construct, a discursive response to the activities of the late nineteenth-century women’s movement.⁴

Levy wrote prolifically on women’s issues and her fiction frequently addressed the topic of the new opportunities for women cropping up in late Victorian London’s urban setting, as well as the controversies fuelled by the New Woman’s challenging attitude towards the traditional constraints of Victorian society.⁵ In *The Romance of a Shop*, in fact, Levy describes the unorthodox decision of four sisters to determine their future by living in the city as emancipated working women. By doing so, she aimed to demonstrate how the New Woman was a distinctly urban figure whose self-realisation was directly influenced by the circumstances of metropolitan life.

² C. SCHEINBERG, *Women’s Poetry and Religion in Victorian England: Jewish Identity and Christian Culture*, Cambridge, CUP, 2002, p. 190.

³ C. PULLEN, *The Woman Who Dared: A Biography of Amy Levy*, Kingston upon Thames, Kingston U.P., 2010, p. 7.

⁴ S. LEDGER, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle*, Manchester, Manchester U.P., 1997, p. 1.

⁵ See I. DOBOSIEWICZ, “‘She Dwells in London Town’: The Urban Experience in Selected Works of Amy Levy”, *Revista Anglo Saxonica*, 3 (9), 2015, p. 84.

When the Lorimer sisters – Gertrude, Fanny, Lucy, and Phyllis – suddenly lose their father, they find themselves on the verge of starvation. If aware of the extraordinary risk of their decision, they choose to stay together and survive by their own means, refusing to accept a fate that would see them divided among the various relatives who had offered them hospitality and protection. Having learned the art of photography from their father, they decide to leave the quiet area of Campden Hill and move to the crowded and lively Baker Street in the heart of London, where they open a photography studio, much to the dismay of the general public. Together with Gertrude, the eldest sister and main protagonist of the novel, the urban environment plays a fundamental role as an element intrinsically related to the progressive development of the female characters. As scholar Deborah Epstein Nord underlines, the “opportunities afforded by London attracted aspiring women novelists, social investigators and political activists, but the city also represented the antithesis of those private and protected spaces that middle-class women traditionally had occupied”.⁶ As a matter of fact, the sisters leave a safe domestic space – their big family house surrounded by a garden – to rent “two floors [...] above a chemist’s shop” (p. 36) in a busy central street in London, where the distinction between domestic and commercial space, private and public sphere, becomes blurred.⁷ This spacial transition epitomises “a historical movement from old to new gender roles, the latter exemplified by the arrival of an urban New Woman”.⁸ Levy depicts a vibrant urban environment connoted by a multitude of interactions between people, events and venues which generate a sense of rhythm and vitality. London is a constantly changing, gathering space for people of various social classes and with different customs, and the four sisters start to enjoy the pleasures and opportunities offered by it:

Life, indeed, was opening up for them in more ways than one. The calling which they pursued brought them into contact with all sorts and conditions of men, among them, people in many ways more congenial to them than the mass of their former acquaintance; intercourse with the latter having come about in most cases through “juxtaposition” rather than “affinity”. They began to get glimpses of a world more varied and interesting than their own. (p. 104)

In the busy urban space, the sisters have the opportunity to encounter new people by chance or for working reasons and, therefore, to create new relationships. Furthermore, they enjoy watching and listening to what is happening in the city, especially Gertrude, an aspiring urban artist who “was beginning, for the first time, to find her own level; to taste the sweets of genuine work and genuine social intercourse” (*ibidem*). The increasing presence of women seeking independence in late Victorian London and the opportunity of moving around freely is a central theme in Levy’s urban vision. In her short essay “Women and Club Life”, published, like the novel, in 1888, she claims that the limitations of patriarchal family life relegated women to the sole roles

⁶ D. EPSTEIN NORD, “‘Neither Pairs nor Odd’: Female Community in Late Nineteenth-Century London”, *Signs*, 15 (4), Summer 1990, p. 734.

⁷ See I. DOBOSIEWICZ, “‘She Dwells in London Town’: The Urban Experience in Selected Works of Amy Levy”, p. 87.

⁸ S. BROOKE CAMERON and D. BIRD, “Sisterly Bonds and Rewriting Urban Gendered Spheres in Amy Levy’s *The Romance of a Shop*”, *Victorian Review*, 40 (1), 2014, p. 79.

of mother and wife, preventing them from accessing the city and all of its resources, such as libraries, literary clubs and other cultural venues. In such a context, according to Levy, the woman's club could offer them an alternative world of opportunities that would otherwise be unavailable: "And here is a haven of refuge, where we can write our letters and read the news, undisturbed by the importunities of a family circle that can never bring itself to regard feminine leisure and feminine solitude as things to be respected".⁹ Levy thus describes the club as a safe place where women, liberated from the restrictions of the family circle, are able to forge relationships with people they share affinities with and gain new positions in line with their passions and interests, just like the Lorimer sisters do by opening their own photography business in the centre of London.¹⁰ As scholars Cameron and Bird clearly point out, both the short essay and the novel explore "how alternative social structures might liberate women from the constraints of traditional family life";¹¹ the club and the shop are instrumental in converting the 'old' woman "who owns no interest beyond the circle of home"¹² into the 'new' one, striving to become independent and willing to expand her knowledge of the world.

In the frenetic and dangerous Victorian London, the shop-apartment at 20B Upper Baker Street comes to represent a safe domestic space from which the Lorimer sisters can easily move and enjoy the energy of city life. In this female-centred sphere, they both work and live together, managing to sustain themselves jointly. There is no need for male involvement because of the effective organisation and division of labour they planned before their arrival in London:

"Gertrude and I," went on Lucy, "would do the work, and you Fanny, if you would, should be our housekeeper."

"And I," cried Phyllis, her great eyes shining, "I would walk up and down outside, like that man in the High Street, who tells me every day what a beautiful picture I should make". (p. 14)

The strong bond between the sisters seems to guarantee a balanced subdivision of work and pleasure in the feminine microcosm situated at 20B Upper Baker Street. Much differently from the typical middle-class Victorian house, which tended to isolate women from the rest of society, this space becomes both a safe haven from the dangers of the city and an observation point gravitating between the streets of London and a voyeuristic view of city life captured from the window. Phyllis, the youngest of the sisters, is particularly keen on staring out the window:

"After the meal, Phyllis went over to the window, drew up the blind, and amused herself, as was her frequent custom, by looking into the street."

"I wish you wouldn't do that," said Lucy; "anyone can see right into the room". (p. 70)

Phyllis enjoys so much observing the chaotic street life that, disregarding the Victorian etiquette for ladies, she cannot help commenting on what people do: "There is a light

⁹ A. LEVY, "Women and Club Life", in EAD., *The Complete Novels and Selected Writings of Amy Levy, 1861-1889*, ed. M. NEW, Gainesville, Florida U.P., (1888) 1993, p. 533.

¹⁰ See S. BROOKE CAMERON and D. BIRD, "Sisterly Bonds and Rewriting Urban Gendered Spheres", p. 80.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² A. LEVY, "Women and Club Life", p. 537.

in Frank Jermy's window—the top one,' she cried; 'I suppose he is dressing. He told me he had an early dance in Harley Street. I wish I were going to a dance'" (*ibidem*). Similarly to the lens of a photographic camera, the window glass offers the sisters a unique viewpoint on the outside world, allowing them to keenly observe the ever-changing metropolitan spectacle from the safety of their studio.

The sisters, however, do not simply stare at the window, but also physically enter the city streets for the pleasure of visual consumption. In one of the novel's most memorable episodes, Gertrude takes an omnibus ride, where she is exposed to both the joys and hazards of the new and fascinating metropolitan environment:

Indeed, for Gertrude, the humors of the town had always possessed a curious fascination. She contemplated the familiar London pageant with an interest that had something of passion in it; and, for her part, was never inclined to quarrel with the fate which had transported her from the comparative tameness of Campden Hill to regions where the pulses of the great city could be felt distinctly as they beat and throbbed. (p. 41)

In fact, as an aspiring artist of the city, she longs to be immersed in its sights and sounds, which are a source of inspiration. For this reason, she excludes the possibility to travel by underground railway with her sister Phyllis: "'Because one cannot afford a carriage or even a hansom cab,' she argued to herself, 'is one to be shut up away from the sunlight and the streets?'" Instead, she is seen "mounting boldly to the top of an Atlas omnibus" (*ibidem*). As scholar Ana Parejo Vadillo observes, the specific mention of the *Atlas* omnibus demonstrates Levy's familiarity with London's transportation system, as well as her interest in exposing women's interaction with the city through it.¹³ It should be noted that this type of public transportation had been originally designed with the aim of giving priority to the accommodation of ladies and children, who were supposed to travel on the interior level of the omnibus, while men would occupy the open top.¹⁴ Gertrude's decision to sit at the top of it reflects not only the increasing mobility of women in late Victorian London, but also her disregard for conventional customs in order to experience the aesthetic pleasure of sightseeing. In this context, the use of mass transit may be regarded as a significant motif linked to modernity, particularly to a reconfiguration of gender and class in metropolitan life, as it enables a single woman like Gertrude to enjoy a favourable view from above a new means of transport without risking to lose her honour for wandering alone outside the domestic space.

The protagonist's predilection for sensory consumption in the urban environment recalls the figure of the *fin-de-siècle* urban stroller in search of visual stimuli, namely the *flâneur*, who was first explored and popularised by French writer Charles Baudelaire in his essay "The Painter of Modern Life" (1863). According to Baudelaire, the *flâneur* is a solitary artist, a dandy who loves mixing with the crowd and observing the myriad expressions of the modern city. He is associated with the act of gazing, which makes him a solitary spectator visually consuming the facets and attractions of the city. However, it was German philosopher Walter Benjamin who consecrated the *flâneur* as the

¹³ See A. PAREJO VADILLO, *Women Poets and Urban Aestheticism: Passengers of Modernity*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, pp. 71-72.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 18.

icon of modernist culture in his seminal work *The Arcades Project*.¹⁵ In this exploration of the effects of urban life on the human psyche, Benjamin makes a distinction with regard to the notion of experience, identifying the complementary concepts of *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*.¹⁶ While *Erlebnis* refers to the temporary shock and estrangement caused by the first overwhelming sensory stimulation produced by modern city life, *Erfahrung* generates a more positive and lasting reaction, as it relates to the *flâneur*'s movement and wandering, to an unmediated sensorial experience of the city's multitude of sights, sounds, and odours. As a modern *flâneuse*, a *flâneur*'s female counterpart, Gertrude reacts to the city in a way that may be understood through Benjamin's concept of *Erfahrung*, since her mobility enables her to immediately experience the city's variety of sights and noises.¹⁷ Through her imaginative and sensitive gaze she brings the city to life, as when Levy describes her enthusiasm for the system of illumination: "Gertrude [...] had herself a secret, childish love for the gas-lit street, for the sight of the hurrying people, the lamps, the hansom cabs, flickering in and out the yellow haze, like so many fire-flies" (p. 70). In this passage, the city appears to be animated due to the constant movement of people and cabs, which look like small luminous fireflies at night leaving a luminous trail in their wake. Gertrude's gaze, which recalls the use of photography as an artistic medium,¹⁸ will evolve along with her self-awareness over the course of the narrative, becoming, at times, an instrument of defence as well as a means of enacting her personal point of view.

As several critics have evidenced, the urban New Woman – the *flâneuse* – could not represent, by the end of the nineteenth century, an equal counterpart of the male *flâneur*. According to Janet Wolff, for one, women were primarily the object of a male gaze and, as such, were not regarded as real participants in the act of gazing.¹⁹ As a result, the city was mainly a space for men's adventure and visual pleasure. Furthermore, in Martha Vicinus's words, the city and its public spaces were not safe havens for women: "a lady was simply not supposed to be seen aimlessly wandering the streets",²⁰ as this would have posed a threat to her reputation. This becomes clear when, on a bright winter day, Gertrude decides to take an omnibus ride, with "her hair blowing gaily in the breeze, her ill-gloved hands clasped about a bulky note-book" (p. 64). She then meets the gaze of Frank, an artist living across her studio, who takes off his sombrero and waves it to greet her. This pleasurable moment is, however, immediately spoiled the instant Gertrude catches her aunt's gaze, which is filled with "speechless

¹⁵ See W. BENJAMIN, *The Arcades Project*, eds and Engl. trans. H. EILAND and K. MCLAUGHLIN, Cambridge (Massachusetts), Harvard U.P., (1982) 1999 (or. title *Passagenwerk*).

¹⁶ See B. SEAL, "Baudelaire, Benjamin and the Birth of the Flâneur", 14 November 2013, <https://psychogeographicreview.com/ baudelaire-benjamin-and-the-birth-of-the-flaneur/> (last accessed on 18 March 2022).

¹⁷ See I. DOBOSIEWICZ, "'She Dwells in London Town': The Urban Experience in Selected Works of Amy Levy", p. 89.

¹⁸ See M. CHIA-CHIEH TSENG, "Who's Afraid of Women Photographers? Redefining Gender, Gaze, and Photography in Amy Levy's *The Romance of a Shop*", in E.V. SHABLIY, D. KUROCHKIN and K. O'DONNELL (eds), *Women's Emancipation Writing at the Fin de Siècle*, New York, Routledge, 2018.

¹⁹ See J. WOLFF, *Feminine Sentences: Essays on Women and Culture*, Los Angeles, California U.P., 1990, p. 28.

²⁰ M. VICINUS, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850-1920*, Chicago, Chicago U.P., 1985, p. 297.

horror” at the inappropriateness of her behaviour. From an open carriage, her aunt’s disapproving “frozen stare of nonrecognition with a humiliating consciousness of the disadvantages of her own position” (*ibidem*) is enough to make Gertrude stop looking outward and realise being the object of a negative gaze that epitomises an old generation’s conservative perspective. The weight of such a meaningful gaze makes Gertrude feel ashamed and “undignified”. She has thus internalised the aunt’s reproach without the need for words, simply by being the target of her hostile gaze, which makes it hard for her to continue enjoying the urban journey.

In other circumstances, Gertrude and her sisters are also subjected to male gazes that reinforce the notion of women as visual objects for male pleasure, rather than equal counterparts. When, for instance, Gertrude meets for the first time Sidney Darrell, a painter of the Royal Academy and a perfect example of the modern *flâneur*, she seems to endure the weight of his gaze when “looking up and meeting the cold, grey glance” (p. 73). Yet, Gertrude’s identity as a novice female photographer is directly challenged by the painter’s confident and masculine gaze. In front of “his heavy-lidded eyes”, she instantly feels uncomfortable and worries about her external appearance as a result of the internalisation of the man’s judgmental gaze: “What was there in this man’s gaze that made her, all at once, feel old and awkward, ridiculous and dowdy?”. Gertrude is intimidated by his “indifferent politeness through which she seemed to detect the lurking contempt” to the point of “beginning to take part not only against herself but also against the type of woman to which she belonged” (*ibidem*). At this stage, Gertrude is still new to the photographic profession and has made no contacts in the social circle. She is vulnerable and lacks the confidence to work as a self-sufficient woman. Following a simple exchange of gazes, she immediately perceives Darrell’s rejection and disdain for her, and this makes her “long to snatch her heavy camera and flee from his presence, never to return” (*ibidem*).

On the one hand, the conflict between Darrell and Gertrude recalls the rivalry between the traditional art of painting, regarded as superior, and the newly emerging art of photography, considered by many as a far inferior trend destined to fade. The tension created by their antagonistic gazes, on the other hand, exemplifies a traditional gender-power dynamics in which the woman is in a typically submitted position to the man. Gertrude internalises so much the *flâneur*’s judging gaze as to be defeated by it and to feel her identity as an independent New Woman being questioned even by herself in a kind of submissive self-blame. Levy was aware that a woman of her time could not enjoy the same level of intellectual and physical freedom as men. Indeed, in her essay “Women and Club Life” she claims that the *flâneuse* is an imaginary woman who does not exist in reality: “the female club-lounger, the *flâneuse* of St. James’s Street, latch-key in pocket and eye-glasses on nose, remains a creature of the imagination”.²¹ Nevertheless, Levy does manage to draw attention to a real, emerging and more independent woman, namely the female passenger.

Despite the male dominance of the urban landscape, a growing presence of women in the late nineteenth-century city was still something that, in part, was made possible

²¹ A. LEVY, “Women and Club Life”, p. 537.

by mass transportation, as well exemplified by the image of Gertrude riding the omnibus as a passenger. Public transportation became in fact a valid option for women seeking to move around safely and without being overly exposed to urban dangers. Levy herself loved to travel on the top of the omnibus, an experience that she celebrates in the poem “Ballade of an Omnibus”,²² where the female passenger enjoys the pleasures of the city and the freedom to move across its places. As Vadillo points out:

for Levy, the figure of the passenger had important social and political implications because it was as passenger, she argued, that women poets could become spectators of modern life, challenging masculinist representations of women in the modern metropolis and transgressing the incarcerating ideology of the private/public spheres.²³

In other words, Levy proposes her own version of the modern *flâneuse*, whom she identifies with the female passenger touring the city aboard the omnibus. Despite the social barriers that still prevented women from strolling alone, the female passenger would represent a step closer to the independence of the ideal *flâneuse*, who, from the top of the omnibus, could enjoy a privileged viewpoint and freely gaze down on the city it was passing through. As Benjamin asserted, urban mass transportation played a crucial role in the development of modern visuality by exposing its passenger-observers to a sequence of temporary visual moving images, showing reality at an accelerated speed. As a result, this type of visual experience helped project the woman into a modern context.

Along with the successful development of urban transportation, the rapid advancement of photographic technology also contributed to the emergence of a new type of visuality and made the camera a popular instrument in the hands of the middle class. The Lorimer sisters’ decision to open a photography studio in London is a progressive choice, not only because it looks at a new, flourishing industry, but also because it allows them to become self-sufficient without relying on men. The female protagonist, in particular, epitomises the new visual sensibility through her photographic gaze, which leads her to observe reality with curiosity and in search of stimuli as if she were looking through a camera. During a party at Frank’s house, Gertrude openly expresses to Mr Watergate her fascination with observing things:

“You look so tired, Miss Lorimer; let me find you a seat.”

“No, thank you; I prefer to stand. One sees the world so much better.”

“Ah, you like to see the world?”

“Yes; it is always interesting”. (p. 81)

Levy frequently employs a vivid photographic language that demonstrates a high level of technical competence in the field – she refers to tripods, chemicals, studio fittings and other equipment – but she also focuses on visual qualities such as clarity, blurriness, shadow, frame, focus, and so on, which are applied to both people and situations.²⁴ As a matter of fact, the novel’s main characters are often introduced with a

²² See A. LEVY, “The Ballade of an Omnibus”, in EAD., *The Complete Novels and Selected Writings of Amy Levy, 1861-1889*, ed. M. NEW, Gainesville, Florida U.P., 1993.

²³ A. PAREJO VADILLO, *Women Poets and Urban Aestheticism: Passengers of Modernity*, p. 40.

²⁴ See M. CHIA-CHIEH TSENG, “Who’s Afraid of Women Photographers? Redefining Gender, Gaze, and Photography in Amy Levy’s *The Romance of a Shop*”, p. 59.

description of their eyes or some visual details they perceive, as in the case of Gertrude, who has “short-sighted eyes” and “as she stood in the full light of the spring sunshine [...] she looked, perhaps, older than her twenty-three years” (p. 10), while Frances is said to have “look[ed] the picture of impotent distress”, and Phyllis appears as “a slender, delicate-looking creature of seventeenth” (p. 11). Frank, their next-door neighbour, is recalled for his “eager young face, the brilliant, steadfast eyes” (p. 55) that transmit a sense of protection.

However, it is Gertrude’s unique perspective that proves most intriguing throughout the novel. Levy frequently portrays her vision in vivid photographic terms, since Gertrude has developed a camera-like approach and a natural ability to frame reality through her own eyes as if it were a picture:

The curtain between this apartment and the studio were drawn aside, displaying a charming picture—Lucy, in her black gown and Holland pinafore, her fair, smooth head bent over the re-touching frame; Phyllis, at an ornamental table, engaged in trimming prints, with great deftness and grace of manipulation. (p. 60)

The depicted scene seems to have been staged by her, almost as if she were on a photographic set, ready to take a picture of it. Yet, the focalising lens is represented by Gertrude’s eyes instead of her camera. She is indeed an acute observer whose visual sensitivity increases over time and mainly consists in “brief flashes of insight, in passing glimpses scarcely realised or remembered” (p. 31).

Another intriguing scene relating to Gertrude’s ability to frame reality as a camera takes place in a professional setting. Among the commissions received by the Lorimer sisters at their studio is a request to photograph the dead wife of a certain Lord Watergate.²⁵ Once Gertrude arrives at his house, it is fascinating to see how her eyes act like a camera even before she uses the photographic apparatus, as she looks around, silently registering distinct pictures of what surrounds her to the point of allowing readers to perceive traits of her consciousness. While quietly preparing things “for her strange task”, she gets accustomed to the light of the apartment, initially dark, and observes the beautiful woman lying on the open bedstead. She thus notices that “another figure, that of a man, was seated by the window, in a pose fixed, as motionless, as that of the dead woman herself” (p. 49). The man in the room is the widowed Lord Watergate, who gets framed in Gertrude’s head as if he were a still picture. While silently doing her job, she is “instinctively refrained from glancing in the direction of this second figure; and had only the vaguest impression of a dark, bowed head, and a bearded, averted face”. Then, once finished, she finally meets the man’s eyes:

²⁵ In this period, *post-mortem* photography became very popular among the Victorian middle-class people. The images of deceased people chimed with a particular feeling of nostalgia for the past and an obsessive need for mementoes and empirical evidence.

For one brief, but vivid moment, her eyes encountered the glance of two miserable grey eyes, looking out with a sort of dazed wonder from a pale and sunken face. [...] these together formed a picture which imprinted itself as by a flash on Gertrude's overwrought consciousness, and was destined not to fade for many days. (*ibidem*)

In this scene, we never see Gertrude actually taking the picture she is there for, but we are presented with a series of meaningful snapshots captured through her visual insight, which is highly selective and denotes her ability to see things differently, somewhat off the grid. Levy's photographic narration lets readers familiarise with Gertrude's consciousness and, in the same breath, gain "an appropriate experience of modernity itself",²⁶ as she reveals herself through her subjective perception of reality. In a world where the act of gazing was considered an all-out male prerogative, Levy demonstrates, through the character of Gertrude, that women could actively see beyond the boundaries of their domestic sphere.

It is worth noting that, as the novel progresses, Gertrude's self-esteem increases in parallel with her business's success. As a consequence, also her gaze gets more confident and fearless. This becomes evident near the end of the story during another confrontation with Darrell, the arrogant painter who, in the meantime, has started an affair with Phyllis and plans to secretly escape with her to Italy. Gertrude, determined to save her younger sister, finds them at his place and informs Phyllis that he is a married man and thus cannot marry her. At this point, the two come face to face and Gertrude is finally standing up to the man who once defeated her with his arrogant gaze:

His face was livid with passion; his prominent eyes, for once wide open, glared at her in rage and hatred. Gertrude met his glance with eyes that glowed with a passion yet fiercer than his own. [...] Face to face they stood; face to face, while the silent battle raged between them. Then with a curious elation, a mighty throb of what was almost joy, Gertrude knew that she, not he, the man of whom she had once been afraid, was the stronger of the two. For one brief moment some fierce instinct in her heart rejoiced. (p. 147)

In this moment of tension, no words are required. Gertrude's empowered self-confidence activates her visual power, as well as her ability to fiercely stare into the man's eyes without any feeling of submission. Darrell is thus forced to engage and respect her firmly triumphant gaze: Gertrude's "fierce instinct" wins the 'battle of gazes', allowing her to bring her sister back to the safety of their studio at Upper Baker Street. In this episode, the enhanced gaze of Gertrude reflects her personal development into a more conscious and self-assured woman, as well as the possibility for a woman to redefine certain conservative power dynamics in a male-dominated society.

Despite the novel's conventional happy ending, in which Gertrude complies with Lord Watergate's romantic quest, Levy has here been able to redefine the spaces and roles of women in late Victorian culture. Even if Gertrude's independence and dimension still differ from what a male *flâneur* experiences, Levy suggests that, for women, living in an urban context can act as a key to a world that has always been denied to them. The four sisters' decision to open a photography studio not only provides them

²⁶ D. WANCZYK, "Framing Gertrude: Photographic Narration and the Subjectivity of the Artist-Observer in Levy's *The Romance of a Shop*", *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 43 (1), 2015, p. 136.

with financial independence, but also contributes to opening their eyes to a world that is more varied and exciting than expected. Gertrude, in particular, is the one who is most pleased with the “new state of things”: “Fastidious and sensitive as she was, she had yet a great fund of enjoyment of life within her; of that impersonal, objective enjoyment which is so often denied to her sex” (p. 104).

The creative experience of the world, which she first achieves through her visionary gaze, is best described via Benjamin’s concept of *Erfahrung* as a cultural journey and sensorial internalisation of the city’s variety of sights and noises. In this context, the mobility provided by the modern modes of transportation of the time reveals itself as essential in allowing women to move around safely while ensuring them a privileged point of view on the city. Gertrude’s photographic gaze, in particular, follows a path of empowerment which mirrors her transformation from an inexperienced and vulnerable female photographer to a more confident and self-assured woman. As a result, Levy’s work does not seek to equate men and women in the late Victorian era, but rather to envisage the possibility for women to embrace the urban environment as an alternative world of freedom and opportunities where they can pursue their self-realisation.

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