In ‘The Death of the Author’, Barthes claims that ‘to write is [...] to reach that point where only language acts, “performs”, and not “me”’. What could seem more distant from this than Woolf’s love for biography, obsession with diary-keeping and merging of personal and fictional writing on the levels of both content and form? Yet, her own form also attests to this, and does so largely through a commitment to visuality and spatiality. In ‘Modern Fiction’, she draws attention to two main elements when suggesting that writers should ‘record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall’ and ‘trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance’ (my italics). The focus is on parts and the whole, and on the writer’s ability to restore fragments to unity through a patterned form. Nonetheless, the increasingly alluring call of the fragmentation of her prose tends to obscure the unifying pattern behind it and makes the provisional nature of any interpretation even more so: plurality enhances interpretative possibilities. By providing one reading, this book necessarily imposes an arbitrary pattern. This is meant to illustrate Woolf’s peculiar use of visual and spatial strategies and to reveal an unexpected outcome due to a clash between the levels of content and form. What will emerge is both the role of form as meaning which finally opposes an explicitly thematized content, and the ability of artistic form to provide remedial tools, albeit in contrast with the author’s own intents.

However, form cannot easily dispense with its subtle dependence on its author, who is the individual intentionality which organizes it. As Mukařovský states in ‘The Essence of the Visual Arts’, the ‘meaning’ of a work of art is ‘rendered [...] objectively by its organization’. This presupposes the necessary, organizing role of such intentionality and the idea that form itself (in the sense of Hjelmslev’s expression plane) is significant. Hence, the author as a willing intention needs to be considered in order to determine how the ensuing formal result gains a degree of autonomy from it.
Fundamental to this book are both the previous presuppositions and the conviction, as expressed by Jameson, that the ‘shift of form into content is a relatively recent literary phenomenon, but one which in modern times has become in some sense absolute’ (The Prison-House of Language). In line with these, I will devote careful attention to formal strategies and investigate them specifically in relation to thematization and in the light of wider contextual issues.

Within the cultural climate of modernity, visuality and spatiality prove to fit coherently into the modernist cultural and historical context as gnoseological categories. At the same time, they also particularly respond to Woolf’s individual, artistic and existential search and are, accordingly, embodied in formal terms.

To illustrate this, I believe it is necessary to start from traditional interart comparisons grounded on Woolf’s commitment to coeval aesthetic theories and her fascination for visual vividness, and then to read long-debated theoretical and critical issues in the light of some specific philosophical implications. This entails a connection between the role of Woolf’s formal strategies and a philosophical perspective on modernity as the coherent development of the aporia at the core of Western thought, which considers being as non-being. Therefore, what makes Woolf’s art an interesting case for investigation into the modernist intermedial field is that her production, poetics and practice distinctly attest to the use of visual and spatial strategies also as an extreme, agonizing attempt to contrast modern nihilist awareness in artistic and formal terms.

My investigative tools of Woolf’s prose are three analytical criteria: descriptive visuality, spatial form and cognitive visuality. The first involves a traditional treatment of visuality in terms of enargeia, i.e. the verbal translation of the vividness of visual experiences. The second develops directly from Frank’s widely debated notion of ‘spatial form’ which I interpret as a form of energeia, i.e. a form of simultaneity. The third refers to a kind of visuality which is cognitive as the act of seeing reveals a fundamental contradiction of being.

The choice of focusing on To the Lighthouse, The Waves and Between the Acts is motivated by the fact that these novels specifically testify to the use and development of visuality and spatiality as means which comply
both with a cognitive quest and an inquiry into the role that artistic creation plays in the quest. Consistently, these novels also illustrate the cognitive and remedial value of Woolf’s visuality and spatiality: visuality as a means of perceiving the contradictory essence of being; spatiality as an artistic remedy for modern nihilism through the spatial wholeness that form achieves. This is remedial as it restores parts to wholeness and flow to unity or, in philosophical terms, becoming and non-being to being. My analysis takes into consideration how the nature and development of visual and spatial strategies are both thematized and formally epitomized in the novels. The relevant comparison between them further reveals an outcome which was seemingly unintentional on Woolf’s part, that is to say, a decreasing correspondence between content and form. On the former level, form is topicalized in meta-artistic terms by Lily’s painting, Bernard’s writing and visualizing, and Miss La Trobe’s pageant. On the latter, it is concretely represented by the spatial strategies of the texts. Novel by novel, the remedial function of art is increasingly questioned by content but constantly reasserted by form. Paradoxically, the latter keeps on testifying to the possibility of unity and resists the author’s own explicit denial of it. Through spatial means, the very same form reveals its simultaneous ability to convey two opposing meanings: one explicit and related to the narrated object, the other implicit and related to narration. This is how form states its independence from its author, asserts the ‘suprapersonal’ essence and remedial status of art, and survives its author’s death.