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► **To cite this version:**

Christine Reynier. Image as Text in Leonard Woolf's 'Quack, Quack in Politics'. *Études britanniques contemporaines - Revue de la Société d'études anglaises contemporaines*, 2006, 31, 10.4000/ebc.12285 . hal-04448697

HAL Id: hal-04448697

<https://hal.science/hal-04448697>

Submitted on 9 Feb 2024

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Études britanniques contemporaines

Revue de la Société d'études anglaises contemporaines

31 | 2006

The Infinite Dialogue

Image as Text in Leonard Woolf's 'Quack, Quack in Politics'

L'image comme texte dans 'Quack, Quack in Politics' (1935) de Leonard Woolf

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<https://doi.org/10.4000/ebc.12285>

Résumés

Français English

'Quack, Quack in Politics', l'essai que Leonard Woolf rédigea en 1935, se présente comme un discours sur la situation politique du moment en Allemagne et en Italie ainsi que comme une puissante défense de la civilisation contre la barbarie. L'auteur illustre son propos avec des photos des dirigeants nazis et fascistes qu'il met en regard avec des photos de dieux de la guerre primitifs. Les images sont ainsi confrontées au langage, le texte analysant soigneusement les photographies et intégrant leur message dans la démonstration discursive. Pour le lecteur d'aujourd'hui, ce qui est particulièrement intéressant, ce ne sont pas tant les photos des dieux et des dirigeants, ni les arguments désormais banals avancés par Leonard Woolf, que la relation triangulaire établie par l'auteur entre le texte, la première et la seconde images. La façon dont l'image est confrontée au langage verbal ainsi qu'à l'autre image, autre forme de langage, comment l'une déconstruit l'autre, ce que cela nous dit d'une part, sur l'emprise du nazisme et du fascisme sur le visuel, et d'autre part, sur les pamphlets politiques et l'art, c'est ce qui est analysé ici, en particulier à la lumière de *Three Guineas* et du travail de Virginia Woolf sur la photographie.

Leonard Woolf's Essay 'Quack, Quack in Politics', written in 1935, is a disquisition on the current political situation in Germany and Italy and a powerful defence of civilization against barbarism. The author illustrates his point with propaganda photographs of the Nazi and fascist leaders and photographs of Hawaiian war-gods. The images are thus mediated by language, the text carefully analysing the photographs and integrating their message into the textual demonstration.

What is particularly interesting for the reader today is not so much Leonard Woolf's text and its now hackneyed arguments nor the photographs of the leaders, now well-known and often commented upon or used to various purposes, but the triangular relationship established by the author between text, image and image. How the image is mediated by verbal language but also by the other image, another form of language; how one deconstructs the other; what it tells us about Nazism and Fascism's hold on the visual image, about political pamphlets and art is what we mean to explore, especially in the light of Virginia Woolf's essay 'The Leaning Tower' and her own work on photography.



Texte intégral

- 1 *Quack, Quack* is an essay on barbarism and civilization, published by Leonard Woolf in May 1935, seven years after Clive Bell's essay *Civilization*;¹ both belong to the same tradition as Montaigne or Rousseau's reflections on savage and civilized human beings, even if their points of view differ widely. While Bell's text reads as a philosophical essay drawing on Greek texts, especially on Plato's *Symposium*, Leonard Woolf's reads more like a political pamphlet, meant to denounce the lies and perversion at the heart of rising Fascism and Nazism as well as the threat they represent to civilization.
- 2 In the first part, 'Quack, Quack in Politics', Leonard Woolf offers a close reading of Mussolini's *Political and Social Doctrine of Fascism* (1932)² and of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, deconstructing their arguments, showing they appeal to emotion rather than the intellect and extol the virtues of patriotism, nationalism, intolerance or ignorance. He argues that in times of political and economic problems (due, in Germany's case, to unjust peace, as J. M. Keynes had pointed out), the quacks come back before identifying Mussolini and Hitler as quacks, the divine kings and medicine-men primitive people relied on and who based their power on fear, hatred, violence, war and the victimization of scapegoats.³ He thus proves that, with them, barbarism is back and civilization threatened.
- 3 What is particularly interesting for the reader today is not so much Leonard Woolf's text and its now somewhat hackneyed arguments as the triangular relationship established by the author between text, image and image. How the image is mediated by verbal language as well as by the other image, another form of language; how one deconstructs the other; what it tells us about Nazism and Fascism's hold on the visual image, about political pamphlets and art is what we mean to explore, especially in the light of Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas* and her own work on photography.
- 4 Indeed, the hundred pages or so of the essay come with four photographs: two of undated effigies of the War-God Kukailimoku from the Hawaiian Islands, now in the British Museum; one of Hitler and one of Mussolini. In order to prove that Nazism and Fascism work along ancestral rules and that the rise to power of Hitler and Mussolini coincides with a return to primitive instincts, Leonard Woolf refers first to the photographs of the German and Italian leaders and comments upon them by quoting from James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. The leaders making speeches are compared with Frazer's description of Polynesian kings: 'As soon as the god had entered the king or priest, ". . . became violently agitated, and worked himself up to the highest pitch of apparent frenzy, the muscles of the limbs seemed convulsed, the body swelled, the countenance became terrific, the features distorted, and the eyes wild and strained"' (L. Woolf 1935, 45). The Polynesian kings and the current leaders are said to be surrounded by the same 'priests' who interpret for the people the often vague declarations the chiefs make. Finally, the Polynesian chief wears a piece of cloth, 'an indication of inspiration, or of the indwelling of the god with the individual who wore it' (46), analogous to the swastika or the black shirt.
- 5 Leonard Woolf then turns to the photographs of the two Hawaiian effigies which he has placed face-to-face with the German and Italian leaders. The photographs have been selected because the war-gods are supposed to produce the same impact on the beholder as the Nazi or fascist propaganda photographs: '[t]he significant point', Leonard Woolf writes 'is the psychological effect which the facial appearance is clearly meant to produce. . . . They are faces not of individual human beings, but of generalized emotions of the savage' (47). Depersonalized emotions create terror in the beholder even if, as the author points out, 'the effigy itself is a vivid representation, not only of a terror-producing being, but of a terrified human being' (48), something he will expatiate upon later, referring to Freud's analysis of the 'inferiority complex' (86).
- 6 Through Frazer's text and the effigies of the war-gods, Leonard Woolf highlights the similarities between the fascist leaders and the primitive chiefs, their similar behaviour and ambivalence, thus showing that Nazism and Fascism are a regression to primitive

instincts, a point he further develops by analyzing the written propaganda of the Nazi and the radio broadcasts of their meetings. Frazer's text and the images are clearly meant to illustrate his point as is further underlined by the insertion of the photographs within the two pages of commentary. By first restricting the function of images to an illustrative one, Leonard Woolf indirectly asserts the primacy of the text.

7 Yet the diptych-like arrangement of the photographs suggests that the images are also conceived of as mirror-images of each other. By placing the leader's photographs face-to-face with the effigies, Leonard Woolf, far from submitting the image to the text, introduces a dialogue not only between the text and the photographs but between the photographs themselves. Each photograph sheds a light on the other and reverberates in turn on the text in an interplay that exceeds by far the illustrative function. This dialogic relation which is, as Liliane Louvel has convincingly shown,⁴ characteristic of the word-image relation, is what I would like to look at more closely.

8 For today's reader, the propaganda photographs of Mussolini and Hitler have become sadly familiar and are sinister reminders of the cruel acts of the fascists and Nazis; they have acquired a 'patina' in the sense that they now bear the traces of a traumatic experience. The documentary function⁵ of these 'historical monuments' is both altered and enriched by the presence of the effigies facing them on the page. Placed as they are, the photographs inevitably ask to be read in relation to each other.

9 When the reader first takes in the first set of photographs (see page Figure), the visual impact of the first effigy is the greater, the magnified terror-striking eyes of the war-god first catching our eye, perhaps because we are used to reading from left to right, before we register the pathetic shape of the mouth, its downcast look which makes us go back to the eyes and see them as enlarged by fear. Leonard Woolf's analysis of the effigy as Janus-faced comes home to us. The effigy makes us look more closely at the photo of Hitler. The photo of the war-god re-focuses the beholder's gaze and makes him focus on Hitler's eyes and mouth rather than on his hand, on this gesture of allegiance, strength and aggressiveness that is first striking; through a mimetic effect, it makes us notice in the frightening hero the eyes enlarged by fear. Fear in the statue reveals further signs of fear in the German leader who seems to hold onto his belt as if for comfort or reassurance. Even the hand appears now not so much as aggressive as as a prop on which he supports himself. Because fear becomes obvious, the heroic dimension of the leader is deflated. The signs—uniform, swastika, tie, belt, all of them attributes of power—now read as masks failing to hide fear. The effigy helps to unmask the figure mythified by the Nazi propagandists. In other words, the propaganda photograph of Hitler, meant to extol the unflinching gaze and power of the leader, is, as it were, turned upside down by the first photograph which, through the war-god's pupils dilated by fear, exposes the negative of the other photograph, the fear at the heart of the terror-striking figure. The photograph of the effigy, functioning not only as a mirror-image of the other but as a magnifying-glass, re-directs our gaze, exposing the ambivalent or anamorphic nature of the second photograph.

10 In the second set of photographs (see Figure), what is striking is the curved shape of the war effigy, whose head folds on itself in a sort of helmet, in a slightly obscene aggressiveness confirmed by the shark-like row of teeth. From the effigy, we turn to the photograph of Mussolini and immediately the effigy diverts our gaze from the massive figure of Mussolini to his finger. A detail—what Barthes calls the '*punctum*'⁶—that could go unnoticed if the photo stood on its own, now gives its meaning to the whole picture. The hook-like finger, magnified as a fearsome round-shaped helmet in the effigy, can also be related to the curved barred window at the back of the leader. The aggressiveness of the crooked finger and its threatening power, its menacing promise of imprisonment and entrapment is revealed. The shape of the finger sends us back to the curved shape of the beret and the head, suggesting similarities with the curved head of the war statue, both aggressive and protective, thus suggesting in return introversion and fierce egotism in Mussolini, some form of mental crookedness or perversion. The enlarged menacing curved shape of the effigy draws our attention to a detail in the

photo, the finger which encapsulates the menacing power and crooked nature of the leader.

11 The role of the effigy here is comparable to the role of the caption in the picture of Breughel entitled 'Icarus', as analyzed by Christine Buci-Glucksman.⁷ Icarus is at first sight invisible, hidden in a corner of the painting, reduced to a hardly visible leg, a minute detail. Only the title chosen by the painter makes us look for Icarus and read the painting with this in mind. The effigy here functions exactly like the caption of Breughel's painting; far from being a simple mirror-image of the other photograph, the first one serves as a caption to the second one. The plump figure of the Duce with his pose meant to be comforting and convincing, is turned, through the insertion of the first photograph, into that of a bogey man and the oppressive nature of the regime is exposed.

12 In both cases, the presence of the war statues affects the very photographs, altering their message. The photograph on the left superimposes a second code of reading on the first one, encoded in the propaganda photograph. The intended transparency of the propaganda photograph is blurred, the consensual reading it calls forth is questioned, and the encoded meaning is contradicted by the superimposed one.

13 It is interesting at this point to compare the use Leonard Woolf makes of photography in his essay with the use Virginia Woolf makes of it in *Three Guineas*, an essay published three years later and which is a well-known plea against war and an indictment of the institutions held to be responsible for the perpetual waging of war⁸. Virginia Woolf inserts, in the first edition of the Hogarth Press, several photographs: a General, a group of Heralds, a procession of University dons, a Judge and an Archbishop. These photographs are those of respected, impressive male personalities who, dressed in official robes of office, take part in splendid ceremonies. Yet in the eye of women, debarred from such professions, 'the sartorial splendours of the educated man' (39) look different: 'we', Virginia Woolf writes 'who are forbidden to wear such clothes ourselves, can express the opinion that the wearer is not to us a pleasing or an impressive spectacle. He is on the contrary a ridiculous, a barbarous, a displeasing spectacle' (40). In *Three Guineas*, the female beholder exposes the masculine imposture, their 'love of dress' (25)—a supposedly feminine fault⁹—dressing differently being analyzed as an act that 'rouse[s] competition and jealousy—emotions which. . . have their share in encouraging a disposition towards war' (26). The female beholder thus turns the respectable subjects of photographs into ridiculous and even barbarous objects of satire or laughing-stocks. In *Quack, Quack*, the role of the statues is similar to that of the female beholder (not that the statues look in any way like women!). The photographs of the German and Italian leaders on their own are impressive, frightening propaganda photographs; when confronted with the war effigies, they read differently: the effigies play the part of a second beholder, a metaphoric beholder whose power of perception and exposure partly exceeds that of the authorial beholder commenting on the photograph in the text.

14 Together, these various functions of the photographs end up in creating a satirical effect. The effigies of the war-god, through their magnifying function, become caricatures of the heroic images of the Duce and the Führer, turning them into grotesque figures. A bold move for someone writing in 1935, i.e. five years before Charlie Chaplin's *Dictator*¹⁰, and at a time when Mussolini was much admired by such people as Winston Churchill who could assert in 1933 that Mussolini 'was the greatest living legislator' and Sigmund Freud who could send him 'one of his books, *Warum Krieg?* Written with Albert Einstein' (Falasca-Zamponi 53).¹¹

15 Part of the caricatural function of the stone statues consists in revealing both the inhuman nature of the two leaders and their potential petrification or paralysis; both their deadly power and their death-like nature. The choice of effigies, of bodiless statues further emphasizes the leaders' lack of substance and reduces them to gods with feet of clay, figures of great fragility. This process of reification turns the leaders into lifeless statues, which is a way of depriving them of power.

16 It should also be noticed that the utter bareness of the statues serves as a foil to the artificiality of the photographs and the manipulative skills of the propagandists. In both plates, the leaders stand on a podium dominating the absent or present crowd, a theatrical pose obviously meant to highlight their superiority and power as well as the quasi-divine state they can reach through oration. The backdrop is chosen with care, a bucolic setting in the first case, contrasting with the rigidity of the pose and suggesting that through strength, happiness can be reached; whereas in the second case, the uniforms of the soldiers in the image of the Duce and the barred window in the background emphasize the stern nature of the regime, the necessity of obedience and of the crushing of individual freedom in order to achieve strength and power. What the effigies reveal is that manipulation is at work in both regimes and their iconography; Leonard Woolf implicitly recognizes the power of photographs, of discourse in a nonlinguistic form, 'as an essential element in the formation of the fascist regime's self-identity' (Falasca-Zamponi 3), something critics have recently demonstrated. The two leaders are exposed as trying to construct their identities and concomitantly achieve a form of sacralization through rituals of dressing, speaking, and behaving. They are shown to turn themselves into god-like beings with the same aura as the war-gods, a double glorification of themselves and of war. Whereas photography, in the age of mechanical reproduction, usually reads, according to Walter Benjamin, as a form of emancipation from the cultic and ritual function primitive art objects perform,¹² Nazi and fascist photographs retrieve the ancient cultic function. Leonard Woolf suggests through the juxtaposition of photographed cultic objects and fascist leaders that Nazism and Fascism use the remnants of auratic symbols, and this to political ends. And if the leaders' aura is constructed, it follows that it can be deconstructed. Such is the subversive political message the dialogic relation between the photographs sends back.

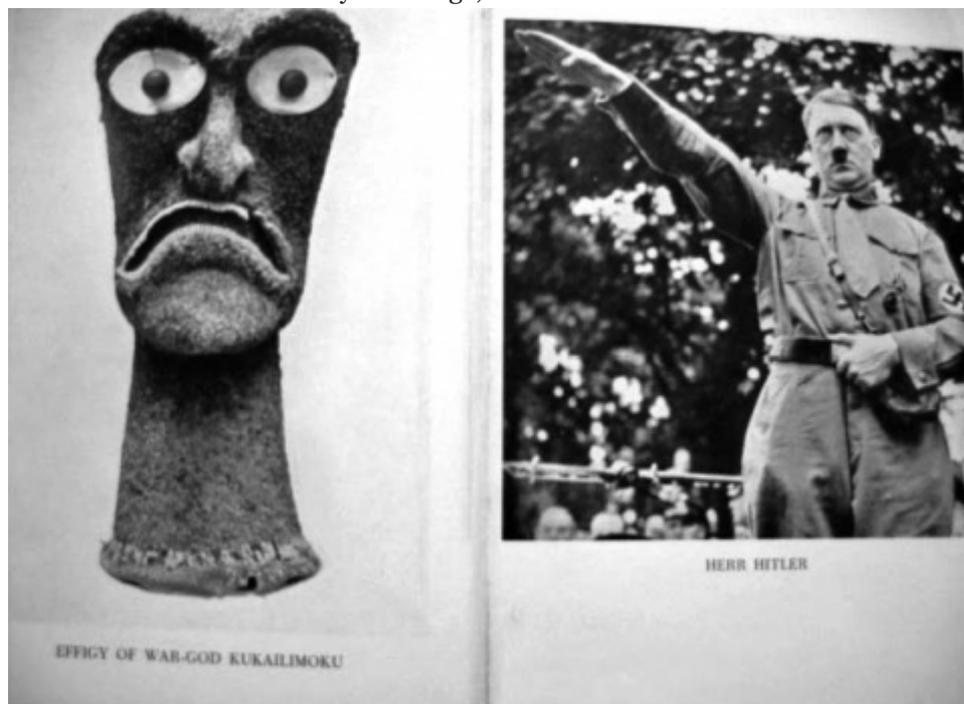
17 Moreover the effigies of gods are effigies of abstractions, without any tangible referent. By revealing the manipulations in the photographs, they point out that the latter are utter constructions and may well have no referent either. In other words, the very presence of the effigies implicitly questions the reality of the leaders' power and inevitably leads the beholder to adopt the same critical stance. The effigies are an open door to the criticism of the subjects of the photographs: through them, an indirect call to rebellion is launched. And here we must notice that while Virginia Woolf's derision of the British institutions aims in the end at preventing war, Leonard Woolf's implicit derision of the Nazi and fascist leaders reads as an act of subversion and rebellion, an indirect call to topple these figures. The sets of photographs thus read as an indirect plea for war.

18 It is interesting to remember at this point that both the Woolfs were at that time, like most members of the Bloomsbury set, pacifists. In May 1935, unlikely as it may seem today, the Woolfs decided to go to Germany. Although they had been discreetly warned by a friend from the Foreign Office, they did not believe that the situation there was so bad and the threat to Jews so tangible. They toured the country and found themselves in Bonn driving right through a Nazi public ceremony and discovered the country was 'all processions and marching and drilling' and years later, Leonard Woolf would write that 'there was something sinister and menacing in the Germany of 1935' (L. Woolf 1967, 192); ironically enough, they drove with some relief out of Nazi country. . . into fascist Italy.¹³ By that time, Leonard Woolf had lost hope in the League of Nation 'as an instrument for deterring aggression and preventing war' (L. Woolf 1967, 243) and was beginning to find his own pacifist position unbearable and the Labour Party's opposition to a policy of rearmament unrealistic. In October 1935, during the Labour Party Conference in Brighton, although he found Ernest Bevin's attack on the Labour pacifist stance devastating, he sided openly with him: 'I was politically entirely on the side of Bevin in this controversy' (L. Woolf 1967, 244), unlike Virginia who, down to the end, would admire Wilfred Owen for writing: 'be killed; but do not kill. . . .' (V. Woolf 1938, 16).¹⁴ We know, thanks to Virginia Woolf's diary, that 'Quack, Quack in Politics', published in 1935, was completed in November 1934.¹⁵ In this essay, the juxtaposed photographs seem to anticipate Leonard Woolf's change and reveal his

latent, still unspoken desire to wage war against Germany and Italy; adopting and adapting a phrase Walter Benjamin uses for the cinema and photography, we could say that they function as the 'optical unconscious' of the text.¹⁶

19 'If the *Ode to a Nightingale* were inspired by hatred of Germany;' Virginia Woolf writes in 'The Artist and Politics', '[. . .] we should feel cheated and imposed upon, as if, instead of bread made with flour, we were given bread made with plaster' (V. Woolf 1966, 231). In this essay, she makes a clear distinction between artistic and political writings just as in 'The Leaning Tower' (1940), she regrets that 'the poet in the thirties was forced to be a politician' (V. Woolf 1966, 176). When first reading Leonard Woolf's essay, the reader cannot help feeling that 'the pedagogic, the didactic, the loud-speaker strain' (V. Woolf 1966, 175) that spoils inter-war poetry likewise dominates his political disquisition, making it, according to Virginia Woolf's criterion, unworthy of the name of art.

20 However the insertion of photographs and their complex dialogic exchange reverberate on the text and alter its nature. By becoming the 'optical unconscious' of the text, they supplement and finally open it.¹⁷ In this rich interplay where the image and the text are both mediated by the image, the didactic is turned into the artistic.



Leonard Woolf, 'Quack Quack in Politics' 'Effigy of Warlord Kukailimoku' and 'Herr Hitler'



Leonard Woolf, 'Quack Quack in Politics' 'Effigy of Warlord Kukailimoku' and 'Signor Mussolini'

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DOI : 10.2307/40117506
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Notes

1 In *Civilization* (1928), Clive Bell proceeds differently from Leonard Woolf since he tries to define the main characteristics of civilization (a taste for truth and beauty, a sense of values, disinterested knowledge, intellectual curiosity, the acceptance of pleasures, tolerance or the art of conversation, for which Plato's *Symposium* provides the best model) before arguing, in the last chapter, in favour of a leisured class, necessarily supported by another class, somewhat similar to the slaves in the so-called Athenian democracy, leisure being, according to him, the necessary condition for civilization to develop. In this rather provocative chapter, Bell departs notably from Leonard Woolf's Labour political position.

2 It should be noticed that Leonard Woolf refers to the authorized English translation by Jane Soames published by the Woolfs' own Press, the Hogarth Press (L. Woolf 1935, 55).

3 On that subject, see the later work of René Girard, *La Violence et le sacré*.

4 Liliane Louvel argues that the relation between word and image is a dialogic rather than an agonistic one. She writes: 'Révisons les figures qui ont servi à désigner ce qui se passe lorsque les mots et les images cohabitent, et proposons de passer de la notion d'*agon*, lutte entre les arts sœurs, du *paragone* de Leonard, à celle de dialogue, puis de transaction. Pourquoi en effet parler de lutte, de rivalité entre les arts, alors qu'il s'agit d'un enrichissement mutuel, d'une émulation fructueuse, d'un échange dialogique, si l'on veut rester au niveau idéaliste, ou encore d'une opération de change, de conversion, de transaction, si la pragmatique l'emporte?' (Louvel 150).

5 Liliane Louvel defines this documentary function as one of the characteristics of photography: 'L'une des caractéristiques de la photographie. . . , sa valeur documentaire, qui prend valeur d'attestation, valeur mémorielle, car cela a 'eu lieu'. . . .Le lecteur assiste à la lourde déposition du temps dans la photographie' (Louvel 153).

6 'Le *punctum* d'une photo, c'est ce hasard qui, en elle, *me point*' (Barthes 49); c'est le détail qui a 'une force d'expansion' (Barthes 74).

7 See Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *L'Œil cartographique de l'art*, chapter 1.

8 The last paragraph or so of *Three Guineas* best summarizes Virginia Woolf's plea: 'we can best help you to prevent war not by repeating your words and following your methods but by finding new words and creating new methods. We can best help you to prevent war not by joining your society but by remaining outside your society but in co-operation with its aim'. That aim is to assert 'the rights of all—all men and women—to respect in their persons of the great principles of Justice and Equality and Liberty' (V. Woolf 1938, 260–61). On Virginia Woolf's use of photography, see Elena Gualtieri, 'Three Guineas and the Photograph: the Art of Propaganda', 165–178.

9 Frédéric Regard analyzes this masculine, instinctive and unconscious, imposture ('La guerre est toujours déjà programmée par une disposition toute masculine. Renversement saisissant de la légende de la féminité, censée n'exister que par et pour la frivolité du paraître. . . .') [Regard 104]) and compares it with the narrator's posture, the democratic posture of a narrator who inhabits a post-feminist, political and ethical space that he chooses to call the space of the feminine.

10 A film which, incidentally, the Woolfs disliked; see Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, chapter 37 on 'Fascism'.

11 Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi adds: 'In the dedication he wrote: To Benito Mussolini, from an old man who greets in the Ruler the Hero of Culture', a surprising lack of insight for a man who was led to end his life in exile in London when the Nazis invaded Austria in 1938.

12 See Walter Benjamin, 'L'Œuvre d'art à l'époque de sa reproductibilité technique' (dernière version de 1939), *Essais III*, 269–316.

13 In his autobiography, Leonard Woolf explains that they had been warned by a friend from the Foreign Office not to get involved in any sort of Nazi procession and that is exactly what they did. Ironically enough, it was not the letter from the German consul in England but their own marmoset who helped them to get through—a sign, according to him, of the Nazi's imbecility (L. Woolf 1967, 185–95).

14 See also Lee, chapter 37 on 'Fascism'.

15 See (V. Woolf 1982, 21 November 1934).

16 Walter Benjamin writes: 'Pour la première fois, [la caméra] nous ouvre l'accès à l'inconscient visuel, comme la psychanalyse nous ouvre l'accès à l'inconscient pulsionnel' (Benjamin 2000, 306). He also ascribes the same function to photography in 'A Small History of Photography' (1931), *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, 243. We could add that what happens in *Quack, Quack* is the reverse of what Elena Gualtieri notices in *Three Guineas* where 'the commentary exposes. . . the 'optical unconscious' of the images to which it relates' (Gualtieri 177).

17 See on that subject Georges Didi-Huberman, *Ouvrir Vénus et L'Image survivante*.

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	Fichier	image/jpeg, 35k
	Légende	Leonard Woolf, 'Quack Quack in Politics' 'Effigy of Warlord Kukailimoku' and 'Signor Mussolini'
	URL	http://journals.openedition.org/ebc/docannexe/image/12285/img-2.jpg
	Fichier	image/jpeg, 39k

Pour citer cet article

Référence électronique

Christine Reynier, « Image as Text in Leonard Woolf's 'Quack, Quack in Politics' », *Études britanniques contemporaines* [En ligne], 31 | 2006, mis en ligne le 31 mai 2022, consulté le 09 février 2024. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ebc/12285> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/ebc.12285>

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