

# Mirror as a Pre-screen Image in Tennyson's Poem "The Lady of Shalott" and Pre-Raphaelite Illustrations

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**Abstract**—The relation between screen culture and images in Alfred Tennyson's poem "The Lady of Shalott" as well as in Pre-Raphaelite illustrations and paintings to the poem are analyzed in the article. The image of the Lady represents a total dependence on a magical "screen", which in itself is a mirror. The author draws attention to the fact that fairy behaves like a dependent person, passive perceiving individual, more typical for mass media era. Works by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Everett Millais and William Holman Hunt which represent the poem episodes and consider to different extents the image of a mirror similar to screen are studied. Hunt's illustrations highlight the connection between pre-screen motifs with the theme of female self-determination and crisis of romantic masculinity. As well author analyzes Henry Peach Robinson's staged photography "The Lady of Shalott" which resembles black-and-white film frame.

**Keywords**—visual culture; screen prehistory; Tennyson; the Lady of Shalott; the Pre-Raphaelites; mirror; photography; film; addiction; gender

## I. INTRODUCTION

The author of the book "Traditions and interaction of arts" V. I. Bozhovich, in reference to S.M. Eisenstein, marks that the elements of cinematographic vision existed in different arts for thousands of years. Author defines the decades preceding the creation of cinema as "a period of embryonic development of cinema, its progressive maturing in the bosom of precede arts, which also approached the boundary of sharp structural mutations". [1]. Forefeeling of the new art birth could be found in the novels by Emile Zola, Gustave Flaubert, Marcel Proust as well as in the British art of the XIX century, in particular, in Alfred Tennyson's poetry.

It is indicative that Herbert Marshall McLuhan in his article "Tennyson and Picturesque Poetry" notes that "if anybody ever had and consciously cultivated a movie-camera eye it was Tennyson". [2].

The images of the poem "The Lady of Shalott" (published in 1842) are of interest to contemporary researchers largely due to the image of a mirror, analyzed in

the context of the symbolic vision of the world in art [3], ancient imagery, as well as the English tradition of mirrors and portraits pun in works by Lewis Carroll, Oscar Wilde, Joan Rowling [4]. But still there is no scientific works where the poem analyzed as a part of the literary background of modern media.

Nevertheless, for all its exquisite poetry, the poem "The Lady of Shalott" can be analyzed as one of the precursors of cinema and television. We consider that it would be useful to study the poem and Pre-Raphaelite illustrations to it, which also show penchant to dialogue of Tennyson's poetry and visual arts.

Activation of the relationship between literature and painting which partly determined the cinema emergence is representative of 19<sup>th</sup> century art and its perception by contemporaries.

In England the relationship between poetry and painting was marked by John Ruskin and Joshua Reynolds [5]. Comparison of the poem and illustrations is also useful as an example of the complicated interaction of verbal and visual images, which is studied today in the human sciences devoted to mass media [6].

This research can be attributed to studies devoted to the history of contemporary screen culture and its relationship to gender, in particular, to literary and dramatic images referring to the phenomenon of a mirror and a screen [7], [8]. Also, this article is based on the studies devoted to the history of female self-determination and representation of this theme in art. [9]

The subject of the article is the study of the images in poem "The Lady of Shalott", associated with the mirror and screen, and interpretation of these images in painting, drawings by the Pre-Raphaelites. The aim of the study is to analyze the formal and substantial aspects of the mirror image in Tennyson's poem and illustrations to it in the context of the further history of screen arts, and also in the context of the formation of views on the remote interaction of people and transformation of the women role in society.

## II. PRE-SCREEN IMAGES IN TENNYSON'S POEM "THE LADY OF SHALOTT"

The poem is about beautiful woman who must continually weave on her loom images reflected in the magic mirror. Curse will lie upon her, if she looks directly out at the world.

Character of the curse, which forces the Lady to live a sheltered life, is unknown, as distinct from a weaver Arachne, who was turned by Athena into a spider; or Princess enhanced by evil fairy in "The Sleeping Beauty" by Charles Perrault. The curse in the poem is an objective impersonal power which could not be identified with a concrete figure.

The Lady subserviently fulfills the will of unknown agency being insensitive to anything else, till she sees knight Lancelot in the mirror. She stops weaving and looks out of her window toward Camelot. After that mirror cracks, the web flew out. The Lady leaves her prison, sings the last song and dies in the boat on the way to Camelot.

In the earlier version of the poem (1832), the dead Lady holds a letter explaining what happened. In the later version, she is known for the citizens of Camelot only by the name, which she wrote on the boat's prow. The Lady "sends" herself as a message, which has a name, inextricably linked with the artificial barrier of the body, with the boat. A beautiful dead woman in a boat doesn't need any detailed commentary or message; she is a message to the big world, from which she was torn off for a long time.

It radically changes position of the heroine. Before, she only obediently functioned, remaining unknown for people. She wove a tapestry, creating estranged image, guided, in turn, by the images in the mirror, also estranged from the outside world. According to the poem, no one has ever seen the Lady before. Only reapers hear her song that echoes cheerily from the river to Camelot — political and social centre of the "real" world, where the various urban classes go, passing by the island of Shalott. [10]. Now the heroine reveals herself to an open reality, engages all eyes, even at the cost of her life.

In "Alfred Lord Tennyson: A memoir by his son" Hallam Tennyson gives a comment attributed to Tennyson himself: "the new-born love for something, for someone in the wide world for which she had been so long secluded takes out of the region of shadow into that of realities". [11]. The Lady sacrifices her life for the right to feelings, for love. Awaken love forces the Lady's eyes away from the mirror and turns to a big world. That activates destructive magical power which shortly takes her life.

As can be seen, the mirror brings certain ambivalence, because it tears the Lady from a fulfilled life in the real world, but also shows her Lancelot, for whom she will break the ban and turn away from the mirror-screen. This way, it suppresses the Lady, and fuels a riot. For the first time the Lady realizes, that her barren life, in fact, imprisonment, passes in the world of shadows, when she sees two lovers in the magic mirror. At that time the Lady breaks the silence.

She says "I'm half seek of shadows" — images, produced by the magic mirror.

Like "a number of man living in an underground cavernous chamber", which "could have seen anything of themselves or of each other, beyond the shadows thrown by the fire upon the part of the cavern facing them" in "The Republic of Plato", confined Lady could see nothing except the mirror. In essence, the mirror forms the perception of reality, which the Lady, in turn, reproduces creating the tapestry. [12]

Joseph Chadwick discusses the magic mirror not only as "the central symbol of her separation", saying that unlike the "market girls," the "troop of damsels glad," or the "two young lovers", she remains outside the cycles of economic and sexual ("She hath no loyal knight and true") exchange". He believes, "that mirror, showing her "shadows of the world" rather than her own reflection, indicates that she is utterly dependent upon the world from which she is separated". Her inner world is unknown for her. [13]

O.V. Stroeve analyzes the evolution of Narcissus' image from the archaic era to the age of "selfie" [14]. The Lady of Shalott is an anti-Narcissus, she lives in "anti-selfie" genre. Not only outside world is inaccessible for her, but even the self-contemplation. Forcible anti-narcissism inevitably leads to an "explosion", to Lady's rebellion and the destruction of artificial distancing from the "self" and the world. Psychologically, the ability to visual self-recognition is unique human ability [15]. So the magical world for a long time doesn't make possible to the Lady to gain a mature human self-identity. Leaving the tapestry and the mirror costs the heroine's life.

In the context of screen culture, it is important to note that the image of the Lady embodies a strong dependence on the magic "screen", which, in fact, is a mirror, if we mean the broad interpretation of the screen as "a plane with an estranged image" [16]. In the second half of the twentieth century and at present, the reality of screen addiction, outlined by Tennyson, takes root in everyday life, losing its glamour. Long hours in front of the screen or screens became a part of modern life. Every day parallel realities in social networks are perceived remotely by recipients, who get used to the endless contemplation of what is "not here."

The reapers name the Lady of Shalott a "fairy". However, she doesn't realize her magical potential. Paradoxically, the heroine-fairy behaves as totally dependent person, passive, perceiving individual, typical for the era of media domination. And only the appearance of handsome knight, who represented as a symbol of absolute, makes the Lady to neglect the self-protection and violate the magical rules.

Tennyson's landscape is a means to show the contrast between real life and the world of shadows. V. Pitt marks: "All the way through the poem there is this contrast between the fruitful world of the barley sheaves, the fields and the reapers and the world of the Lady in the tower" [17].

Arthur Vaughn finds out that the whole spirit of the poem changes directly the mirror cracks: "Suddenly we are in the open air with the Lady: the breeze is in our faces, we are out

on the stream. The pictures are no longer the pictures of the mirror; they are the sounds and sights of living, moving nature". [18].

Tennyson's landscape is an embodiment of the Lady's states of mind. Pale yellow woods, stormy east-wind, the stream complaining in the banks predict her death. Later, combining of different states of nature with emotional expressions of heroes became one of cinematic clichés, which gave a sense of parallelism between human life and nature.

Filling the poem with highly semantic images, such as mirror, tapestry, boat, island, Tennyson creates a work faced the future of culture, the era of the growing presence of visual images and screens in everyday life and mediate interaction of the individual with surrounding world.

### III. ILLUSTRATIONS TO POEM

Artists' interest in Alfred Tennyson's poems was largely due to visibility of the images and emotional depths. Pre-Raphaelite illustrations of Tennyson's "Poems", published by Edward Moxon in 1857, as well as paintings and drawings are studied in this part of the article in order to understand artists' response to Tennyson's images and "pre-screen" tendencies in his poetry.

In particular, we'll analyze the illustration by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1857), drawing The Lady of Shalott by John Everett Millais (1854), painting by the artist of the Pre-Raphaelite circle Arthur Hughes (1858) and numerous artworks by William Holman Hunt on this subject, created in different years, including the major painting The Lady of Shalott created with Edward Robert Hughes (1886-1905).

The painters produced numerous visual interpretation of final episode of Tennyson's poem, when already dead Lady comes into the view of Lancelot and turns from the passive perceiver into the main object of visual perception. Lancelot, surrounded by knights and burghers, lords and dames, looks at the Lady and says "She has a lovely face". Perhaps just for this moment the Lady decided to break the ban – for posthumous admiration, for manifestation of her beauty and name. The death is used as a continuation of mediated interaction with the world, previously driven by curse. But now the Lady becomes the center of the media space, a kind of an artwork that is meant to be admired.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti shows the Lady's arrival in Camelot and depicts Lancelot, surrounded by fearful burghers, looking at her. Elizabeth K. Helsinger marks, that "the apparently fraught relations between the figures are not easy to explain as ordinary human experiences or emotions... the closeness and strangeness is raised to an almost claustrophobic pitch by the crowding of every inch of the small picture space (about three inches square) "The drawing resembles a tapestry, each figure seems as it is woven or scratched in the effect that there is no empty space left. Figures stand still in unnatural poses like in a stop-frame. And it may seem that the domination of the mirror-screen reality comes back and subjugates the whole world - the curse still works. According to Helsinger, the artist "wanted

to capture a tone or mood or idea representative of the whole poem inventing decor and details to produce a highly condensed, replete image of the text, not simply a rendition of a scene from it". His work seems to give a sense of prolongation of the magic mirror effect on the world around and dependence on an unknown force. This force controls the movement of people, like a player controls the movement of computer game figures and put them on a "pause". [19]

In his drawing, closely related to 1851 the painting Ophelia, John Everett Millais represents the Lady in a tiny boat. Millais focuses on the death itself as a beautiful and romantic event. He depicts both women in the last moments of life, just as they merge with the watery landscape, ending their life for love. Life and death are engaged in the drawing and in the canvas: spring anemones near a fallen tree over Ophelia's head, a flock of young swans near driftwood and the single swan close to the Lady. [20] This beautiful "frame" sublimates the death and melodramatize the view of a dead body. In the era of cinema, such intra-frame compositions with dead and alive components became a common screen vehicle. Arthur Hughes, associated with the Pre-Raphaelite circle, illustrates the moment when the Lady arrives in Camelot. Her beautiful hair and dress trail through the water like in Millais's works. The Lady's face is turned towards the viewer, but her unseeing eyes look beyond the viewer. In the background, Hughes represents Camelot women, who are looking at the Lady with fear, sympathy and, perhaps, curiosity. This painting can be compared with a stop-frame of a fairy-tale film or computer game with a medieval setting.

A notable work on Tennyson's poem was a composite photograph by Henry Peach Robinson's The Lady of Shalott (1861). The photographer saw the relationship between Pre-Raphaelite paintings with minute accuracy in natural details and photography and followed their principles. In particular, he was impressed by Millais's Ophelia. At first Robinson photographed outdoor a model lying in the punt, then a length of the river and printed two negatives together. [21]. The photograph resembles a black and white film frame.

The photographer explained: "I made the barge, crimped the model's long hair....and gave her a background of weeping willows, taken in the rain that they might look dreary; and really they were very expressive...I think I succeeded in making the picture very Pre-Raphaelite, very weird and very untrue — I mean imaginative". Illustrating the poem accurately Robinson deviated from it in the inscription on the boat "Ye Lady of Shalott". One of the critics wrote that "no girl, distraught from such grief, would do such a thing inscription", another critic did "not like the boat, which is not a boat but a punt" and mentioned as well that the boat did not show any evidence of movement in the water. [22]

So, critics did not consider photography as a self-contained work, creating which artist has a right to express own aesthetic principles. On the other hand, spectators were waiting for the illusion of dynamics in the static image. That also indicates the spontaneous moving towards the era of cinema common to artists and audience. But the most

significant and unusual in Robinson's photograph is the combination of realistic image and elaborate composition, which will later determine the principles of staged photo, cinema, including digital and even computer graphics.

The Lady of Shalott is a key image in William Holman Hunt's art. Hunt continually turns to the moment when the curse falls upon the Lady. The earliest representation of the subject is drawing made by the artist in 1850. He represents the Lady's story in a set of small mirrors which look like film frames, surrounding the large central cracked mirror which reflects the Lady entangled in the tapestry threads and Lancelot riding away to Camelot.

Thus, the artist emphasized the all-encompassing significance of the mirror, which, according to the illustration, saves the visual images of the recent past, displaying the ability for more complex enchantment than in the poem. This fact often remains on the periphery of the researchers' interests, discussing gender issues in Pre-Raphaelite illustrations.

Elizabeth Prettejohn notes that Hunt focuses on the aspect of sexual morality. The Lady abandons her duty and forsakes woman's passive role and gives her life for a single look at Sir Lancelot [23].

The Lady's awareness and affirmation of her own attraction and sexuality, which comes through the interaction with the magical screens, is inherent in self-immolation. Thus female risk-bearing self-determination is determined as extremely high value.

Working on the illustration (1857) to the Moxon Tennyson artist creates completely new image based on the earliest one. On the foreground, Hunt placed gigantic figure of the Lady in the frame of the web. Her flying hair merges with cracks on the mirror's surface. The heroine tries to break the bonds of the threads entangled her. The moment, when the Lady forsakes her work, is represented in this illustration much more dynamically and dramatically, than it's described in the poem.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Motives pre-existed screen culture and development of the distant modes of interaction are dominant in Tennyson's poem. Mirror-screen extremely complicates but prolongs the existence of the heroine and pushes her to a new stage of self-awareness, self-determination. The complex nature of the effect of the magic mirror-screen on person is realized in this way. Present day motive of the user's inextricable communication with his screen is forefelt in the poem.

In the illustrations the image of the mirror fades into the background. But the threads of the tapestry entangled the Lady in the paintings by Hunt and John William Waterhouse is the most successful visual image which doesn't occur in Tennyson's poem, but invented by the Pre-Raphaelites and associated with the remote action and addiction to the mirror-screen and with the threads of fate in ancient understanding. The Lady takes first step to death when she

stops to weave; she plays the role of Parka and cut the thread of her life.

The artists felt more acutely than Tennyson the dependence of the beautiful heroine and interpreted it as a symbol of the woman's social and psychological dependence. Their paintings became a mirror of trend to highlight this problem in the art and literature of England in the mid-19th century. Illustrations with the dominance of female figures and disregarding of Lancelot's image highlight the connection between pre-screen motifs with the theme of female self-determination and crisis of romantic masculinity.

In contrast to the poem, artists elaborate the details of the Lady's life with the striking life-likeness. The "stage lightning" used in photography as well as bright colors of Pre-Raphaelite paintings produce the effects of modeling. The artworks look like a stop-frame. Pre-Raphaelite paintings can be called pre-screens, showing the various moments of the death of iconic figure of the Victorian era trying to break her bonds.

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