

**Francesca Woodman's photography: the body as canvas.
The dichotomies of Eros/Thanatos and the angelic/ghostly in her
photographic work**

**La fotografía de Francesca Woodman: el cuerpo como lienzo.
Las dicotomías de Eros/Tánatos y lo angelical/fantasmal
en su obra fotográfica**

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Abstract:

Francesca Woodman's photographic work is usually linked to photographic artistic branches that seek an aestheticization of the female body (her own, in this case); by way of a physical mapping as a transcript of her own experiences. However, our work is a synchronic journey through her photographic work from a less addressed point of view: the articulation of the binary dichotomy of Eros/Thanatos on the one hand and, on the other, the conceptualization of the aesthetic resource of the angelic/ghostly. Through a photographic analysis methodology, part of her work has been analyzed around the aforementioned axes: both are binomial metaphors of the author's own personal hollows. Some of the conclusions is that her work contains a mechanism of meaning that, beyond the aesthetic, provides an artistic search much broader than the merely visual, which transcends the classic photographic genres and the previously established codes of artistic photography of nude portraits and the female body.

Resumen:

La obra de Francesca Woodman suele vincularse a ramas artísticas fotográficas que buscan una estetización del cuerpo femenino (el suyo propio, en este caso); a modo de un mapeado físico como trasunto de sus propias vivencias. Sin embargo, nuestro trabajo es un recorrido sincrónico por su obra desde un punto de vista menos abordado: la articulación de la dicotomía binaria de Eros/Tánatos por un lado y, por otro, la conceptualización del recurso estético de lo angelical/fantasmal. Mediante una metodología de análisis se ha analizado parte de su obra (gráfica y textual) en torno a los mencionados ejes: ambas son metáforas binómicas de las oquedades personales de la propia autora. Algunas de las conclusiones son que su obra encierra un mecanismo de significación que, más allá de lo estético, aporta una búsqueda artística mucho más ancha que lo meramente visual, que trasciende los géneros artísticos clásicos del retrato del desnudo y el cuerpo femenino.

Keywords: Francesca Woodman; Photography; Poetry; Body; Ghostly; Angels.

Palabras clave: Francesca Woodman; fotografía; poesía; cuerpo; fantasmal; ángeles.

1. Introduction

In history, the representation of the absent has existed since the birth of art itself, taking the form of conceptual metaphor, in the analogous sense in which music and literature would codify it for centuries, genres and stages. In photographic art, which would become the natural language of modernity and the precursor to the advent of cinema in the 19th century, as a new medium it would experiment, from very early on, with visual codes more or less distantly related to the pictorial; in the early years, much of the retouching of photographs was done with brushes and paints and, even more so, the very beginnings of photography—as an art or as an industry—will be pictorialist (Blanco Pérez, 2022). In those early days, attempts were also made to explore the presentation or representation of concepts that were more complex than the mere imitation of painting, which remained in vogue—albeit with countless nuances—until the interwar period in Europe. More specifically, in the second half of the 20th century, with the revival of the Modernity project after the rupture caused by the Second World War, a new photographic art, heir to the fleeting but fertile avant-garde movements, was to be reborn with force in the Euro-Western world:

Photography is not a record of history, but one of its driving forces. Photography is "THE" historical event of the 19th century and, as such, marks a turning point in history that can only be seen in hindsight: photography ushers in a new world, now at the disposal of the machine. (Cortés-Rocca, 2011, p. 11)

This work focuses on the work of Italian-American artist Francesca Woodman who, despite committing suicide at the age of 23, left behind one of the most indisputable and prolific photographic works in this art form. Specifically, it will address her legacy based on a hypothesis: the articulation of her photographic corpus around two dichotomous axes present in her work: Eros versus Thanatos and the angelic versus the ghostly. These visual metaphors, so present in part of the history of photography (Blanco Pérez & Mihaela Cristea, 2023), are binomial in Woodman's case and are elevated to another level of semiotic significance in her work where, beyond the mere aesthetic link between the referent and the referred (or between the real object and the

figurative), the artist experiments, often using her naked body as a canvas, with different metaphorical objects (angel wings, mirrors, crystals, ghostly steles and sheets, but also stuffed or dead animals, such as snakes and fish, etc.).

Our central hypothesis is that Woodman will design, with all these proposals, a self-referential artistic microclimate, with highly suggestive interpretations of discourse, but which transcend the traditional readings of her work—usually linked to the aestheticisation of the female body as a sensualised/sexualised, naked, erotic object—to take it to a new expressive horizon of artistic significance around the axes of Eros/Thanatos and the angelic/ghostly.

The conceptualisation of Woodman's creative universe will establish, as we shall see, the presence of an ever-present Eros, but, in a certain way, in eternal dialogue with Thanatos. This extraordinarily fertile bipolarity has been responsible for many of Woodman's iconic images which, often using her own body as a canvas, are now part of the history of contemporary artistic photography. Unfortunately, however, the stereotypical media cliché that was inferred about her, namely that of the tormented young girl who committed suicide in her twenties, has, in our opinion, overshadowed for too long the work of a complex and prolific artist, the daughter of a family of artists and trained at several schools that are still leaders in the United States and Italy today. Francesca Woodman explored and unified, as we shall see, atmospheres that had not been explored before, thus becoming, indisputably, one of the most powerful voices in contemporary artistic photography.

2. Theoretical framework.

2.1 Eros and Thanatos: a minimal empirical approach

The presence of Eros in art history dates back to the origins of our era. In Greek mythology, Eros (in classical Greek *"Ἔρως*, in Latin *Eros*) is the Great Primordial God. The primordial gods, in the cosmogonic mythology of the Near East, date back to the third millennium BC, and with the rise of various

civilisations throughout the Mediterranean, Greek poets began to adopt these myths, one of the first appropriations of which can be found in Homer's Iliad (7th century BC). Eros is the son of Aphrodite and Ares (García Gual, 2023). In turn, Aphrodite (in ancient Greek Αφροδίτη, in Latin *Aphrodite*) is, in Greek mythology, the goddess of beauty, sensuality and love (her Roman equivalent would be Venus) and, although in contemporary popular culture Aphrodite is referred to as "a goddess of love", it is important to note that in ancient times she was always associated not with love, but rather with a carnal and sexual meaning:

Aphrodite is, in winged flight, a honey-producing bee, but one that mercilessly stings her victims. Through this barely sketched paradoxical image, the choral song returns, with a completely classical ring structure, to the ambivalence of love, embodied in Eros, the "soldier of pleasure." (Calame, 2002, p. 10)

Pleasure, therefore, has been conceived since the beginning of our era as something binomial (Barrett, 1964), which in Asian culture is also present in Taoist concepts such as Yin and Yang: two fundamentally opposite and complementary forces, but interconnected and existing in all things (Ferré, 2022). Thanatos, on the other hand, is not a god like Eros, but rather an indisputable reality (the end of life) that affects every living being on the face of the earth. Homer alludes to it profusely ("sleep is the brother of death," he says), as Carlos Megino Rodríguez (2002) points out. Its etymology goes back to the Indo-European tha. From this root derives the Spanish word tanatorio and the Catalan tanatori (according to the RAE: "building where corpses are deposited during the hours preceding their burial or cremation"). But the word "thalamon" also derives from this same root:

It is curious that the only other word in Greek that has the same root is thalamon, from which our word thalamus, the bridal chamber, derives. Thalamon is the place in the house where the wife lives. It is the most central room, but also the innermost and darkest. Etymologically, then, the word thanatos appears to be linked on the one hand to darkness and confinement and, on the other, to women and love. (Dörr Zegers, 2009, p. 194).

Other authors propose to complete this view of classical Greco-Roman culture by intersecting three axes: creativity, art, and psychoanalysis:

These triadic relationships require imagining the encounter of antagonistic positions: rational and irrational, logical and absurd, where mythology is an explanatory resource and the unconscious can be metaphorised through allegorical characters in which morality, laws and time vanish, thus allowing the link between excluded worlds such as eroticisation/de-eroticisation and the life/death drive, allies in the functioning of the human psyche (Serrano Barquín, Salmerón Sánchez and Serrano Barquín, 2010, p. 327).

Both Eros and Thanatos are profusely present in Woodman's work. Eros because, in almost three-quarters of her artistic production, Woodman decides to use her own body as a tapestry: a naked body that she will subject to all kinds of physical crucifixions: in extreme foreshortening, twisted, fragmented... and sometimes subjected to various physical processes (almost Christian martyrdom, as we shall see) with different tools or objects. But Thanatos will also be an omniscient presence, beyond her series on cemeteries (in which her body appears naked among the gravestones). the sombre, dark, black discourse that underpins Woodman's work will act as a quasi-omnipresent character in her life and work, a kind of dichotomy between light and darkness, which will also occur, in our humble opinion, perhaps, in another dichotomy: the angelic and the ghostly, which we will analyse in the following section.

2.2 The angelic and the ghostly

Since ancient times / guardian angels fly / ever vigilant of their vows / against abuse and excess. / Beside children's cradles, / beside the sad dying, / they say that gentle beings / with wings from another world watch over them.

[*Cita con ángeles*, Silvio Rodríguez, 2005]

The angelic as an artistic representation of the religious has a history spanning several millennia in our civilisation. In classical Hebrew, 'angel' [malach] [malaj] (מֶלֶךְ) means 'messenger', and in the book of Genesis, it is one of the

first forms that God takes to have a visible form. Later, angels acquired an independent entity, beyond the mere representation of the divine, and could be exterminating angels (such as the punishers of Egypt), or guardian and protective angels (such as those who guide the Hebrews to Canaan, or Raphael, the angel who guides Tobias), hence their capital importance and their somewhat ambivalent nature. Suffice it to say that the history of art, at least until the Renaissance, is nothing more than a representation of biblical episodes and their moral and religious teachings (in all branches of the historical arts). In this transcendental worldview, angels and their artistic representation have always been a central theme and reflection, since:

winged beings appeared in very ancient religions. Archaeology has shown that such figures were part of the artistic language of Mesopotamia, which includes the empires of Assyria and Babylon (...). Winged beings in these ancient cultures were not always instruments of divine justice sent from heaven, but also from hell, and could take the form (as in Etruscan images, influenced by ancient Western cultures) of monstrous beings with animal attributes, sometimes carrying snakes (Ward and Steeds, 2006, p. 8).

The figure of angels, winged emissaries of the divine, has undergone changes in its own ontology throughout the different stages of the clerical institution itself, to the point that, in medieval times, angels gave rise to numerous religious debates (Néret, 2003):

L'organicità di un sistema ormai solidamente strutturato prende corpo, iconograficamente, attraverso l'allontanamento dai moduli compositivi tradizionali, o meglio, attraverso la formulazione di nuovi schemi espressivi, che tendono a rappresentare un divino sempre più inintelligibile ed apocalittico. In quest'ottica, si diffondono le rappresentazioni estatiche e teofaniche di Cristo, che vedono il Verbo circondato da un vero e proprio corteo, composto ora da teorie di santi ora da figure angeliche. Se i primi sono, per il fedele, il tramite preferenziale per un rapporto d'intercessione, i secondi

costituiscono l'aspetto esteriore della maestà divina, concorrendo entrambi alla formazione di modelli ormai pienamente medievali¹. (Proverbio, 2007, p. 98).

However, although angels are emissaries and immaterial, they maintain a relationship of a certain duality, on the basis of which, in the eyes of authors such as José Jiménez, light (angelic) and darkness (ghostly, spirits) can converge, since:

Human beings need a body, the reflection of the image, the presence of the invisible in the visible. If God is, at the same time, so close and so far away, there is no other solution than to resort to the illumination of the intermediate spirits, to navigate in their flight the distance that separates us from the identity of the image (...) But the heart of man is not complete if the mirror of light, of good, is not opposed by that of darkness, of evil. We need not only the identity of light, but also that of shadows (...) Satan is a demand for symbolic identity in the shadows, just as the angels of presence are a demand for identity in the light. (Jiménez, 2007, p. 189).

Francesca Woodman will use and abuse the figure of the angel throughout her work; From Angel series (1977), as well as From a series on Angel (1977), and another series simply called Angels (1978). In all of them, she will use scenes in which her naked body will sometimes wear white wings, or in which white sheets will be used as props () to give that angelic, but also ghostly, vision of her body as a canvas.

The idea of spirits, embodied as ghostly beings, is very ancient in art. It is already present in classical Greece and the Bible, and continues to this day. It was precisely with the birth of photography that this idea of the ghostly spread throughout Europe, which had previously only been found in texts for a literate part of society (especially those Gothic texts of Romanticism). Now, it will

¹ “The organic nature of a now solidly structured system takes shape, iconographically, through a departure from traditional compositional and expressive modules, or rather, through the formulation of new expressive schemes, which tend to represent an increasingly unintelligible and apocalyptic divine. In this context, ecstatic and theophanic representations of Christ spread, showing the Word surrounded by a veritable procession, composed of either rows of saints or angelic figures. If the former are, for the faithful, the preferred means of intercession, the latter constitute the outward aspect of divine majesty, both contributing to the formation of models that are now fully medieval”. The translation has been done by us.

come to occupy various strata (and eventually even the popular strata) thanks to the visual and graphic dimension of photography itself:

Photography and supernatural events have been associated since very early in history. We should remember that Roger Bacon used the camera obscura to observe eclipses and that this activity led to him being accused of conjuring up the dead by the ecclesiastical court. (Sougez, 1999, p. 14).

Photography thus developed alongside the visual arts, weaving a mixture with the domains of death and darkness:

We must not forget that from the beginning, photography was associated with death. Some early viewers, for example, associated the daguerreotype with black magic. Nadar amusingly recounts that his friend Balzac was terrified of being photographed (Batchen, 2004, p. 314).

Even Félix Tournachon Nadar (2019 [1899]), a great French artist and one of the main promoters of this invention in France at the time, famous for installing a camera with its tripod in a hot air balloon to obtain, on the outskirts of Paris, the first aerial photograph in the history of art, wrote that:

the daguerreotype was also associated with black magic, and Balzac, for example, was "terrified" of being photographed because, according to his theory, he could lose one of the spectres, or constituent essences, of which every body in nature was formed. (Geoffrey, 2004, p. 314).

Photography in those years spread, among other things, thanks to the invention of photographic visiting cards (portrait carte-de-visite), or CdV (in its French abbreviation), patented by Disdéri in 1854, and which from 1854 onwards other authors soon began to use to portray, according to them, ghosts:

(...) just as the identity of a medium disappears in the middle of a session when they channel and embody the spirit of the dead, the camera or photographer recedes in this dynamic, allowing the viewer and the subject to experience a more direct and experiential relationship. (Yocavone, 2017, p. 286).

Photographs of ghosts, from the domain of photography as a language of modernity (and later, even more so, together with cinema), become a concept that, although linked to the supposedly supernatural in a past era (the 19th and 20th centuries), continues to be relevant today, albeit mainly as a visual metaphor and mechanism of meaning, a resource that will become a constant in the work of Francesca Woodman.

Whether or not they believe in apparitions of the dead, all men have their ghosts; and they would not know how to live without them. Life itself is populated by ghosts, overshadowed by death, permeated by absences. There is no escape: as long as man is transient, there will be ghosts. (Quevedo, 2014, p. 196).

2.3 The photographic work of Francesca Woodman

The character that Francesca Woodman created, voluntarily or not, has always eclipsed the person who lived beneath it, and that in our current era, one of the absolute exhibition of all components of anonymous citizen life on social media and its exponential multiplication year after year, generates all kinds of far-reaching debates, some of which will be addressed in section 4. Francesca Woodman, a prodigious art student, threw herself into the void in January 1981 at the age of 22 in New York, where she was living at the time, thus creating a unique legend in the history of photography, which continues to generate all kinds of appropriations, framings and links in art today. In a large part of her work, she uses her own body as a tapestry, as a communicative element at the service of a much deeper artistic conceptualisation:

The photographer's concern for the body and her interest in both the subject-object dichotomy and female iconography give rise to a feminist reading of her work. Among other insightful observations, the critic points out that Woodman's nudes, seemingly traditional from an art history perspective, often include details that alter the composition and compel the viewer to examine them more deeply.. (Tellgren, 2019, p. 12).

It is precisely from this perspective, that of the intrusion of metaphorical elements into seemingly normal compositions of nineteenth-century nudes,

that we will address the dichotomy of Eros and Thanatos crossed with the angelic and the ghostly in Woodman's work. Francesca Woodman's work has already accumulated a certain volume of international academic literature, as it has been analysed from various different perspectives in the arts and humanities, but also in the social sciences. Some proposals for analysis, in Spanish, on both sides of the Atlantic, start from what they consider to be the aestheticisation of the female body (Casado Chamizo, 2022), or from her corporeality inhabiting space (Brencio, 2014). Her photographic work has also been studied in relation to the genre of photographic self-portraiture and linked to fabulation and metamorphosis (Baños Palacios, 2021). In its link with the ghostly and spectral, there is a very solid contribution in Portuguese by Linhares Sanz and Da Silva de Souza (2018). Along these lines of the ghostly as a presentation and representation of absence, we also find other works, such as those by Ferrero Cández (2011) and Pereira and Silva Teixeira Filho (2017). Along the same lines, Katharine Conley's extensive book *Surrealist Ghostliness* (2013), which has not been published in Spanish (its title could be translated as "surrealist phantasmagoria"), was the most notable approach to date to Woodman's work from a ghostly perspective. Carol Armstrong had written an insightful contribution (2006) from the same perspective, linking Woodman's work to the ghostly, which Anna Kiesel (2017) would follow years later.

Also in Portuguese, researchers Loures and Borges analyse Francesca Woodman's work from a purely psychological- perspective, focusing on self-representation as an artist's portrait, a perspective, that of the selfie in Francesca Woodman's photographic work, linked to surrealist elements, which will be the subject of study by Renata Barboza Carvalho (2014). There are also works that link her work to Lacanian desire (Marón, 2021) or to different branches of philosophy, specifically finding in her work the concept of the sublime from a Kantian perspective (Téllez García, 2018).

Other authors propose approaching her work from a feminist perspective, re-semantising the concept of the intimate (Baños Palacios, 2016). Finally, within the field of art psychology, the contribution of Alejandra E. Martín G. (2019)

is noteworthy, in which she analyses Woodman's work from a psychological perspective. Even her brief videographic work has been the subject of academic study (Tejada Martín, 2013). In 2010, documentary filmmaker Scott Willis presented his film *The Woodmans*, which won the Tribeca Film Festival in New York that same year. For the film, he drew on the testimonies of her parents, who were also artists, among many others. her father was a painter and university art teacher (who died in 2017) and her mother was a ceramist and sculptor (who died in 2018).

Photography as a medium, in its historically germinal link with art and communication, has had a conflictive relationship with certain themes or approaches, one of these being the social taboo of suicide, which, as we know, was the cause of Woodman's own death and the subject of well-documented studies on how the mainstream press usually treats it (Olivar-Julián and Segado-Boj, 2020). Finally, with regard to the visual discourse of Woodman's photography, especially in relation to the presence of the ghostly, some authors propose a clear influence, that of photographer Deborah Turbeville:

Among her followers, it is worth mentioning the American photographer Francesca Woodman (1958-1981). Both share the use of blurred figures and the placement of these in dilapidated rooms or abandoned factories. Francesca was also greatly attracted to the Victorian mansions of Rhode Island. (Guerrero González-Valerio, 2015, p. 22).

In short, it is a convoluted proposal, in which the cultural heritage of the classical arts naturally plays a part, but which, precisely because of its groundbreaking nature, has links with other arts and artistic references, as we shall see. And it is this latter point that will ultimately lead us to discuss in this section the elements of convergent validity, that is, to assume that this theoretical framework is based on convergent validity not only in the results but also in the process of arriving at them. While Umberto Eco warned that even if there were 'as many books as readers' (and these could be multiple), all interpretations should refer back to the text, usage, by contrast, made the text a means of constructing an autonomous discourse, truly its own and independent, since, as Castilla Urbano points out:

Although Eco was referring to literary writings in general, the distinction can be considered valid for philosophical analysis, which, to a greater or lesser extent, also approximates one of these models, which can be considered ideal types. From the outset, neither of them should be given more or less importance, and their significance, although different in each case, is neither greater nor lesser. However, those who opt for one of the two alternatives must be clear about what they have chosen and the demands to which they must submit. In the first option, interpretation is a conjecture about the text whose validity is tested by its correspondence with the text. In the second, freedom prevails and what must be assessed is not the relationship with the original but the resulting new text. (Castilla Urbano, 2024, p. 345)

3. Metodología

The history of photography is, to say the least, problematic and, of course, minuscule when compared to other ancient historical arts, although it is somewhat older than its stepchild, cinema. Hence the importance of being precise in stages and periods in whose intersections Woodman will find, in a latent form, a certain discursive anchorage, as advocated by a new history of 21st-century photography (Blanco Pérez and Parejo, 2021).

A highly philological, semiotic-inspired photographic analysis tool has been used, as proposed by Javier Marzal (2007), as well as various tools from cultural studies applied to art for a comprehensive visual analysis (photographic and cinematographic) analysis (Blanco Pérez, 2022), which seeks to make cross-referenced, suggestive readings with an artistic horizon (Jauss, 2007) beyond the limits of the frame. This visual analysis is detailed in the attached file.

Level 1. Semiotic reading, chronotopes
Level 2. Compositional analysis to interpretive
Level 3. Horizon of expectations, Jauss (2007)
Level 4. Final conclusion of the image

Made by us.

For the selection of the corpus of Francesca Woodman's photographic work, from which we have chosen five pieces for comparative analysis, we have opted for the books compiled by George Lange (2019), Marco Pierini (2010) and Chris Townsend (2014), as well as the Spanish translation of the work *Francesca Woodman. Ser un ángel* (2019), a highly comprehensive exhibition (which even includes reproductions of the videos filmed by the artist alongside her photographs), compiled by Anna Tellgren, is currently touring Europe: in Spain, it arrived in Madrid, in an exhibition at the Fundación Canal de Madrid (2019-2020), for which a comprehensive catalogue was published by La Fábrica (Spain).

4. Análisis fotográfico de la obra de Francesca Woodman en torno a los ejes Eros/Tánatos y lo angelical/Fantasmal

Francesca Woodman, who enjoyed barely a decade of life as a photographer, from her first amateur photograph at the age of 13 to her suicide at 22, was nevertheless able to create a photographic world full of nuances and artistic references. From the outset, her work explores the way people inhabit spaces (interior and exterior) and how, through the creation of complex games of meaning, she is able to show her body—almost always naked—while concealing a deeper meaning; she has been able to create multiple levels of interpretation in her photographs. Woodman poses visual enigmas that compel a much deeper reflection on artistic referentiality.

In Francesca Woodman's work, her corporeality, like a naked canvas, interacts with the medium and spaces in an irremediably problematic way, diluting her material presence in diverse environments and places, both exterior and interior. In her work, the corporeal, as we shall see, dematerialises to the extent that it becomes ghostly, and on other occasions merges with the paper of the walls, or is embraced by the bark of a tree or glass (which is still a natural element that humans mould and fuse): glass that presses tightly against her chest, blurring the shape of her breasts, and causing a visual distortion that makes her fragile and returns her, in a way, to the primordial mud from which

humans grew from the ground. Natividad Pulido thus defines that artistic and wounded gaze, which makes Woodman an:

unclassifiable artist who, despite obsessively portraying herself – she was her own best muse – often hid her face. Perhaps trying to hide her tormented soul. Fragile, introverted and vulnerable, those who knew her say that she was also charismatic, provocative, passionate, eccentric, brilliant, dramatic, with a very peculiar sense of humor. Angel and demon.. (Pulido, 2019).

In this dichotomy of angel and demon, the artistic vision of:

Woodman aligns herself with the grand narrative, what we call our 'cultural history', through countless references to famous works, myths and motifs, which the photographer presents in her own way: lilies, swans, snakes/eels, slender birch trees, angel wings. All are related to being a woman and 'dressing' a female body, and in Woodman's interpretation they become something totally new and surprising. It is not easy, as this examination is very painful (Palm, 2019, p. 22).

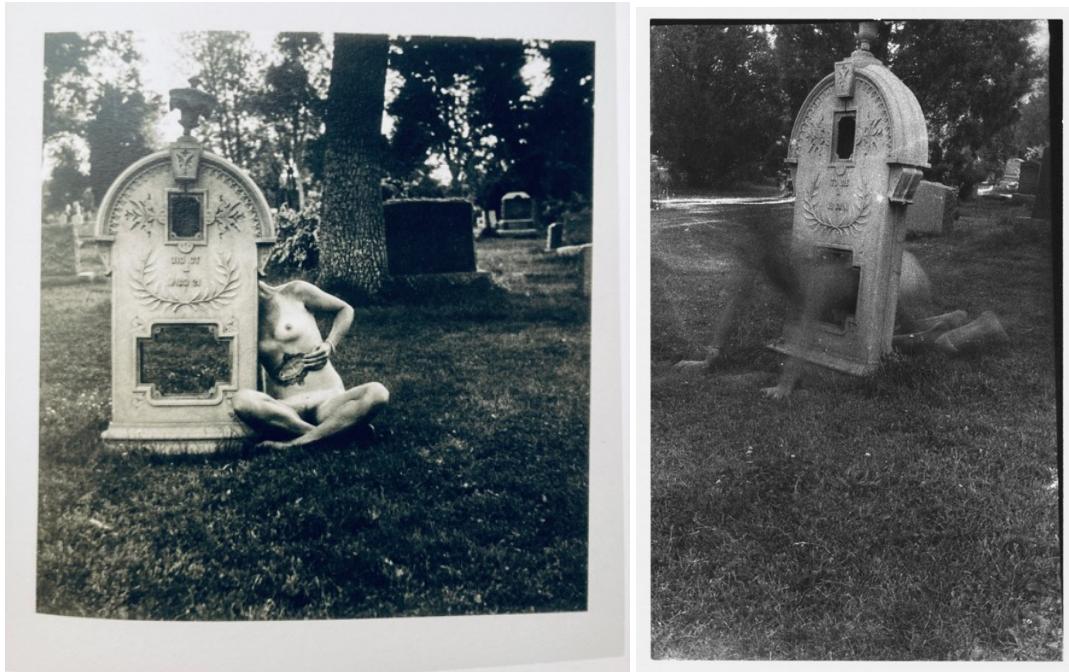
Many of Woodman's images involve a certain level of deconstruction of photographic artistic discourses that preceded her and yet appear in her work as a substrate. In Woodman's landscapes, her body is present, integrating itself into nature. Piece 1 presents a black-and-white landscape of a stream or lake, on the bank of which stands a tree with solid roots that extend into the water.

Among these roots, but floating on the surface, Woodman herself appears, clinging to a small log as if it were a handhold. Her long hair waves at the mercy of the gentle current, creating a play of sinuous visual nooks and crannies identified with the waves of the water and, even more so, with the capricious shapes of the roots. The pale skin of her naked body dialogues with the pure white of the reflections in the water. And in the background, in the distance, in a second phase of semiotic reading, subjugated to the first, we perceive that the distant landscape (slightly diaphragmed in what appears to be f8) is, in reality, a graveyard full of tombs and funerary elements (Thanatos).



F1. *[Untitled]*. Boulder, Colorado (1976). Source: Townsend (2014, p. 78)

The image in Figure 1 transports us to the very origin of life, when the first multicellular beings emerged from the water and occupied the earth to live and transform themselves. There is a certain narrative discourse reminiscent of Genesis in the Christian creation story, where Woodman, therefore, will be associated with Eve, and the water—at whose mercy she seems to float—will represent purification, so this image will actually speak of the carnality of birth and the materiality of death. In a way, it refers to the Greek myth of Daphne. Daphne was a nymph who fled from Apollo (the Greek god who had mocked Eros, and whom Eros himself condemned to consummate his carnal love for Daphne). Daphne, in her flight, ended up next to her own father, the river Peneus, whom she asked for help. Her father, the river Peneus himself, then decides to turn Daphne into a laurel tree. This literary image, widely used in Golden Age poetry, was also used by Shakespeare to portray Ophelia, who fell from a tree by a river and floated down it until her death, uniting the two forever. In this same series, Woodman explores other, perhaps more suggestive ideas in which, with a certain eroticism, she moves her own naked body (Eros) among the tombs and funerary elements (Thanatos), as we can see in figures 2 and 3.



F2. F3. *[Untitled]*. Boulder, Colorado (1972-1975). Source: Lange (2019, pp. 29 and 37).

This image, in turn, refers to the work of other female visual artists who had already explored this concept, such as Ana Mendieta, who in a 1972 photograph:

places her naked body inside an archaeological site and covers it with flowers, adopting a funerary posture. In her action, Mendieta combines life, death and regeneration through her encounter with nature. In other works, she also transforms her body and merges it with a tree trunk. Pollock points to the root of these works in the healing of trauma (in Mendieta's case, exile from her homeland, family and language) in which death and life symbolically coexist. (Baños Palacios, 2021, p. 56).

Woodman's small flat, which did not even have a toilet or bathtub and was unfurnished, was located in a former fabric shop. That element, the fabrics—always white—would be present as props in her photography. Sometimes she would use them as a suggestive communicative element that would break the dichotomy of absence/presence, in a kind of ghostly iconography, and at other times, they would be a synecdochic element of the angelic. Woodman herself, in one of her notebook entries, wrote by hand: "Am I in the photograph? Am I entering or leaving it? I could be a ghost, an animal or a dead body, not just

this girl sitting in the corner." (Sawyer, 2019, p. 110) Antonio Muñoz Molina, a self-confessed admirer of Woodman, defines her way of portraying the places she inhabits as follows:

The spaces in which she photographs herself are already places of absence, houses that may have been inhabited for generations and in which no one has lived for a long time, living rooms with fireplaces in which no fire is lit, with walls that have been peeling and ceilings that have leaked moisture, with empty cupboards in which there will only be a smell of staleness and perhaps mouse droppings, with frosted mirrors that once reflected forgotten people. (Muñoz Molina, 2012)

While it is true that, among the places the artist will discuss, the cemetery (Thanatos) will undoubtedly be one of her favorite settings:

The photographs from the cemetery connect to a recurrent thematic aspect of Woodman's oeuvre that has been addressed elsewhere: her interest in the Gothic. As Chris Townsend writes, "she uses Gothic tropes to explore some fundamental problems of photography as a medium. Rather than being concerned with death, Woodman's works constantly seeks to undermine the convention than a photograph is a surface within which something is a fixed and therefore dead. central to these early pictures is a ... reanimation of the photographic subject". (Burnett Abrams, 2019, p. 105).

Francesca Woodman, in the photograph in Figure 4, continues this series by working with the concept of angel wings, which ties in with the ambivalent religious iconography itself and which, like the jump itself, had already been explored in Photography. A few years earlier, in his famous photographs of personalities from American politics and culture, the great Philippe Halsman (Teruel, 2015) portrayed them just as they were jumping: giving the impression of flying, still, anchored in the celestial. This is a concept closely linked to transcendence, escape and, above all, the desire for freedom and flight.



F4. *[Angel]*. Roma, Italia (1977). Source: Tellgren (2019, p. 25).

For Francesca Woodman, too, the jump is a projection of flight, freedom and ascension, but also, let us not forget, a playful and creative proposition, as it was for Halsman. Man is *Homo Ludens*: like practically all mammals, he is a being who needs to play, who needs to rearrange spaces in an idle and playful way, exactly as a human baby or a puppy learns and apprehends the world, long before cultural codes unify his instincts, repress them and socialise his desires. That is why angels have been children since the Middle Ages. They were also always a providential entity for a world of mundane humans. In 1920, the painter Paul Klee painted his work *Angelus novus*, coinciding with his entry into the Bauhaus and his first exhibition in Munich. Walter Benjamin, one of the intellectuals who best and most deeply understood photography in his time, acquired the work a year later, and based on it, he developed a whole theory about the angel as a reinterpretation of one of the Jewish Talmudic legends (Azoulay, 2006).

Four and a half centuries earlier, in 1514, Albrecht Dürer made an engraving (*Melancholia I*) depicting a troubled angel, anchored to his earthly physicality when, precisely, his creative spirit would urge him to do what is natural to him: fly through the skies.



Figura 5. *[Untitled]*. Roma, Italia (1977). Source: Tellgren (2019, p. 127).

Thus, the intersection of the angelic and the ghostly in Francesca Woodman's work is the result of an aesthetic that straddles many artistic convergences, some of which have already been discussed here. Art critic Ken Johnson describes Woodman's style in an article published in *The New York Times* as:

But Woodman's borderline kitschy style, a heated mix of Victorian gothic, Surrealism and 19th-century spirit photography, was a throwback. Her admiration for the neo-Pictorialism of the fashion photographer Deborah Turbeville shows in the many lushly shadowed and textured scenes Woodman shot in an abandoned house in Providence, R.I., where her own figure often blurs into a ghostly, dematerialized form. The small, squarish format of most of her prints enhances the look of antiquity. (Johnson, 2012).

Woodman's playful component, playing with deception, with a face that is hidden (or not) and a body that materialises (or not), is also linked to the dreamlike, almost suggestive game that involves suggesting rather than showing, and deducing rather than exemplifying. In Figure 5, we can see Woodman (dressed, we do not know if barefoot) jumping in profile in front of a wall full of chips. In the image, she is descending from the heavens to the ground, as evidenced by the fact that her long, straight hair extends about 50 centimetres above her head. These were Woodman's Roman days, when she

was studying for a year in Italy, and was (as her diaries reflect) deeply fascinated by ancient Roman architecture: its verticality and the grandeur of the cypress trees, so common in all Roman ruins and, in general, in all the countries of the Mediterranean basin (and so scarce in Spain, where they are inevitably associated with cemeteries). Her hair, which plays an undeniable leading role in her work, thus becomes a vertical expression of ascension to the divine (heaven) and of connection with the mundane (earth), onto which the artist seems to be collapsing, precisely when she is dressed and, therefore, with her body covered: not naked.

Furthermore, the Italian period was a profound shock for Francesca Woodman who, in the heart of an ancient culture, came across some artistic discoveries that were translated and reflected in her work, mainly in the composition, which at that time was already far removed from the classical syntax of her early works. Her own father explained it this way:

We know that on one occasion she visited friends in Venice, and in that city, after missing a train connection, she discovered the work of Tintoretto. Was she influenced by it, then? Art history can happen while a girl is licking an ice cream cone. How lucky we are!! (Woodman, 2019).

This dichotomy, heaven (angelic) and earth (corporeality), but sometimes faded, almost ghostly, will form the axis of duality that will crystallise into a discourse as powerful as it is fruitful for the history of photography.

5. Conclusions

Our line of work has consisted of analysing Francesca Woodman's photographic work, brief but immensely intense, from a double dichotomous axis (visual and conceptual, as we have seen) of the angelic and the ghostly, on the one hand, and, on the other, the double articulation of her discourse around Eros versus Thanatos.

Through an analysis, certainly inspired by semiotics, but above all anchored in cultural and art studies, we have reflected on how her work links not only to a self-referentiality of the nineteenth-century history of photography, but rather to creative investigative processes that, visually and conceptually, lead her to explore a language marked by visual metaphors of a power unknown until then, where it is fruitful to make many cross-readings.

A battery of concepts from both the humanities and a more political or politicised view of the body can be applied to Woodman's work, and in a way her work has traditionally been interpreted in feminist, emancipatory codes, etc., but we believe we have proven—as seems to be confirmed by the fragment of text that her own father wrote about Francesca Woodman in 2018—that, in her work, Francesca is very exploratory and playful, an extraordinarily creative place from which she approaches the construction of her work around several axes.

The presence of a constant Eros, but in a way in eternal dialogue with Thanatos, has generated many iconic images that are now part of the history of photography, . Likewise, there are many authors who, as we have seen, when analysing Woodman's work, refer to it as ghostly photography, an aspect that we have wanted to contrast with the angelic, around whose magnetic power Francesca Woodman herself always orbited in a more or less conscious way. The stereotypical cliché of the tormented young girl who commits suicide in her twenties has, in our opinion, overshadowed for too long the work of a complex and prolific artist, cultured and trained in various arts, who knew how to create a very personal narrative microclimate: and who unified atmospheres that had not been explored until then, thus becoming, indisputably, one of the most powerful voices in contemporary artistic photography.

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