Celebrity Studies

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rcel20

‘Forget it’s between two women’: negotiating a queer Virginia Woolf in Chanya Button’s *Vita & Virginia*

Lisa Stead

To cite this article: Lisa Stead (31 Jan 2024): ‘Forget it’s between two women’: negotiating a queer Virginia Woolf in Chanya Button’s *Vita & Virginia*, Celebrity Studies, DOI: 10.1080/19392397.2024.2310305

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2024.2310305

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

Published online: 31 Jan 2024.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 195

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=rcel20

CELEBRITY STUDIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2024.2310305

‘Forget it’s between two women’: negotiating a queer Virginia Woolf in Chanya Button’s *Vita & Virginia*

Lisa Stead

School of Culture and Communications, Swansea University, Swansea, Wales, UK

ABSTRACT
This article explores the gendered authorial negotiations at work in adaptations of Virginia Woolf’s works and celebrity image in screen media, focusing on a case study of *Vita and Virginia* (2018) directed by British filmmaker Chanya Button. The article discusses Button’s film’s textual and promotional strategies, considering how it adapts both Eileen Atkins’ 1995 play of the same name and original historical correspondence between Woolf and the writer Vita Sackville-West. It draws upon critical models of literary celebrity, the celebrity biopic, and the concept of adaptation networks to argue that Button’s strategic choices in cinematography and details of *mise-en-scène* formulate an ‘archival’ gaze in order to forge connections between Woolf and Button as gendered authorial and celebrity personas. This creates a visual dialogue between women authors across media and time. The article suggests that Button’s processes of adaptation work to destabilise the essential queerness of the epistolary material and literary celebrity images as a result of this archival technique. This produces a representation of queer desire that distances body and mind and privileges an intellectual romance above a physical, desiring and embodied queer sexuality. This ultimately reinforces rather than reframes or reimagines a popular image of Woolf’s literary celebrity, focused instead on her status as a melancholic, suffering figure.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 22 June 2023
Accepted 17 January 2024

KEYWORDS
Authorship; gender; literary celebrity; queer; embodiment

Introduction

This article focuses on Virginia Woolf as a British literary celebrity. It understands the writer as a form of what Paul Davis terms a ‘culture-text’ (Davis 1990, p. 110) and as a catalyst for a network of adaptation. It considers the most recent cinematic iteration of Woolf’s image as an historical literary celebrity and authorial icon in the 2018 film *Vita & Virginia*, written and directed by British filmmaker Chanya Button. The article draws upon theories of celebrity and adaptation to explore how Button negotiates ideas of gendered authorship and queerness within the film and the promotional discourses surrounding it. It considers how Button’s interpretation of Woolf as a literary celebrity shapes these negotiations with

CONTACT Lisa Stead l.r.smithstead@swansea.ac.uk School of Culture and Communications, Swansea University, Digital Technium 105B, Singleton Campus, Swansea SA2 8PP, UK

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

reference to a pre-existing network of adaptations of her biography and her works. This network has fashioned Woolf's celebrity image along specific lines, emphasising her struggles with mental health above other aspects of her public image and personal life.

Rebecca Braun and Emily Spiers suggest that critical studies of literary celebrity enable 'the study of literature to go beyond itself and ask how ideas of literary value intersect with other predominant notions of social and economic value at any one time or place' (2016, p. 449). They understand literary celebrity as 'a way of seeing the relationships that are facilitated by fictional texts even as these relationships also transcend the texts' (Braun and Spiers 2016, p. 450). In the case of *Vita & Virginia*, the network of adaptation that surrounds Woolf facilitates a relationship between women creators across time and media. It enables Button to forge links between herself and Woolf and assert her authorship as a woman director in the immediate aftermath of #MeToo by connecting her creative craft to a more extended history of representations of Woolf's literary celebrity.

This relationship is complicated, however, by the film's specific articulation of Woolf's queerness. Button''s film is based on the 1995 stage play *Vita and Virginia: A Play* by the actress Eileen Atkins and it focussed on the exchange of intimate letters between Woolf and the writer Vita Sackville-West in the late 1920s, exploring the correlation between their developing desire for one another and the creation of Woolf's 1928 novel *Orlando*. I argue that Button's strategic choices in cinematography and details of *mise-en-scène* focused on the physical quality of paper documents exchanged between the Woolf and Sackville-West formulates an 'archival' gaze in the film. The filmmaker utilises this as a means to communicate authorial authenticity.

This 'authenticity' is twofold. In one sense, it relates to Button's presentational focus on paper ephemera as physical historical evidence of Woolf's literary genius. Genius is in turn connected to queerness (Woolf's romantic epistolary exchanges with Sackville-West act as the catalyst for the creation of her famous literary works). In another, interconnected sense, authenticity relates to Button's use of Woolf's as a famous British literary celebrity as a means to assert her own authorship as a filmmaker. We can understand the urgency of claims to women's film authorship within the context of the #MeToo movement, which grew hugely in prominence in 2017 in the wake of allegations against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein. The early activism and awareness raising of the movement highlighted many of the barriers preventing women from taking a leading role in filmmaking behind the scenes, as well as addressing the sexual harassment and abuse faced by actresses working in Hollywood. When *Vita & Virginia* was released in 2018, women accounted for just 8% of directors working on the top-grossing 250 movies (Lauzen 2019, p. 1). Button's assertion of her authorship as a filmmaker can thus be understood in the context of a longer history of female authorship in her focus upon Woolf, and her attention in particular to concerns common to what Katrijn Bekers and Gertjan Willems have termed the '#MeToo Literary biopic'. This emergent subgenre of the literary biopic includes films such as *Colette* (2018), directed by British filmmaker Wash Westmoreland, and *Wild Nights with Emily* (2018), directed by American filmmaker Madeleine Olnek. Like *Vita & Virginia*, these films are aligned with 'fourth-wave feminisms' strong attention to intersectionality and LGBTQIA + identities' (Bekers and Willems 2022, p. 343).

Button's direction of *Vita & Virginia* makes her one of the first woman filmmakers to lead a screen project focused on Woolf. Sue Thornham argues that films which:

> bear the signature of women [. . .] by their very nature [. . .] must engage with those issues which have been of concern to feminist theorists: questions of subjectivity, or narrative and its relation to gender, of fantasy and desire, of the gendered ordering of space and time, and of regulation and agency. (Thornham 2012, p. 1)

Button's film is explicitly concerned with how different media 'bears' women's signatures and how acts of women's creative practice connect to questions of subjectivity and desire. Button's signature is literally placed alongside those of Woolf and Sackville-West in the paratextual framings of the film, for example, creating a chain of authorship that crosses media boundaries. When the film's title appears on screen in the opening sequence, the two women's names are interconnected with an elongated ampersand that bleeds into the background design — a dimly lit image of marbled endpaper echoing that of a printed book. The end credits repeat the same marbled endpaper image with 'A FILM BY CHANYA BUTTON' in the same typeface, cementing an aesthetic connection between the three figures.

Beyond paratext, Button forges connections between herself and Woolf by inserting her own creative labour into the historical record of the Woolf/Sackville-West romance, interspersing epistolary fragments from their historical letters with her own original screenplay additions. At the same time, Button made claims to authoring a new 'take' on Woolf's celebrity identity in publicity surrounding the film by seeking to avoid an explicit representation of lesbian sexuality on screen. In interviews, both Button as writer/director and Gemma Arterton (who plays Sackville-West) as star/producer expressed their desire to avoid any 'gratuitous' depiction of sexual activity between their biographical subjects and spoke about their uneasiness with the physical component of Woolf and Sackville-West's embodied desire.

The essential queerness of the subjects depicted is fundamentally altered as a result of this avoidance and the intense attention to the material paraphernalia of *writing* desire, rather than *embodying* desire. Button's strategy for selecting and reworking components of the original correspondence removes pieces of the letters from their original context and location in the unfolding timeline of the women's historical relationship. This results in a representation of queer desire that distances body and mind. An intellectual romance is privileged above a physical, desiring and embodied queer sexuality. As the article will show, this, in turn, reinforces a specific narrative of Woolf's literary celebrity – one which focuses overwhelmingly upon melancholy and mental health, ultimately representing her as passive.

Using critical frameworks from theories of literary celebrity and adaptation studies, the analysis which follows thus offers a new framework for interpreting contemporary women's biopics led by women directors. It considers how negotiations between popular images of women's historical authorship and the authorial signature of contemporary women filmmakers can produce tension and stagnation as much as dialogue and reinterpretation.

Woolf's adaptation network

There has been a variety of scholarship from within literary studies on the concept of literary celebrity across the last two decades (see Moran 2000, Glass 2004, York 2007,

Leithart 2010, Easley 2011, Weber 2016, Honings 2018, Davidson 2019). Gaston Franssen and Rick Honings survey how scholars in the field have explored 'the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sources of literary celebrity, its close yet tense relation with modernism, and its fusion with postmodern popular culture' (2017, p. 16). They describe the concept of literary celebrity as an 'intriguing form of renown, which seems to be as widespread as it is intangible' (Franssen and Honings 2017, p. 16). Braun and Spiers suggest that even 'canonically famous authors' like Woolf whose 'celebrity has become part of a normalising discourse of world literature' pose challenges to 'purely aesthetic readings' of their significance because of 'the way in which they are appropriated by other discourses and fields' (Braun and Spiers 2016, p. 454). Indeed, while Woolf is a staple of any University English Literature course on Modernism, across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries she has also been configured as a cultural icon, a painted image, a film character, a postcard in the National Gallery – continually taken up by new audiences, but also by writers and filmmakers as a rich subject for both biopic and literary adaptation.

As suggested earlier, we can understand Woolf as a form of what Paul Davis terms 'culture-text' (1990, p. 110). Davis uses the term to counter a reductive understanding of adaptation as bound to a fixed and stable single source text. Lissette Lopez Szwydky suggests that the 'culture-text' can refer to 'all the retellings and adaptations across media and time' which exist 'beyond the scope of their [...] "original"' (2018, p. 131). The development of Woolf's image as a literary celebrity within film and TV media has been forged by this kind of 'regular adaptation, appropriation, and allusion' (Lopez Szwydky etal. 2018, p. 131).

Kate Newell has argued that adaptations need to be studied in terms of their particular 'adaptation network', which she understands as 'the aggregate of texts responsible for and generated by a given work' (2017, p. 2) and 'the broad inventory of narrative moments, reference points, and iconography that comes to be associated with a particular work though successive acts of adaptation' (2017, p. 8). For Woolf, this inventory includes varied attempts to adapt her works to the screen – perhaps the most famous example being Sally Potter's (1992) adaptation of *Orlando*. A feature film of *Mrs Dalloway* was also produced in (1997) starring Vanessa Redgrave, and *To The Lighthouse* (1983) was adapted as a TV movie by the BBC in 1983 starring Rosemary Harris and Kenneth Branagh. There have also been films based on her short stories, such as the (2017) film *A Ghost Story*, based on her 1921 short story 'A Haunted House', and the short film *Kew Gardens* (2018), based on her 1919 short story of the same name.

Beyond the adaptation of her works, she has been the subject of literary biopic films. This is a subgenre defined by Elaine Indrusiak and Ana Iris Ramgrab as 'biographical films in which lives of writers are told' (Indrusiak and Ramgrab 2018, p. 98). Eileen Atkins was one of the first to embody Woolf as a character on screen in the television adaptation of *A Room of One's Own* (1991), where she featured as the narrator. A few years later in 1996, John Füegi and Jo Francis directed the 52-minute documentary film *The War Within: A Portrait of Virginia Woolf*, (1995) which utilised a variety of archive footage and family photos to narrativise Woolf's life and work. In the early 2000s, Nicole Kidman famously played Woolf in Stephen Daldry's adaptation of *The Hours* (2002), which focused on Woolf writing the novel *Mrs Dalloway*. More recently, two different actresses played Woolf in the

(2015) BBC three-part mini-series *Life in Squares*. Woolf has also been the subject of animation, featuring in a (2016) BBC animation titled *Words Fail Me* based on a 1937 recording of her voice.

These varied representations of the writer have emphasised different aspects of Woolf's voice and physicality. In *A Room of One's Own*, for example, Atkins offers a relatively androgynous silhouette. Kidman's nose was altered with prosthetics in *The Hours* to better match one specific aspect of Woolf's profile. The physical transformation deglamorised Kidman in her embodiment of what Alison Bechdel terms a 'tormented Virginia' (Bechdel 2021, p. xii). It is this particular incarnation of Woolf which, I argue, Button extends in *Vita & Virginia* explicitly in relation to her queerness.

Epistolary authenticity

Press material surrounding Button's film emphasised the desire of both Button and Arterton to offer something different from previous representations of Woolf in popular culture. Interviews with Arterton, for example, highlighted her desire to make Woolf's literary celebrity less about her famous death by suicide and more about the earlier stages of her life. In an interview with *Vanity Fair*, she suggested that 'the fascination with [Woolf] is always the end of her life, which is sad, I think' (Arterton qtd. in Miller 2018, n.p.). Button made similar assertions in an interview with *Screen Daily*, commenting: 'If we can be relied upon to know anything about Virginia Woolf, it's how she passed away' (qtd. in McCarthy 2019, n.p.). Button's film focuses instead on the early period of Woolf and Sackville-West's relationship from their first meeting at the time of the publication of *Jacob's Room* in the early 1920s to the aftermath of the publication of *Orlando* in the late 1920s.

Karen Sproles describes the mutual influence that the two writers had upon one another:

> Woolf brought to their exchange formal experiments in representing subjectivity; Sackville-West brought an insistence on the presence of desire, particularly women's erotic desire for one another. In all that they wrote during their affair – essays, literary criticism, novels, poems, and most especially biographies and letters to each other – Woolf and Sackville-West struggle to articulate their desire for one another and to resist the social pressures that work to repress women's desire altogether. (Sproles 2006, p. 5)

Button's film attempts to express this influence, but primarily in regard to Sackville-West's effect on Woolf, giving limited attention to Sackville-West's own writing. The film also portrays these 'struggles' differently for the two women. Sackville-West is shown in conflict with her mother and the expectations placed upon her to behave in accordance with her aristocratic lineage. For Woolf, the central struggle depicted in the film is her resistance to physical intimacy.

Hila Shachar suggests that '[o]ne of the primary ways through which literary biopics have sought to explore the life narratives of authors creatively and ideologically is via a judicious "pruning" of their biographies with a distinct thematic focus' (2019, p. 63). This process typically involves foregrounding a romantic storyline as a commercially viable way to connect with audiences. Button and Atkins' screenplay follows this pattern by making Woolf's story the story of her love affair with Sackville-West. Atkins' play closely follows the chronological pattern of both diary entries and written correspondence that is

mapped out in the published version of Woolf and Sackville-West's exchanges, turning diary extracts into direct addresses to the audience and transforming letters into 'one long conversation' (Atkins 1995, p. 1) between the two women. The film, in contrast, makes frequent and specific disruptions and reversals to this timeline. Button borrows expressions of intimacy from a later stage of their relationship to frame the initial written interactions between Woolf and Sackville-West in the filmic timeline. This strategy continues across the film, with Button extracting lines from correspondence from much later in their relationship to sketch out its early development.

On one level, this technique modifies the slow burn of their real-life relationship for dramatic purposes, serving the basic function of speeding up intimacy to aid the romance narrative. Speaking of the historical correspondence, Alison Bechdel observes, for example, that whilst 'their early letters contain sparks of flirtation, it takes a while for things to heat up', particularly given that 'Vita became entangled soon after they met in an affair with a man' (Bechdel 2021, p. x). Relocating later expressions of deep intimacy to the first fledgling moments of correspondence supports the narrative choice to remove these obstacles. At the same time, however, the choice to compress and reschedule the original epistolary exchanges affirms Sackville-West as focaliser and aggressive pursuer. Woolf's agency and active solicitation of intellectual exchanges between the two is significantly diminished as a result.

Martha Perotto-Wills observes that the full span of Woolf and Sackville-West's correspondence ranged in tone 'from deathless romance to publishing shoptalk to bizarre inside jokes' (2019, n.p.). Sproles describes the letters as 'full of puns on having and coming, exploring budding flowers, and romping with licking dogs' (2006, p. 8). She notes that while 'Woolf is not popularly known for her sense of humour or her ribaldry' it is 'the letters that most overtly show this side of her, after which it is impossible to miss' (Sproles 2006, p. 8). This playfulness and humour are absent from the film's visualisation of the letter exchanges. Instead, it frames their flirtation as an uneven push and pull between the two women where Woolf resists and Sackville-West forces.

In doing so, the film reinforces a version of Woolf present in the film's wider adaptation network. In interviews about the film, Button spoke of her desire for *Vita & Virginia* to 'sit alongside' (qtd. in Russell 2019, n.p.) Sally Potter's *Orlando* – but also Daldry's *The Hours*. Lee Marshall and Isabel Kongsgaard suggest that in creating biopics, '[f]ilm-makers must present history in a way that is consistent with the audience's understandings of that history' (2012, p. 356). Button's engagement with the melancholic image of Woolf is part of this engagement with Woolf's adaptation history. It taps into an audience's pre-existing understanding of Woolf's cinematic image shaped by *The Hours* and its own adaptation network, affirming its status as a film which helped code a popular image of Woolf as a melancholic figure. Linda Hutcheon asserts that the 'appeal of adaptations for audiences lies in their mixture of repetition and difference, familiarity and novelty' (114). She refers to audiences as 'knowing' an 'unknowing' (2013, p. 120). The former constitutes those familiar with the adapted text, and the latter those unfamiliar with it. Button's film appeals to 'knowing' audiences familiar with both Potter's *Orlando* adaptation and Daldry's film in constructing its image of Woolf. Our first complete image of Woolf in *Vita & Virginia*, for example, shows her dressed in period costume that seems to directly reference Tilda Swinton's costuming in the early sections of *Orlando*. The connection to Daldry's film, in contrast, is less about physical characteristics of Woolf's celebrity image, and more about

the representation of her mental health. *The Hours* plays into a broader trend of a 'fixation with female malady and gloom' (Shachar 2019, p. 101) in recent depictions of women authors on screen. Linking Daldry's representation of Woolf with that of Sylvia Plath in the film *Sylvia* (2003), Shachar suggests that '[w]illowy, white, fragile, and ethereal' images of women authors offer the spectator 'familiar visual and cultural territory of the "sick" woman in art that comes straight out of nineteenth-century conceptions of femininity' (2019, p. 101). This 'territory' is reinforced from the very first images of *The Hours* which show Woolf descending into river waters as she commits suicide in 1941 before moving backwards in time to 1923 to depict her in bed, prone, staring into the middle distance as her husband and doctor discuss her health downstairs. Button's representation of Woolf thus forms a dialogue with Daldry's interpretation of her celebrity image as fragile and ethereal. Instead of focusing on her suicide, Button's film emphasises the connection between Woolf's major literary works and her correspondence with Sackville-West, but still codes both as inherently melancholic, reinforcing the ethereal and fragile image of the author and her creative process.

The first scene depicting Woolf writing to Sackville-West establishes this. It shows Woolf writing by hand to Sackville-West (who is travelling) asking her to describe her encounters. Woolf's lines are lifted directly from a letter written in early September 1925, where she writes:

> I can get the sensation 'of seeing you' – hair, lips, colour, height, even, now and then, the eyes and hands, but I find you going off, to walk in the garden, to play tennis, to dig, to sit smoking and talking, and then I can't invent a thing you say – This proves, what I could write reams about – how little we know anyone, only movements and gestures, nothing connected, continuous, profound. (Woolf and Sackville-West 2021, p. 23)

Button's screenplay compresses this into:

> I can get the sensation of seeing you, now and then . . . then I find you going off. How little we know anyone. Only movements, gestures, nothing connected, continuous, profound.

The tone is markedly transformed, despite some of the content remaining unchanged. In the filmed version of the letter, Debicki delivers the lines as if in a trance, staring directly at the camera with a worried, distant expression and slightly furrowed brow and elongating the gaps between the words 'connected', 'continuous', 'profound' to make each a stand-alone sentence. In the original letter, Woolf prefaces these musings with an explanation that she is writing with 'one dog in my room, and nothing else but books, papers and pillows and glasses of milk and quilts that have fallen off my bed and so on' (2021, p. 23) – adding specific, tactile physical detail and connecting the space of composition to the intimate space of the bedroom. The film's citation of fragments of the letter thus transforms it into a sad utterance rather than a curious one, translating embodied desire and its connection to intensely physical and tangible things into disembodied melancholy. It also removes the exchange from its distinct sense of place (omitting the specific references to the bed and bedroom) by focusing exclusively upon Debicki's facial performance and solemn tone.

Literary biopics face the problem of trying to represent a creative act that seems antithetical to cinematic modes of visualisation and dramatisation. Judith Buchanan considers how filmmakers have addressed this issue, representing literary creation

'through imaginative projections of various sorts' (2013, pp. 3–4) and depicting the writing process by relying on 'aestheticized views of desks, quill, parchment, inkpot, typewriter, the writer in a moment of meditative pause' (2019, p. 5). Button's film follows these conventions in relation to Woolf's literary composition but has the added difficulty of conveying the experience of writing and receiving intimate correspondence.

Button attempts to convey this experience by having both actors directly address the camera to verbalise the content of the letters. The composition and *mise-en-scène* for each of these to-camera letter sequence remain unchanged throughout the film. Sackville-West and Woolf are positioned centrally in medium close-up standing before what looks to be patterned wallpaper. The details of their make-up, clothing and hairstyling remain static for each letter. The cinematography deliberately blurs sections of the frame in these images, so that their faces seem unfocused and incomplete, echoing the attempts that both women make to capture one another in memory and create an image of one another in their writing.

In promotional interviews at the time of the films' release, Button explained the device, suggesting that she:

> wanted to give an audience an experience of them [the letters], which is why we did them in this very confronting, very act-y way [. . .] I wanted to create an experience for the audience of what it must have felt like to receive that letter. What it must be like to be seduced by Vita Sackville-West. What it feels like to have Virginia Woolf and the full laser beam of her attention on you. (qtd. in Atkinson 2019. n.p.)

Elsewhere, Button describes the technique as a means to challenge 'the way these sorts of things are normally translated on screen', expressing her own boredom with the representation of 'a huge piece of paper scrolling through the frame' and her desire to 'give the audience the experience of what it's really like to read the letters' (qtd. in Coleman 2019, n.p.)

Button's visual style enables viewers to connect with the act of creating the letters – the production of physical words on the page – whilst using the actor's performed recitation as the visual equivalent of feeling. Elaine Scarry has explored the formal practices writers use to affect a 'mimetic perception' (1999, p. 9). This enables the reader to create vivid mental images as they read. Button attempts to express the emotions of the letters without relying on a directly literal visualisation of what the two women describe: to do so would be to override the specificity of Woolf and Sackville-West's own techniques of mimetic perception and their attempts at an 'exteriorization of what the imagining mind does' (Scarry 1999, p. 162). Yet Button ultimately still relies upon citing *things* explicitly as a means to mobilise the emotions described in Woolf and Sackville-Wests' letters. It is here that the archival gaze takes precedence. She combines her images of the women speaking with fragmented images of the paper documents of their letters, which symbolise both the emotional and romantic exchanges between the women and Woolf's literary authority and Button's authorship. The camera singles out emotive words and phrases in tight insert shots, adopting a highly presentational mode for displaying Woolf and Sackville-West's written emotion and giving the viewer intimate access to the letters as tangible historical documents. In one exchange, for example, the phrases 'endless letter', 'intoxication', and 'thrill' are picked out as

individual insert shots; in another: 'strength', 'clarity', 'A gift', and the phrase 'So you must be very kind'. By freezing the images of the writers, the sequences privilege the spectacle of literary artefacts above the contextualised content of those artefacts and, crucially, the embodied desire underpinning them. Though the letters are written over a significant period of time, and from various geographical locations, with Sackville-West often travelling abroad as she writes, the images of composition and reception remain static and abstract.

Newell's concept of adaptation networks again offers a valuable framework for understanding how the archival gaze operates. We can understand Button's strategies of literary visualisation as a literal gaze in the cinematic sense. However, we might also understand this tendency in the film as indicative of its adaptation network, privileging the physical evidence of Woolf's composition and authorship as a key part of the iconography of 'Woolf' the culture-text, where films like *The Hours* give intense attention to the labour of writing. Like *Vita & Virginia, The Hours* features scenes of Woolf in her writing chair, surrounded by copious pages of handwritten draft with close up shots dwelling on her ink-stained fingers.

Button's focus on paper artefacts repeats this iconography and aligns with Woolf's particular relationship with the physicality of paper as a writer and correspondent. Karen V. Kukil describes Woolf as an 'epistolary iconoclast' (2013, p. 175), posing fundamental challenges to the conventions of letter writing by playing around with their content and physical form. Kukil draws attention to the marks of the writer on the paper, for example, which can be seen in documents in the Smith College archives. She observes that Woolf 'delighted in colour and variety, writing in a hurried spidery hand with black, blue, and violet-coloured inks on odd sizes of paper' (Kukil 2013, p. 179). Kukil offers an example of a letter written to Lytton Strachey in 1912, which 'seems to have been intentionally written on "bumf" or toilet paper' (2013, p. 179). Elsewhere, she highlights the connection between Woolf's interest in the materials of epistolary composition and the humorous opportunities this afforded her as a letter writer. She cites examples such as a letter from 1917 in which '[e]ven the envelope with an impression of a perfect rose in black wax is ridiculed in the text with a sexual joke about sticking and unsticking', with Woolf turning a box of sealing wax into 'a bawdy prank' (Kukil 2013, p. 179).

The selection and pruning described earlier, however, complicates Button's way of framing Woolf''s handwritten and typewritten words. The highlighted phrases listed above – save 'endless letter' – are from Button's fictionalised additions to the exchanges threaded into the screenplay. Button's authorship thus overlays Woolf's and Sackville-West's in these examples. However, rather than blending into the source text, they are picked out and emphasised so that they punctuate the rhythm of the sequence, visually elevated so that they become subject to the archival gaze of the camera lens which transforms Button's screenplay into a form of hybrid faux-historical artefact. At the same time, the film's dramatisation of letter writing downplays opportunities for epistolary playfulness by focusing instead on the isolation of words to affirm the chain of authorship running from Woolf / Sackville-West to Button. By making the material artefact a source of reverence and melancholy, the archival insert shots thereby reframe Woolf's epistolary iconoclasm as an ethereal, maudlin process of tortured romantic entanglement.

Queering/not queering woolf

Pamela Demory's concept of 'queer/adaptation' offers a useful framework for understanding how Button's use of an archival gaze impacts the film's melancholic presentation of Woolf's sexuality. Demory understands adaptation itself 'as in some way already queer' (2019, p. 1), seeing the two terms as 'parallel theoretical constructs that can both orient the way we approach or think about a given text or texts' (2019, p. 1). Demory suggests that '[a] queer perspective on adaptation can be a way of resisting normative ideologies and of revealing the fissures, absences, or silences of canonical texts' (2019, p. 4).

Button's film adapts content already coded as queer. This applies to Atkins' play and the original letters, but also to its connection to a pre-existing celebrity image of Woolf within its adaptation network. However, while Demory asserts that 'queerness and adaptation function as repetition and as resistance' (2019, p. 6), Button's film arguably uses repetition to resist the idea of a fully embodied queer realisation of Woolf. The archival gaze strips sexuality out of the text rather than offering a more radically resistant repetition of Woolf's literary celebrity.

Alison Bechdel has discussed the erotic charge of Woolf and Sackville-West's correspondence. She notes that from the beginning of their written exchanges, they were keenly focused on each other's physicality, citing exchanges such as: 'Virginia loves Vita's body' (Bechdel 2021, p. x). Sproles has further suggested that 'Sackville-West increased Woolf's confidence and focused her attention on sensuality and sexuality' (2006, p. 17). Sackville-West wrote to Woolf that she was 'very beautiful indeed' (Woolf and Sackville-West 2021, p. 246). Perhaps most famously, she wrote of being 'reduced to a thing that wants Virginia' (Woolf and Sackville-West 2021, p. 44) in Woolf's absence. The film minimises these expressions of physical desire, particularly in its extremely limited depiction of erotic physical interactions between the two women. Whilst it resists the conventional structures of the male gaze by centring the same-sex desire of two women protagonists, it does not structure a viable alternative means to mobilise a lesbian look.

This lack is compounded by the staggered way Woolf is introduced into the narrative as the central object of the film's gaze. We do not get a clear image of the writer for some time. The opening sequences are deliberately evasive, showing only fragments of Woolf's body at work in her writing room. Instead, we are focalised through Sackville-West, joining her in pursuit of Woolf as she finds herself invited to a party in Bloomsbury. She declares Woolf to be a 'wickedly brilliant mind' whilst taking tea with her judgemental aristocratic mother, asserting that she 'must know her'. We then see her attend the party with the sole intention of encountering Woolf in person. Unable to find her, she sneaks into a side room which appears to be Vanessa Bell's studio, littered with canvases and easels. She picks out a small canvas with a faceless figure reclining on a deckchair in a garden. The image is a replica of one of Bell's well-known portraits of her sister, painted in 1912 in the garden of Charleston House.

Sackville-West is shown delicately touching the edges of the canvas, caressing it as if it were already the face of someone she loves. The camera work captures the moment in an insert shot close to her shoulder, aligning the spectator with Sackville-West in a shared desire to finally see a fully embodied image of 'Virginia'. Clive Bell interrupts her reverie and invites her back to the party to meet 'the real thing'. Sackville-West converses briefly with Bell and Duncan Grant in the liminal space of the hallway with an open doorway

giving a glimpse of people dancing behind them. She then realises that Woolf is present in the crowd, and her gaze fixes upon Woolf's dancing body.

Sackville-West, centrally framed, takes a step towards the doorway to gain an unobstructed view. We then cut to a point-of-view shot in slow motion as the camera glides up Woolf's body from her waist to her shoulders as she dances unselfconsciously. As she turns towards the camera, she meets Sackville-West's gaze and holds it . We cut back to a closer framing of Sackville-West returning the gaze – a determined and desiring expression on her face – before cutting back again to her view of Woolf, who continues to dance whilst holding eye contact. This initially charged and provocative act of initiating and returning the gaze is then largely displaced by the focus on the epistolary exchanges, however, where the to-camera technique discussed earlier positions the two women as imagined composer/recipient image.

The relationship eventually takes on a physical aspect at roughly the film's midpoint. Woolf initiates a kiss, which then transitions to a brief sequence of the pair in bed together. The camera begins at their feet as they move beneath the covers, tracking horizontally from screen right to screen left before rising slightly to accommodate the torsos of both women in the frame, clothed in undergarments which cover most of their bodies. Sackville-West tops, pinning Woolf's hand behind her head, but otherwise their bodies seem to barely touch, with the choreography working to maintain considerable distance between their faces. As Woolf reaches climax, she kisses Sackville-West briefly before whispering: 'I wonder if death feels anything like that. As if all of a sudden, time gets stuck. And you feel empty'.

In interviews promoting the film, Arterton expressed her desire to resist 'gratuity' in the film's representation of sex. She explained in an interview for *The Guardian* that she wanted to avoid the audience seeing 'something that was gratuitous', remarking that she would 'be the first person to condemn anything gratuitous: boobs out and that sort of thing' (qtd. in Armitstead 2019, n.p.). She went on to state: 'it's important for young people to see something beautiful' (Arterton qtd. in Armitstead 2019, n.p.), inadvertently implying that a more explicit representation of sexually active queer bodies would not be beautiful or aspirational. The way this particular interview emphasises Arterton's own heterosexuality compounds this. She suggests to the interviewer, for example, that she and Button embrace for the camera, but then considers 'that would give the wrong impression' (qtd. in Armitstead 2019, n.p.). The interviewer also notes that Arterton has just arrived 'from Chichester, where she is staying with her boyfriend' (Armitstead 2019, n.p.). They later go on to remark that 'Button and Arterton both bridle at the word "sapphic"', seeing it as having a 'negative spin' (Armitstead 2019 n.p.)

Button reinforced this resistance to the embodied queer desire at the centre of the Woolf/Sackville-West romance in her own press interviews. In an interview with *Vanity Fair*, she stated:

> I hope people have this experience when they watch the film, but for us on set, we forget that it's a love story between two women [. . .] It's about love and inspiration and creativity and sexuality, and you sort of forget gender. (Button qtd. in Miller 2018, n.p.)

She repeats this sentiment in the *Guardian* interview, remarking that '[p]eople [. . .] have said they sort of forget it's between two women', and that in her view, '[t]heir relationship

was with their own sexuality, as much as with each other' (qtd. in Armitstead 2019, n.p.). This sentiment risks obscuring the significance of queer bodies as desired bodies specifically *for* their gendered qualities. Martha Perotto-Wills argues that these kinds of statements limit the film's potential to visualise historical lesbian relationships because they imply that a lesbian relationship is 'indistinguishable from a straight one' (Perotto-Wills 2019, n.p.). She stresses that 'Woolf certainly never forgot it was a woman she was in love with. She was obsessed with the way Vita inhabited femininity: her maternity, her glamour, "her being in short (what I have never been) a real woman"' (Perotto-Wills 2019, n.p.). She goes further in suggesting that 'it is the heterosexual woman's tragedy to be unable to conceive of an openly sexual gaze onto a woman that *isn't* male, or to figure a two-directional "lesbian look"' (Perotto-Wills 2019, n.p.). Button and Arterton's 'genderless' framing of the relationship between Woolf and Sackville-West and their professed resistance to the term 'sapphic' thus translates as a resistance to sexualising queer sexuality, mobilising same-sex romance instead as a means to enhance an archival gaze and affirm Button's authorship.

Writing in 1990, Chris Straayer suggested that a lesbian look in cinema 'requires exchange. It looks for a returning look, not just a receiving look. It sets up two-directional sexual activity' (Straayer 1990, p. 53). Where Button's film initially aligns us with Sackville-West, it sets up a desiring female gaze. But unlike other recent attempts by women filmmakers to pursue an alternative to the male gaze and represent lesbian sexuality and desire on screen, the film does not consistently establish the 'two-directional' activity Straayer describes. In her (2019) film *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, for example – a period film focused on a same-sex love affair between a woman painter and her subject – French filmmaker Céline Sciamma works to reject the spectator's 'objectification of her characters, our possible voyeurism, and our fetishization of their bodies' with the understanding that 'we have been conditioned by a century of male gaze' (Bacholle 2022, p. 6). Sciamma has spoken in particular of the nudity in the film. She argues that her depiction of the naked bodies of her protagonists needs to be understood in relation to the larger structures of visual grammar established across the narrative. She states:

> At that point in the film, when they share their intimacy, they are both in the frame. They're naked but they're not exposed [. . .] in addition to the fact the camera is still and not travelling around the body. There is no editing in that scene. The female gaze is also a grammar that develops within the film; by the time of that scene, we respect this character. (qtd. in Garcia 2019, p. 11)

Sciamma's description reads, in some respects, as the inversion of the intimate scene in *Vita & Virginia* described above. Button's camera travels up and along the bodies of her women characters whilst simultaneously hiding queer women's bodies under sheets and clothing, rather than presenting women's nakedness as 'just a fact' (Sciamma qtd. in Garcia 2019, p. 11). In Button's film, the spectator is not able to capitalise on a developing visual grammar of patterns of looking between queer women subjects. Instead, Woolf's agency as the object of Sackville-West's gaze is restricted by the limited opportunities the film affords for Woolf to gaze back.

Conclusion

At the centre of the film, then, is a tension between claims to authorship and authenticity configured around the desire to give a fresh look at Woolf as a queer British literary celebrity and a resistance to connecting that celebrity image to an embodied queer desire. Button's assertions of authenticity and authorship are seemingly in conflict with the radical potential of the queer romance at the centre of the film, where an archival gaze produces a sanitised and safe queer romance in place of an embodied and passionate one.

The figure of the authoress and historical icons of literary celebrity are indeed proving a rich source for women filmmakers and adaptors in the post-#MeToo landscape, enabling them to assert new forms of gendered authorship in films like *Wild Nights with Emily* discussed earlier – and others, such as the surreal Shirley Jackson literary biopic *Shirley* (2020), directed by experimental filmmaker Josephine Decker. Yet, as the article has shown, critical tools from adaptation theory combined with insights from theories of literary celebrity can assist in interrogating what these works hold in tension or hold back, and how an assertion of gendered authorship may compress or compromise other facets of literary celebrity images.

Estella Tincknell has written of a tendency to make superficial claims to offering 'reparation' for the neglect and pathologizing of historical female characters in recent biopics featuring women stars (rather than women authors). She argues that films such as *Seberg* (2019) and *Once Upon a Time In . . . Hollywood* (2019) in reality serve only 'to recuperate female stars as victims, not only of the Hollywood system and recent history but also of their own inherent frailties' (Tincknell 2023, p. 569). Along similar lines, *Vita & Virginia* makes claims to move away from focusing on Woolf as a victim of mental health yet ends up focusing on her frailties by avoiding the active, embodied, desiring lesbian sexuality present in her historical diary entries and letters, favouring instead a repetition and sedimentation of the melancholy image of the writer as a queer literary celebrity. The film and its promotional discourses serve to reinforce rather than reframe or reimagine a pre-existing image of Woolf as a literary celebrity by repeating an image of her as a suffering figure. In doing so, it enacts a complex negotiation of queerness in its attempts to connect discourses of gendered authorship across time and media.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Lisa Stead is Senior Lecturer in Film Studies at Swansea University | Prifysgol Abertawe. Her primary research interests reside with feminist film historiography, women's literary cultures of cinema, star studies, and archival film theory and practice. She is the author of *Off to the Pictures: Women's Writing, Cinemagoing and Movie Culture in Interwar Britain* (Edinburgh University Press, 2016) and *Reframing Vivien Leigh: Gender, Stardom and the Archive* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

References

Armitstead, C., 27 June 2019. 'I felt kind of promiscuous': Gemma Arterton on Vita and Virginia. *The Guardian*. Available from: https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/jun/27/gemma-arterton-vita-and-virginia-bloomsbury

Atkins, E., 1995. *Vita and Virginia: a play*. New York: Samuel French Ltd.

Atkinson, N., 25 Nov 2019. Director Chanya Button turns the page on Virginia Woolf. *The Globe and Mail*. Available from: https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/film/article-director-chanya-button-turns-the-page-on-virginia-woolf/

Bacholle, M., 2022. For a fluid approach to Céline Sciamma's P*ortrait of a Lady on Fire*. *French Cultural Studies*, 34 (2), 1–14.

Bechdel, A., 2021. Introduction. In: V. Woolf and V. Sackville-West, eds. *Vita Woolf and Vita Sackville-West: love letters*. London: Vinage, vii–iv.

Bekers, K. and Willems, G., 2022. The woman writer on film and the #MeToo literary biopic. *Adaptation*, 15 (3), 332–347. doi:10.1093/adaptation/apab020.

Braun, R. and Spiers, E., 2016. Introduction: Re-viewing literary celebrity. *Celebrity studies*, 7 (4), 449–456. doi:10.1080/19392397.2016.1233709.

Coleman, R., 6 Sep 2019. Vita & Virginia: Director chanya button discusses making bold visual and story choices in her exploration of queer desire. *MovieMaker*. Available from: https://www.moviemaker.com/vita-virginia-chanya-button/

Colette, 2018. Directed by Wash Westmoreland. US: Number 9 Films.

Davidson, G., 2019. *Categorically famous: literary celebrity and sexual liberation in 1960s America*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Davis, P., 1990. Literary history: retelling a Christmas carol: text and culture-text. *The American scholar*, 59 (1), 109–115.

Demory, P., 2019. Queer/Adaptation: an introduction. *In*: P. Demory, ed. *Queer/Adaptation*. London: Palgrave, 1–13.

Easley, A., 2011. *Literary celebrity, gender, and Victorian authorship, 1850-1914*. Newark: University of Delaware Press.

Franssen, G. and Honings, R., 2017. Idolizing authorship: an introduction In: G. Franssen, R. and Honings, R., eds. *Idolizing authorship: literary celebrity and the construction of identity, 1800 to the present* . Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 11–28.

Garcia, M., 2019. Deconstructing the filmmaker's gaze: an interview with Céline Sciamma. *Cineaste*, 45 (1), 8–11.

A Ghost Story, 2017. Directed by David Lowery. US: Sailor Bear.

Glass, L., 2004. *Authors Inc.: literary celebrity in the modern United States, 1880–1980*. New York: New York University Press.

Honings, R., 2018. *Star authors in the age of romanticism: literary celebrity in the Netherlands*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

The Hours, 2002. Directed by Stephen Daldry. US: Miramax Films.

Hutcheon, L. and O'Flynn, S., 2013. *A theory of adaptation*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.

Indrusiak, E. and Ramgrab, A.I., 2018. Literary biopics: adaptation as Historiographic Metaficion. *In*: D. Cutchins, K. Katja, and V. Eckart, eds. *The Routledge companion to adaptation*. London: Routledge, 97–105.

Kew Gardens, 2018. Directed by Nick Cohen. UK: Psychology News.

Kukil, K.V., 2013. Teaching the material archive at Smith College. *In*: C. Smith and L. Stead, eds. *The boundaries of the literary archive: reclamation and representation*. London: Routledge, 171–188.

Lauzen, M.M., 3 Jan 2019. The celluloid ceiling: behind-the-scenes employment of women on the top 100, 250, and 500 films of 2018. Center for the study of women in television and film, San Diego State University. Available from: chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/2019_Celluloid_Ceiling_Report.pdf

Leithart, P.J., 2010. *Jane Austen: a literary celebrity*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Incorporated.

Life in Squares, 2015. Directed Simon Kaijser. UK: BBC.

Lopez Szwydky, L., *et al*. 2018. Adaptations, culture-texts and the literary canon: on the making of nineteenth-century classics. *In*: D. Cutchins, ed. *The Routledge companion to adaptation*. London: Routledge, 128–142.

Marshall, L. and Kongsgaard, I., 2012. Representing popular music stardom on screen: The popular music biopic. *ß*, 3 (3), 346–361. doi:10.1080/19392397.2012.679455.

McCarthy, E., 18 Sept 2019. Vita & Virginia with Gemma Arterton, Elizabeth Debicki: Exclusive New Image and Set Report. *Screen Daily*. Available from: https://www.screendaily.com/features/vita-and-virginia-with-gemma-arterton-elizabeth-debicki-exclusive-new-image-and-set-report/5126779.article

Miller, J., 18 Sept 2018. Meet the woman bringing Virginia Woolf's notorious love affair to the screen. *Vanity Fair*. Available from: https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2018/09/virginia-woolf-vita-sackville-west-movie

Moran, J., 2000. *Star authors: literary celebrity in America*. London: Pluto Press.

Mrs Dalloway, 1997. Directed by Marleen Gorris. UK: First Look Pictures.

Newell, K., 2017. *Expanding adaptation networks*. London: Palgrave.

Orlando, 1992. Directed by Sally Potter. UK: Sony Pictures Classics.

Perotto-Wills, M., 8 Jul 2019. The (not so) queer failure of chanya button's 'vita and virginia'. *Another Gaze*. Available from: https://www.anothergaze.com/not-queer-failure-chanya-buttons-vita-virginia-review/

Portrait of a Lady on Fire, 2019. Directed by Céline Sciamma. France: Lilies Films.

A Room of One's Own, 1991. Directed Patrick Garland. UK: Oyster Films.

Russell, J., 24 Aug 2019. 'Vita & Virginia' Director Chanya Button on the allure of recreating Virginia Woolf's world on film. *The New York Observer*. Available from: https://observer.com/2019/08/vita-virginia-director-chanya-on-casting-gemma-arterton-elizabeth-debicki/

Scarry, E., 1999. *Dreaming by the book*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Seberg, 2019. Directed by Benedict Andrews. US: Universal Pictures.

Shachar, H., 2019. *Screening the author: the literary biopic*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Shirley, 2020. Directed by Josephine Decker. US: Killer Films.

Sproles, K.Z., 2006. *Desiring women: the partnership of Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Straayer, C., 1990. The hypothetical lesbian heroine. *Jump cut*, 35, 50–57.

Sylvia, 2003. Directed by Christine Jeffs. UK: Focus Features.

Thornham, S., 2012. *What if I had been the hero: investigating Women's cinema*. London: BFI.

Tincknell, E., 2023. Tragic blondes, Hollywood, and the 'radical sixties' myth: *Seberg* and *Once upon a time in Hollywood* as revisionist and reparative biopic. *Celebrity studies*, 14 (4), 568–583. doi:10.1080/19392397.2022.2149346.

To the Lighthouse, 1983. Directed by Colin Gregg. UK: BBC.

Vita & Virginia, 2018. Directed by Chanya Button. UK: Bl!nder Films.

The War Within: A Portrait of Virginia Woolf, 1995. Directed by Morten Bruus and John Fuegi. UK: Flare Productions.

Weber, B.R., 2016. *Women and literary celebrity in the Nineteenth Century: the transatlantic production of fame and gender*. London: Routledge.

Wild Nights with Emily, 2018. Directed by Madeleine Olnek. US: P2 Films.

Woolf, V. and Sackville-West, V., 2021. *Vita Woolf and Vita Sackville-West: love letters*. London: Vintage.

Words Fail Me, 2016. Directed by Phoebe Halstead. UK: BBC Culture and BBC Britain.

York, L., 2007. *Literary celebrity in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.