Liesbeth Juta 3495868

Karel Doormanlaan 171

3572 NT Utrecht

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A Change is in the Wind: Baroque Stylistics in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*

> The Baroque always projects forward and tends, in fact, to a phase of expansion at the culminating moment of a civilization, or when a new social order is about to be born. It can be a culmination, just as it can be a premonition (Alejo Carpentier 98)

> 'On that bright day when I am no more a singular being but, warts and all the female paradigm, no longer an imagined fiction but a plain fact – then he will slap down his notebook, bear witness to me and my prophetic role' - Sophie Fevvers (Angela Carter, *Nights at the Circus* 339)

The prophetic role of Sophie Fevvers, Angela Carter's winged woman in *Nights at the Circus* (1984), heralds a utopian vision in which equality and freedom are fundamental. Carter's work, which has been described as "Baroque" (Pearson), "vivid" (Day 1), "extravagant" and "carnivalesque" (Michael 492), and a "unique mixture of the voluptuous and the snarling, the erudite and the demotic" (Clapp), provides a platform for dubious characters through whom she sought to question social decorum. Moreover, these were characters which she not only invented, but also often recycled from other media.

From the beginning of her career, Carter became known for her revisions of traditional fairytales. However, her habit of recycling of myths and fairytale creatures had left her frequently misunderstood in her time. During an interview with Mary Harron of the *Guardian* in 1984 she stated: “I’m a *socialist*, damn it! How can you expect me to be interested in fairies?” (Day 11). Indeed, her adaptations had a more political and social intention than anything else: she revealed that she became “mildly irritated” (Carter, *NFL* 38) when people talked about the mythical quality of her work because, as she pointed out, “*this* world is all there is, and in order to question the nature of reality one must move from a strongly grounded base in what constitutes material reality.” As a self-proclaimed socialist and feminist, she continually sought new ways to empower her arguments through her work. She did this with such zest that it seemed to set her apart from her contemporary peers. Moreover, her work expanded outside the literary world into journalism, children’s stories, film and radio plays, which contributed to her constant aim towards artistic versatility and evasion of categorization. It may also explain why she became one of the most popular subjects for research in the academic field of literary studies.[1] However, Clapp reminds us: “It's easy to forget that during her life she was sidelined, regarded as a feminist exotic”, as her work seemed to stretch beyond the postmodern realm.

A considerable amount of literature has been published on Carter’s revolutionary perspective on writing and her persistence in tackling her own contemporary cultural and social constructions.[2] Lorna Sage argues that “the whole project [...] is devoted to deconstructing the notion of transcendence [...] She wanted to *secularise* the art of writing” (18), which indicates that Carter aimed to change the relationship between author, reader and text which existed in her time. She disregarded critical traditions, including 1970s post-structuralists, “which would cut textuality from worldliness” (ibid. 19) because, for her, the narrative was a medium through which worldly ideas can be explored. An “openness of

discourse" (Kaveney 171) is crucial in this vision, which Carter expresses in her fiction through continual shifts between literary genres. She aimed to find multiple voices for contriving some sort of interpretable, provisional truth.

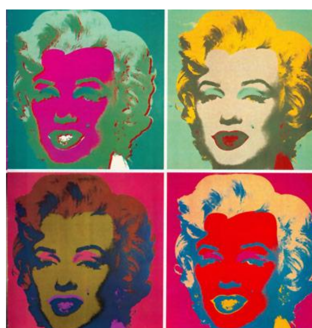
It has been observed that the worldly ideas which Carter explores in *Nights at the Circus* are that of the New Woman as an embodiment for progressive feminism and freedom of sexuality; an idea embellished through the many female characters in the novel (Kiliç). Additionally, Da Cruz Cordeiro Moreira sees Carter's rewriting of fictional female characters as a way to deconstruct male perspectives on women (78-85). However, Sarah Gamble argues that "Carter's interest in exploring a 'completely new order of things', psychic and social, is apparent from the motifs on which the novel is structured" (140) as many of her characters are deconstructed and reconstructed, by themselves or through the narrative.

However, while her work has been thoroughly examined within a feminist and a postmodern framework, far too little attention has been given to the relation between Carter's Baroque quality and that of the digital age. Therefore, an attempt should be made to examine the analogies between her Baroque methods of writing and the Baroque characteristics of the digital age which will be analysed in the first chapter, as both are involved in the illusion of movement in otherwise static images. Through a case-study of *Nights at the Circus*, and an examination of her personal essays, *Notes from the Frontline,* and *Fools are my Theme,* this thesis will attempt to show how Carter's later work anticipates a transition from postmodernism towards the new digital Baroque age.

I

In 2011 the V&A Museum in London held an exhibition titled *Postmodernism –Style and subversion 1970-1990,* which *The Daily Telegraph* reviewed as a showcase for "capitalist kitsch" which dominated popular culture in the period (Sooke). Several critics have pointed out that the museum's decision to end the timeframe of postmodernism at 1990 is congruent

with the rise of the Information Age (Docx; Kirby; Sooke). Characterized by rapid developments in information technology and a growing popularity of the Internet, the early1990s drastically simplified the copying, pasting and spreading of images and information. Moreover, the distribution of the Personal Computer in homes and work places offered these techniques to a growing audience outside the artistic community. The ability for the masses to copy not only information but also works of art caused a breakdown of the formerly elevated position of art. During the postmodern period, artists such as Andy Warhol (1928-1987) already experimented with the idea of mass-production in their art, for instance in his copies of the image of Marilyn Monroe. The original image is copied and reproduced with different colours, creating a series of slightly alternating images. This practice is described as a "media-reflexive gesture [which] appears in the endless reproduction, dissemination, and simulacra made possible by photography and machines" (Ganis). These techniques, however, remained exclusively in the hands of the artistic community during postmodernism. In the Information Age, art itself became a means of communication used *by* the masses, not strictly *to* the masses. In doing so, the dream of postmodernism became insignificant as it was steadily becoming reality. As postmodernism found a quiet death around 1990, Carter's death in 1992 consequently categorizes her as one of the last writers to be placed within the postmodern timeframe.



Warhol. *Marilyn Monroe* (1967)

However, unlike many other movements which arise as counter-expressions towards its anteceding art and discourse, the post-postmodernist movement –an official name is yet to be given- can be regarded as a continuation of postmodernism in manifested form, because the internet, and the post-postmodern era which entails it, is observed as postmodernism's final product (Docx), which may be the reason why the end of the movement went by

unnoticed at the time. Docx identifies a similarity between postmodernism and its successor which can be found in the fact that both reject the idea of a single, dominant discourse or systematic worldview. In addition, he argues that postmodernism is not disappearing:

> postmodernism is itself being replaced as the dominant discourse and is now taking its place on the artistic and intellectual palette alongside all the other great ideas and movements. In the same way as we are all a little Victorian at times, a little modernist, a little Romantic, so we are all, and will forever be, children of postmodernism. (This in itself is, of course, a postmodern idea.) (Docx).

In contrast, Alan Kirby argues that postmodernism has disappeared almost entirely. He points out that new technologies which emerged in the late 1990 re-structured the relationship between the author, the text and the reader:

> [the internet offers] a far more intense engagement with the cultural process than anything literature can offer, and gives the undeniable sense (or illusion) of the individual controlling, managing, running, making up his/her involvement with the cultural product" (Kirby).

Essential to post-postmodernism is the active participation of the reader in the creation of culture and art, which can be contrasted against the passive role of the reader or viewer in postmodern times. Texts and images are recycled in a few clicks. Because of this, users of the internet can contribute to a text and form artistic collaborations in which elements of art are borrowed outside copyright law.[3] He draws our attention to the existence of a gap between postmodern literature and art and works influenced by the Digital Age. This gap exists because, as he points out, postmodern authors were unaware of the future possibilities of new media and therefore the generation which grew up in the post-postmodern era –born approximately from the mid 1980s onward— experiences a sense of disconnection from postmodern theory and literature. However, it also needs to be pointed out that a theory which

dominated the postmodern movement, namely the idea of death of the author and the active role of the reader with the text, i.e. the text changes each time it is read, connects postmodernism and post-postmodernism: where the postmodernist has played with this idea, new technological media allows for this idea to be manifested.

In 2008 Timothy Murray published a book in which he analyses the Baroque quality of digital media and art. In *Digital Baroque: New Media and Cinematic Folds* he addresses how new media changes perspective on time and space. He describes the digital Baroque as a dynamic, constantly shifting mechanism. Murray argues: “the promise of new media [...] lies in its performative and analogical disjunction, divergent point of view, and digital incompossibility” (Murray 39-40). In his analysis, Murray employs Gilles Deleuze’s idea of ‘the fold’ as explained in *The fold: Leibniz and the baroque*. Deleuze describes the fold as occurring when perspective is no longer fixed, or, as he exemplifies: “the same construction or point of view over the city continues to be developed, but now it is neither the same point of view nor the same city, now that both the figure and the ground are in movement in space” (Deleuze, qtd. in Murray, 35). The fold holds potential for democratisation of representation because it is characterised by its ability to extend into other folds or to pile up (Deleuze, 227, 236-238): a ‘collage’ of representations and perspectives which eventually alternates into something new. Therefore, it questions representation or the idea of a single, universal perspective. Murray points out that many post-postmodern artists return to the Baroque model, which offers a dynamic perspective and the illusion of freedom.

The new Baroque model as proposed by Deleuze and Murray appears to find its foundation in earlier observations of Baroque art by historians and art critics[4]: in 1946, William Fleming argued that movement is one of the main characteristics of Baroque art, which he refers to as the starting point of modern art styles. He said: “Baroque art emerged out of [the] struggle for freedom from old shackles and inhibitions and spoke with an

energetic and highly eloquent rhetoric of progress, [...] of ceaseless activities and motion" (Fleming 121). According to Fleming, the Baroque is intrinsic to the creation of machinery, in particular the mechanical clock and flying machines, which altered the Renaissance perspective on the regularity of time and of space. He says: "[...] the scientific thinking of [the 17th century] was concerned with movement [...]. Is it then any wonder that movement is of dominant importance in the art of the Baroque? [...] Progress is in the wind and there is no nostalgic longing for the classical serenity of antiquity." (Fleming 123-124). Consequently, the notion of the importance of the wind in Baroque art has been pointed out by several observers, including Deleuze in *The Fold*, as the wind creates movement and progress upward and forward.

The interactivity between reader/viewer and the text or image which Kirby refers to as pseudo-postmodern, and the artistic movement to which Murray refers to, allows for the observation that the Digital Baroque is the final outcome of postmodernism. The questionability of originality, which was essential to the postmodern movement stretches out into the digital era and gives the definite answer that there is no singular representation of an image. The interactive participation of the reader or viewer and the digital utilization of elements of the past are characteristic of the time which followed Carter's death in 1992. Nevertheless, it needs to be pointed out that an analogy can be found between the elements which define the post-postmodernist movement and Carter's ideas expressed in some of her literary work and personal essays, in particular that of the mid-1980s onward.

II

Carter creates the ultimate embodiment of the Baroque spirit in the character of bird woman Sophie Fevvers, whose giant wings enable her to soar above the constraints of Victorian society straight into the twentieth century; the age of female liberation from the social "mind forg'd manacles" as she aptly quotes Blake (Carter, *NFL* 38; *NC* 339), for "It is the final

waning season of Our Lord, and Fevvers has all the *éclat* of a new era about to take off." (Carter, *NC*, 8-9). She exploits this idea of 'taking off', a phrasal verb which not only unremittingly associates with movement and flight but also, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* observes, refers to an act of imitation or counterfeit, especially by way of mockery and burlesque (*OED*). She does this in the shape of Fevvers, whose ambiguous nature keeps her suspended between fact and fiction, between woman and bird, perhaps even between human and machine. Her dubious appearance creates a disturbance in the air around her, an idea which Carter shows in the following fragment:

> On her back she wore an airy burden of furled plumage as gaudy as that of a Brazilian cockatoo. Look at me! With a grand, proud, ironic grace, she exhibited herself before the eyes of the audience as if she were a marvellous present too good to be played with. Look, not touch. [...] She rose up on tiptoe and slowly twirled round, giving the spectators a comprehensive view of her back: seeing is believing. [...] Oooooooh! The gasps of the beholders sent a wind of wonder rippling through the theatre. [...]At the first crescendo, she jumped [...] to catch the dangling trapeze, jumped up some thirty feet in a single heavy bound, transfixed the while upon the arching white sword of the limelight. The invisible wire that must have hauled her up remained invisible. [...] Her wings throbbed, pulsed, then whirred, buzzed and at last began to beat steadily on the air they disturbed so much that the pages of Walser's notebook ruffled over (*NC* 12-15)

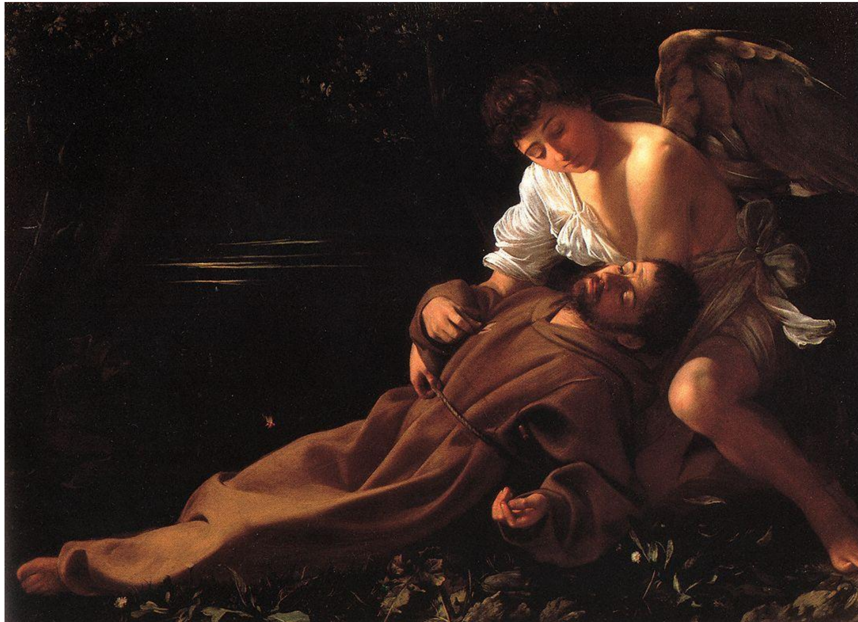
In Baroque art the emphasis is on the visual and on what we perceive outside our mind, in dimensional space. With the description of Fevvers' performance of flight, Carter cunningly inserts this visual aspect of Baroque spirit into the narrative. Fevvers' display reads like a burlesque performance, an example of which is found in the rising tension of the beating of her wings, each movement gradually revealing a creature that cannot exist in the rational world. Burlesque, with its exaggerated movements of revealing flesh and its notion of display,

parallels the focus on visualisation which is the key element in Baroque art. Fleming points out that "[Baroque art] strove for the magnificent and the stupendous. Display, not comfort, was its goal" (125).

The fragment exposes visualisation as an element of Fevvers' empowerment. This notion can in particular be found in the allegorical description of the limelight as an arching sword: it is her weapon with which she demands attention. Furthermore, with the arching limelight Carter seems to evoke the image of some of the 17th century Baroque paintings. The description of an arching limelight, which suggests an indirect light or a trace of light, is similar to how lighting is used in Baroque visual art. For example, the revolutionary work of Caravaggio (1571-1610) differentiated from prior Renaissance canvasses because the lighting and the painting's vanishing point appear to come from outside the painting; from the space of the viewer. Moreover, the lighting and shadows create the illusion of movement in space. Its effect results in the illusion that the visual object and the viewer obtain the same room and the boundaries between viewer and image are blurred. The aim of Baroque stylistics is not to merely show, but to let the viewer *believe* in what she sees, with the aid of lighting or, when displayed in the theatre, by a cleverly draped veil or invisible wire. The purpose of this is to create a sense of interaction between the visual object and the viewer. Baroque art, therefore, consists of an alliance between the viewer and the object itself. "Do you think she's *real*?" (Carter, *NC* 5) is the question which the Baroque artist seeks to convey from her viewer. The fragment of Fevvers' performance reveals this in the wind of wonder exhaled by the audience, which fills the theatre and offers the illusion of enabling her to take flight, which suggests that her performance is a partnership between the wondering spectator and the object.

The visual texture of Caravaggio's paintings may have been used as a foundation for Fevvers as a piece of art made flesh –Carter admitted that she liked to borrow from other

media besides literature (*NFL* 41) –as the narrative parallels several elements of his painting Caravaggio's *Saint Francis of Assisi in Ecsatcy* (1595).



Caravaggio *Saint Francis of Assisi in Ecsatcy* (1595).

Apart from thematic parallels between the painting and Carter's narrative structure – the larger than life angel bulking over Saint Francis who lies in a catatonic state due to the angel's sudden appearance resembles the plot of *Nights at the Circus*, as Walser progressively enters a state of madness, which is catalysed by Fevvers' appearance – both Carter and Caravaggio appear to convey a sense of hyperreality.[5] It has been observed that "when [Caravaggio] was at the height of his powers in Rome, [he] had asked himself just one, bold question. What would it have looked like, this scene from the Bible, in every detail, if it was taking place right here, right now, in Rome, before my very eyes?" (Dixon). Therefore, to make the fanciful story of St. Francis' stigmata look realistic, he depicts it as if it were a play or tableau vivant; in any case enacted, which makes the image appear simultaneously real and unreal. Caravaggio knew how "to imitate natural things well" (Martin 166). Consequently, in order for something to look real, an image needs a touch of sham or imitation. Similarly, Fevvers dyes her feathers pink in order to enhance her forged appearance, for, as Walser questions

while he observes her performance from the crowd, “in order to make a living, might not a genuine bird-woman [...] have to pretend she was an artificial one?” (Carter, *NC* 16). Additionally, her feathers, which are described as “gaudy as that of a Brazilian cockatoo” (ibid. 12), anticipate the flakiness of her wings as cockatoo’s are not native to Brazil, but to the Australian regions. If her ontological status could be defined as either real or fake, she would cease to remain questionable and to be marvelled at.[6]The perception of Fevvers must remain in movement between fact and fancy, which therefore aligns itself with the essentialism of the Information Age where an emphasis is made on the idea that perspective cannot be fixed (Deleuze). Consequently, the dangers of stabilization of perspective is shown when she, in horror, sees herself become an “idea” or a “dream” in the prophetic, “vatic glare” of Walser’s eyes which disclose “no trace of scepticism” (Carter, *NC*. 343-344). As she is in danger of doubting her own psychological challenge, “Am I fact? Or am I fiction? (ibid. 344) she displays her feathers in order to prevent herself from being pigeonholed into the male perspective of what a normal woman should be (ibid. 344) which, according to Carter, is one of life’s fictions.[7]

Fevvers defies the clear, straight line of the Renaissance as nothing about her is straight or symmetrical. Her Rubensesque body bulges and curves to a point where she is about to explode out of her restraining bodice (ibid. 15). Her wings look like an “uncomfortable looking pair of bulges” which appears “desirous of breaking loose” (ibid. 4). Even the slightest sign of symmetry is deliberately muddled up: “[...] she confronted herself with a grin in the mirror as she ripped six inches of false lash from her left eyelid with an incisive gesture [...]. One lash off, one lash on, Fevvers leaned back a little to scan the asymmetric splendour reflected in her mirror with impersonal gratification” (ibid. 4). Consequently, it is her view of herself in which her own satisfaction of her self-creation can be seen. She displays herself as a beautiful monster and this is also how she is observed by

Jack Walser, who notices that “at close quarters [...] she looked more like a dray mare than an angel, [...] nothing subtle about her appeal” (ibid. 9). She is an aesthetic grotesque, a manifestation of fancy and irrationality, which is enhanced through the narrative’s extravagant use of aesthetically conflicting images to describe Fevvers’ appearance: the Cockney Venus, New Helen, virgin whore; she is both subject and object, fact and fiction.

The spectacle of performance and aesthetic display is essential in Carter’s work and subsequently points out that visualisation and representation is in itself a subject of the plot, for where is Fevvers without her spectator? Without her viewer –both within the narrative and without— she remains a flight of fancy, an internal idea, and she needs her spectators in order to live. Consequently, Carter provides a double-take on this idea: in the narrative Fevvers’ wings provide her financial independence and therefore maintain her status as a New Woman, an idea which she is acutely aware of as she echoes her foster mother Lizzie:

> All you can do to earn your living is to make a show of yourself. You’re doomed to that. You must give pleasure of the eye, or else you’re good for nothing. For you, it’s always a symbolic exchange in the market place; you couldn’t say you were engaged in productive labour, now, could you, girl? (*NC* 217)

Additionally, Carter plays with a textuality which seems to be conscious of the role of the reader as spectator of the text as the reader aligns herself with Walser in the first chapter. She possessed an ability to create texts which read as a performance or a play enacted for the reading audience, an idea also pointed out by Sage: “all the people are pretty consistently treated like role-players, assemblages of gestures and ready-scripted lines [...] [yet] at the same time, recognizably human [...]. Carter’s people are constructs in any case, not born but made” (5-6).

What is more, the plot of *Nights at the Circus* has been structured in a manner which can be paralleled to Shakespeare’s plays. His work and in particular *A Midsummer Night’s*

Dream has been observed to clearly approach the Baroque spirit as his plays are "tumultuous, profuse, apparently disordered [...] without empty surfaces or dead moments," full of small units of scenes and characters, each interwoven into the larger text (Carpentier 96). While Carter uses Fevvers as the novel's gravitational point, other characters' stories are coiled into the text and create the story as a unit. These storylines are often seemingly unrelated and do not necessarily add to the plot, but merely enhance the already established themes of the novel and, moreover, prophesise what will happen to Fevvers' narrative. Moreover, with these intersected tales, Carter presents the narrative as an "infinite plurality of worlds" (*NC* 31). Because of this, it seems to become a three-dimensional layered or folded unit.

An example of this can be found in the insertion of the story of the female prisoners who mutineer as an "army of lovers" (Carter, *NC* 255) against the House of Correction (ibid. 246-257). It shows love as an invisible force of rebellion against Countess P., who can be read as an embodiment of static, immovable authority as she forbids any kind of change and loss of control within her establishment –in alignment with the narrative's other authority figure, the patriarchal clown Buffo. Moreover, this scene reveals Carter's perception of the wind, which derives from love; both equally invisible concepts which can only be perceived through external manifestations. Love and desire lift and stir the "stale air" (ibid. 254) of the correction facility as two women, who are constructed as unequal by the Countess –one is a prisoner and the other a warden – fall in love. The air "[is] moved by currents of anticipation, of expectation, that blew the ripened seeds of love from cell to cell" (ibid. 254). Consequently, this short story recaptures the notion of love and desire which acts as a catalyst for alteration of the status quo, and the wind is, because of its equal invisibility, its perfect medium.

Many of the characters Carter coils into the narrative are reconstructed characters which she borrows from the works of other authors. Her blatant importation of J.W. Goethe's

Mignon (*Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, 1795-96) which she inserts into the narrative shows a democratisation over Goethe's text as she provides a different perspective on her. Goethe's Mignon is characterised as oppressed by her tragic and unanswered love for his protagonist Wilhelm and her broken heart eventually leads to her death. However, Carter reinvents Mignon as she gives her a history, a voice with the purpose to listen to and a love affair which provides her a happy ending. With this, Carter dislodges her from her role of victim: "Mignon's song is *not* a sad song, not poignant, not a plea. There is a grandeur about her questioning." (*NC* 295). With this, a reference can be made to Deleuze's notion of the intersection folds, which results into a 'heaping' of folds as she intersects the works of other authors into her texts.

Additionally, apart from established authors such as Shakespeare and Goethe, a special mention should be made of Carter's echo of William Blake's illustrious poem "The Tyger"(1794), which she uses as a textual fold or relic or ornamentation. She describes the Siberian tigers, which are "authentic, fearfully symmetric tigers" who are "burning [...] brightly" (ibid. 295), in comparison with Blake's first and last stanza.[8] Blake questions: "In what distant deeps or skies//Burnt the fire of thine eyes?" ("The Tyger" 5-6); similarly, Carter depicts their "eyes, *gold* as the background to *a holy picture*, [which] had summoned up the sun that *glazed* their pelts until they looked *unutterably precious*" (ibid. 295) (Italics mine). The stylistics of Carter's narrative suggests that Blake's poem is used as an ornamental backdrop to the narrative, as the tigers' appear to function merely as decorative imagery. In addition, *fearfully symmetric* tigers stand out in a novel in which every detail, character and every reference to another text is asymmetrical, ambiguous, curved and made up of layers of folds; something other-worldly about the tigers. They appear to resonate on a different frequency, yet are intersected within the text. Consequently, this shows how Carter employs the idea of the textual fold: she takes something well known, and reconstructs it in order to

place it between the original and a new perspective. However, Blake is not necessarily subjected to criticism by Carter. As Sage points out, he was one of her favourite sources “because of his radical irony and the parodic authority of his devil’s aphorisms” (12), with which she indicates that Carter also borrowed out of admiration.

Carter’s personal essay *Notes from the Frontline* sheds more light on this technique:

> I feel free to loot and rummage in an official past, specifically a literary past[...]. This past, for me, has important decorative, ornamental functions; further, it is a vast repository of outmoded lies, where you can check out what lies used to be á la mode and find the old lies on which new lies are based (Carter, *NFL* 41).

Additionally, Sage also points out that for Carter the past was “stuff to animate, galvanise and replay” (4). Therefore, it seems that recycling old material was a method of opening up the dynamics of textuality. By deconstructing dominant discourses of the past, Carter repositioned her authority as both a reader of old texts and a writer of new texts. Consequently, this notion resonates with Fleming’s observation on the Baroque practice of renewing existing material, as he says:

> The Baroque artists never failed to pay lip service to the classic idea, but they succeeded in utilizing classical forms and models in a highly unclassical manner. The aesthetic path they travelled was away from classical serenity and repose towards the progressive, the striving, the aspiring, the becoming (Fleming 122).

Moreover, Carter’s emphasis on the democratisation of representation and perspective signals that she utilizes the Baroque notion that perspective is not fixed but dynamic. With this, she seems to address the idea of intellectual property which, according to Murray, also characterises the digital Baroque. Therefore, it can be said that Carter aimed for a renovation of the perception of writing and authorship towards a model similar to how writing and intellectual property is regarded in the digital age.

Consequently, through employment of a Baroque writing style she allows easy access for the reader to get into the text and interact with it. Communication with the reader was Carter's ultimate goal of fiction writing: [...]I try [...] to present a number of propositions in a variety of different ways, and to leave the reader to construct her own fiction for herself from the elements of my fictions (reading is just as creative an activity as writing [...]) (Carter, *NFL* 37). Her aim was to make text a social platform on which ideas can be discussed, by having hers displayed to as many people as possible, in different forms. The text becomes an open source and she expected her readers to take her narrative apart and make it their own, in a similar approach to her own adaptations of texts of other authors.

Additionally, her essay *Fools are my Theme* also reveals her conviction of the idea that writing fiction is a way of articulating and discussing contemporary ideas, which the reader actively deconstructs and recreates (Carter, *FT* 33-35).[9] "Once the book is published it belongs to the fan, not the writer. [...] it takes on a life of its own. It doesn't belong to me" (ibid. 33); an idea which she appears to applaud:

> People take a book personally. They tell you what it means to them. They tell you what should have happened in Chapter Seven. They take you to task over things that happened in Chapter Five. And if you didn't quite mean that yourself, well your interpretation is just as valid as theirs (ibid. 33).

Consequently, it was the reader's ability to "get into the text" (ibid. 36) which seemed to matter to Carter. Therefore, her emphasis on visualisation and performance is a means to draw the reader in: "you don't actually need plot, or characters, only an idea, and a monomaniacal obsession with getting it across" (ibid. 36).

III

If we return to *Nights at the Circus*, Carter's concept of engagement with the object of art, or 'getting into the text', may be exposed through the development of Fevvers' male counterpart, American reporter Jack Walser, who willingly enters the realm of circus performance as he is drawn in by an unfamiliar feeling of love for Fevvers. At the start of the narrative they are constructed as each other's opposites, with Fevvers as a grotesque, fanciful monster; an embodiment of irrationality and the irregular female Baroque line in opposition to Walser, who Carter created as the embodiment of rationality, scepticism and order. His occupation is to observe Fevvers, in order to include her in a series titled "Great Humbugs of the World" (ibid. 8). As he exhibits the "professional necessity to see all and believe nothing" (ibid.6), his "grey eyes of scepticism" (ibid.6) observe in his first encounter with her a woman whose self-created myth he is unwilling to believe in. He continuously looks for proof that she is a hoax and rationalises what he sees and discredits her capacity of flight to "mass hysteria and the delusion of crowds... a little primitive technology and a big dose of the will to believe" (ibid. 14). While he can still maintain his sceptical position from a safe distance as a spectator in the crowd, this becomes progressively more difficult when he engages with her up close. To be sure, a decline of his rationality begins shortly after he personally meets her, or, more precisely, when he inhales the "essence of Fevvers" (ibid. 5) which "clogged the room" (ibid. 5), an intoxicating mixture of "perfume, sweat, greasepaint and raw, leaking gas" (ibid. 4), with a "fishy" undertone (ibid. 4), which consequently suggests a cover-up of hard human labour, theatricality and danger of explosion, and an awareness that one is tricked somehow. The notion of the air around Fevvers as a hallucinatory drug is an emphasis on the sense of surrealism which surrounds her, which, for Walser, appears to blur the rational world and the world of the imagination as, just before she starts her autobiography, he could "swear [he] saw a fish, a little one [...] wriggling, alive-oh, go into the bath" (ibid.19).

Later in the narrative Walser experiences the sensation of being on the threshold of the

'real' world and fiction, which is foreshadowed by an allusion to Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland:* "Curiouser and curiouser, thought Walser; [...] Shall I believe it, shall I pretend to believe it?" (ibid. 29). Carter describes Walser's moment of entering the Baroque world as he looks into Fevvers' eyes, which, as they are "made for the stage", emphasise an onset of theatricality:

> Walser felt the strangest sensation, as if these eyes of the *aerialiste* were a pair of set of Chinese boxes, as if each one opened into a world into a world into a world, an infinite plurality of worlds and these unguessable depths exercised the strongest possible attraction, so that he felt as if he, too, stood on an unknown threshold (ibid. 31)

Additionally, the notion of doors infinitely opening into other worlds may also point at the idea that Walser is about to enter the realm of narrative in which, in the sphere of postmodernism's intertextuality and allusions, texts from different texts are folded in –which the allusion to Carroll's narrative moments before merely emphasises. Similar to Carroll's Alice, he leaves his own rational world and enters the pantomime with its transformations and visual trickery and, moreover, becomes part of the act as he finds work as a performing clown and therefore aligns himself with the narrative's other, more ambiguous characters instead of his placement in front of them as a spectator.

Carter's decision to transform the rational writer into a clown seems to symbolize how she regarded writing itself. Sage observes that Carter regarded writing as a practical craft and, moreover, ostracized the notion of writers as creators of 'fine art'. She undermined the stereotypical character of the spiritually tormented, outsider artist (Sage, 16-17). Additionally, Carter reveals her determination on deconstructing the myth of the artist as an 'elevated' soul in *Notes from the Frontline*: "writing –to cite one art—is only applied linguistics and Shelley was wrong, we're *not* the unacknowledged legislators of mankind." (*NFL* 41).[10] Walser is proliferated into a clown-writer, who "juggle[s] with the dictionary with a zest that would

have abashed Walser-the-foreign-correspondent" (Carter, *NC* 112), which reveals a sense of self-mockery towards authorship because, despite his newly-acquired writing skill, he is still dressed as a clown and housed among the poorest.

Consequently, the start of the St-Petersburg chapter reveals how Walser has transformed from sceptical journalist into a writer whose stylistics strikingly resemble Carter's own elaborate writing style (ibid. 109-111). Walser's improvisation in his description of the city of St Petersburg (ibid.111) shows the Baroque quality which he has adopted through his new role. He admits to "inventing an imaginary city as I go along" (ibid. 111) which shows him practising creating an "imaginary world in which ideas can be discussed" (Carter, *FT* 34). Consequently, his writing reveals his description of the city as an expression of a more philosophical idea: it becomes a Baroque masterpiece, full of movement and wind, transformation and space:

> [Russia is a sphinx; St Petersburg, the beautiful smile of her face. Petersburg, loveliest of all hallucinations, the shimmering mirage in the Northern wilderness glimpsed for a breathless second between black forest and the frozen sea. Within the city, the sweet geometry of every prospect; outside, limitless Russia and the approaching storm. [...] At the command of the Prince, the rocks of the wilderness transformed – turned into palaces! The Prince stretched out his lordly hand, pulled down the Northern Lights, used them for chandeliers [...] St Petersburg, a city built of hubris, imagination and desire....] As we are ourselves; or, as we ought to be. (Carter, *NC* 111).

Walser's redefinition of the city parallels Deleuze's notion of the Baroque Fold as occurring through addition of personal perspective; as Walser brings his own interpretation of the object –in this case the city – he experiences the Baroque chimera of personal engagement and freedom of interpretation with the object.

Additionally, the writing appears to reveal a sense of prophecy, as the approaching storm

which he envisions will hit the narrative in the Siberia chapter, as a storm sweeps away the circus clowns (ibid. 287-288), which alludes again to the importance of the Baroque notion of the wind as a medium for progress. Consequently, Carter revisits her argument that writing should be considered as performance and a practical craft by stating: “look, it *is* all applied linguistics. But language is power, life and the instrument of culture, the instrument of domination, and liberation” (*NFL* 43). Walser’s visionary role as a writer may illustrate her definition of the new role of the author which she strived towards herself, which is to show the construction of social myths and conventions and to create a solution: changes can be written into life.

Consequently, in light of the idea of writing as performance, Carter seems to give a nightmarish account of a backward, literary world which she so fervently tried to crack by representing this world through the clowns, who have been observed as an “effective symbol of the patriarchal social order” (Gamble 141) as the circus ring is dominated by a male hierarchy. Their establishment of the circus code may embody Carter’s repeatedly criticised authors who refer to their profession as legislative, as Buffo the Great, the clown patriarch, represents himself as a great artist determined to “teach little children the *truth* about the filthy ways of the filthy world” (Carter, *NC* 141). Buffo takes on an instructing role, which she considered inappropriate in a society which is continuously under development (Carter, *NFL* 42). In addition, his commentary on clowning refers to the artist as a tortured but elevated character: “we possess one privilege, one rare privilege, that makes of our outcast and disregarded state something wonderful, something precious. We can invent our own faces!” (Carter, *NC* 141). However, possibly the most sinister aspect of the clowns lies in their disapproval of change of any sort: Buffo states that the “code of the circus permits of no copying, no change” (ibid. 141). Nothing can be added onto, or folded into, their image, which emphasises the idea of the creation of social constructions and deprives of space for a

change of such conventions: the clowns can "terrify, enchant, vandalise, ravage, [and] detonate the entire city [...] and nothing would really change. [...] So then you'd know [...] that things would always be as they always had been" (ibid. 177). Moreover, the static and backward-looking clowns are particularly frightening to the future generation which they intent to instruct; the children, as the outlook on incapacity to change lethargy and patriarchal constitutions diminishes their prospect of Carter's envisioned Utopia.

Through the clowns she seems to question the purpose of narrative if it is *not* a medium of exchanging ideas and a means to offer multiple perspectives on a subject. For her, the true nightmare of the narrative is the incapacity of change, for if one is not allowed to copy or make changes, progression cannot occur. This is also observed by Gamble, who says that Carter aimed towards discontinuation of current situations (140). There are intentionally very few authenticities about Carter's work as she systematically borrows from other authors. She copies *and* changes.

From this point, a return can be made to the symbolism of Fevvers. Her name, Cockney vernacular for the word feathers, aligns itself by association with quill writing and, notably, copying. The expression 'borrowed feathers' derives from Aesop's fable about the vain jay which borrows a peacock's feathers and inserts it into his own plumage as ornamentation (Aesop). It has been used to satirise plagiarism: for example, Robert Greene (1558-1592) accused Shakespeare of plagiarism by referring to him as an "upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his [Tiger's heart wrapped in a Player's hide], supposed he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you" (Bate 15). The notion of Fevvers' wings is significant here as wings are a collage of feathers, i.e. a collage of the works of past authors, who wrote about women from a male perspective or, notably, neglected to write about them. These feathers, which consequently may symbolize texts, are pasted together and create a symbol which defies these original writings as Fevvers uses them to fly

away from textual confinement. Notably, her description of Walser as the medium who is, with her help, supposed to “write the histories of those woman who would otherwise go down nameless and forgotten, erased from history as if they had never been” (Carter, *NC* 338) (grammatical inaccuracy not mine), signals Carter’s intention of writing: she aims to insert the female into history, and therefore into a position of cultural power.

Parallel to the narrative itself, Fevvers’ wings are presented not as fact, but as an exotic mixture of quills; similar to Aesop’s jay, partially her own contrivance, and also aesthetically enhanced to make herself look deliberately inauthentic. Therefore she may be, in alignment with being the symbol for the New Woman, a symbol of the copy-paste: she has taken a painting of Leda and the Swan and has pasted it into the story of her own creation (Carter, *NC* 28-29), thus creating the New Helen and while Helen has been described as a voiceless “pawn in the hands of God and men” (Da Cruz Cordeiro Moreira, 82), the voice of Carter’s New Helen “clang[s] like dustbin lids” (*NC* 1). It is a copy-paste-change-distribution sequence, which correlates itself with the technological developments of the late eighties and early nineties. The narrator’s observance of her wings as an “airy burden” (ibid. 12) and “uncomfortable looking” (ibid. 4) therefore needs to be treated with suspicion, as she may not consider her wings –read: coiled works of other authors – as oppressive, for instead of weighing her down, it lifts her up and allows her to soar towards a new era. Consequently, this is in alignment with Carter’s self-observations as she regarded herself as a “new kind of being [...] unburdened with a past” (*NFL* 40-41).

Past writings were, in Carter’s book, subjected to intersection into one’s own creation. The promise of the text and image as an open source, which concluded in the worldwide distribution of the internet, was for her a symbol for socialist freedom and a tool to achieve secularisation of the art of writing. She revealed that through democratization over images, over the “social fictions” (ibid. 38) or representation (of woman), one can restructure them

and allow for progress away from the original, the static, to occur. [11]

Endnotes:

1. in 1994, Crequer wrote for The Independent that out of the research proposals presented to the British Academy, in one selection panel 30 students opted to study Carter's work, whereas only two research students proposed to study 18th Century literature. (Crequer, Ngiao. "Aspiring Dons Desert Tradition for Angela Carter" *the Independent*. 01 April 1994)

2. examples: Day, Aidan. *Angela Carter: The Rational Glass*. Manchester: Manchester University Press (1998).
Sage, Lorna. Angela Carter: the Fairy Tale. *Angela Carter and the Fairy Tale.* Ed. Danielle M. Roemer and Christina Bacchilega. Detroit: Wayne State University Press (2001) 65- 82.
Suleiman, Susan Rubin. "The Fate of the Surrealism Imagination in the Society of the Spectacle" *Flesh and the Mirror*. Ed. Sage, Lorna. Vigaro press, (1994) 98-116.

3. social network communities such as create collaborative artworks, in which each art contribution can be recycled and renewed. The community has distributed a collection of short stories and short films.

4. for examples of early postmodern historians and critics and their discussions of Baroque art, see *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*: Special issue on the Baroque Style and Arts (Dec. 1946)

5. Umberto Eco provides more perspective on hyperreality in *Travels in Hyperreality,* in which he names Disneyland as a perfect example of the hyperreal in its ability to reproduce a simulacra of reality more enjoyable than reality itself (Eco 24).

6. Day observes that Fevvers is constructed as both fact *and* fiction: "she has been composed or written into being and in that sense is fictional. But that composition, that 'fiction' is now fact. She's the new, the reconstituted woman." (Day 181).

7. In *Notes from the Frontline* Carter refers to femininity is a “social fiction” which was “created, by means outside my control, and palmed off on me as the real thing” (Carter, *NFL* 38).

8. Carter uses the same allusion to Blake’s poem in her short story, *Lizzie’s Tiger*: She describes the tiger walking up and down “like Satan walking about the world and it burned. It burned so brightly, she was scorched. [...] its eyes like yellow coins of a foreign currency [...]” (Carter, *American Ghosts and Old World Wonders* 13).

9. Carter quotes Lord Byron (1788-1824), who cited: “fools are my theme, let satire be my song” (*The Works of the right honourable Lord Byron* 51)

10. Carter refers to Percy Bysshe Shelley’s final statement in *A Defence of Poetry* (1821): “poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world” (*Norton Anthology of English Literature* 850).

11. However, Carter’s other work and in particular her final novel *Wise Children* (1991) is recommended for further study in order to obtain further enlightenment about her standpoint regarding the role of the writer which has been examined in this study.

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